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The FIEND in YOU

Tales of hidden horror from contemporary writers — of the insidious evil that lurks within every human being . . .

ed. Charles Beaumont

AN ORIGINAL BALLANTINE BOOK

16

Stories of horror that could really happen—from:

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CHARLES E. FRITCH
WHIT BURNETT
RICHARD M. GORDON
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YONDER

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NIGHT RAID AND OTHER STORIES

THE INTRUDER

THE OMNIBUS OF SPEED
(WITH WILLIAM F. NOLAN)

THE FIEND IN YOU (ed.)

THE FIEND IN YOU

Edited by

CHARLES BEAUMONT

BALLANTINE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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INTRODUCTION

by CHARLES BEAUMONT

Sad, but true: after centuries of outstanding service to the human imagination, the classic terrors—the ghosts, the vampires, the werewolves, the witches, the goblins, all the things that go bump in the night—have suddenly found themselves unable to get work, except as comedians. We love them, of course. And we feel sorry for them. But we are not afraid of them any more.

And if the poor old Shades conclude from this that fear is on its way out, I say let them have that small satisfaction. How could they be expected to know that fear is on its way *in,* and for that reason is going to be bigger—much bigger—than ever before?

We've discovered a new monster, you see.

He doesn't wear an opera cape or a shaggy shirt or a white bedsheet; he doesn't rattle chains or moan; he doesn't drink blood or sleep in a coffin; yet he is the most terrifying monster of them all.

He's called The Mind.

This book is about him.

To the complacent, to those weary of having sensations promised (YOU'LL SHUDDER! YOU'LL TREMBLE! YOUR FLESH WILL CRAWL!) and never delivered, and especially to those who anticipate the simple oldtime pleasure of gooseflesh, a cautionary word:

These stories must be taken internally. Any one of them could serve to prod the slumbering fiend in you.

Maybe he'll turn over and go back to sleep.

Maybe he won't.

So be careful. And try not to worry about that closet door, or the face at the window, or the clock that just stopped ticking.

Remember: It's all in your mind!

FINGER PRINTS

by RICHARD MATHESON

Some stories are written; others happen. This one happened, and there was nothing Richard Matheson could do about it, though he would have liked to, I'm sure. It couldn't have been a very pleasant experience, watching this nightmare uncoil before his eyes. It can't be a very pleasant experience for you, either. Yet, as you draw back in disgust, as you certainly will, reflect: what are you drawing back from? *Why, like the nice intelligent narrator, are you feeling something so much deeper than shame, so much colder than fright?*

When I got on the bus, the two of them were sitting in the third row back on the right hand side. The small woman in the aisle seat was staring into her lap where her hands were resting limply. The other one was staring out the window. It was almost dark.

There were two empty seats across the aisle from them so I put my suitcase up on the rack and sat down. The heavy door was pulled shut and the bus pulled out of the depot.

For a while I contented myself with looking out the window and browsing through a magazine I'd brought with me.

Then I looked over at the two women.

The one on the aisle had dry flat-colored blonde hair. It looked like the wig from a doll that had fallen on the floor and gotten dusty. Her skin was tallow white and her face looked as if it had been formed of this tallow with two fingers; a pinch for the chin, one for the lips, one for the nose, one each for the ears and, finally, two savage pokes for her beady eyes.

She was talking with her hands.

I had never seen that before. I'd read about it and I'd seen pictures of the various hand positions that deaf mutes use for communication but I'd never actually seen them used.

Her short colorless fingers moved energetically in the air as though her mind were teeming with interesting things she must say and was afraid to lose. The hands contracted and expanded, they assumed a dozen different shapes in the space of a few moments. She drew the taut hand figures one over the other, pulling and squeezing out her deathly still monologue.

I looked at the other woman.

Her face was thin and weary. She was leaning back on the head rest with her eyes fixed dispassionately on her gesticulating companion. I had never seen such eyes before. They never moved, they were without a glimmer of life. She stared dully at the mute woman and kept nodding her head in an endless jerky motion as if it were on rockers.

Once in a while she'd try to turn away and look out the window or close her eyes. But the moment she did, the other woman would reach out her pudgy right hand and pluck at her dress, tugging at it until her companion was forced to look once more at the endless patterns of shapes created by the white hands.

To me it was phenomenal that it could be understood at all. The hands moved so quickly that I could hardly see them. They were a blur of agitating flesh. But the other woman kept nodding and nodding.

In her own soundless way, the deaf mute woman was a chatterbox.

She wouldn't stop moving her hands. She acted as though she had to keep it up at top speed or perish. It got to a point where I almost could hear what she was talking about. I almost could imagine in my mind the splatter of insensate trivia and gossip.

Every once in a while, she seemed to come up with something very amusing to herself; so overpoweringly amusing that she would push her hands away quickly, palms out, as though physically repulsing this outstandingly funny bit of business lest, in retaining it, she should destroy herself with hilarity.

I must have stared at them a long time because suddenly they were conscious of it and the two of them were looking over at me.

I don't know which of their looks was the more repelling.

The small deaf mute woman looked at me with her eyes like hard black beads, her button-like nose twitching and her mouth arced into a dimpling bow-like smirk and, in her lap, her white fingers plucked like leprous bird beaks at the skirt of her flowered dress. It was the look of a hideous life size doll, somehow come to life.

The other woman's look was one of strange hunger.

Her dark-rimmed eyes ran over my face, then, abruptly, down over my body and I saw the shallow rise of her breasts swell suddenly under her dark dress before I turned to the window.

I pretended to look out at the fields but I could still feel the two of them looking at me steadily.

Then, from the corner of an eye I saw the deaf mute woman throw up her hands again and begin weaving her silent tapestries of communication. After a few minutes I glanced over at them.

The gaunt woman was watching the hands again in stolid silence. Yes, she nodded wearily, yes, yes, yes.

I fell into a half-sleep, seeing the flashing hands, the rocking head. Yes, yes, yes . . .

I woke up suddenly, feeling a furtive pluck of fingers on my jacket.

I looked up and saw the deaf mute woman weaving in the aisle over me. She was tugging at my jacket, trying to pull me up. I stared up at her in sleepy bewilderment.

"What are you doing?" I whispered, forgetting that she couldn't hear.

She kept tugging resolutely and, every time the bus passed a street lamp, I could see her pale white face and her dark eyes glittering like jewels set in the waxy flesh.

I had to get up. She kept pulling and I was so sleepy I couldn't get my mind awake enough to combat her insistent efforts.

As I stood up in the aisle, she plumped down where I had been and drew up her feet so that she covered both seats. I stared down at her uncomprehendingly. Then, as she pretended to be suddenly asleep, I turned and looked at her companion.

Her companion was sitting quietly, looking out the window.

With a lethargic movement I dropped down beside her. Then, seeing that she was not going to say anything I asked,

"Why did your friend do that?"

She turned and looked at me. She was even more gaunt than I had thought. I saw her scrawny throat contract.

"It was her own idea," she said, "I didn't tell her to."

"What idea?" I asked.

She looked more closely at me. And again I saw that look of hunger. It was intense. It burned out from her like an arc of drawing flame. I felt my heart jolt unsteadily.

"Are you sisters?" I asked for no other reason than to break the disturbing silence.

She didn't answer for a moment. Then her face seemed to grow tight.

"I'm her companion," she said, "I'm her *paid* companion."

"Oh," I said, "I guess it . . ." But I forgot what I was going to say.

"You don't have to talk to me," she said, "it was her own idea. I didn't tell her to."

We sat there in awkward, painful silence, me looking at her groggily, her watching the dark streets pass by. Then she turned and her eyes glittered once from the light of a street lamp.

"She keeps talking all the time," she said.

"What?"

"She keeps talking all the time."

"That's funny," I said awkwardly, "to call it talking I mean. I mean—"

"I don't see her mouth anymore," she said, "her hands are her mouth. I can hear her talking with her hands. Her voice is like a squeaky machine." She drew in a hurried breath. "God, how she talks," she said.

I sat there without speaking, watching her face.

"I never talk," she said, "I'm with her all the time and we never talk because she can't. It's always quiet. Then I get surprised when I hear people really talking. I get surprised when I hear *myself* really talking. I forget how

to talk. I feel like I'm going to forget every thing I know about talking."

Her voice was jerky and rapid, of indefinite pitch. It plunged from a guttural croak to a thin falsetto, more so since she was trying to speak under her breath.

And there was a mounting unrest in her voice which I began to feel in myself. As though, at any moment, something in her was going to explode.

"She never lets me have any time to myself," she said. "She's always with me. I keep telling her I'm leaving. I can talk a little with my hands too. I tell her I'm going to leave. And she cries and moans around and she says she's going to kill herself if I go away. God, it's awful to watch her begging with me. It makes me sick.

"Then I feel sorry for her and I don't leave. And she's happy as a lark and her father gives me a dollar a week raise and then he sends us on another trip to see some of her relatives. Her father hates her. He likes to get rid of her. I hate her too. But it's like she has some power over us all. We can't argue with her. You can't yell with your hands. And it isn't enough for you to close your eyes and turn away so you can't see her hands anymore."

Her voice grew heavier and I noticed how she kept pressing her palms into her lap as she spoke. The more she pressed down against herself, the harder it was to keep my eyes off her hands. After a while I couldn't stop. Even when I knew she saw me looking I couldn't stop. It was like the complete abandon one feels in a dream when any desire is allowable.

She kept on talking, her voice trembling a little as she spoke.

"She knows I want to get married," she said, "any girl wants that. But she won't let me leave her. Her father pays me good and I don't know anything else. Besides, even when I hate her most, I feel sorry for her when she cries and begs. It's not like real crying and real begging. It's so quiet and all you see are tears running down her cheeks. She keeps begging me until I stay."

Now I felt my own hands trembling in my lap. Somehow her words seemed to mean something more than they said on the surface. It seemed that what was coming grew more and more apparent. But I was hypnotized. With the

lights flashing over us in the pitch blackness as the bus sped on through the night, it was like being inextricably bound in some insane nightmare.

"Once she said she'd get me a boyfriend," she said and I shuddered. "I told her to stop making fun of me but she said she'd get me a boyfriend. So when we went on a trip to Indianapolis, she went across the aisle in the bus and brought a sailor to talk to me. He was just a boy. He told me he was twenty but I bet he was eighteen. He was nice though. He sat with me and we talked. At first I was embarrassed and I didn't know what to say. But he was nice and it was nice talking to him except for *her* sitting across the way."

Instinctively I turned but the deaf mute woman seemed to be asleep. Yet I had the feeling that the moment I turned back, her beady eyes popped open again and refocused on us. "Never mind her," said the woman beside me.

I turned back.

"Do you think it's wrong?" she said suddenly and I shuddered again as her hot damp hand closed over mine.

"I . . . I don't know."

"The sailor was so nice," she said in a heavy voice. "He was so nice. I don't care if she's watching. It doesn't matter, does it? It's dark and she can't really see. She can't hear anything."

I must have drawn back because her fingers tightened on mine.

"I'm clean," she whined pathetically, "it's not all the time. I only did it with the sailor, I swear I only did. I'm not lying."

As she spoke more and more excitedly, her hand slipped off mine and dropped quivering on my leg. It made my stomach lurch. I couldn't move. I guess I didn't want to move. I was paralyzed by the sound of her thickening voice and the flaring sensation of her hand beginning to move over my leg slowly, sensuously caressing.

"Please," she said, almost gasping the word.

I tried to say something but nothing came.

"I'm always alone," she said, starting in again, "she won't let me get married because she gets afraid and she

doesn't want to let me leave her. It's all right, no one can see us."

Now she was clutching at my leg, digging her nails in fiercely. She put her other hand in my lap too and, as a blaze of light splashed over us, I saw her mouth like a dark gaping wound, her starved eyes shining.

"You *have* to," she said, moving closer.

I felt her hot breath on my face and I forgot about the deaf mute woman across the aisle watching us in silent obscene triumph. I was lost. The darkness caught me and threw its cloak of sudden lust around me.

Suddenly, she threw herself against me. Her mouth was burning hot, shaking under mine. Her breath was hot in my throat and her hands were wild and clutching on my suddenly exposed flesh. She almost clawed at me and her frail hot limbs seemed to wrap themselves around me again and again like writhing tentacles. The heat of her body blasted me into numbed submission. I'll never know how the other passengers slept through it. But they didn't all sleep through it. One of them was watching us.

Then, suddenly, the night had chilled, it was over.

She drew back quickly and her dress rustled angrily as she pulled it down like an outraged old lady who has inadvertently exposed her ankles. She turned and looked out the window as if I wasn't there any longer. Stupidly I watched her back rise and fall, feeling drained of strength, feeling as if my muscles had become fluid.

Then, shakily, I adjusted my clothing and struggled up into the jolting aisle. Instantly, the deaf mute woman jumped up and pushed past me roughly, wide awake. I caught a glimpse of her excited face as she moved.

As I slumped down on the other seat, I looked across the aisle again and saw her stubby white fingers grasping and fluttering, milking greedy questions from the air. And the gaunt woman was nodding and nodding and the deaf woman wouldn't let her turn away.

FOOL'S MATE

by STANLEY ELLIN

Stanley Ellin writes civilized stories. It is precisely this quality which makes them so terrifying. They greet you in broad daylight, shake your hand, invite you to their flat, feed you an excellent dinner, then proceed to tear out your throat with their bare hands. FOOL'S MATE is clad in characteristically impeccable prose. But don't trust it for a minute.

When George Huneker came home from the office that evening he was obviously fired by a strange excitement. His ordinarily sallow cheeks were flushed, his eyes shone behind his rimless spectacles, and instead of carefully removing his rubbers and neatly placing them on the strip of mat laid for that purpose in a corner of the hallway, he pulled them off with reckless haste and tossed them aside. Then, still wearing his hat and overcoat, he undid the wrappings of the package he had brought with him and displayed a small, flat, leather case. When he opened the case Louise saw a bed of shabby green velvet in which rested the austere black and white forms of a set of chessmen.

"Aren't they beautiful?" George said. He ran a finger lovingly over one of the pieces. "Look at the work on this; nothing fancy to stick away in a glass case, you understand, but everything neat and clean and ready for action the way it ought to be. All genuine ivory and ebony, and all hand-made, every one of them."

Louise's eyes narrowed. "And just how much did you pay out for this stuff?"

"I didn't," George said. "That is, I didn't buy it. Mr. Oelrichs gave it to me."

"Oelrichs?" said Louise. "You mean that old crank you brought home to dinner that time? The one who just sat and watched us like the cat that ate the canary, and wouldn't say a word unless you poked it out of him?"

"Oh, Louise!"

"Don't you 'Oh, Louise' me! I thought I made my feelings about him mighty clear to you long before this. And, may I ask, why should our fine Mr. Oelrichs suddenly decided to give you this thing?"

"Well," George said uneasily, "you know he's been pretty sick, and what with him needing only a few months more for retirement I was carrying most of his work for him. Today was his last day, and he gave me this as a kind of thank-you present. Said it was his favorite set, too, but he wanted to give me the best thing he could, and this was it."

"How generous of Mr. Oelrichs," Louise remarked frigidly. "Did it ever occur to him that if he wanted to pay you back for your time and trouble, something practical would be a lot more to the point?"

"Why, I was just doing him a favor, Louise. Even if he did offer me money or anything like that, I wouldn't take it."

"The more fool you," Louise sniffed. "All right, take off your things, put them away right, and get ready for supper. It's just about ready."

She moved toward the kitchen, and George trailed after her placatingly. "You know, Louise, Mr. Oelrichs said something that was very interesting."

"I'm sure he did."

"Well, he said there were some people in the world who *needed* chess—that when they learned to play it real well they'd see for themselves how much they need it. And what I thought was that there's no reason why you and I. . ."

She stopped short and faced him with her hands on her hips. "You mean that after I'm done taking care of the house, and shopping, and cooking your hot meals, and mending and darning, then I'm supposed to sit down and learn how to play games with you! For a man going on fifty, George Huneker, you get some peculiar ideas."

Pulling off his overcoat in the hallway, he reflected that there was small chance of his losing track of his age, at least not as long as Louise doted so much on reminding him. He had first heard about it a few months after his marriage when he was going on thirty and had been offered

a chance to go into business for himself. He had heard about it every year since, on some occasion or other, although as he learned more and more about Louise he had fallen into fewer traps.

The only trouble was that Louise always managed to stay one jump ahead of him, and while in time he came to understand that she would naturally put her foot down at such things as his leaving a good steady job, or at their having a baby when times were hard (and in Louise's opinion they always were), or at buying the house outright when they could rent it so cheap, it still came as a surprise that she so bitterly opposed the idea of having company to the house, or of tuning in the radio to a symphony, or, as in this case, of taking up chess.

Company, she made it clear, was a bother and expense, small print hurt her eyes, symphonies gave her a splitting headache, and chess, it seemed, was something for which she could not possibly find time. Before they had been married, George thought unhappily, it had all been different somehow. They were always in the midst of a crowd of his friends, and when books or music or anything like that were the topics of discussion, she followed the talk with bright and vivacious interest. Now she just wanted to sit with her knitting every night while she listened to comedians bellowing over the radio.

Not being well, of course, could be one reason for all this. She suffered from a host of aches and pains which she dwelt on in such vivid detail at times that George himself could feel sympathetic twinges go through him. Their medicine chest bulged with remedies, their diet had dwindled to a bland and tasteless series of concoctions, and it was a rare month which did not find Louise running up a sizeable doctor's bill for the treatment of what George vaguely came to think of as "women's troubles."

Still, George would have been the first to point out that despite the handicaps she worked under, Louise had been as good a wife as a man could ask for. His salary over the years had hardly been luxurious, but penny by penny she had managed to put aside fifteen thousand dollars in their bank account. This was a fact known only to the two of them since Louise made it a point to dwell on their relative poverty in her conversations with anyone, and

while George always felt some embarrassment when she did this, Louise pointed out that one of the best ways to save your money was not to let the world at large know you had any, and since a penny saved was a penny earned she was contributing as much to their income in her way as George was in his. This, while not reducing George's embarrassment, did succeed in glossing it with increased respect for Louise's wisdom and capability.

And when added to this was the knowledge that his home was always neat as a pin, his clothing carefully mended, and his health fanatically ministered to, it was easy to see why George chose to count his blessings rather than make an issue of anything so trivial as his wife's becoming his partner at chess. Which, as George himself might have admitted had you pinned him down to it, was a bit of a sacrifice, for in no time at all after receiving the set of chessmen he found himself a passionate devotee of the game. And chess, as he sometimes reflected while poring over his board of an evening with the radio booming in his ears and his wife's knitting needles flickering away contentedly, would seem to be a game greatly enhanced by the presence of an opponent. He did not reflect this ironically; there was no irony in George's nature.

Mr. Oelrichs, in giving him the set, had said he would be available for instruction at any time. But since Louise had already indicated that that gentlemen would hardly be a welcome guest in her home, and since she had often expressed decided opinions on any man who would leave his hearth and home to go traipsing about for no reason, George did not even think the matter worth broaching. Instead, he turned to a little text aptly entitled *An Invitation to Chess,* was led by the invitation to essay other and more difficult texts, and was thence led to a whole world of literature on chess, staggering in its magnitude and complexity.

He ate chess, drank chess, and slept chess. He studied the masters and past masters until he could quote chapter and verse from even their minor triumphs. He learned the openings, the middle game, and the end game. He learned to eschew the reckless foray which led nowhere in favor of the positional game where cunning strategy turned a side into a relentless force that inevitably broke and

crushed the enemy before it. Strange names danced across his horizon: Alekhine, Capablanca, Lasker, Nimzovich, and he pursued them, drunk with the joy of discovery through the ebony and ivory mazes of their universe.

But in all this there was still that one thing lacking: an opponent, a flesh-and-blood opponent against whom he could test himself. It was one thing, he sometimes thought disconsolately, to have a book at one's elbow while pondering a move; it would be quite another to ponder even the identical move with a man waiting across the board to turn it to his own advantage and destroy you with it. It became a growing hunger, that desire to make a move and see a hand reach across the table to answer it; it became a curious obsession so that at times, when Louise's shadow moved abruptly against the wall or a log settled in the fireplace, George would look up suddenly, half expecting to see the man seated in the empty chair opposite him.

He came to visualize a man quite clearly after a while. A quiet contemplative man much like himself, in fact, with graying hair and rimless spectacles that tended to slide a bit when he bent over the board. A man who played just a shade better than himself; not so well that he could not be beaten, but well enough to force George to his utmost to gain an occasional victory.

And there was one thing more he expected of this man; something a trifle unorthodox, perhaps, if one was a stickler for chess ritual. The man must prefer to play the white side that moved first, that took the offensive until, perhaps, the tide could be turned against it. George himself infinitely preferred the black side, preferred to parry the thrusts and advances of white while he slowly built up a solid wall of defense against its climatic moves. *That* was the way to learn the game, George told himself; after a player learned how to make himself invulnerable on the defense, there was nothing he couldn't do on attack.

However, to practice one's defense still required a hand to set the offense into motion, and eventually George struck on a solution which, he felt with mild pride, was rather ingenious. He would set up the board, seat himself behind the black side, and then make the opening move for white. This he would counter with a black piece, after which he

would move again for white, and so on until some decision was reached.

It was not long before the flaws in this system became distressingly obvious. Since he naturally favored the black side, and since he knew both plans of battle from their inception, black won game after game with ridiculous ease. And after the twentieth fiasco of this sort George sank back into his chair despairingly. If he could only put one side out of his mind completely while he was moving for the other, why, there would be no problem at all! Which, he realized cheerlessly, was a prospect about as logical as an ancient notion he had come across in his reading somewhere, the notion that if you cut a serpent in half, the separated halves would then turn on each other and fight themselves savagely to death.

He set up the board again after this glum reflection, and then walked around the table and seated himself in white's chair. Now, if he were playing the white side what would he do? A game depends not only on one's skill, he told himself, but also on one's knowledge of his opponent. And not only on the opponent's style of play but also on his character, his personality, his whole nature. George solemnly looked across the table at black's now empty chair and brooded on this. Then slowly, deliberately, he made his opening move.

After that, he quickly walked around the table and sat down on black's side. The going, he found, was much easier here, and almost mechanically he answered white's move. With a thrill of excitement chasing inside him, he left his seat and moved around to the other side of the board again, already straining hard to put black and its affairs far out of his mind.

"For pity's sake, George, what *are* you doing!"

George started, and looked around dazedly. Louise was watching him, her lips compressed, her knitting dropped on her lap, and her manner charged with such disapproval that the whole room seemed to frown at him. He opened his mouth to explain, and hastily thought better of it.

"Why, nothing," he said, "nothing at all."

"Nothing at all!" Louise declared tartly. "The way you're tramping around, somebody would think you can't find a comfortable chair in the house. You know I . . ."

Then her voice trailed off, her eyes became glassy, her body straightened and became rigid with devouring attention. The comedian on the radio had answered an insult with another evidently so devastating that the audience in the studio could do no more than roar in helpless laughter. Even Louise's lips turned up ever so slightly at the corners as she reached for her knitting again, and George gratefully seized this opportunity to drop into the chair behind black's side.

He had been on the verge of a great discovery, he knew that; but what exactly had it been? Was it that changing places physically had allowed him to project himself into the forms of two players, each separate and distinct from the other? If so, he was at the end of the line, George knew, because he would never be able to explain all that getting up and moving around to Louise.

But suppose the board itself were turned around after each move? Or, and George found himself charged with a growing excitement, since chess was completely a business of the mind anyhow—since, when one had mastered the game sufficiently it wasn't even necessary to use a board at all—wasn't the secret simply a matter of *turning oneself into the other player* when his move came?

It was white's move now, George bent to his task. He was playing white's side, he must do what white would do—more than that, he must feel white's very emotions—but the harder he struggled and strained in his concentration, the more elusive became his goal. Again and again, at the instant he was about to reach his hand out, the thought of what black intended to do, of what black was surely *going* to do, slipped through his mind like a dot of quicksilver and made him writhe inwardly with a maddening sense of defeat.

This now became the obsession, and evening after evening he exercised himself at it. He lost weight, his face drew into haggard lines so that Louise was always at his heels during mealtimes trying to make him take an interest in her wholly uninteresting recipes. His interest in his job dwindled until it was barely perfunctory, and his superior, who at first had evinced no more than a mild surprise and irritation, started to shake his head ominously.

But with every game, every move, every effort he made,

George felt with exultation he was coming nearer that goal. There would come a moment he told himself with furious certainty, when he could view the side across the board with objectivity, with disinterest, with no more knowledge of its intentions and plans than he would have of any flesh-and-blood player who sat there; and when that day came, he would have achieved a triumph no other player before him could ever claim!

He was so sure of himself, so confident that the triumph lay beyond the next move each time he made a move, that when it came at last his immediate feeling was no more than a comfortable gratification, and an expansive easing of all his nerves. Something like the feeling, he thought pleasurably, that a man gets after a hard day's work when he sinks into bed at night. Exactly that sort of feeling, in fact.

He had left the black position on the board perilously exposed through a bit of carelessness, and then in an effort to recover himself had moved the king's bishop in a neat defensive gesture that could cost white dear. When he looked up to study white's possible answer he saw White sitting there in the chair across the table, his fingertips gently touching each other, an ironic smile on his lips.

"Good," said White pleasantly. "Surprisingly good for you, George."

At this, George's sense of gratification vanished like a soap bubble flicked by a casual finger. It was not only the amiable insult conveyed by the words which nettled him; equally disturbing was the fact that White was utterly unlike the man that George had been prepared for. He had not expected White to resemble him as one twin resembles another, yet feature for feature the resemblance was so marked that White could have been the image that stared back at him from his shaving mirror each morning. An image, however, which, unlike George's, seemed invested with a power and arrogance that were quite overwhelming. Here, George felt with a touch of resentment, was no man to hunch over a desk computing dreary rows of figures, but one who with dash and brilliance made great decisions at the head of a long committee table. A man who thought a little of tomorrow, but much more of

today and the good things it offered. And one who would always find the price for those good things.

That much was evident in the matchless cut of White's clothing, in the grace and strength of the lean, well-manicured hands, in the merciless yet merry glint in the eyes that looked back into George's. It was when he looked into those eyes that George found himself fumbling for some thought that seemed to lie just beyond him. The image of himself was reflected so clearly in those eyes; perhaps it was not an image. Perhaps . . .

He was jarred from his train of thought by White's moving a piece. "Your move," said White carelessly, "that is, if you want to continue the game."

George looked at the board and found his position still secure. "Why shouldn't I want to continue the game? Our positions . . ."

"For the moment are equal," White interposed promptly. "What you fail to consider is the long view: I am playing to win; you are playing only to keep from losing."

"It seems very much the same thing," argued George.

"But it is not," said White, "and the proof of that lies in the fact that I shall win this game and every other game we ever play."

The effrontery of this staggered George. "Maroczy was a master who relied a good deal on defensive strategy," he protested, "and if you are familiar with his games . . ."

"I am exactly as well acquainted with Maroczy's games as you are," White observed, "and I do not hesitate to say that had we ever played, I should have beaten him every game as well."

George reddened. "You think very well of yourself, don't you," he said, and was surprised to see that instead of taking offense White was regarding him with a look of infinite pity.

"No," White said at last, "it is you who thinks well of me," and then as if he had just managed to see and avoid a neatly baited trap, he shook his head and drew his lips into a faintly sardonic grimace. "Your move," he said.

With an effort George put aside the vaguely troubling thoughts that clustered in his mind, and made the move. He made only a few after that when he saw clearly that he was hopelessly and ignominiously beaten. He was beaten

a second game, and then another after that, and then in the fourth game made a despairing effort to change his tactics. On his eleventh move he saw a devastating opportunity to go on the offensive, hesitated, refused it, and was lost again. At that George grimly set about placing the pieces back in their case.

"You'll be back tomorrow?" he said, thoroughly put out at White's obvious amusement.

"If nothing prevents me."

George suddenly felt cold with fear. "What could prevent you?" he managed to say.

White picked up the white queen and revolved it slowly between his fingers. "Louise, perhaps. What if she decided not to let you indulge yourself in this fashion?"

"But why? Why should she? She's never minded up to now!"

"Louise, my good man, is an extremely stupid and petulant woman . . ."

"Now, that's uncalled for!" George said, stung to the quick.

"And," White continued as if he had not been interrupted at all, "she is the master here. Such people now and then like to affirm their mastery seemingly for no reason at all. Actually, such gestures are a sop to their vanity—as necessary to them as the air they breathe."

George mustered up all the courage and indignation at his command. "If those are your honest opinions," he said bravely, "I don't think you have the right to come to this house ever again."

On the heels of his words Louise stirred in her armchair and turned toward him. "George," she said briskly, "that's quite enough of that game for the evening. Don't you have anything better to do with your time?"

"I'm putting everything away now," George answered hastily, but when he reached for the chessman still gripped between his opponent's fingers, he saw White studying Louise with a look that made him quail. White turned to him then, and his eyes were like pieces of dark glass through which one can see the almost unbearable light of a searing flame.

"Yes," White said slowly. "For what she is and what

she has done to you I hate her with a consuming hate. Knowing that, do you wish me to return?"

The eyes were not unkind when they looked at him now, George saw, and the feel of the chessman which White thrust into his hand was warm and reassuring. He hesitated, cleared his throat, then, "I'll see you tomorrow," he said at last.

White's lips drew into that familiar sardonic grimace. "Tomorrow, the next day, any time you want me," he said. "But it will always be the same. You will never beat me."

Time proved that White had not underestimated himself. And time itself, as George learned, was something far better measured by an infinite series of chess games, by the moves within a chess game, than by any such devices as a calendar or clock. The discovery was a delightful one; even more delightful was the realization that the world around him, when viewed clearly, had come to resemble nothing so much as an object seen through the wrong end of a binocular. All those people who pushed and prodded and poked and demanded countless explanations and apologies could be seen as sharp and clear as ever but nicely reduced in perspective, so that it was obvious that no matter how close they came, they could never really touch one.

There was a single exception to this: Louise. Every evening the world would close in around the chessboard and the figure of White lounging in the chair on the other side of it. But in a corner of the room sat Louise over her knitting, and the air around her was charged with a mounting resentment which would now and then eddy around George in the form of querulous complaints and demands from which there was no escape.

"How *can* you spend every minute at that idiotic game!" she demanded. "Don't you have anything to talk to me about?" And, in fact, he did not, any more than he had had since the very first years of his marriage when he had been taught that he had neither voice nor vote in running his home, that she did not care to hear about the people he worked with in his office, and that he could best

keep to himself any reflections he had on some subject which was, by her own word, Highbrow.

"And how right she is," White had once taken pains to explain derisively. "If *you* had furnished your home it would be uncluttered and graceful, and Louise would feel awkward and out of place in it. If she comes to know the people you work with too well, she might have to befriend them, entertain them, set her blatant ignorance before them for judgment. No, far better under the circumstances that she dwells in her vacuum, away from unhappy judgments."

As it always could, White's manner drove George to furious resentment. "For a set of opinions pulled out of a cocked hat that sounds very plausible," he burst out. "Tell me, how do you happen to know so much about Louise?"

White looked at him through veiled eyes. "I know only what you know," he said. "No more and no less."

Such passages left George sore and wounded, but for the sake of the game he endured them. When Louise was silent all the world retreated into unreality. Then the reality was the chessboard with White's hand hovering over it, mounting the attack, sweeping everything before it with a reckless brilliance that could only leave George admiring and dismayed.

In fact, if White had any weakness, George reflected mournfully, it was certainly not in his game, but rather in his deft and unpleasant way of turning each game into the occasion for a little discourse on the science of chess, a discourse which always wound up with some remarkably perverse and impudent reflections on George's personal affairs.

"You know that the way a man plays chess demonstrates that man's whole nature," White once remarked. "Knowing this, does it not strike you as significant that you always choose to play the defensive—and always lose?"

That sort of thing was bad enough, but White was at his most savage those times when Louise would intrude in a game: make some demand on George, or openly insist that he put away the board. Then White's jaw would set, and his eyes would flare with that terrible hate that always

seemed to be smouldering in them when he regarded the woman.

Once when Louise had gone so far as to actually pick up a piece from the board and bang it back into the case, White came to his feet so swiftly and menacingly that George leaped up to forestall some rash action. Louise glared at him for that.

"You don't have to jump like that," she snapped; "I didn't break anything. But I can tell you, George Huneker: if you don't stop this nonsense I'll do it for you. I'll break every one of these things to bits if that's what it takes to make you act like a human being again!"

"Answer her!" said White. "Go ahead, why don't you answer her!" And caught between these two fires George could do no more than stand there and shake his head helplessly.

It was this episode, however, which marked a new turn in White's manner: the entrance of a sinister purposefulness thinly concealed in each word and phrase.

"If she knew how to play the game," he said, "she might respect it, and you would have nothing to fear."

"It so happens," George replied defensively, "that Louise is too busy for chess."

White turned in his chair to look at her, and then turned back with a grim smile. "She is knitting. And, it seems to me, she is always knitting. Would you call that being busy?"

"Wouldn't you?"

"No," said White, "I wouldn't. Penelope spent her years at the loom to keep off importunate suitors until her husband returned. Louise spends her years at knitting to keep off life until death comes. She takes no joy in what she does; one can see that with half an eye. But each stitch dropping off the end of those needles brings her one instant nearer death, and, although she does not know it, she rejoices in it."

"And you make all that out of the mere fact that she won't play at chess?" cried George incredulously.

"Not alone chess," said White. "Life."

"And what do you mean by that word *life*, the way you use it?"

"Many things," said White. "The hunger to learn, the

desire to create, the ability to feel vast emotions. Oh, many things."

"Many things, indeed," George scoffed. "Big words, that's all they are." But White only drew his lips into that sardonic grimace and said, "Very big. Far too big for Louise, I'm afraid," and then by moving a piece forced George to redirect his attention to the board.

It was as if White had discovered George's weak spot, and took a sadistic pleasure in returning to probe it again and again. And he played his conversational gambits as he made his moves at chess: cruelly, unerringly, always moving forward to the inescapable conclusion with a sort of flashing audacity. There were times when George, writhing helplessly, thought of asking him to drop the subject of Louise once and for all, but he could never bring himself to do so. Something in the recesses of George's mind warned him that these conversational fancies were as much a part of White as his capacity for chess, and that if George wanted him at all it would have to be on his own terms.

And George did want him, wanted him desperately, the more so on such an evening as that dreadful one when he came home to tell Louise that he would not be returning to his office for a while. He had not been discharged, of course, but there had been something about his taking a rest until he felt in shape again. Although, he hastily added in alarm as he saw Louise's face go slack and pale, he never felt better in his life.

In the scene that followed, with Louise standing before him and passionately telling him things about himself that left him sick and shaken, he found White's words pouring through his mind in a bitter torrent. It was only when Louise was sitting exhausted in her armchair, her eyes fixed blankly on the wall before her, her knitting in her lap to console her, and he was at his table setting up the pieces, that he could feel the brackish tide of his pain receding.

"And yet there is a solution for all this," White said softly, and turned his eyes toward Louise. "A remarkably simple solution when one comes to think of it."

George felt a chill run through him. "I don't care to hear about it," he said hoarsely.

"Have you ever noticed, George," White persisted, "that that piddling, hackneyed picture on the wall, set in that Baroque monstrosity of a frame that Louise admires so much, is exactly like a pathetic little fife trying to make itself heard over an orchestra that is playing its loudest?"

George indicated the chessboard. "You have the first move," White said. "The game can wait, George. For the moment I'd much prefer to think what this room—this whole fine house, in fact—could be if it were all yours, George. Yours alone."

"I'd rather get on with the game," George pleaded.

"There's another thing, George," White said slowly, and when he leaned forward George saw his own image again staring at him strangely from those eyes, "another fine thing to think of. If you were all alone in this room in this house, why, there wouldn't be anyone to tell you when to stop playing chess. You could play morning, noon, and night, and all around to the next morning if you cared to!

"And that's not all, George. You can throw that picture out of the window and hang something respectable on the wall: a few good prints, perhaps—nothing extravagant, mind you—but a few good ones that stir you a bit the first time you come into the room each day and see them.

"And recordings! I understand they're doing marvelous things with recordings today, George. Think of a whole room filled with them: opera, symphony, concerto, quartet—just take your pick and play them to your heart's content!

The sight of his image in those eyes always coming nearer, the jubilant flow of words, the terrible meaning of those words set George's head reeling. He clapped his hands over his ears and shook his head frantically.

"You're mad!" he cried. "Stop it!" And then he discovered to his horror that even with his hands covering his ears he could hear White's voice as clearly and distinctly as ever.

"Is it the loneliness you're afraid of, George? But that's foolish. There are so many people who would be glad to

be your friends, to talk to you, and what's better, to listen to you. There are some who would even love you, if you chose."

"Loneliness?" George said unbelievingly. "Do you think it's loneliness I'm afraid of?"

"Then what is it?"

"You know as well as I," George said in a shaking voice, "what you're trying to lead me to. How could you expect me, expect any decent man, to be that cruel!"

White bared his teeth disdainfully. "Can you tell me anything more cruel than a weak and stupid woman whose only ambition in life was to marry a man infinitely superior to her and then cut him down to her level so that her weakness and stupidity could always be concealed?"

"You've got no right to talk about Louise like that!"

"I have every right," said White grimly, and somehow George knew in his heart that this was the dreadful truth. With a rising panic he clutched the edge of the table.

"I won't do it!" he said distractedly. "I'll never do it, do you understand!"

"But it will be done!" White said, and his voice was so naked with terrible decision that George looked up to see Louise coming toward the table with her sharp little footsteps. She stood over it, her mouth working angrily, and then through the confusion of his thoughts he heard her voice echoing the same words again and again. "You fool!" she was saying wildly. "It's this chess! I've had enough of it!" And suddenly she swept her hand over the board and dashed the pieces from it.

"No!" cried George, not at Louise's gesture, but at the sight of White standing before her, the heavy poker raised in his hand. "No!" George shouted again, and started up to block the fall of the poker, but knew even as he did so that it was too late.

Louise might have been dismayed at the untidy way her remains were deposited in the official basket; she would certainly have cried aloud (had she been in a condition to do so) at the unsightly scar on the polished woodwork made by the basket as it was dragged along the floor and borne out of the front door. Inspector Lund, how-

ever, merely closed the door casually behind the little cortege and turned back to the living room.

Obviously, the Lieutenant had completed his interrogation of the quiet little man seated in the chair next to the chess table, and obviously the Lieutenant was not happy. He paced the center of the floor, studying his notes with a furrowed brow, while the little man watched him, silent and motionless.

"Well?" said Inspector Lund.

"Well," said the Lieutenant, "there's just one thing that doesn't tie in. From what I put together, here's a guy who's living his life all right, getting along fine, and all of a sudden he finds he's got another self, another personality. He's like a man split into two parts, you might say."

"Schizoid," remarked Inspector Lund. "That's not unusual."

"Maybe not," said the Lieutenant. "Anyhow, this other self is no good at all, and sure enough it winds up doing this killing."

"That all seems to tie in," said Inspector Lund. "What's the hitch?"

"Just one thing," the Lieutenant stated: "a matter of identity." He frowned at his notebook, and then turned to the little man in the chair next to the chess table. "What did you say your name was?" he demanded.

The little man drew his lips into a faintly sardonic grimace of rebuke. "Why, I've told you that so many times before, Lieutenant, surely you couldn't have forgotten it again." The little man smiled pleasantly. "My name is White."

BIG, WIDE, WONDERFUL WORLD

by CHARLES E. FRITCH

The Fritch canon includes much science fiction, a good portion of it orthodox. Occasionally, however, this nice fellow surprises people—himself in particular—with something so far from orthodox that classification becomes pointless. BIG, WIDE, WONDERFUL WORLD takes place in the future, but it is no more "sf" than is THE FOUR FACES OF EVE, for the inner reality with which it deals is very real indeed.

Chuck got the idea. "Let's have a nightmare," he said.

We looked at him, wondering if he could be serious. He was, or at least he looked like he was, which in his case was the same thing.

"You crazy or something, boy?" I said. "A nightmare? Count me out. I came close a couple times, but no more. Not ever again."

"Aw, you're chicken," he said. "How about you, Bill? Len?"

Bill looked at me and at Chuck and then at Len and then at Chuck again. He rubbed his stubble of beard uncertainly. "I—I don't know, Chuck. It—it's risky stuff. I've seen guys go into nightmares." He shuddered at the memory. "It's not pretty."

"Of course, it's not pretty. Nobody said it was. It's the excitement, the thrills. Why do you suppose they play Russian roulette?"

"At least with Russian roulette," Len put in, "you're either dead or you're not. Having a nightmare you just *wish* you were dead."

"OK, look," Chuck said, and I could see he was trying hard not to be exasperated, "what can we lose? We've got our needles"—he patted the one at his belt—"and if any of us is too far gone, one of the others can give him the hypo."

The way he said it, it sounded pretty reasonable.

"I'm with you," Len said.

"OK," Bill said, "I'll go along with it."

"Me, too," I said, without hesitating. I didn't like it, but I had no choice. I would have to give in, so I figured I might as well do it right away so they wouldn't think I was scared.

I *was* scared, though. Plenty. I remember once I forgot my needle when I went out for a walk, and the whistle sounded for Injection and when I reached down to my belt I found the needle wasn't there. Boy, was I scared then. I ran for home as fast as I could, but before I got there the nightmare began and I felt cold and sick to my stomach and I saw the world around me start to waver like a reflection in a muddy stream of water. It was terrible.

It would be terrible now, too, but I had to stick it out.

"OK, then," Chuck said, consulting his wristwatch, "here's what we'll do. The Injection whistle's gonna blow in about half an hour. We'll go over by the woods there so no one'll see us and lie down; you can take a nightmare a lot easier if you're lying down. Then, when the whistle blows we'll just stay there. We won't do anything. We won't even take our needles from the holster, got that? We'll just sit there and have ourselves a nightmare and see who can take it the longest."

We nodded. I hoped I wasn't really as pale and scared-looking as I felt. I knew the one who could take it the longest wouldn't be me, but I prayed I wouldn't be the first to needle myself. Let Bill or Len do it, I thought, it wouldn't be so bad if one of them cracked first. . . .

We went over to the woods and sprawled on the ground out of sight of anyone who might pass by. It was a beautiful day, and it was a big, wide, wonderful world in which to be alive. The trees were blossoming with spring, and the grass was green and cool, and the air was fresh and clean. I wished I didn't have to go through with this. But I did, and I forced the wish from my mind. Soon it would be over, I told myself; it would be over and done and in the past and that would be that.

I must have dozed, for I came awake with a start when the whistle blew.

Chuck looked at his watch. "Right on the button," he said proudly. "We've got about five minutes."

Five minutes never passed so slowly. We sat staring at each other. All of us were pretty nervous. I found myself tearing a leaf into shreds and discarded it and wished I'd kept it because I wanted to do something so I wouldn't have to think of what was going to happen.

"It should be starting now," Chuck said.

"Yes," Bill breathed. "Things are starting to get a little fuzzy. How about you, Len? Anything?"

"No, not yet. . . . Wait! Yes, it's starting."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't speak. Around me, the world was beginning to come apart at the seams. *The needle!* a voice cried inside me. *No!* I thought, fighting it.

I felt myself getting cold, shivering. My stomach began tying itself into knots. Desperately, I looked at the others. One of them had to do it first. *Needle yourself!* I thought at Bill. *Needle yourself!* I thought at Len. I looked at Chuck. He was trembling. His face was distorted in pain. I closed my eyes, balled my fists and struck at the ground.

Someone screamed.

I forced my eyes open. It was Len. He had staggered erect, was pawing frantically at the hypo in his belt. Suddenly the pain seemed more bearable. Len would be the first, I thought unashamedly, and I the second. His hypo came loose, flashing in the sunlight, and then it dropped from his shaking hands into the grass somewhere. He cried out in despair and dropped to all fours.

I'll help you, Len, I thought. But I couldn't move. The world was pressed down on me, knotting my stomach, forcing the blood to pound in my head. The air swirled in muddy currents, and there was the smell of burned wood and the odor of decay. I forced myself to one knee.

The world was a nightmare. The Earth was a black, ugly thing now. The forest was a graveyard of charred stumps. The buildings in the distance were not buildings at all but skeletons of buildings. I felt sick.

I turned to look at Chuck and Bill and Len. They were hideous things, pale, scarred, disfigured horribly, like grubs of humans produced by some atomic war. I vomited.

The needle! I thought frantically. I got it out of the holster with a trembling hand, fearing at any moment I might drop it and lose the precious drug inside and have to spend forever in this nightmare world. I jabbed myself,

and the liquid flowed warmly into my veins, and I dropped back on the ground to relax and wait.

The trembling ceased. The dark mists parted before the warm rays of the sun, and the air became fresh again and the grass and trees green, the buildings whole. I breathed a sigh of relief and stood up.

Len was lying face down, unmoving, his arms outstretched and his fingers extended to within an inch of his shattered needle. Bill was sitting beside a tree, an empty needle in one hand; he was panting, eyes closed, unable to speak. Chuck was screaming.

I pulled Chuck to his feet and hit him as hard as I could. He lay still and moaned. I fumbled at his needle holster, got the hypo out and with a steady hand shot the fluid into his arm. He relaxed and after a moment his eyes fluttered open. There was fear in those eyes, then relief as they saw the world was good again.

I went over to see how Len was.

"I never want to go through that again," Bill said. He held his head in his hands and said it over and over and over again. "I never want to go through that again. I never want to go through that again."

"I didn't think it would be quite so bad," Chuck said, almost apologetically. "Everybody OK?"

"Len's dead," I told him.

"Oh," he said.

"Look, Chuck," I said. "You're bigger than I am and older, but if you ever suggest something like this again I'm going to beat you into a bloody mess!"

Chuck looked up at me, at my clenching fists, and over at Len, and he knew I meant it. He nodded slowly.

"C'mon, then," I said. "We've got to get Len back home."

Together the three of us carried the body into the city, through the big, wide, wonderful world of tall trees and green grass and fresh air and shining buildings.

THE NIGHT OF THE GRAN BAILE MASCARA

by WHIT BURNETT

Dreams are almost never useful to writers except as springboards, alas. Things would be a lot simpler if it were otherwise. But somehow those "perfect little stories" never seem to come to anything. You leap up, grab a pencil, jot down the vision and go back to sleep, certain that your unconscious has just cracked the New Yorker for you; then, in the morning, you look at the note you've jotted ("Guy alone on desert . . . hears telephone . . . sees mother, dead forty years . . . screams") and you go back to the hard work of creating. Still, you never stop hoping for that "perfect little story." I know I'll never *stop hoping for it now, because THE NIGHT OF THE GRAN BAILE MASCARA is exactly that. Whit Burnett swears it is no more than a literal transcription of a dream, or nightmare . . .*

I am kept in this place as a prisoner. I have lost track of exactly how long I've been held here. But that—does not very much matter. I am treated well and persons attend to my wants with courteous regularity and precision. What I fail to get is understanding. For the Spanish are a peculiar people; I doubt if they understand themselves—least of all me.

I am not a Spaniard, either, but was born in America. Though perhaps I am not wholly an American; maybe there is something other in me, something Russian, wilder, clearer. I do not know. But now and then, although I am still a young man, I have been able to see with a sharper clarity of vision than any others I have known, with a curious almost Fourth Dimensional eye. And I sometimes think that all the world is one great diseased mind, and only occasionally does an individual free himself from the compass of its illusions.

But this is aimless speculation. And not my story. For I

want now to relate my experience, which has no duplicate in modern times.

It began in Toledo. Of that I'm quite sure. For, with my companion, an artist seeking picturesque spots for illustrative sketches, I had been in Spain not much longer than a week. From the French border, through Barcelona and Madrid, we had gone directly there, you see, seeking in the old towers and gates and castles bordering the Tajo some quickening of our feelings for all Spain. And the events I am to tell of occurred on the night of the *gran baile mascara,* for which the town, the day of our arrival, was garlanded, expectant, tense and alive.

Yet, perched on the top of an eminence overlooking the muddy curling snake of the river that swirls about its base on three steep rocky sides, Toledo affected me oddly as we passed through its gates, and when I stepped from the conveyance that had brought us from the station, it was was if I had stepped into a kind of walled-up cage. But the sensation was very momentary and quickly dispelled in the noisy, moving bustle of the crowds in the old *plaza de Zocodover,* which was filling with its sauntering crowds of Spaniards who turn out to stroll and smile and amble along just before dusk each day.

As my friend, an Italian, was negotiating for rooms, I stood outside to watch the people: cadets in their bright infantry uniforms, *guardias civiles* in their dark blue capes trimmed with the blood-red dear to Spain; the old, shriveled men and women of other times and other generations; beshawled crones with sinewy faces and wide, swinging skirts; noisy, carnival-spirited boys with masks or blackened faces; blanket-carrying peasants; basket-laden matrons and maids with great water-filled earthen *botijas.*

One old man—not, indeed, so very old—impressed me singularly. Dressed in a blanket cape of black, which he held around his chest with one bony hand, frayed of boot and with a battered hat cocked over his left eye, he turned on me a fleeting, curious, bearded face, and passed on. His features were caught in a semi-levitous mood, his crooked brow and sharp brown eye and great descending bulbous nose all combined with a general air to make him seem strangely unreal and realistic at the same time.

My friend came out of the little hotel.

"*Complet,*" he said. "Rooms all taken for the ball tonight."

I hardly heard him.

"Just now," I said, "I have seen Menipo."

"Menipo?"

"Yes," I answered. "By Velasquez."

"Oh," he said, "Toledo is full of types. A person could spend a year here and never due them justice. You mean the old fellow, full length, in the panel that always seem to companion Velasquez's Æsop? Marvelous type!"

We went to another hotel. Also full. We were referred then to a smaller place, a *posada,* "for man and beast," and in a short time we had engaged two *habitaciones* in the Posada de la Sangre on the Calle de Cervantes, through the Arco de la Sangre off the public square and almost in the shadow of the great murderous-spired fortress of the Alcazar.

Although by this time it was late twilight, there was still a fair amount of visibility and my friend, throwing down his bags in his room, left the *posada* at once with his portfolio under his arm, planning, as was his custom, to make a quick survey of the locality at once so that in the morning, with better light, he might go directly to his subject.

And I was left alone in the ancient inn.

From the Zocodover I could hear the blended noise of the crowds of Toledanos, whose gay spirits were quickening with the approach of night. Across the narrow *calle,* a light had appeared in a window, and inside I could see a Spanish woman sitting in a corner sewing on a huge white cloth, unmarked and immaculate as a shroud. Her face was full of character, lined and reminiscent of life. Her silent, steady needle-plying fascinated me, and I stood watching her from my darkened little room a long time before turning on my light (for this Fourteenth Century hostelry, remodeled since the days of Cervantes and his squire and serf, boasted at least this much of modern convenience).

Tired as I was from the railroad journey from Madrid, my mind was far from fatigued, and as I lay resting on the bed, scrutinizing my narrow little whitewashed room,

whose red flag-stones, worn by generations, sloped weirdly to the door and to the balcony overlooking the *patio,* I was suddenly moved by a great desire to enter into the spirit and activity of the town while in Toledo, to know these people, or at least to be with and a part of them.

What better opportunity could have been made to my order, I thought, than this very night, when all the town is masked and festive for the *gran baile mascara?*

I was stirred by the thought and hurriedly washing and brushing up, I decided to purchase a costume at once and make ready for the ball, which was to be held, the announcements said, in the Teatro de la Rojas.

I tugged at the huge old-fashioned lock on my door, which yielded with irritating reluctance only after I had had to put in the tremendous key upside down and turn it backward to disengage the latch.

I must describe briefly the Posada of the Blood of Christ, for it struck me so forcibly as a mad-house of architecture, or, more exactly, as a sane house that, through the weary acquiring of years, had fallen into architectural senility and despair. Its rooms, all narrow and cell-like as my own, were built three stories high around an open air court below, upon whose cobblestones were deployed the cluttery old carts and wagons of the guests, mostly peasants and out-of-townsmen. To the south, and off the main court, were the stables for the mules, the patient *burros* of Spain, and from these quarters came the strong and piercing smell of wet straw and manure.

Above me were the now clear stars, shining in a sky more deeply blue than the depths of a grottoed sea. A little light beside a water trough in the *patio* threw shadows behind the antique columns supporting the balcony and made a few old benches lifelike as recumbent sleepers. Standing at the north balcony of the court, I was surprised at the angles of the floor I stood on; it sloped almost precariously to the wobbly pillars, and I smiled at the thought that not even the strongest *vino de Jerez* such as we had at a café before entering the *posada* could have induced such reckless equilibrium in my mind.

Here had Cervantes stayed in 16-something, and written his "Novelas Ejamplares," centered in the square outside. Had he indeed, I wondered? Was this house then

so sloped, so fallen in at the roof, so weak at the knees? Doubtless not. I stood musing, watching the walls around the *patio,* absorbing the unusual silence and black desertion of the place and staring at the opposite side of the balcony whose death-white surface was ribbed vertically with the shadows of the upright balcony railing. . . .

"I could go," I thought, "as a matador. But everyone goes like that. And there are so many masked balls always in Spain. Something different, now. . . . A pirate? Old-fashioned. A clown? Pierrot? A peasant? . . . How unimaginative the mind is," I concluded, "in a new situation."

I shrugged my shoulders and walked along the western side of the balcony to the doorway leading to the ground floor. I will wait and see, I decided, what I can find at a costumer's.

At the last step but one, the curious revelatory idea that is essential in an understanding of my plight, occurred to me.

"Go," said something deep inside me, "as Menipo!"

"I will," I said.

And, as if by some strange affiliation of will and chance, I walked straight to the water-trough near the doorway leading into the stables and took down from a huge spike a great, dark-hued blanket-coat that hung there, threw it round my shoulders, and pulled over my head some unknown owner's cold-banded hat.

I lacked now only a beard to be as Menipo.

I was exhilarated so disguised suddenly, strangely let out of myself, in a manner none may understand except those who have experienced it.

As I stood at the entrance to the stables, which looked through the *patio* and out into the Calles de Cervantes, my mind was divided between the necessity of a beard for my disguise and with contemplation of the sudden activity in the street outside.

From the Gobierno Militar, passing up the narrow aisle-like *calles, guardias civiles,* in their great capes were moving in strange groups westward to the Arco de la Sangre that entered onto the Plaza. There was nothing so strange in their going there, but it seemed that either they too

were affected by the *mascara* spirit, or that something was wrong with my eyesight, for these usually so precise and dignified police servants were beyond all dignity now and lurched and swung along with an abandon I had never seen before. Three or four, appearing at intervals, even made light of their stature, apparently ridiculing the very build that had assured them a government post in Spain, for they had bent their knees nearly to the ground and were waddling away, their legs hidden under their capes so that they appeared like absurd dwarfs beside the others.

I could not help laughing as I stood there, safely protected from conspicuousness by my own new trappings. I walked across the court to the outer doorway, and at that instant, from the Zocodover came the sudden strains of band music, which drew more and more people through the channel of the street and thence through the arch and into the hidden crowds. Behind me, passed some peasants from the interior of the *posada;* but I did not turn around. A second or two later I saw even the proprietor himself, with his apron around his middle, go up the street. I then looked behind me, and found myself almost dreadfully conscious of complete isolation.

But, as I stared into the shadows behind me, I discerned one significant dark shape. It was a man. He was emerging from the stables. Wrapped like myself in a blanket cape, he came with appalling slowness toward me, slowly but directly, inevitably, like a heavily looming mountain.

Fearful that he might bump into me, I decided to step out into the doorway. His slow, determined stride came on. There was no avoiding a collision. His face was down, hidden by the angle of his hat. A weighty oppressiveness settled on me. He was assuredly bound to walk right over me. I could not move.

With great effort, I stepped, at last, to one side. But he did not pass. He lifted his head, and I saw the features of the man with the crooked brow and the great descending nose. It was Menipo!

"*Buenos,*" I mumbled in greeting, and was for leaving.

He made no response.

Instead, he walked closer toward me until he was so near I felt his breath in my face. Then, muttering words or sounds I could not understand, he pushed me back-

ward, slowly, grossly, with his bent arm beneath his cape elbowing at my stomach.

Backward I moved, unable, through surprise or something else, to offer any resistance. Further and further back I went, away from the door and into the shadows of the frightful court.

After a century of time, it seemed, I found my tongue and what few Spanish words I knew that I hoped would cover the situation.

"What do you want?" I cried. "Stop this!"

He laughed, mumbled, and then talked, in a disordered, broken, high-pitched voice that rasped and scratched my ears. The man, I was convinced, was mad.

Could I offer him money, I wondered.

I made out one word here and there. And then:

"*Pasaporte!*" he said.

It was now my turn to laugh, if I had had the courage. *Pasaporte!* Passport, indeed. He was like the multitudinous officials that board the trains in and out of Madrid, seemingly at random, to scrutinize the documents of the entrants. This was Spain. The man was an official? Possibly. But where his uniform? The Spanish are a funny people. . . . My mind began to lag in thoughts, my body to fail to function quickly as I continued to back and back like a tired horse.

He was no official. He was a madman, and my very life in danger. I should spring at his throat, I thought. I should kill him, lest he kill me. I looked sidewise, hopefully, into the street. Deserted as the court. I was helpless. I had no weapon. What lay behind his own great coat, I could not tell.

Then, stumbling on a cobblestone, I fell backward on the uneven flooring and struck my head an astounding blow on the stones.

Fortunately, however, I did not lose consciousness, for I remember that even in falling I had the presence of mind to cry for help.

And added, too, "a madman, madman! *Loco, loco!*"

That I did not lose consciousness was apparent to me as soon as I fell, for looking up from the cold stones at the man above me, I could see at his elbow something I had not observed before. He was standing near the outer

entrance to the court, beside a little wall shelf, on which reposed an open ledger and beside it a bottle of ink and a couple of pens.

I remember, too, that this seemed unusual to me, almost as if the book were an American hotel register, and thus quite out of place in Spain where the guests must fill out little slips for the police instead of merely signing their names in the book.

Beside the ink-bottle there were three other objects. A hammer. A hatchet. And a small, yellow wooden barrel I assumed to be filled with tacks.

I took these objects into my mind in a glance. As I did, my frightful torturer picked up the hammer and the hatchet. I saw the keen blade shining in the dim light, and I felt as one must feel who stands on the edge of his own death.

If I could divert this maniac's attention—! How? My mind strove like a tugging animal.

"The tacks!" I screamed. "The tacks!"

He turned his bearded face to peer at the stand. Then he took from the tiny barrel one of the tacks. My plan was working! Renewed strength came into me, almost enough to enable me to lift my head. But not enough it seemed. I sank back upon the stones, beside the smelly bristles of some dirty straw.

But his simple child's mind was occupied. I was glad. Perhaps he would spend time trying to drive these tacks, diverted from my case. And my cry for help would bring me aid. But when? Why did no one come? I listened, terrified, for some friendly sound in the street, some footfall in the house. But no sound came from the gloomy inn, none from the town but the misplaced music of the distant band in the Zocodover.

These crazy Spaniards, with their *fêtes!*

He scrutinized the tack in his hand. He weighed it carefully and then pinched it in two fingers and lifted the hatchet in his right hand. Above the tack it poised an instant, and then descended.

No brittle metal sound came back. The tack bounced away and fell beside me, soundless, springing back weirdly into the air, and then was lost again on the ground where I lay.

The tacks were rubber!

I knew the tacks were rubber by no unusual faculty of mind. Who has not seen those insane products of the notion stores of America: ink blots made out of black celluloid to sell to juvenile minds for ten cents, cigars that explode when half-smoked, imitation flies to pin on one's lapel and amuse one's friends? Rubber tacks!

Betrayed as I was by this heinous trick of fate, I sensed then the utter uselessness of living further. Why not capitulate? Why not—for a tack's sake as for a woman's, or a country's, or a people's, for art's sake, Menipo's or for God's?

But it was strange withal, I mused, that they were really rubber tacks. Before I had reasoned out an action, I found I was on my feet beside the madman, absorbed with him in examination of these important objects.

He threw down the hatchet. It clattered on the stones. Then he tried to place a tack with the hammer.

The tack bounced away, and then, reaching again into the barrel, I saw him draw out of it half a dozen six-inch spikes, glistening with true steel. These were no rubber counterfeits. And then, ending all child's play at the shelf, he came at me, hammer in one hand, and these cruel crucifixion nails glistening in the other.

"Now you," he said. "*Su cabeza! Su corazon!*"

I got that much. My head whirled with the pain of my fall and with the excitement and fear of my plight. He was going to drive these nails into my head, into my heart! I knew this as well as if he had said it a dozen times. From his eyes to mine danced a message of terror that drained me of my elements, of reason, caution, hope and courage.

I crouched. I lay down. Flattened myself, as before, on my back. If I could worm away, I thought, from this towering oppressor! My hand touched the hatchet, and I hurled it with the crying speed of a cyclone.

It struck his head and the blood came. Rich and red as the Spanish flag, deep hued as bull's blood on a black hide.

And then occurred what frightens me now, but did not then.

I had not killed Menipo. He reached for the hatchet,

fallen again on the floor. But when he lifted his head, I saw then a great change in the maniac. Though blood was on his face and his hair and beard were tangled in a wildness, unearthly and mad, there was a new clarity in his eyes. He looked at the hatchet in his hands with wonder and then down at me.

Now, I thought, it is over. With calm precision he will slay me, hammering my head into the cobblestones. But, I still have a voice. Ten seconds may save me.

"*Loco, loco!*" I shouted. "Help!"

And at that moment help arrived. I saw the white movement of the proprietor's apron as he turned the corner street to the doorway. But the madman had seen the movement, too. And on my chest I felt the hatchet fall. My fingers clutched it hopefully.

"Who called out?" roared the heavy-voiced proprietor. "Who is a madman here?"

Who, indeed? I could not lift my head. Much time must certainly have passed with that great giant looming over me. I felt strangely relaxed, almost at home resting on the floor, like a worm, like a dog, smelling, with only half my consciousness, the ground, the chill stone and straw.

I lacked a beard, though, I recalled. That was it. If I had had the beard when starting out . . . I clutched at the straw on the floor and tucked some under my chin. At a *mascara* you know, it is the quaintness that attracts. And one must be imaginative.

I looked up.

"Who," cried the proprietor, "started all this? Who is crazy here?"

I could not answer him in words that he would know. My Spanish took queer turns and starts. I mumbled all the tongues I knew.

And then I heard a voice by the register shelf that was like the voice of myself, calm and well-poised as when I ordered dinner in a great place. And the voice was that of Menipo, the madman.

"There," he was saying, "is the madman. He is crazy—see him on the floor there, like a dog. I was passing by, on my way to the *gran baile mascara,* when the dog there sprang upon me with a hatchet. Look at my cheek here. Call a guard, and lock him safe in jail."

This is what I heard. Everyone heard it. Could I deny it?

I clutched at the proprietor's apron.

"Look," I said, "at my beard here. *I* am the real Menipo. How could I have hurt that thing? He is a picture by Velasquez. You are idiots. You are all mad!"

And so they are, though no one will see this but myself.

A PUNISHMENT TO FIT THE CRIMES

by RICHARD M. GORDON

This is perhaps the most consciously wrought story in the anthology, yet it springs—as you shall see—from an area far beneath the conscious, the place where visions, revelations and sudden truths dwell. I doubt that A PUNISHMENT TO FIT THE CRIMES will remind you of anything else in literature; I also doubt that you will escape a slight shudder of familiarity, as from remembering, abruptly, and vaguely, a long forgotten resolution.

"Oyez! Oyez! The court is now in session!" chanted the red-robed figure with ritual solemnity in the nearly empty chamber. He was powerfully built, handsome, and lithe in his movements before the shadowed dock except that he favored one leg ever so slightly. His judicial wig, perfectly expressive of the dignity of his person and position, stood just a little away from his forehead as if displaced by a pair of short, unobtrusive horns, which, as a matter of fact, it was.

"This court will hear no plea of innocent," he continued, "and will render no verdict of not guilty. However, the Accused is an Englishman and must have a trial. I am the prosecutor; I am the judge; and I am the jury. I will pronounce sentence and carry it out in due course. It would be inappropriate for me to say, 'May God have mercy on his soul.'

"Before I proceed to the calling of the first witness, I should like to comment on the promptness and dispatch with which the prisoner has been brought to the bar. The crimes of which he is accused were committed a mere seventy-odd years ago, and, of course, he has been in our possession for even less time than that. Nevertheless, his processing has been completed; those who were accessories after the fact are in our hands; and there is no need to extradite any of the witnesses against him because they too are in our jurisdiction. We take pride in the fact

that no one in any way connected with this case has escaped us. The whole affair is much more neatly tied up than usual, and we are ready to proceed.

"I call the first witness." The dim shape of a woman appeared in the box. "You have been chosen from among many who have knowledge of these crimes and whose testimony would be essentially the same as yours. We will not waste our time on the others; the weight of your evidence will be multiplied by the number of those whose stories can differ from yours only in their names and ages. Our case rests on you; you know what is required of you and can imagine the consequences if it is not forthcoming.

"Doyousolemnlysweartotellthetruththewholetruthandnothingbutthetruth, so help you?"

"I do."

"Your name, calling, and address?"

"My name was Annie Chapman. My trade was streetwalker, and I plied that trade in the stinking, teeming alleys of the lowest part of London. My price was what I could get—a few farthings, sixpence, perhaps a shilling. I had no fixed address.

"Annie Chapman—even now more than seventy years later, my name is remembered. It is true that in life I was ragged and filthy, diseased, drunken, always hungry, always cold, often abused. It is true that I was scorned by the respectable women of the neighborhood, mocked by their children, and cheated by their men, but how many of them are remembered after seventy years? You see, on the night of September Eighth, 1888, in Hanbury Street, Whitechapel, when I was forty-seven years old, the Defendant slit my throat, sliced open my abdomen, and made off with one of my ovaries and three brass rings. By killing me, he made me immortal."

The handsome face of the prosecutor took on a reflective look. He raised his hand, and the shade of Annie Chapman fell silent.

"Why did you do it?" he asked. "We understand the Accused; in our preparation for his trial, we learned what there is to know about him—who he was, why he chose to commit the crimes he did in the way he did, and the reason he suddenly retired after his career of carnage and terror, unidentified and unexplained. We understand

him, but we do not understand you. You—Emma Smith and Martha Tabram, Mary Nichols and Annie Chapman, Long Liz Stride and Catherine Eddowes and Mary Jane Kelly—all of you who paid him for immortality in the transient coin of passing gratification, you are here for reasons unconnected with *his* crimes. We have examined the mind of the murderer, but we cannot fathom the minds of the victims. Whitechapel and the whole East End of London were in panic as he struck again and again, always in the same area, always at the same women. Didn't you feel it? Why did you continue to walk the streets at night alone, courting the coppers of all men and the steel of one? Speak for them all, witness; why did you do it?"

"It was our life," said Annie Chapman simply. "It was our life, and like farmers on the flank of Vesuvius, we had to live it or die; we lived it, and we died.

"We bear him no grudge. Poor fellow, he did himself more harm than he did us. It was over for us in a moment—a mere slash of a knife across our throats, and after that, if he chose to indulge himself on our bodies, why it was no more than he had paid to do, paid like the countless others before him. It was the way we made our living."

"The witness will confine herself to the questions I ask and not venture into matters of opinion or forgiveness. Forgiveness is not the business of this court," interrupted the prosecutor severely. "I understand the Defendant stole from you certain items of value?"

"Nothing of value, sir, only some brass rings and my life. And what was life? The autopsy surgeon who finished what the Defendant had started said that my body showed signs of great deprivation, that I was badly fed, that I was bruised. The night I was killed, I was turned out into the deadly dark streets from a common lodging house for lack of fourpence to pay for my bed. Yes, I bear him no grudge; he was just part of a foolish destiny which was misread for me in a cracked teacup."

"Explain, please."

"Once I was an honest wife living in Windsor with a respectable husband, a coachman who was dull but good, good but very dull. I was a romantic—aging, searching,

unfulfilled. A gypsy read my fortune in the tea leaves and saw—need I say it?—a tall dark man who would change my life. One day, a tall dark man did appear, and I left my short, fair, good husband and went away with him—I, a woman of forty-two, no beauty, but a fine figure of a woman, aging and discontented—I went with him, searching for romance like a green girl. It was not long before he left me. He changed my life; that much of the gypsy's prophecy was true.

"For a time, my husband, the coachman, dull but very good, sent me ten shillings a week, but then he died. I was left to sell my body in courtyards and arcades for miserable farthings; I had already sold my soul for the fraudulent romance of a gypsy charlatan.

"For it was the promise of romance that made me leave the humdrum of Windsor for the lodging houses of Thawl Street and Dorset Street and the lanes and alleys of Spitalfields and Whitechapel. The gypsy never promised fame; she never told me that seventy years after my death people would still know my name and wonder about what had happened to me. I believed in romance; I would never have believed in immortality.

"Romance! When I was lucky I went drunken to a filthy bed and awoke with coppers for rum at the Ringers or the Five Bells. Rum was my only friend and my dearest enemy. Oh, I pursued romance to the bitter end, the very depths! I wore three brass rings as if they were gold, and I sang sad songs in a cracked voice and wept at their false sentiment—'It was only a violet I plucked from Mother's grave . . .' "

"Spare us, please," said the figure in red. "You may be excused. We will attend to you later." And the woman who had been Annie Chapman faded from the box.

"We rest our case," intoned the prosecutor as he ascended to the bench and assumed the role of judge. "We have proved beyond doubt what was already known beyond doubt: the Defendant murdered Annie Chapman and the others, women unknown to him, in a manner calculated to terrify a whole city and to horrify succeeding generations. Despite our reputation, it is neither our function nor our desire to reward evil. If the Defendant

wishes to make a statement before we pass sentence, he may do so."

From the darkness of the dock rose a face so ravaged by an unspeakable disease as to be unrecognizable as an individual or, indeed, even as a human being.

"Why am I here? Why am I made to stand this mockery of a trial? Hell I expect, but why am I singled out for special punishment? I did not escape retribution on earth; I have been punished humanly and inhumanly. I plead that my debt has been paid. I do not demand justice; I beg for mercy."

The judge laughed. "We deal only in justice here. However, if you think you can soften our heart, proceed."

"Let me go back then. Let me speak to you from the damnation which was mine before my death. Let me prove that my punishment on earth was crueler than any which you might devise in Hell. Let me show that my debt has been paid so that I may share in the general damnation of all sinners rather than suffer alone a particular fate which will again make me a stranger to mankind."

"You may go back," said the judge. "Return to the years that intervened between the death of Mary Jane Kelly and your own. Speak to us from there."

From the dock, the voice, echoing back through the years, was dull with puzzlement and pain, but in its very dullness, fear and horror screamed in imprisoned agony as the halting words asked questions of a fugitive self that was afraid to answer them.

"Where am I? Why am I here? The iron bars at my window are artfully wrought in the fanciful shapes of flowers that do not grow, of birds that neither fly nor sing, and of animals that do not leap nor love nor, indeed, live. The bars are gilded, but they are still iron and still bars. The locks on my door, they say, are to keep out the terrors and affrights of the world, but they also keep *me* in. My gaolers are called nurse, companion, mother, but they are still gaolers. They say that I am ill, but I am a prisoner. Though my bonds be of the softest silk, they are as of the strongest steel; I am a prisoner.

"I do not know how it happened. There are no mirrors in my cell wherein I can divine the reason for my being here. It is buried in the barren wastes of my mind, and I

spend my days frantically digging, frantically tearing at the bleeding soil of an injured brain hoping to find the answer and fearing what I might find. I dare not succeed, and I dare not fail, and I am lost in the nothingness between.

"It was my hands that sinned, not I. I look at my hands and marvel that they are still unstained by the crimes which they, not I, committed, and which I cannot now remember. Even now as I speak, my words seem strange to me, the product of my hands, of another and alien personality.

"Who am I? Once I was free. I remember I walked in the world beyond this cell as John S——, Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, respected and loved, healing the sick and mourning the dead. And I remember that I was also young Saucy Jackie, Gentleman, and only slightly—only youthfully—wicked. Once there was gaiety and wine and the friendship of men and the love of women. I remember the strengths and lusts of youth, the high-life of the West End and the low-life of the East—the oat-sowing evenings which began in the glittering salons of Mayfair and ended stupidly in silly, drunken, sordid commerce with pitiful drabs in the squalid alleys of Whitechapel and Spitalfields.

"There was a time when my mother did not weep for her son, and when the gilded iron at my window formed a mere decorative grate, a bar to intrusion instead of to escape. There was a time when I was a single, unfragmented being, when my hands did not make my mind shudder and flee into the darkness, the most miserable victim of my own unremembered crimes.

"They say that I am ill. It is true; I am ill. But the dread and revulsion I see in the eyes of my attendants are not caused by the loathesome disease which rots my body and turns my brain to corruption. I am ill and horrible to look at, but that does not explain why I am denied a razor to shave my beard and a knife to cut my food. Do they fear that I might commit some small crime against myself? Or can it be that they would guard against some horrid abomination to themselves?

"I am ill, but that is not why I am a prisoner; that is not why the doctor comes, a smiling executioner, speak-

ing to me as if he were a man and I were a man like him, smiling and exchanging false encouragements with my gaolers, smiling and lying, smiling and hating the obvious wealth that has bought him and his silence and his smiles.

"Perhaps he will come soon, bearing his gift of sleep, of sleep in a bottle, of sleep without dreams. Once, I remember, sleep came as a friend, but now there are dreams which have robbed me of my freedom and have made my hands the enemies of my mind. Now there are dreams, and I awake feeling my guilt but without the memory of my crimes.

"So here am I with my bars and my locks and my dreams. Here am I, knowing that I might be saved if I remember, knowing that I might be lost if I remember. I *must* remember! The only thing worse than remembering is not remembering. Who am I? Where am I? Why am I here? If I could remember, perhaps I could repent. I *must* remember! A crime out of mind is a crime out of conscience. I *must* repent! For in repentance is the salvation of the soul, and my mind and body are already damned.

"I must remember. The dreams—the fog in Whitechapel, always the same—myself, nameless and faceless in the fog, always the same—but each night a different cowering figure—each night the flash of my knife in the fog—and then—AND THEN! . . ."

The tormented voice stopped abruptly and then started again on a note of despair: "Where am I? Why am I here? The iron bars at my window are artfully wrought in the fanciful shapes . . ."

The judge broke the spell. He had been listening intently. Now he clapped his hands with a sharp report which shut off the dismal flow of words from the dock.

"Come back through the years and hear my sentence; return and hear your doom! The punishment meted out to you on earth by your mother for love and your attendants for gain is indeed as just and as cruel as any we could devise here. For their sins, I condemn your mother, your physician, your nurses and companions, all of whom are in our power, to relive their roles throughout eternity; I condemn the one to despair and grief and the others to hatred and fear for all time.

"As for you, John S——, Surgeon, alias Saucy Jackie, alias Jack the Ripper, I sentence you to the care of those who protected you in life from the justice of men; I sentence you to that barred room until the end of time, to the fear of your own hands and mind and past forever.

"ALL HOPE ABANDON, YE WHO ENTER HERE!"

THE HORNET

by GEORGE CLAYTON JOHNSON

George Johnson writes the way some modern composers compose: every now and again he feels obliged to insert a sour note. If the purpose of this is to slap the reader from his drowse, Johnson might as well abandon the device. It isn't necessary: no one *could drowse through the ordered chaos of THE HORNET, which tells of a perfectly ordinary situation* or *a situation so extraordinary as to disturb a man's honest dreams* . . .

Seen from outside, Simon's house is like a hundred others on a clean, black-topped street, trimly curbed with white concrete. The homes crowd the walkway like eager tourists leaning to see something important.

Or, perhaps they are listening.

You ever had a beef? One of those mind-tangling arguments that start from nothing and build until every word is a scream? Simon has. He's having one now.

As he shrieks at his wife and she lashes back bitterly, the sounds of strife take on an almost physical presence. It is as though the darknesses within them dim the light of the room and thicken the air so that it becomes hard to breathe.

And oddly, as Simon rages, he can't help comparing the shrill voice of his wife with the sound made by that thing buzzing against the screen.

He dismisses the notion. It's outside and she's inside and she makes about sixty times the noise that it does.

Here he comes out of the house, slamming the door as a parting shot. Spring. A day as soft and soothing as talcum powder. Is the sky soft and blue as your mother's eyes and is the grass like the grass you used to lie on at the warm, wonderful, beginning of school vacation? Don't ask Simon. He's much too sore to notice the sky, the grass—or the thing that has buzzed up and away from the window screen.

Down the walk he goes, seething. He wrenches open the car door and flings his thickening body behind the wheel. He fumbles out his car keys and stabs them into the vitals of the dashboard, twisting them like a blade. He tromps the gas pedal and gooses the starter button. The motor leaps briskly to life and he backs out of the driveway. He tools the car along, obeying all the rules and signals, growing angrier as he thinks of all the cutting, incisive things he might have said. He sits in his thrumming car and nurses his fury like a foundling baby.

He is oblivious to the hornet that perches on the back seat. It moves. Its compound eyes survey the situation and then it crawls the way that hornets crawl and launches itself in flight the way that hornets fly.

Get a picture of this hornet. One of the white-faced kind. You've seen them. Sleek as a moon-missile, graceful, curved and shaped and glossy, with a tail section as lethal looking as a hypo full of curare. It has wings that shimmer in movement and buzz like a defective doorbell.

Up it goes careening off the enclosing surfaces of the car roof until it comes up flush against the front windshield. What do hornets do when their path is obstructed by glass? Right. They get mad and they buzz. They scoot from one side of the glass to the other and from the bottom to the top and from the top to the side and then they do it over in a different order and they'll keep on doing it until they fall dead from exhaustion and frustration. That is the way hornets are—unless something happens to make them do something else.

Simon is no fool. He knows that the hornet won't bother him unless he bothers it. But he's human, and it doesn't make his mood any better to know that a hornet is using his windshield for a skating rink while he's driving through the car through traffic.

He uses his head.

He cranks down his side window and hopes the hornet will have enough sense to fly out. Will it feel the pull of the wind and be diverted from its senseless cavorting on the window pane? No? Perhaps if he helps it a trifle it will get the idea. He lifts one hand carefully from the steering wheel and watching the traffic cautiously, he

negligently waves at the hornet. Get it started in the right direction and the problem is solved.

It occurs to Simon that he is dealing with an obstinate hornet for it doesn't take the hint. What do you do in a case like this? If you're like Simon and happen to have a newspaper on the seat beside you, you pick it up. Why wave at a hornet with a vulnerable hand when you have a newspaper. Simon will simply scrape the hornet, gently, gently, toward the window and it will take wing and vanish as dreams do.

But it doesn't. It sees the thousand-fold image of the approaching newspaper and takes evasive action. Specifically, it skitters madly across the windshield, bumping angrily.

This is a ring-wise hornet.

Oh, yeah, says Simon, and starts to try again. There is a sharp honk of a horn and a quick squeal of brakes. Simon wrenches the wheel, sweating cold momentarily, and then he is safe again and master of the road.

And mad? Yes. Mad.

He'll pull the car to the side of the road and park, and then, by God . . .

But Simon is on the freeway now, that wonderful solution to the crosstown traffic problem and he abruptly realizes that there is no convenient place to stop the car.

What the hell, he'll ignore the damn hornet. Five more minutes and he'll pull into a parking lot and face his adversary, man to insect.

Adversary? Odd word to apply to a bug? Not for Simon. He's a good friend and an implacable enemy and when a hornet gives him static, encroaches on what is his, dares him with insolence, threatens his life and his peace of mind, then the battle lines are clearly drawn.

Five minutes, bug, goes Simon's thinking, and you'll be the sorriest guy who ever gave me a hard way to go.

He has his newspaper and he's a dead shot. He's performed acts of carnage with such a newspaper as would terrify an army of flies, bugs, bees and hornets. If he backs down now he'll have no honorable peace.

Everything is under control. The car is blasting down the correct alley of this auto bowling lane. There are cars ahead and behind but not dangerously close. The

roadway is as straight as a baseball pitch. One flick of the newspaper-loaded wrist and his problem is solved.

But Simon is a sensible guy. He's got patience. He can wait. Anticipation will make the vengence sweeter.

He eyes the hornet. It pauses in its wild swings across the glass to eye him. Is that a sneer on the hornet's face? Does it lift its semi-lethal tail in a gesture of defiance?

Damn you, hornet, you'll get yours.

Perhaps the gentle tug of the wind, as it slicks itself through the open window, belatedly attracts the white-faced hornet. It pauses with its flaps down momentarily, and then, as though having made up its mind, it launches itself and flies. Away from the window it goes toward Simon to land neatly on his shoulder and begin a progress toward his neck and face.

Now things have gone too far.

Unprovoked hostility!

Up it clambers across his collar, to lay a clawed foot against the rough skin of his neck.

He sucks in his breath and goes cold.

With a panicked shrug, and then another, Simon dislodges the hornet. It buzzes at his ear to set his blood drumming while he tries to watch the road, the rearview mirror and the side of his own face. Miraculously, he succeeds in doing all three until, tired of the aerial skirmish, the hornet retreats to the safety of the glass.

But, of course, it is no longer safe. Because of his sting-fright and his rage, Simon decides to act.

There sits the hornet, grinning insolently. There is Simon with a newspaper in his hand and the certain memory of a thousand accurate blows delivered. There is destiny.

Back goes the newspaper. There—that eagle aim—and there—the blow.

It smacks the glass with the papery crack of doom.

Slow it down.

The newspaper descending with a tidal rush of air. The hornet rising to meet his fate, curving, curving, as the paper hurtles down.

Score for the white-faced hornet.

With an instantaneous spurt of speed it clears the edge of the paper swifting away. And Simon, seeing his failure,

begins to thresh the paper in a panicked attempt to down the hornet before it can touch him.

He has, of course, forgotten the steering wheel.

With the thunder of the paper splatting the windshield, blend in the scream of brakes, the tearing sound of metal collapsing under hideous strain, the avalanching of two great masses coming together in collision.

Picture a catastrophe.

Watch the dust powdering the air as the two cars plow themselves into the embankment. Hear a motor go momentarily mad before it chokes on its own oil.

Feet run. Faces peer.

Do they see the white-faced hornet perched on the incredibly unbroken ridge of Simon's nose? And when the hornet, peering into Simon's cold-filmed eyes, grows tired of this amusement, breaks free and flies away, do they see?

And what of the hornet?

It drifts along the roadway, obviously unshaken by its recent ordeal. It drifts along the stalled snake of metal that humming, waits, so that it, the snake, can continue it writhings and undulations across the land.

The hornet moves in flitting jerks from car to car. Does it pause at each open window to listen before moving on? Does it eye the passengers with its antennae quivering? And at last, when it comes to a certain parked sedan, why does it linger hovering at the window?

The driver and his companion, a woman, do not see the hornet for they have other things to occupy them. He gripes and beefs because he will be late for work and she fumes because she's sick of his harsh and bitter voice.

The hornet slips through the open window to land on the rear seat where it sits and pulses as insects do. It sits quietly and waits.

Presently the car will move again and the hornet can fly up to the windshield to continue the war.

PERCHANCE TO DREAM

by CHARLES BEAUMONT

A train thunders by late at night, you gaze idly at the dark rushing mass, you see a patch of light and within that patch of light, a face; in a wink of time it is gone—but, having see it, you know it will never be gone, you know you will see that face in your dreams perhaps forever. Such is the insubstantial stuff of which fiction—or madness—is made. When I wrote PERCHANCE TO DREAM, I didn't have any idea of its genesis. Only much later did I remember the woman at the amusement park, sitting all by herself in the whirling "Whip," eyes closed, smiling; and the tapestry at which I'd stared in ten-year-old awe, waiting for the horses to move ("They will, if you look at them long enough!"); and the first time I'd wondered how it would feel to plunge forty stories to the hard cement below . . . From all of these real impressions, the following "unreal" story was woven.

"Please sit down," the psychiatrist said, indicating a somewhat worn leather couch.

Automatically, Hall sat down. Instinctively, he leaned back. Dizziness flooded through him, his eyelids fell like sash weights, the blackness came . . .

He jumped up quickly and slapped his right cheek, then he slapped his left cheek, hard. "I'm sorry, doctor," he said.

The psychiatrist, who was tall and young and not in the least Viennese, nodded. "You prefer to stand?" he asked, gently.

"Prefer?" Hall threw his head back and laughed. "That's good," he said. *"Prefer!"*

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand."

"Neither do I, doctor." He pinched the flesh of his left hand until it hurt. "No, no; that isn't true. I do understand. That's the whole trouble. I do."

"You—want to tell me about it?"

"Yes. No." It's silly, he thought. You can't help me. No one can. I'm alone! "Forget it," he said and started for the door.

The psychiatrist said, "Wait a minute." His voice was friendly, concerned, but not patronizing. "Running away won't do you much good, will it?"

Hall hesitated.

"Forgive the cliché. Actually, running away is often the best answer. But I don't know yet that yours is that sort of problem."

"Did Doctor Jackson tell you about me?"

"No. He said he was sending you over, but he thought you'd do a better job on the details. I only know that your name is Philip Hall, you're 31, and you haven't been able to sleep for a long time."

"Yes. A long time . . ." To be exact, 72 hours, Hall thought, glancing at the clock. Seventy-two horrible hours . . .

The psychiatrist tapped out a cigarette. "Aren't you ——" he began.

"Tired? God, yes. I'm the tiredest man on earth! I could sleep forever. But that's just it, you see: I would. I'd never wake up."

"Please," the psychiatrist said.

Hall bit his lip. There wasn't, he supposed, much point to it. But, after all, what *else* was there for him to do? Where would he go? "You mind if I pace?"

"Stand on your head, if you like."

"O.K. I'll take one of your cigarettes." He drew the smoke into his lungs and walked over to the window. Fourteen floors below, the toy people and the toy cars moved. He watched them and thought, this guy's all right. Sharp. Intelligent. Nothing like what I expected. Who can say—*maybe* it'll do some good. "I'm not sure where to begin."

"It doesn't matter. The beginning might be easier for you."

Hall shook his head, violently. The beginning, he thought. Was there such a thing?

"Just take it easy."

After a lengthy pause, Hall said: "I first found out about the power of the human mind when I was 10. Close to that time, anyway. There was a tapestry in my bedroom.

It was a great big thing, the size of a rug, with fringe on the edges. It showed a group of soldiers—Napoleonic soldiers—on horses. They were at the brink of some kind of cliff, and the first horse was reared up. My mother told me something. She told me that if I stared at the tapestry long enough, the horses would start to move. They'd go right over the cliff, she said. I tried it, but nothing happened. She said, 'You've got to take time. You've got to *think* about it.' So, every night, before I went to bed, I'd sit up and stare at that damn tapestry. And, finally, it happened. Over they went, all the horses, all the men, over the edge of the cliff . . ." Hall stubbed out the cigarette and began to pace. "Scared hell out of me," he said. "When I looked again, they were all back. It got to be a game with me. Later on, I tried it with pictures in magazines, and pretty soon I was able to move locomotives and send balloons flying and make dogs open their mouths: everything, anything I wanted."

He paused, ran a hand through his hair. "Not too unusual, you're thinking," he said. "Every kid does it. Like standing in a closet and shining a flashlight through your finger, or sewing up the heel of your palm . . . common stuff?"

The psychiatrist shrugged.

"There was a difference," Hall said. "One day it got out of control. I was looking at a coloring book. One of the pictures showed a knight and a dragon fighting. For fun I decided to make the knight drop his lance. He did. The dragon started after him, breathing fire. In another second the dragon's mouth was open and he was getting ready to eat the knight. I blinked and shook my head, like always, only—nothing happened. I mean, the picture didn't 'go back.' Not even when I closed the book and opened it again. But I didn't think too much about it, even then."

He walked to the desk and took another cigarette. It slipped from his hands.

"You've been on dexedrine," the psychiatrist said, watching as Hall tried to pick up the cigarette.

"Yes."

"How many grains a day?"

"Thirty, 35, I don't know."

"Potent. Knocks out your coordination. I suppose Dr. Jackson warned you."

"Yes, he warned me."

"Well, let's get along. What happened then?"

"Nothing." Hall allowed the psychiatrist to light his cigarette. "For a while, I forgot about the 'game' almost completely. Then, when I turned 13, I got sick. Rheumatic heart——"

The psychiatrist leaned forward and frowned. "And Jackson let you have 35——"

"Don't interrupt!" He decided not to mention that he had gotten the drug from his aunt, that Doctor Jackson knew nothing about it. "I had to stay in bed a lot. No activity; might kill me. So I read books and listened to the radio. One night I heard a ghost story. *Hermit's Cave* it was called. All about a man who gets drowned and comes back to haunt his wife. My parents were gone, at a movie. I was alone. And I kept thinking about that story, imagining the ghost. Maybe, I thought to myself, he's in that closet. I knew he wasn't; I knew there wasn't any such thing as a ghost, really. But there was a little part of my mind that kept saying. 'Look at the closet. Watch the door. He's in there, Philip, and he's going to come out.' I picked up a book and tried to read, but I couldn't help glancing at the closet door. It was open a crack. Everything dark behind it. Everything dark and quiet."

"And the door moved."

"That's right."

"You understand that there's nothing terribly unusual in anything you've said so far?"

"I know," Hall said. "It was my imagination. It *was*, and I realized it even then. But—I got just as scared. Just as scared as if a ghost actually *had* opened that door! And that's the whole point. The mind, doctor. It's everything. If you *think* you have a pain in your arm and there's no physical reason for it, you don't hurt any less . . . My mother died because she thought she had a fatal disease. The autopsy showed malnutrition, nothing else. But she died just the same!"

"I won't dispute the point."

"All right. I just don't want you to tell me it's all in my mind. I *know* it is."

"Go on."

"They told me I'd never really get well, I'd have to take it easy the rest of my life. Because of the heart. No strenuous exercise, no stairs, no long walks. No shocks. Shock produces excessive adrenaline, they said. Bad. So that's the way it was. When I got out of school, I grabbed a soft desk job. Unexciting: numbers, adding numbers, that's all. Things went OK for a few years. Then it started again. I read about where some woman got into her car at night and happened to check for something in the back seat and found a man hidden there. Waiting. It stuck with me; I started dreaming about it. So every night, when I got into my car, I automatically patted the rear seat and floorboards. It satisfied me for a while, until I started thinking, 'What if I forgot to check?' Or, 'What if there's something back there that isn't human?' I had to drive across Laurel Canyon to get home, and you know how twisty that stretch is; 30-, 50-foot drops, straight down. I'd get this feeling halfway across. 'There's someone . . . something . . . in the back of the car!' Hidden, in darkness. Fat and shiny. I'll look in the rear-view mirror and I'll see his hands ready to circle my throat . . . Again, doctor: understand me. *I knew it was my imagination.* I had no doubt at all that the back seat was empty—hell, I kept the car locked and I double checked! But, I told myself, you keep thinking this way, Hall, and you'll see those hands. It'll be a reflection, or somebody's headlights, or nothing at all—but you'll see them! Finally, one night, I did see them! The car lurched a couple of times and went down the embankment."

The psychiatrist said, "Wait a minute," rose, and switched the tape on a small machine.

"I knew how powerful the mind was, then," Hall continued. "I knew that ghosts and demons did exist, they did, if you only thought about them long enough and hard enough. After all, one of them almost killed me!" He pressed the lighted end of the cigarette against his flesh; the fog lifted instantly. "Doctor Jackson told me afterward that one more serious shock like that would finish me. And then's when I started having the dream."

There was a silence in the room, compounded of distant automobile horns, the ticking of the ship's-wheel clock,

the insectival tapping of the receptionist's typewriter, Hall's own tortured breathing.

"They say dreams last only a couple of seconds," he said. "I don't know whether that's true or not. It doesn't matter. They *seem* to last longer. Sometimes I've dreamed a whole lifetime; sometimes generations have passed. Once in a while, time stops completely; it's a frozen moment, lasting forever. When I was a kid I saw the Flash Gordon serials, you remember? I loved them, and when the last episode was over, I went home and started dreaming more. Each night, another episode. They were vivid, too, and I remembered them when I woke up. I even wrote them down, to make sure I wouldn't forget. Crazy?"

"No," said the psychiatrist.

"I did, anyway. The same thing happened with the Oz books and the Burroughs books. I'd keep them going. But after the age of 15, or so, I didn't dream much. Only once in a while. Then, a week ago——" Hall stopped talking. He asked the location of the bathroom and went there and splashed cold water on his face. Then he returned and stood by the window.

"A week ago?" the psychiatrist said, flipping the tape machine back on.

"I went to bed around 11:30. I wasn't too tired, but I needed the rest, on account of my heart. Right away the dream started. I was walking along Venice Pier. It was close to midnight. The place was crowded, people everywhere; you know the kind they used to get there. Sailors, dumpy-looking dames, kids in leather jackets. The pitchmen were going through their routines. You could hear the roller coasters thundering along the tracks, the people inside the roller coasters, screaming; you could hear the bells and the guns cracking and the crazy songs they play on calliopes. And, far away, the ocean, moving. Everything was bright and gaudy and cheap. I walked for a while, stepping on gum and candy apples, wondering why I was there." Hall's eyes were closed. He opened them quickly and rubbed them. "Halfway to the end, passing the penny arcade, I saw a girl. She was about 22 or 23. White dress, very thin and tight, and a funny little white hat. Her legs were bare, nicely muscled and tan. She was alone. I stopped and watched her and I remember

thinking, 'She *must* have a boyfriend. He *must* be here somewhere.' But she didn't seem to be waiting for anyone, or looking. Unconsciously, I began to follow her. At a distance.

"She walked past a couple of concessions, then she stopped at one called The Whip and strolled in and went for a ride. The air was hot. It caught her dress as she went around and sent it whirling. It didn't bother her at all. She just held onto the bar and closed her eyes, and—I don't know, a kind of ecstasy seemed to come over her. She began to laugh. A high-pitched, musical sound. I stood by the fence and watched her, wondering why such a beautiful girl should be laughing in a cheap carnival ride, in the middle of the night, all by herself. Then my hands froze on the fence, because suddenly I saw that she was looking at me. Every time the car would whip around, she'd be looking. And there was something in her eyes, something that said, Don't go away, don't leave, don't move . . . The ride stopped and she got out and walked over to me. As naturally as if we'd known each other for years, she put her arm in mine, and said, 'We've been expecting you, Mr. Hall.' Her voice was deep and soft, and her face, close up, was even more beautiful than it had seemed. Full, rich lips, a little wet; dark, flashing eyes; a warm gleam to her flesh. I didn't answer. She laughed again and tugged at my sleeve. 'Come on, darling,' she said. 'We haven't much time.' And we walked, almost running, to The Silver Flash—a roller coaster, the highest on the pier. I knew I shouldn't go on it because of my heart condition, but she wouldn't listen. She said I had to, for her. So we bought our tickets and got into the first seat of the car . . ."

Hall held his breath for a moment, then let it out, slowly. As he relived the episode, he found that it was easier to stay awake. Much easier.

"That," he said, "was the end of the first dream. I woke up sweating and trembling, and thought about it most of the day, wondering where it had all come from. I'd only been to Venice Pier once in my life, with my mother. Years ago. But that night, just as it'd happened with the serials, the dream picked up exactly where it had left off. We were settling into the seat. Rough leather, cracked and

peeling, I recall. The grab-bar iron, painted black, the paint rubbed away in the center.

"I tried to get out, thinking, 'Now's the time to do it; do it now or you'll be too late!' But the girl held me, and whispered to me. We'd be together, she said. Close together. If I'd do this one thing for her, she'd belong to me. 'Please! Please!' she begged. Then the car started. A little jerk; the kids beginning to yell and scream; the *clack-clack* of the chain pulling up; and up, slowly, too late now, too late for anything, up the steep wooden hill . . .

"A third of the way to the top, with her holding me, pressing herself against me, I woke up again. Next night, we went up a little farther. Next night, a little farther. Foot by foot, slowly, up the hill. At the halfway point, the girl began kissing me. And laughing. 'Look down!' she told me. 'Look down, Philip!' And I did and saw little people and little cars and everything tiny and unreal.

"Finally we were within a few feet of the crest. The night was black and the wind was fast and cold now, and I was so scared, so scared that I couldn't move. The girl laughed louder than ever, and a strange expression came into her eyes. I remembered then how no one else had noticed her. How the ticket-taker had taken the two stubs and looked around questioningly.

" 'Who are you?' I screamed. And she said, 'Don't you know?' And she stood up and pulled the grab-bar out of my hands. I leaned forward to get it.

"Then we reached the top. And I saw her face and I knew what she was going to do, instantly: I knew. I tried to get back into the seat, but I felt her hands on me then and I heard her voice, laughing, high, laughing and shrieking with delight, and——"

Hall smashed his fist against the wall, stopped and waited for calm to return.

When it did, he said, "That's the whole thing, doctor. Now you know why I don't dare to go to sleep. When I do—and I'll have to, eventually; I realize that!—the dream will go on. And my heart won't take it!"

The psychiatrist pressed a button on his desk.

"Whoever she is," Hall went on, "she'll push me. And I'll fall. Hundreds of feet. I'll see the cement rushing up

in a blur to meet me and I'll feel the first horrible pain of contact——"

There was a click.

The office door opened.

A girl walked in.

"Miss Thomas," the psychiatrist began, "I'd like you to——"

Philip Hall screamed. He stared at the girl in the white nurse's uniform and took a step backward. "Oh, Christ! No!"

"Mr. Hall, this is my receptionist, Miss Thomas."

"No," Hall cried. "It's her. It is! And I know who she is now, God save me! I know who she is!"

The girl in the white uniform took a tentative step into the room.

Hall screamed again, threw his hands over his face, turned and tried to run.

A voice called, "Stop him!"

Hall felt the sharp pain of the sill against his knee, realized in one hideous moment what was happening. Blindly he reached out, grasping. But it was too late. As if drawn by a giant force, he tumbled through the open window, out into the cold clear air.

"Hall!"

All the way down, all the long and endless way down past the 13 floors to the gray, unyielding, hard concrete, his mind worked; and his eyes never closed . . .

"I'm afraid he's dead," the psychiatrist said, removing his fingers from Hall's wrist.

The girl in the white uniform made a little gasping sound. "But," she said, "only a minute ago, I saw him, and he was——"

"I know. It's funny; when he came in, I told him to sit down. He did. And in less than two seconds he was asleep. Then he gave that yell you heard and . . ."

"Heart attack?"

"Yes." The psychiatrist rubbed his cheek thoughtfully. "Well," he said. "I guess there are worse ways to go. At least he died peacefully."

THE THIRTEENTH STEP

by FRITZ LEIBER

It's a mistake to call any novel "the best," yet I will make that mistake now and state that in my opinion Fritz Leiber's CONJURE WIFE is the best novel of terror and the supernatural ever written in this country. If you haven't read it, do so at once; but read THE THIRTEENTH STEP first. Slowly, carefully, remembering at all times that there is madness in its method . . .

The leader cut short the last chuckles of laughter by measuredly spanking the rostrum with the flat of his hand. He grinned broadly at the forty-or-so people occupying, along with their ashtrays and coffee cups, the half dozen rows of folding chairs facing him.

He said, "If anyone came here tonight thinking that the life story of an alcoholic couldn't be hilariously funny as well as heartbreakingly tragic, I imagine he changed his mind after the pitch we just heard. Any way you slice it, it's a Happy Program—sometimes even slaphappy."

His face grew serious. He said, "Our last speaker is a gal. She's surprisingly young, just out of her teens. Some of the old timers used to think you couldn't make the Program until you'd drunk your way through a dozen jobs and four or five wives and light housekeepers—or handy men—but they've had to change their minds in recent years. This gal's only been on the Program a short time—two months—but I heard her make a great pitch at the open meetings last week. She's so new she still gets a little emotionally disturbed from time to time—" (he paused for a brief warning frown, his eyes roving) "but I asked her about it and she told me that as long as she knows we're all pulling for her everything'll be all right. So without more ado—"

A pucker-mouthed woman with hennaed hair in the second row whispered loudly to her neighbor, "If she's that disturbed, she ought to be in a mental hospital, not an A.A. meeting."

Faces turned. The room grew very still. The leader glared steadily at the woman with hennaed hair. She tilted her chin at him and said loudly, "I was speaking of someone else." He frowned at her skeptically, nodded once, then put on the big grin and said, "So without more ado I'll turn the meeting over to Sue! I'm sure she's got a Great Message for us. Let's give her a big hand."

Forty-or-so people pounded their palms together—some enthusiastically, some dutifully, but only the woman with hennaed hair abstaining completely—as a thin ash-blonde in a dark green dress rose from the last row and made her way to the rostrum with the abstracted deliberateness of a sleepwalker. As the leader stepped back and aside for her, he simultaneously smiled warmly, sketched a bow, and gave her elbow a reassuring squeeze. She nodded her thanks without looking at him. He seated himself in an empty chair at the end of the front row, switching around enough so that he had the hennaed woman within view.

Looking straight in front of her, just over the heads of her audience, the ash-blonde said in a low but somewhat harsh voice, "My name is Sue and I'm an alcoholic."

"Hi, Sue," a score-or-so voices responded, some brightly, some dully.

Sue did not immediately start her pitch. Instead she slowly swung her face from side to side, her gaze still just brushing the tops of her audience's heads with the suggestion of a heavy machine gun ranging over an enemy crouched in foxholes. Never smiling, she looked back and forth—from the inappropriate "Come Dressed as Beatniks" party posters of some other organization on the right-hand wall across the leader's and the other assorted heads to the left-hand wall where a row of open doors let in the balmy night and the occasional low growl of a passing car beyond the wide lawn and shrubbery. Then just as the pause was becoming unbearable—

"I accepted you people and your Twelve Steps only because I was frightened to death," Sue said with measured, almost mannered intensity. "Every day I dwelt with fear. Every hour I knew terror. Every night I slept—blacked out, that is—with horror! Believe me I know what it means to drink with desperation because the Fifth

Horseman is waiting outside for me in the big black car with the two faceless drivers."

"Oh, one of those," the hennaed woman could be heard to say. She tossed her head as the leader scowled at her sharply from his seat by the inner wall.

Sue did not react except that the knuckles of her hands grasping the sides of the rostrum grew white. She continued, "I had my first snort of hard liquor at the age of seven—brandy for a toothache. I liked it. I liked what it did for me. From that day on I snitched liquor whenever and wherever I could get it. The way was made easy for me because both of my parents were practicing alcoholics. By the age of thirteen I had passed over the invisible line and I was a confirmed alcoholic myself, shakes, morning drink, blackouts, hidden bottles, sleeping pills and all."

A gaunt-faced man in the third row folded his arms across his chest, creaked his metal chair and snorted skeptically. The hennaed woman quickly looked back to him with an emphatic triple nod, then smiled triumphantly at the anxious-eyed leader as she faced front again.

Sue did not take direct note of either of her hecklers, but she sent her next remarks skimming just above the silvery thatch of the gaunt-faced man.

"Why is it that even you people find difficulty in accepting the child alcoholic?" she said. "Children can do everything bad that adults can do. Children can formulate dark evil plots. Children can suffer obsessions and compulsions. Children can go insane. Children can commit suicide. Children can torture. Children can commit—yes! my dear friends . . . murder!"

"—self-dramatizing little . . . herself."

Ignoring the mostly indistinct whisper, Sue took a slow deep breath and continued, "I emphasize murder because soon after my thirteenth year I was to be subjected, again and again, to that hideous temptation. You see, by the time I was fifteen the big black car had begun to draw up and park in front of my home every afternoon at four thirty—or so soon as I had managed to snitch my first four or five drinks of the day."

"—just can't stand the scare-you-to-death school!" The last part of the hennaed woman's whisper to her neighbor came across very clearly. The neighbor, a white-haired

woman with rimless glasses, went so far as to nod briefly and cover the other's hand reassuringly yet warningly.

The knuckles of Sue's hands grasping the sides of the rostrum grew white again. She went on, "I knew who was waiting in that car, invisible between the two faceless drivers. You people often speak of the Four Horsemen of Fear, Frustration, Disillusionment, and Despair. You seldom mention the Fifth Horseman, but you know that he's always there."

"—can't stand the let's-share-my-aberration school either!"

"And I knew whom he was waiting for! I knew that some afternoon, or some evening, or very late some night —for the big black car stayed there at the curb until the first gray ray of morning—I knew that I would have to walk out to it and get inside and drive away with him to his dark land. But I also knew that it would not be that easy for me, not nearly that easy."

For the first time Sue smiled at her audience—a lingering half-tranced smile. "You see, my dear friends, I knew that if I ever went out to the car, before we could drive away I would first have to bring *him* and the two faceless drivers back into the house and take away with us my mother, my father, my brothers, my sister and whomever else happened to be inside on however innocent a pretext."

"Look, I came here to an A.A. meeting, not to listen to ghost stories." All of the hennaed woman's whisper was quite audible this time. There was a general disapproving murmur, shot here and there with approval.

Sue seemed to have difficulty going on. She took three deep, heaving breaths, not quite looking at the hennaed woman. The leader started to get up, but just then—

"That is why I had to drink," Sue resumed strongly. "That is why I had to keep my brain numbed with alcohol, day after day, month after month. Yet that is also why I feared to drink, for if I blacked out at the wrong time I might walk out to the car unknowing. That is why I drank, fearing to!

"Let me tell you, my friends, that big black car became the realest thing in my life. Hour after hour I'd sit at the window, watching it, getting up only to sneak a drink. Sometimes it would change into a big black tiger with

glossy fur lying by the curb with his jaw on his folded arms, occupying all the space a parked car would and a little more, looking almost like a black Continental except that every hour or so he'd swing his great green eyes up toward me. At those times the two faceless drivers would turn black as ebony, with silver turbans and silver loincloths—"

"Purple if you ask me!"

"But whether I saw it as a black tiger or a black car, it regularly drew up at my curb every evening or night. It got so that by the time I was seventeen, it came even on the rare days when I couldn't get a drink or hold one down."

Just at that moment a passing car, growling more softly than others, became silent, as if its motor had switched off, followed by the faintest dying whisper of rubber on asphalt, as if it had parked just outside, beyond the dark lawn and shrubs.

"She's got confederates!" the hennaed woman whispered with a flash of sour humor. Two or three people giggled nervously.

At last Sue looked straight into her adversary's eyes. "I prayed to a god I didn't believe in that *I* wouldn't become a confederate!—that *he* wouldn't trick me into leading him and the two faceless drivers inside." Her gaze left the hennaed woman and ranged just over their heads again. "The Fifth Horseman is tricky, you know, he's endlessly subtle. I talked with him in my mind for hours at a time as I sat at the window watching him invisible in the car. When I first learned to tell time and found there were twelve hours, he told me he was the thirteenth. Later when I learned that some people count twenty four hours, he told me he was the twenty fifth. When they instructed me at church that there were three persons in the godhead, he told me he was the fourth—"

"I don't think I can stand much more of this. And flouting religion—" The hennaed woman half rose from her chair, her neighbor clinging to her arm, trying to draw her down again.

Three more heaving breaths and Sue continued, though seeming to speak with the greatest difficulty, "The Fifth Horseman *still* talks to me. You know our Twelve Steps,

from the First where we admit we are powerless over alcohol, to the Twelfth, where we try to carry the Message to others. We sometimes joke about a Thirteenth Step—where we carry the Message to someone because we've got a crush on them, or for some other illegitimate reason —but *he* tells me that *he* is the Thirteenth Step, which I will someday be forced to take, no matter how earnestly I try to avoid it!"

"No, I cannot stand any more of this! I refuse to!" The hennaed woman spoke out loud at last, shaking off her neighbor's hand and standing up straight. She made no move to leave, just faced the rostrum.

The leader stood up too, angry-browed, and started toward her, but just then—

"I'm sorry," Sue said quickly looking at them all, "I really am," and she walked rapidly to the door opposite the rostrum and out into the night.

For three or four seconds nobody did a thing. Then the leader started after her past the rostrum, taking long strides, but when he got a few feet short of the open doors, he suddenly checked and turned around.

"Where's her sponsor?" he called toward the back of the room. "She said her sponsor was bringing her to the meeting. It would be a lot better if her sponsor went out and talked to her now, rather than me."

No one stepped forward. The hennaed woman chuckled knowingly, "*I* wouldn't admit to being her sponsor after *that* performance. If you ask me, it'll be a lot better if she just keeps on walking until the police pick her up and throw her in the psycho ward!"

"Nobody's asking you!" the leader rasped. "Look, everybody, I suppose the next best thing would be if a couple of you ladies would go out after her and quietly talk to her . . ."

The half dozen or so other women in the room looked around at each other, but none of them moved.

"If you're . . . well . . . nervous," the leader said, "I suppose a couple of the guys could go out with you . . ."

The thirty-odd men in the room looked at each other. None of them moved either.

"Oh my God," the leader said disgustedly and himself

started to turn, though somewhat slowly, toward the huge rectangles of darkness just behind him.

"You'll just be making a big fool of yourself, Charlie Pierce," the hennaed woman said stingingly.

"Look here," he retorted angrily, whirling back toward her a bit eagerly, "you're the one who's been making fools and worse of us all and of the program. You're—"

He got no further. The hennaed woman, staring mad-eyed and mouth a-grimace over his shoulder, had started to scream. The others in the room, following her gaze, took it up.

The leader looked around.

Then he screamed too.

THE CONSPIRACY

by ROBERT LOWRY

The work of Robert Lowry cannot be categorized, labeled, pigeonholed, or even described. It is too variegated. Sometimes it is brutally realistic, other times impressionistic, still other times it is more surrealistic than the most far-out of the far. Which is to say, Lowry has many moods and feels obliged to express them. THE CONSPIRACY is typical in that it differs from anything he's ever done. It is surely one of the most genuinely spine chilling stories ever set to paper . . .

They had seen her the moment they both reached the landing, Chris a little in the lead. She was stretched flat on her stomach right in front of their apartment door, her rather cheap-looking blue dress pushed up high, exposing thin, fish-white thighs and varicose veins, her soiled little white hat with pink berries crushed under her head. They climbed the remaining stairs and stood looking down at her.

"She seems to be asleep," Paul said. "Maybe she was at a party in the building."

"I think she's drunk," Chris said.

"Hmm," said Paul, and gave her a long look that was not altogether humorous in intention since he was still pretty irritated about *several* things that she had said between drinks at the Samuelsons' this evening. He put a hand on the woman's shoulder as he leaned over her. "I beg your pardon, but are you all right?"

Chris started to laugh at that, it seemed such an *inadequate* thing to say to someone parked prone in front of your door at one in the morning. Paul *was* such a polite fellow to have for a husband.

The woman grunted something when Paul pushed her shoulder a little.

"What was that?" Paul asked. "This is no place to sleep, you know."

The woman grunted something else. But did not open her eyes.

"I can't understand a thing she's saying," Paul said. He looked very serious as he straightened up, and Chris laughed again. "I wonder if I got her awake and on her feet whether she'd be able to navigate. . . . And incidentally, dearest dumpling, this is *not* a joke. We can't just *leave* her here for Reilly to find when he collects the garbage in the morning."

"Try to make her stand up," Chris said, the drinks that she had had adding emphasis to the sprightly, naughty little girl that she always seemed to be just under the surface—as if all of life's minor disasters were little acts in a Punch and Judy show put on just for her amusement. "If you make her stand up, she'll *have* to do *something.*"

"Yes," Paul said. "How true. Although what she may do is to fall right back down again." He pulled at the woman's shoulders. "Come on now—upsy-daisy. Get up." The woman remained limp. "You've got to try to stand up. You can't sleep *here.*"

"Apparently she can," Chris said.

"I guess we could call someone. The police? A doctor? Do you think she's ill? How did she get into the building anyhow if the front door was locked? She doesn't live in the building, does she?"

"No. You know she doesn't. I never saw her before in my life." Chris thought a moment. "But there *was* a party somewhere in the building tonight. Upstairs. I saw the delivery boy carrying up the liquor and I heard a lot of people going up before you came home. Were you upstairs at a party?" Chris asked the woman.

She didn't answer.

Paul unlocked the apartment door and snapped on the living-room light.

"Oh this is fun," Chris said, lifting her legs high to step over the woman. "You're just not *anyone* on the East Side any more unless you have one of these to step over when you get home."

"We *could* just close the door and forget her," Paul said. "Does that seem too unkind?"

The woman on the floor grunted.

"What was that?" He leaned over and listened. She

grunted again. "I think she said 'Coffee,' " he said, straightening up. He looked around at the apartment as if to see whether it might be presentable to their guest. "So—shall we give her some coffee?"

"Yes, by all means," Chris said. "Let's give her some coffee."

She watched admiringly as Paul, a fairly slight man, picked up the woman in his arms, carried her (stumbling over the edge of the rug) to the couch, and deposited her there in a more or less sitting position.

"Pull down her dress," Chris said, picking up the little white hat from the doorsill and putting it on the mantel. "She seems to lack even the essentials in underwear."

"It was like carrying a skeleton," Paul said. "Just bones." He looked over at Chris with a frown and his face always reminded her of a dignified little boy pondering his first arithmetic when he frowned this way. "Are you sure you've never seen her before, Chris? Doesn't she—*vaguely* remind you of someone? I admit that I can't think who, but . . . "

Chris had started to take off the jacket of her suit but then remembering that they had company, kept it on. At his question she turned and studied the grey, angular heap of fifty-year-old womanhood that Paul had deposited there on the couch. The face had a pinched, bony, Irish look and something primeval about the eyes that Chris remembered seeing in pictures and reconstructions of early man. What color would her eyes be when she opened them? Her hair had apparently been dyed a bright red but it had almost all grown out into a dull grey now and it was bobbed and curled in a way that had been the fashion fifteen or twenty years ago.

"Well, no, Paul, I don't *think* that I've ever seen her before. I'm *sure* that I don't know her. And who could she remind you of?" But his question had made her doubtful and she went over and stood above the woman. "Paul, her dress is ripped there at the neck. Do you think that someone attacked her or something? Maybe hurt her? And oh, Paul, look at her arms and legs, they're so thin."

"I don't think that she weighs more than ninety pounds," Paul said, coming over and standing beside Chris.

"I'll make some instant coffee and we'll bring her around. That's what she asked for."

"But maybe she *has* been hurt," Chris said. She was completely sober now or at least the surface of her mind was alerted enough to make her seem sober. Her father was a professor of English out in Indiana, and Paul always saw something of him reflected in her face in these determinedly sober moments. "And maybe you were right when you said that we ought to call the police or a doctor or somebody."

But Paul was out in the kitchen, running water into a pan, and he was not there to see the woman's small blue eyes pop open at that moment. Chris saw them, however, and Chris was transfixed; for the eyes opened so abruptly and absolutely that Chris had the feeling that the woman had been conscious all the time and had only been keeping her eyes closed so that she could listen to what was being said—or perhaps as a ruse to get them to bring her inside their apartment.

"Oh, we're glad that you're awake," Chris said. "We didn't know what to think."

Their guest, however, did not answer, but her eyes remained wide-open and staring at Chris or more accurately *through* Chris and beyond her at some point in infinity, it seemed. Chris shivered. "Do you know where you are?" Chris asked.

Paul came in from the kitchen at that moment and stood silently beside Chris, also waiting for the woman's answer. But she gave none.

"You know that you were lying outside our apartment door, don't you?" Paul said. "We'd like to know whether you're all right."

"All right?" she said flatly as if she were repeating a phrase out of a foreign tongue. And Chris had to repress a strange trill of laughter trying to escape her, perhaps at the fact that their guest's lipstick, which was orange, was smudged over her upper lip and cheek to give her a huge, lopsided comic mouth that moved imperceptibly when she spoke.

"What Paul means," Chris said as she felt the trill of laughter ebbing, "is are you hurt or anything?"

"Or anything what?"

Chris heard herself panting with the effort to repress her laughter. She glanced hopelessly at Paul, wondering whether he was having to control something like this too. And those eyes! Those eyes never blinked, never focussed, they just stared on and on and on!

"Were you at a party in the building?" Paul asked, his even tone telling Chris, even as she had to turn her head away to repress a new surge of humor, that he was taking all of this quite seriously. "The party upstairs?"

The woman answered to Chris instead of to Paul, saying "No" in that flat way and never removing her eyes from Chris'.

"Then how did you get into the building?" Paul persisted. "Were you visiting someone in the building?"

"I live here," the woman said.

Chris and Paul exchanged a look. It was a small walk-up apartment building, four floors with two apartments on each floor and a dry-cleaning shop on the street level, and in the more than two years that they had been living here they had gotten to know pretty well everybody who went in and out. But they had certainly never seen her in the building before—had they? Chris had an inspiration.

"Did you just move in?" Chris asked. "Because we've never seen you before."

"I've been living here for over two years," the woman said.

It seemed preposterous. "But how could that be? What apartment do you live in?"

The woman looked from Chris to Paul and back to Chris again.

"This one," she said.

They stood gazing at her with their mouths open.

"But *we* live *here,*" Chris said finally. "And neither of us has ever seen you before. You must have gotten into the wrong building by mistake."

"Is this the Folkstone Apartments?" the woman asked.

"Yes," Chris said, "but——"

"Apartment D?"

"Yes."

"Well, honey, that's where I live."

Chris looked hopelessly at Paul. It was really all too—too *insane!*

"Let's have the coffee," Chris said. "I need it."

As they sat around the coffee-table with their cups, Paul said quite sternly to the woman, "I'm afraid that you'll have to leave after we drink this because you *don't* live here, you know."

There was a faint trace of alcoholic mockery in her worn face as the woman stared back at him. Oh why didn't she just get up and walk out? Chris wondered. It wasn't funny any more.

"Do you want me to go down to the street with you and help you find a cab?" Paul asked, putting down his cup.

" 'Help me find a cab,' " she quoted. "That's what you want to do—'help me find a cab'?"

"That's entirely up to you," Paul said. "The point is that you don't live here and you can't stay here. Are you feeling better now? Can you walk?" And he tried to help her up by taking her arm, but she pushed him away.

"I'll walk," she announced. "Just leave me be and I'll walk."

And she got up and did, but none too steadily, Chris noticed.

"Oh dear—your hat." Chris brought the hat from the mantel, but the woman, instead of putting it on her head, carried it wadded up in her hand, like a rag.

"I'm going with you," Chris said. "I hope we'll be able to find a cab at this hour."

On the way down the stairs the woman stumbled a couple of times, but Paul was watchful and caught her. And outside in a neighborhood barren of people and cars at this hour, they looked hopelessly up and down the avenue for a cab, and saw none, and then like a miracle one turned a corner three blocks away and headed toward them.

"You do know where you're going, don't you?" Paul asked the woman. "You can give the driver an address, can't you?"

"I've got an address," the woman said with such assurance that their conversation upstairs might never have taken place. "Just don't you worry your little heads about me. I've got an address."

Paul looked wonderingly at her for a moment, then

turned away to hail the cab. As it veered in toward the curb he brought a dollar bill out of his pocket and put it into the woman's hand. Then he opened the cab door, she stumbled in, and he closed it behind her. Even her wide-open eyes now were lost in the dark box of the cab.

"I certainly hope that we did the right thing," Chris said as they stood watching the cab whine away down the avenue. "I'm actually trembling, Paul. It was one of the strangest experiences I ever had and I don't know why. Maybe we shouldn't have made her leave. Maybe we should have called a doctor or questioned her further or something. We don't even know whether she knew where she was going."

Paul was unlocking the front door of their apartment building, and as he straightened up to open the door for Chris he said, "Can we afford to care?"

"Afford to care?" Chris repeated.

"Yes," Paul said. "Because after we got her inside I think it was obvious what she was."

"What was she?"

"Why," Paul said, "she was just another one of the mixed-up drunks that you can see every day over on Third Avenue, stumbling along from one bar to another, drinking themselves senseless. The city is full of middle-aged alcoholic women like her, Chris; and that's why she looked so familiar at first. Alcohol makes them all look alike."

"Yes," Chris said as she passed by him into the vestibule. "Maybe that was the reason."

"And she wasn't even willing to tell a straight story," Paul went on as he closed the door firmly behind him and heard the lock snap. "That is, if she had one that would bear telling, which I doubt. Trying to say that she lived in our apartment!"

"I'm just glad that you were with me when we found her." They were going up the stairs now. "I don't know why it all seemed so funny to me at first——"

Chris was a little in the lead as they reached the second-floor landing and it was she who cried out when they saw the crumpled figure there at their apartment door.

The woman lay in exactly the same position in which they had found her the first time—flat on her stomach,

her rather cheap-looking blue dress pulled up high, exposing thin, fish-white thighs and varicose veins, her soiled little white hat with pink berries crushed under her head.

"But, Paul, we just saw her drive away in that cab!" Chris said.

Paul, who was down on one knee examining the woman, looked up at Chris and put a finger to his lips. Then he stood up.

"Let's get inside." He was unlocking the apartment door now. "Not another word." He pointed to the ceiling and then to the floor, meaning, Chris decided, that he did not want her to say anything more that the neighbors might overhear. "I'm going to call the police," he said after he had closed the door behind them. "And you wash up the cups and put them away."

"But what's going on here?" Chris asked. "I feel—weird! Wasn't that woman out there the one that we just now saw drive away in the cab?"

"Yes," Paul said. "You know it's the same one. And she's dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes," Paul said. "Dead. And I'm going to call the police now."

"But——" Chris glanced toward the door. "What kind of story are we going to tell the *police,* Paul? How in the world can we ever explain"—and she gestured toward the door—*"her?"*

Their eyes met, and locked, holding each other across that wide room in the beginning of an understanding that they must carry in secret to their graves. Then Paul came walking toward her, and took her hand.

"We just got home, this minute," Paul said. "Is that clear?"

"Yes."

"And we found—*her*—in front of our door. All right?"

"Yes. Yes, all right."

"I could see immediately that she was dead and so I called them. Nothing else happened this evening, Chris. Nothing. That's the whole story."

"Yes," Chris said. "That's all that happened. I understand."

"I'll smooth out these cushions where she sat," Paul said, "and you put the cups away."

"All right."

"And, Chris——"

Chris turned in the doorway to the kitchen, the cups and saucers in her hands.

"Chris, wouldn't they be clever if they could show that we are lying?"

Chris heard the coffee-cups move and rattle, and she steadied herself. "Yes, they would be, Paul," she said. "They certainly would be." She glanced toward the apartment door. "What's that?"

Paul held up his hand in silence and now there was no mistaking it. Someone had knocked again—at their door.

Paul came across the room and, standing close to the door, said, "Who is it?"

There was not a sound in response.

He fastened the chain-guard and opened the door a few inches—then looked around at Chris.

"She's gone," he said. "There's nobody here."

He closed the door, took off the chain-guard, and opened the door wide.

"There's nobody here," Paul said. "She's gone, Chris. There's nobody here."

Side by side they stood looking out at the empty hallway. And then, without another word, Paul drew Chris back inside, and closed the door, and locked it. And as she turned and saw the woman sitting there, the bright sword of her scream pierced the terrible silence and the room closed down around her like a great black hand.

ROOM WITH A VIEW

by ESTHER CARLSON

Here is a pleasant, almost sentimental story about the most frightening thing in the world. You'll probably smile as you read it, but the smile will disappear when you think about it afterwards—for Esther Carlson has a way of trapping the unwary, of lulling one into the most absurd sense of security. "This is only fiction," she says, "don't let it worry you." Just try . . .

There once was a poor young artist named Bosco Blossom who lived sixth floor rear of a dreadful rooming house on West Seventeenth.

Bosco had a Renoir soul but the convictions of a cubist and his paintings showed a kind of square romanticism that was not in demand. This strange schizophrenia also had an effect on his social life; those whom he could love he could not agree with, and those with whom he could agree gave him the shudders. Consequently Bosco was not only poor, he was lonely.

One fine spring day, however, Bosco worked two miracles; he created a masterpiece, and he filled his life with joy.

Bosco was pacing up and down his room, brush in hand, blank canvas all around him, seething with youth and spring and unable to do anything about it, like a bird with a band on its beak.

Finally he cast himself upon the cot and moaned: "A scrap of blue! A fragment of cloud . . . That's all I ask. Is it too much?"

The object of Bosco's dismay was his window, and a fitting object it was indeed. It was the only window in the narrow room and it opened to a vast expanse of ugly brick, the blind slab side of the neighboring warehouse. Below six stories was a filthy court.

"How *can* I be inspired?" Bosco cried out to his fates bitterly. "Give me a room with a view!"

He hung his head over the side of the bed and stared down at his splotched and dried-up palette.

"And you," he said crazily. "*You* would look like a damned Venetian sunset!"

It was only a figure of speech, but it contained an idea. "A Venetian sunset," Bosco repeated thoughtfully. "And what if I had splashed these colors on that vile brick wall. . . . What if . . ."

Bosco ran down his six flights to the street, sprinted into the hardware store, bought a bamboo pole, ran up again, sat on his cot, and began to think.

He discarded Rio; he considered the Rockettes' dressing room; he gave much thought to the Alps by moonlight. Intellectually he scorned a pleasant daisied meadow; emotionally he could not stand the three-dimensioned, perfect pyramids. Then he examined his painting materials and found nothing but tubes of blue and green and white.

"That settles it," Bosco said. "I'll do a blue nude on a green pony. Anything's better than brick."

With that he tied the brush on the end of his bamboo pole and painted his picture on the part of the warehouse just across from his window.

When his colors ran out, he clambered in off the ledge and stood back for the effect. It was overwhelming.

For what Bosco had painted was the sea-green sea, lit by a bright day, moved by a brisk wind. Delicate white caps broke into chartreuse foam; aquamarine became limpid azure, the horizon shimmered afar off in a filmy mist. The unevenness of the worn bricks lent undulation to the water, gave it sweep to Spain.

"My God," breathed Bosco. "Sheer genius!"

He was unable to do anything the whole day but stare out his window at the vista. Though he had promised himself a walk in the Square, he could not leave his view. The dancing waves lapped against his windowsill and the movements of the city boomed in like distant surf.

Toward evening his landlady came up the stairs to the sixth-floor room, panting the while like a freight engine on a steep grade.

"Blossom," she snorted outside the door. "Rent due."

Bosco returned to reality long enough to shove six worn-out dollar bills under the door.

"Whatcha got in there?" she said. "A girl?"

"No, ma'am," said Bosco.

"Huh," she said, and departed.

Bosco felt a little sick but he consoled himself, for now that he had his view his brush would stroke out pictures of divine reason and beauty and pretty girls and fine fellows would say to him: "Come, Bosco, we are having a party tonight. We all want you to come." Of course!

He dreamed, and for weeks he scarcely took his eyes off the window except to go down the hall, as one must do in rooming houses, or to rush to Nedick's for a quick cheese sandwich. In the early morning the aspect of the sea was fresh and new; by noon the swells grew rounder, heavier. Dusk gave the water a leaden, ominous, exciting power, but night found it sheathed in sheer loveliness. The glare of the city's lights could not touch Bosco's view; instead, a glow from above seemed to diffuse over it, tinging the crests with cool silver. He was content. His was the ever-changing, never-changing sea.

That is, he was content for a while. One morning in early summer he began to pace the floor.

"Look at this hideous, mouse-gnawed hole!" he cried. "How unbecoming. How unseemly. Though my view inspires me to the greatest degree, the moment I take my eyes away from it and pick up my brush, alas, I am surrounded by scabby brown walls, a tipsy couch, a pot-bellied dresser! How can I release my Art in such an interior?" And life was ruined until he received his second great idea.

He painted his room.

He painted his room white. Not for nothing had Bosco once seen the saloon of a yacht. Very lifelike on the walls he drew lifesavers; he strung ropes around with his brush and, with an orange crate and a bit of judicious hammering so as not to arose his landlady, he turned his cot into a bunk. He did not fashion portholes. There was only one porthole, and it had the view.

So exquisite was this workmanship, so lifelike in every detail, that his easel with its empty canvas seemed a jarring note and he tucked them under the bunk and stowed his

art materials aft. That night as he lay in his cabin listening to the crashing breakers of the city-sea, the mewing cries of the taxi-gulls, he felt the gentle sway of the boat under his frail body. The lash of the rain woke him in the morning and through it dimly he saw his oily sea swelling, rolling, and when the Queen Mary boomed in the harbor it seemed only natural for Bosco to reach up, pull an imaginary cord and give her an answering call.

During the midsummer storms Bosco acquired sea legs and not even the lurching of his vessel in the heaving waters threw him to the deck. Then there were the calm days and nights when the boat steered effortlessly on her course and he needed to do nothing but lie on his bunk and dream. It was great fun, and one day he went ashore and with his last three dollar bills purchased a yachting cap.

The transition from his cabin to the hallway and the ordinary sounds, sights and odors of life in a rooming house became almost more than Bosco could bear. In his boat he could sniff the fresh salt air; in the hall it was cabbage. The thought of his landlady caused him to shiver, she who lurked in the slimy depths like a sea monster waiting to devour him and his flimsy craft.

"To hell with his!" Bosco told himself. "I'll take my yacht to the South Seas. Anchors aweigh!" And he locked himself in his cabin, cast off and took her out.

Once when he was hungry he let a line out of his porthole. Some joker downstairs put a sardine on it and Bosco hauled it up and ate it for supper. And all the time it got warmer and warmer, for August was upon the city, and the sea.

Bosco felt the tropical breeze on his cheek. "I should be sighting land soon," he mused. To make certain of it he found his bamboo pole, resurrected his paint brush and green paint and put, on his horizon, a palm-fringed island.

But though the days and nights stretched on and there was not a breath of air, the island drew no closer. Bosco really didn't expect it to; he was not utterly mad.

"Becalmed!" he repeated over and over, shaking his head, conscious that his position was dangerous. The monster would crawl up from her lair at any moment to overwhelm himself and his helpless craft.

There came a still, moon-lit August evening when the sea was calm and awash with silver. In the quiet. Bosco heard her coming up—up—up till she was pounding at his door.

"Blossom! Blossom!"

He did not answer.

"I know you're there, Blossom. Three weeks' rent you're owing."

Bosco lay stiff with loathing; the cabin reeked of her foul cabbage breath and he could feel her sneering eye stripping his dream of the magic paint, so that the view became once again but ugly brick and the scab brown walls of his former room.

"I'm coming back in an hour," she hissed. "I'll get this door open. I know your kind. . . ."

Coming back! Bosco cringed. "Anyway," he said aloud. "Anyway, by God, I'll have a revel my last night on board."

From under his bunk he pulled his emergency stores: a bottle of grog, stowed for many a week and unnecessary, for the young sailor had been drunk of the sea air and imagination. He watched his waving palm trees in the distance and moodily swigged from the bottle.

"Room with a view," he said. "Farewell. Good-bye!"

Suddenly the floor tipped, the craft surged forward, the bunk swayed under him. Bosco sat up, staring at his view. He was drawing closer to the island! He *was!* The trees *were* closer, more distinct. Yes, he could almost distinguish a sandy beach out there in the moonlight and closer . . . closer. He peered, squinting his eyes. On the beach were people, girls running about, playing. He could almost hear the laughter. He yearned for them and for the soft sand beneath his toes.

"Hurry!" he cried, tossing down the grog. "Hurry and we'll make her. Faster. Faster."

Beautiful girls, long dark hair, dancing on the beach. Clumping outside, cabbage smells, drawing near, crawling toward him . . .

"Give her all she's got, Mr. Engineer," he hollered down the bottle neck. "Full speed ahead!"

Louder came the clumping, mutterings outside his cabin

door. Bosco downed the last of the liquid and took off his clothes.

A pounding began on the door. "Blossom. I'm coming in!"

"What do I care?" Bosco shouted. "I can make it now!"

And as she battered down his cabin door, Bosco dove from the porthole into the deep dark sea.

THE CANDIDATE

by HENRY SLESAR

Henry Slesar is the despair of his competitors. While running a successful business with one hand, with the other he is building—far too fast—a reputation as one of the best science fiction/fantasy/mystery writers in America. When you are not reading Slesar in all the top magazines, you are watching him on Alfred Hitchcock's TV show. No doubt he will have invaded the motion picture theaters before this is published. I don't like him, and I'm sure you don't, either. Now if we all got together and thought of some suitable fate for this obviously unpleasant person . . .

"A man's worth can be judged by the calibre of his enemies." Burton Grunzer, encountering the phrase in a pocket-sized biography he had purchased at a newsstand, put the book in his lap and stared reflectively from the murky window of the commuter train. Darkness silvered the glass and gave him nothing to look at but his own image, but it seemed appropriate to his line of thought. How many people were enemies of that face, of the eyes narrowed by a myopic squint denied by vanity the correction of spectacles, of the nose he secretly called patrician, of the mouth that was soft in relaxation and hard when animated by speech or smiles or frowns? How many enemies? Grunzer mused. A few he could name, others he could guess. But it was their calibre that was important. Men like Whitman Hayes, for instance, there was a 24-carat opponent for you. Grunzer smiled, darting a sidelong glance at the seat-sharer beside him, not wanting to be caught indulging in a secret thought. Grunzer was thirty-four; Hayes was twice as old, his white hairs synonymous with experience, an enemy to be proud of. Hayes knew the food business, all right, knew it from every angle: he'd been a wagon jobber for six years, a broker for ten, a food company executive for twenty before the old man had brought him into the organization

to sit on his right hand. Pinning Hayes to the mat wasn't easy, and that made Grunzer's small but increasing triumphs all the sweeter. He congratulated himself. He had twisted Hayes's advantages into drawbacks, had made his long years seem tantamount to senility and outlived usefulness; in meetings, he had concentrated his questions on the new supermarket and suburbia phenomena to demonstrate to the old man that times had changed, that the past was dead, that new merchandising tactics were needed, and that only a younger man could supply them. . . .

Suddenly, he was depressed. His enjoyment of remembered victories seemed tasteless. Yes, he'd won a minor battle or two in the company conference room; he'd made Hayes' ruddy face go crimson, and seen the old man's parchment skin wrinkle in a sly grin. But what had been accomplished? Hayes seemed more self-assured than ever, and the old man more dependent upon his advice. . . .

When he arrived home, later than usual, his wife Jean didn't ask questions. After eight years of a marriage in which, childless, she knew her husband almost too well, she wisely offered nothing more than a quiet greeting, a hot meal, and the day's mail. Grunzer flipped through the bills and circulars, and found an unmarked letter. He slipped it into his hip pocket, reserving it for private perusal, and finished the meal in silence.

After dinner, Jean suggested a movie and he agreed; he had a passion for violent action movies. But first, he locked himself in the bathroom and opened the letter. Its heading was cryptic: *Society for United Action.* The return address was a post office box. It read:

Dear Mr. Grunzer:

Your name has been suggested to us by a mutual acquaintance. Our organization has an unusual mission which cannot be described in this letter, but which you may find of exceeding interest. We would be gratified by a private discussion at your earliest convenience. If I do not hear from you to the contrary in the next few days, I will take the liberty of calling you at your office.

It was signed, *Carl Tucker, Secretary.* A thin line at the bottom of the page read: *A Non-Profit Organization.*

His first reaction was a defensive one; he suspected an

oblique attack on his pocketbook. His second was curiosity: he went to the bedroom and located the telephone directory, but found no organization listed by the letterhead name. *Okay, Mr. Tucker,* he thought wryly, *I'll bite.*

When no call came in the next three days, his curiosity was increased. But when Friday arrived, he forgot the letter's promise in the crush of office affairs. The old man called a meeting with the bakery products division. Grunzer sat opposite Whitman Hayes at the conference table, poised to pounce on fallacies in his statements. He almost had him once, but Eckhardt, the bakery products manager, spoke up in defense of Hayes's views. Eckhardt had only been with the company a year, but he had evidently chosen sides already. Grunzer glared at him, and reserved a place for Eckhardt in the hate chamber of his mind.

At three o'clock, Carl Tucker called.

"Mr. Grunzer?" The voice was friendly, even cheery. "I haven't heard from you, so I assume you don't mind my calling today. Is there a chance we can get together sometime?"

"Well, if you could give me some idea, Mr. Tucker—"

The chuckle was resonant. "We're not a charity organization, Mr. Grunzer, in case you got that notion. Nor do we sell anything. We're more or less a voluntary service group: our membership is over a thousand at present."

"To tell you the truth," Grunzer frowned, "I never heard of you."

"No, you haven't, and that's one of the assets. I think you'll understand when I tell you about us. I can be over at your office in fifteen minutes, unless you want to make it another day."

Grunzer glanced at his calendar. "Okay, Mr. Tucker. Best time for me is right now."

"Fine! I'll be right over."

Tucker was prompt. When he walked into the office, Grunzer's eyes went dismayed at the officious briefcase in the man's right hand. But he felt better when Tucker, a florid man in his early sixties with small, pleasant features, began talking.

"Nice of you to take the time, Mr. Grunzer. And believe me, I'm not here to sell you insurance or razor blades.

Couldn't if I tried; I'm a semi-retired broker. However, the subject I want to discuss is rather—intimate, so I'll have to ask you to bear with me on a certain point. May I close the door?"

"Sure," Grunzer said, mystified.

Tucker closed it, hitched his chair closer, and said:

"The point is this. What I have to say must remain in the strictest confidence. If you betray that confidence, if you publicize our society in any way, the consequences could be most unpleasant. Is that agreeable?"

Grunzer, frowning, nodded.

"Fine!" The visitor snapped open the briefcase and produced a stapled manuscript. "Now, the society has prepared this little spiel about our basic philosophy, but I'm not going to bore you with it. I'm going to go straight to the heart of our argument. You may not agree with our first principle at all, and I'd like to know that now."

"How do you mean, first principle?"

"Well . . ." Tucker flushed slightly. "Put in the crudest form, Mr. Grunzer, the Society for United Action believes that—*some* people are just not fit to live." He looked up quickly, as if anxious to gauge the immediate reaction. "There, I've said it," he laughed, somewhat in relief. "Some of our members don't believe in my direct approach; they feel the argument has to be broached more discreetly. But frankly, I've gotten excellent results in this rather crude manner. How do you feel about what I've said, Mr. Grunzer?"

"I don't know. Guess I never thought about it much."

"Were you in the war, Mr. Grunzer?"

"Yes. Navy." Grunzer rubbed his jaw. "I suppose I didn't think the Japs were fit to live, back then. I guess maybe there are other cases. I mean, you take capital punishment, I believe in that. Murderers, rape-artists, perverts, hell, I certainly don't think *they're* fit to live."

"Ah," Tucker said. "So you really accept our first principle. It's a question of category, isn't it?"

"I guess you could say that."

"Good. So now I'll try another blunt question. Have you—personally—ever wished someone dead? Oh, I don't mean those casual, fleeting wishes everybody has. I mean

a real, deep-down, uncomplicated wish for the death of someone *you* thought was unfit to live. Have you?"

"Sure." Grunzer said frankly. "I guess I have."

"There are times, in your opinion, when the removal of someone from this earth would be beneficial?"

Grunzer smiled. "Hey, what is this? You from Murder, Incorporated or something?"

Tucker grinned back. "Hardly, Mr. Grunzer, hardly. There is absolutely no criminal aspect to our aims or our methods. I'll admit we're a 'secret' society, but we're no Black Hand. You'd be amazed at the quality of our membership; it even includes members of the legal profession. But suppose I tell you how the society came into being?

"It began with two men; I can't reveal their names just now. The year was 1949, and one of these men was a lawyer attached to the district attorney's office. The other man was a state psychiatrist. Both of them were involved in a rather sensational trial, concerning a man accused of a hideous crime against two small boys. In their opinion, the man was unquestionably guilty, but an unusually persuasive defense counsel, and a highly suggestible jury, gave him his freedom. When the shocking verdict was announced, these two, who were personal friends as well as colleagues, were thunderstruck and furious. They felt a great wrong had been committed, and they were helpless to right it . . .

"But I should explain something about this psychiatrist. For some years, he had made studies in a field which might be called anthropological psychiatry. One of these researches related to the Voodoo practice of certain groups, the Haitian in particular. You've probably heard a great deal about Voodoo, or Obeah as they call it in Jamaica, but I won't dwell on the subject lest you think we hold tribal rites and stick pins in dolls . . . But the chief feature of his study was the uncanny *success* of certain strange practices. Naturally, as a scientist, he rejected the supernatural explanation and sought the rational one. And of course, there was only one answer. When the Vodun priest decreed the punishment or death of a malefactor, it was the malefactor's own convictions concerning the efficacy of the death-wish, his own faith in the Voo-

doo power, that eventually made the wish come true. Sometimes, the process was organic—his body reacted psychosomatically to the Voodoo curse, and he would sicken and die. Sometimes, he would die by 'accident'—an accident prompted by the secret belief that once cursed, he *must* die. Eerie, isn't it?"

"No doubt," Grunzer said, dry-lipped.

"Anyway, our friend, the psychiatrist, began wondering aloud if *any* of us have advanced so far along the civilized path that we couldn't be subject to this same sort of 'suggested' punishment. He proposed that they experiment on this choice subject, just to see.

"How they did it was simple," he said. "They went to see this man, and they announced their intentions. They told him they were going to *wish him dead.* They explained how and why the wish would become reality, and while he laughed at their proposal, they could see the look of superstitious fear cross his face. They promised him that regularly, every day, they would be wishing for his death, until he could no longer stop the mystic juggernaut that would make the wish come true."

Grunzer shivered suddenly, and clenched his fist. "That's pretty silly," he said softly.

"The man died of a heart attack two months later."

"Of course. I knew you'd say that. But there's such a thing as coincidence."

"Naturally. And our friends, while intrigued, weren't satisfied. *So they tried it again.*"

"Again?"

"Yes, again. I won't recount who the victim was, but I will tell you that this time they enlisted the aid of four associates. This little band of pioneers was the nucleus of the society I represent today."

Grunzer shook his head. "And you mean to tell me there's a *thousand* now?"

"Yes, a thousand and more, all over the country. A society whose one function is to *wish people dead.* At first, membership was purely voluntary, but now we have a system. Each new member of the Society for United Action joins on the basis of submitting one potential victim. Naturally, the society investigates to determine whether the

victim is deserving of his fate. If the case is a good one, the *entire* membership then sets about to *wish him dead.* Once the task has been accomplished, naturally, the new member must take part in all future concerted action. That and a small yearly fee, is the price of membership."

Carl Tucker grinned.

"And in case you think I'm not serious, Mr. Grunzer—" He dipped into the briefcase again, this time producing a blue-bound volume of telephone directory thickness. "Here are the facts. To date, two hundred and twenty-nine victims were named by our selection committee. Of those, *one hundred and four are* no longer alive. Coincidence, Mr. Grunzer?

"As for the remaining one hundred and twenty-five—perhaps that indicates that our method is not infallible. We're the first to admit that. But new techniques are being developed all the time. I assure you, Mr. Grunzer, *we will get them all."*

He flipped through the blue-bound book.

"Our members are listed in this book, Mr. Grunzer. I'm going to give you the option to call one, ten, or a hundred of them. Call them and see if I'm not telling the truth."

He flipped the manuscript toward Grunzer's desk. It landed on the blotter with a thud. Grunzer picked it up.

"Well?" Tucker said. "Want to call them?"

"No." He licked his lips. "I'm willing to take your word for it, Mr. Tucker. It's incredible, but I can see how it works. Just *knowing* that a thousand people are wishing you dead is enough to shake hell out of you." His eyes narrowed. "But there's one question. You talked about a 'small' fee—"

"It's fifty dollars, Mr. Grunzer."

"Fifty, huh? Fifty times a thousand, that's pretty good money, isn't it?"

"I assure you, the organization is not motivated by profit. Not the kind you mean. The dues merely cover expenses, committee work, research, and the like. Surely you can understand that?"

"I guess so," he grunted.

"Then you find it interesting?"

Grunzer swiveled his chair about to face the window.

God! he thought.

God! if it *really* worked!

But how could it? If wishes became deeds, he would have slaughtered dozens in his lifetime. Yet, that was different. His wishes were always secret things, hidden where no man could know them. But this method was different, more practical, more terrifying. Yes, he could see how it might work. He could visualize a thousand minds burning with the single wish of death, see the victim sneering in disbelief at first, and then slowly, gradually, surely succumbing to the tightening, constricting chain of fear that it *might* work, that so many deadly thoughts could indeed emit a mystical, malevolent ray that destroyed life.

Suddenly, ghost-like, he saw the ruddy face of Whitman Hayes before him.

He wheeled about and said:

"But the victim has to *know* all this, of course? He has to know the society exists, and has succeeded, and is wishing for *his* death? That's essential, isn't it?"

"Absolutely essential," Tucker said, replacing the manuscripts in his briefcase. "You've touched on the vital point, Mr. Grunzer. The victim must be informed, and that, precisely, is what I have done." He looked at his watch. "Your death wish began at noon today. The society has begun to work. I'm very sorry."

At the doorway, he turned and lifted both hat and briefcase in one departing salute.

"Goodbye, Mr. Grunzer," he said.

ONE OF THOSE DAYS

by WILLIAM F. NOLAN

The confusion one feels upon first reading ONE OF THOSE DAYS is quickly replaced, upon subsequent readings, by a sort of mounting hysteria commingled with the chilly sensation of having blundered into someone's private nightmare. In a way it is not a story at all but a written illustration, as James Thurber's cartoons may be said to be drawn stories. Try not to understand. Try to experience.

I knew it was going to be one of those days when I heard a blue and yellow butterfly humming "*Si, mi chiamano Mimi,*" my favorite aria from *La Bohême.* I was weeding the garden when the papery insect fluttered by, humming beautifully.

I got up, put aside my garden tools, and went into the house to dress. Better see my psychoanalyst at once.

Neglecting my cane and spats, I snapped an old homburg on my head and aimed for Dr. Mellowthin's office in downtown Los Angeles.

Several disturbing things happened to me on the way . . .

First of all, a large stippled Tomcat darted out of an alley directly after I'd stepped from the bus. The cat was on its hind legs and carried a bundle of frothy pink blanketing in its front paws. It looked desperate.

"Gangway!" shouted the cat. "Baby! Live baby here! Clear back. BACK for the baby!"

Then it was gone, having dipped cat-quick across the street losing itself in heavy traffic. Drawing in a deep lungful of air, smog-laden but steadying, I resumed my brisk pace toward Dr. Mellowthin's office.

As I passed a familiar apartment house a third-story window opened and Wally Jenks popped his head over the sill and called down to me. "Hi," yelled Wally. "C'mon up for a little drinkie. Chop, chop."

I shaded my eyes to get a clearer look at him. "Hi,

Jenks!" I yelled back, and we both grinned foolishly at the old play on words. "On my way to Mellowthin's."

"Appointment?" he queried.

"Spur of the moment," I replied.

"Then time's no problem. Up you come, old dads, or I shan't forgive you."

I sighed and entered the building. Jenks was 3 G, and I decided to use the stairs. Elevators trap you. As I reached the second-floor landing I obeyed an irresistible urge to bend down and place my ear close to the base of the wall near the floor.

"You mice still *in* there?" I shouted.

To which a thousand tiny musical Disney-voices shot back: "Damned *right* we are!"

I shrugged, adjusted my homburg, and continued my upward climb.

Jenks met me at the door with a dry martini.

"Thanks," I said, sipping. As usual, it was superb. Old Wally knew his martinis.

"Well," he said, "how goes?"

"Badsville," I answered. "Care to hear?"

"By all means. Unburden."

We sat down, facing one another across the tastefully furnished room. I sipped the martini and told Wally about things. "This morning, bout forty minutes ago, I heard a butterfly humming Puccini. Then I saw a cat carrying what I can only suppose was a live baby."

"Human?"

"Don't know. Could have been a cat-baby."

"Cat say anything?"

"He shouted 'Gangway!' "

"Proceed."

"Then, on the way up here, I had a brief conversational exchange with at least a thousand mice."

"In the walls?"

"Where else?"

"Finish your drinkie," said Jenks, finishing his.

I did so.

"Nother?" he asked.

"Nope. Got to be trotting. I'm in for a mental purge."

"Well, I wouldn't worry too much," he assured me. "Humming insects, talking felines and oddball answering

mice are admittedly unsettling. But . . . there *are* stranger things in this man's world."

I looked at him. And knew he was correct—for old Wally Jenks had turned into a loose-pelted brown camel with twin humps, all stained and worn looking at the tops. I swallowed.

"See you," I said.

Wally grinned, or rather the camel did, and it was awful. Long, cracked yellow teeth like old carnival dishes inside his black gums. I gave a nervous little half-wave and moved for the door. One final glance over my shoulder at old Jenks verified the fact that he was still grinning at me with those big wet desert-red eyes of his.

Back on the street I quickened my stride, anxious now to reach Mellowthin and render a full account of the day's events. Only a half-block to go.

Then a policeman stopped me. He was all sweaty inside his tight uniform, and his face was dark with hatred.

"Thought you was the wise one, eh, Mugger?" he rasped, his voice venom-filled. "Thought you could give John Law the finger!"

"But officer, I don't—"

"Come right along, Mugger. We got special cages for the likes 'a you." He was about to snap a pair of silver cuffs over my wrists when I put a quick knee to his vitals and rabbit-punched him on the way down. Then I grabbed his service revolver.

"Here!" I shouted to several passers-by. "This man is a fraud. Killed a cop to get this rig. He's a swine of the worst sort. Record as long as your arm. Blackmail, rape, arson, auto-theft, kidnapping, grand larceny, wife-beating, and petty pilfering. You name it, he has *done* it."

I thrust the revolver at a wide-eyed, trembling woman. "Take this weapon, lady. And if he makes a funny move, shoot to kill!"

She aimed the gun at the stunned policeman, who was only now getting his breath. He attempted to rise.

"OOPS!" I yelled, "he's going for a knife. Let him have it! NOW!"

The trembling woman shut both eyes and pulled the trigger. The cop pitched forward on his face, stone dead.

"May heaven forgive you!" I moaned, backing away. "You've killed an officer of the law, a defender of the public morals. May heaven be merciful!"

The woman flapped off. She had turned into a heavy-billed pelican. The policeman had become a fat-bellied seal with flippers, but he was still dead.

Hurrying, and somewhat depressed, I entered Dr. Mellowthin's office and told the girl at the desk it was an emergency.

"You may go right in," she told me. "The doctor will see you immediately."

In another moment I was pumping Mellowthin's hand.

"Sit down, boy," he told me. "So—we've got our little complications again today, have we?"

"Sure have," I said, pocketing one of his cigars. I noted that it was stale.

"Care to essay the couch?"

I slid onto the dark rich leather and closed my eyes.

"Now tell me all about it."

"First a butterfly sang *La Bohême,* or hummed it rather. Then a Tomcat shot out of an alley with a baby in its paws. Then some mice in an apartment house yelled back at me. Then one of my oldest and dearest friends turned into a camel."

"One hump or two?" asked Mellowthin.

"Two," I said. "Large and scruffy and all worn at the tops."

"Anything else?"

"Then a big pseudo English cop stopped me. His dialogue was fantastic. Called me Mugger. Said I was fit for a cage. Started to put cuffs on me. I kneed him in the kishkes and gave his gun to a nice trembly lady who shot him. Then she turned into a pelican and flapped off and he turned into a seal with flippers. Then I came here."

I opened my eyes and stared at Dr. Mellowthin.

"What's the matter?" he asked, somewhat uneasily.

"Well," I said, "to begin with you have large brown, sad-looking liquidy eyes."

"And . . ."

"And I bet your nose is cold!" I grinned.

"Anything else?"

"Not really."

"What about my *overall* appearance?"

"Well, of course, you're covered with long black shaggy hair, even down to the tips of your big floppy ears."

A moment of strained silence.

"Can you do tricks?" I asked.

"A few," Mellowthin replied, shifting in his chair.

"Roll over!" I commanded.

He did.

"Play dead!"

His liquidy eyes rolled up white and his long pink tongue lolled loosely from his jaws.

"Good doggie," I said. "Nice doggie."

"Woof," barked Dr. Mellowthin softly, wagging his tail.

Putting on my homburg I tossed him a bone I'd saved from the garden and left his office.

There was no getting around it.

This was simply one of those days.

LUCY COMES TO STAY

by ROBERT BLOCH

Robert Bloch once remarked that "the world is a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live here." He needn't worry; he hasn't lived in this *world for a long time. Although listed as a permanent resident of Van Nuys, California, with steady and gainful employment in the motion picture business, that may be considered no more than a tax dodge. And if anyone thinks Bloch's real world isn't taxing, let him read the following story.*

"You can't go on this way."

Lucy kept her voice down low, because she knew the nurse had her room just down the hall from mine, and I wasn't supposed to see any visitors.

"But George is doing everything he can—poor dear, I hate to think of what all those doctors and specialists are costing him, and the sanatorium bill too. And now that nurse, that Miss Higgins, staying here every day."

"It won't do any good. You know it won't." Lucy didn't sound like she was arguing with me. She *knew*. That's because Lucy is smarter than I am. Lucy wouldn't have started the drinking and gotten into such a mess in the first place. So it was about time I listened to what she said.

"Look, Vi," she murmured. "I hate to tell you this. You aren't well, you know. But you're going to find out one of these days anyway, and you might as well hear it from me."

"What is it, Lucy?"

"About George, and the doctors. They don't think you're going to get well." She paused. "They don't want you to."

"Oh, Lucy!"

"Listen to me, you little fool. Why do you suppose they sent you to that sanatorium in the first place? They said it was to take the cure. So you took it. All right, you're cured, then. But you'll notice that you still have the

doctor coming every day, and George makes you stay here in your room, and that Miss Higgins who's supposed to be a special nurse—you know what she is, don't you? She's a guard."

I couldn't say anything. I just sat there and blinked. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't, because deep down inside I knew that Lucy was right.

"Just try to get out of here," Lucy said. "You'll see how fast she locks the door on you. All that talk about special diets and rest doesn't fool me. Look at yourself—you're as well as I am! You ought to be getting out, seeing people, visiting your friends."

"But I have no friends," I reminded her. "Not after that party, not after what I did—"

"That's a lie." Lucy nodded. "That's what George wants you to think. Why, you have hundreds of friends, Vi. They still love you. They tried to see you at the hospital and George wouldn't let them in. They sent flowers to the sanatorium and George told the nurses to burn them."

"He did? He told the nurses to burn the flowers?"

"Of course. Look, Vi, it's about time you faced the truth. George wants them to think you're sick. George wants you to think you're sick. Why? Because then he can put you away for good. Not in a private sanatorium, but in the—"

"No!" I began to shake. I couldn't stop shaking. It was ghastly. But it proved something. They told me at the sanatorium, the doctors told me, that if I took the cure I wouldn't get the shakes any more. Or the dreams, or any of the other things. Yet here it was—I was shaking again.

"Shall I tell you some more?" Lucy whispered. "Shall I tell you what they're putting in your food? Shall I tell you about George and Miss Higgins?"

"But she's older than he is, and besides he'd never—"

Lucy laughed.

"Stop it!" I yelled.

"All right. But don't yell, you little fool. Do you want Miss Higgins to come in?"

"She thinks I'm taking a nap. She gave me a sedative."

"Lucky I dumped it out." Lucy frowned. "Vi, I've got

to get you away from here. And there isn't much time."

She was right. There wasn't much time. Seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks—how long had it been since I'd had a drink?

"We'll sneak off," Lucy said. "We could take a room together where they wouldn't find us. I'll nurse you until you're well."

"But rooms cost money."

"You have that fifty dollars George gave you for a party dress—the one you didn't buy."

"Why Lucy," I said. "How did you know that?"

"You told me ages ago, dear. Poor thing, you don't remember things very well, do you? All the more reason for trusting me."

I nodded. I could trust Lucy. Even though she was responsible, in a way, for me starting to drink. She just had thought it would cheer me up when George brought all his highclass friends to the house and we went out to impress his clients. Lucy had tried to help. I could trust her. I must trust her—

"We can leave as soon as Miss Higgins goes tonight," Lucy was saying. "We'll wait until George is asleep, eh? Why not get dressed now, and I'll come back for you."

I got dressed. It isn't easy to dress when you have the shakes, because your hair keeps falling down and you can't find all the snaps on your dress.

But I did it. I even put on some makeup and trimmed my hair a little with the big scissors. Then I looked at myself in the mirror and said out loud, "Why, you can't tell, can you?"

"Of course not," said Lucy. "You look radiant. Positively radiant."

I stood there smiling, and the sun was going down, just shining through the window on the scissors in a way that hurt my eyes, and all at once I was so sleepy.

"George will be here soon, and Miss Higgins will leave," Lucy said. "I'd better go now. Why don't you rest until I come for you?"

"Yes," I said. "You'll be very careful?"

"Very careful," Lucy whispered, and tiptoed out quietly.

I lay down on the bed and then I was sleeping, really sleeping for the first time in weeks, sleeping so the

scissors wouldn't hurt my eyes, the way George hurt me inside when he wanted to shut me up in the asylum so he and Miss Higgins could make love on my bed and laugh at me the way they all laughed except Lucy and she would take care of me she knew what to do now I could trust her when George came and I must sleep and sleep and nobody can blame you for what you think in your sleep or do in your sleep . . .

It was all right until I had the dreams, and even then I didn't really worry about them because a dream is only a dream, and when I was drunk I had a lot of dreams and that's how I got into trouble because people didn't understand but I knew it was all right.

When I woke up I had the shakes again, but it was Lucy shaking me, standing there in the dark shaking me. I looked around and saw that the door to my room was open, but Lucy didn't bother to whisper.

She stood there with the scissors in her hand and called to me.

"Come on, let's hurry."

"What are you doing with the scissors?" I asked.

"Cutting the telephone wires, silly! I got into the kitchen after Miss Higgins left and dumped some of that sedative into George's coffee. Remember, I told you the plan."

I couldn't remember now, but I knew it was all right. Lucy and I went out through the hall, past George's room, and he never stirred. Then we went downstairs and out the front door and the street-lights hurt my eyes. Lucy made me hurry right along, though.

We took a streetcar around the corner. It was crowded, but I managed to find a seat next to a fat man. Lucy just stood there, and when I wanted to talk she put her hand up to her lips, quickly, and I kept silent.

This was the difficult part, getting away. Once we were out of the neighborhood, there'd be no worry. The wires were cut.

The lady at the rooming house on the South Side didn't know about the wires being cut. She didn't know about me, either, because Lucy got the room.

Lucy marched in bold as brass and laid my fifty dollars down on the desk. The rent was $12.50 a week in

advance, and Lucy didn't even ask to see the room. I guess that's why the landlady wasn't worried about baggage.

We go upstairs and locked the door, and then I had the shakes again.

Lucy said, "Vi—cut it out!"

"But I can't help it. What'll I do now, Lucy? Oh, what'll I do? Why did I ever let myself—"

"Shut up!" Lucy opened my purse and pulled something out. I had been wondering why my purse felt so heavy but I never dreamed about the secret.

She held the secret up. It glittered under the light, like the scissors, only this was a nice glittering. A golden glittering.

"A whole pint!" I gasped. "Where did you get it?"

"From the cupboard downstairs, naturally. You knew George still keeps the stuff around. I slipped it into your purse, just in case."

I had the shakes, but I got that bottle open in ten seconds. One of my fingernails broke, and then the stuff was burning and warming and softening—

"Pig!" said Lucy.

"You know I had to have it," I whispered. "That's why you brought it."

"I don't like to see you drink," Lucy answered. "I never drink and I don't like to see you hang one on, either."

"Please, Lucy. Just this once."

"Why can't you take a shot and then leave it alone? That's all I ask."

"Just this once, Lucy, I have to."

"I won't sit here and watch you make a spectacle of yourself. You know what always happens—another mess."

I took another gulp. The bottle was half-empty.

"I did all I could for you, Vi. But if you don't stop now, I'm going."

That made me pause. "You couldn't do that to me. I need you, Lucy. Until I'm straightened out, anyway."

Lucy laughed, the way I didn't like. "Straightened out! That's a hot one! Talking about straightening out with a bottle in your hand. It's no use. Vi. Here I do every-

thing I can for you, I stop at nothing to get you away, and you're off on another bender."

"Please. You know I can't help it."

"Oh yes you can help it, Vi. But you don't want to. You've always had to make a choice, you know. George or the bottle. Me or the bottle. And the bottle always wins. I think deep down inside you hate George. You hate me."

"You're my best friend."

"Nuts!" Lucy talked vulgar sometimes, when she got really mad. And she was mad, now. It made me so nervous I had another drink.

"Oh, I'm good enough for you when you're in trouble, or have nobody else around to talk to. I'm good enough to lie for you, pull you out of your messes. But I've never been good enough for your friends, for George. And I can't even win out over a bottle of rotgut whiskey. It's no use, Vi. What I've done for you today you'll never know. And it isn't enough. Keep your lousy whiskey. I'm going."

I know I started to cry. I tried to get up, but the room was turning round and round. Then Lucy was walking out the door and I dropped the bottle and the light kept shining the way it did on the scissors and I closed my eyes and dropped after the bottle to the floor . . .

When I woke up they were all pestering me, the landlady and the doctor and Miss Higgins and the man who said he was a policeman.

I wondered if Lucy had gone to them and betrayed me, but when I asked the doctor said no, they just discovered me through a routine checkup on hotels and rooming-houses after they found George's body in his bed with my scissors in his throat.

All at once I knew what Lucy had done, and why she ran out on me that way. She knew they'd find me and call it murder.

So I told them about her and how it must have happened. I even figured out how Lucy managed to get my fingerprints on the scissors.

But Miss Higgins said she'd never seen Lucy in my house, and the landlady told a lie and said I had registered for the room alone, and the man from the police

just laughed when I kept begging him to find Lucy and make her tell the truth.

Only the doctor seemed to understand, and when we were alone together in the little room he asked me all about her and what she looked like, and I told him.

Then he brought over the mirror and held it up and asked me if I could see her. And sure enough—

She was standing right behind me, laughing. I could see her in the mirror and I told the doctor so, and he said yes, he thought he understood now.

So it was all right after all. Even when I got the shakes just then and dropped the mirror, so that the little jagged pieces hurt my eyes to look at, it was all right.

Lucy was back with me now, and she wouldn't ever go away any more. She'd stay with me forever. I knew that. I knew it, because even though the light hurt my eyes, Lucy began to laugh.

After a minute, I began to laugh, too. And then the two of us were laughing together, we couldn't stop even when the doctor went away. We just stood there against the bars, Lucy and I, laughing like crazy.

THE WOMEN

by RAY BRADBURY

Ray Bradbury is a fourteen-year-old news vendor who lives with his parents in Venice, California. He said he would give me a free subscription to The Los Angeles Daily News *if I would include his story in this anthology. It marks his first professional appearance.*

It was as if a light came on in a green room.

The ocean burned. A white phosphorescence stirred like a breath of steam through the autumn morning sea, rising. Bubbles rose from the throat of some hidden sea ravine.

Like lightning in the reversed green sky of the sea it was, aware. It was old and beautiful. Out of the deeps it came, indolently. A shell, a wisp, a bubble, a weed, a glitter, a whisper, a gill. Suspended in its depths were brainlike trees of frosted coral, eyelike pips of yellow kelp, hairlike fluids of weed. Growing with the tides, growing with the ages, collecting and hoarding and saving unto itself identities and ancient dusts, octopus-inks and all the trivia of the sea.

Until now—it was aware.

It was a shining green intelligence, breathing in the autumn sea. Eyeless but seeing, earless but hearing, bodyless but feeling. It was of the sea. And being of the sea it was—feminine.

It in no way resembled man or woman. But it had a woman's ways, the silken, sly and hidden ways. It moved with a woman's grace. It was all the evil things of vain women.

Dark waters flowed through and by and mingled with her on the way to the gulf streams. In the water were carnival caps, horns, serpentine, confetti. They passed through her like wind through an ancient tree. Orange peels, napkins, papers, eggshells, and burnt kindling from nightfires on the beaches; all the flotsam of the gaunt

high people who stalked on the lone sands of the continental islands, people from brick cities, people who shrieked in metal demons down concrete highways, gone.

She rose softly, shimmering, foaming, into cool morning airs. She lay in the swell after the long time of forming through darkness.

She perceived the shore.

The man was there.

He was a sun-darkened man with strong legs and a good chest.

Each day he should have come down to the water, to bathe, to swim, to be anywhere at all near. But he had never moved. There was a woman on the sand with him, a woman in a black bathing suit who lay next to him talking quietly, laughing. Sometimes they held hands, sometimes they listened to a little sounding machine that they dialed and out of which music came.

The phosphorescence hung quietly in the waves, anxiety returning. It was the end of the season. September. Things were shutting down.

Any day now he might go away and never return.

Today, he *must* come in the water.

They lay on the sand with the heat in them. The radio played softly and the woman in the black bathing suit stirred fitfully, eyes closed.

The man did not lift his head from where he cushioned it on his muscled left arm. He drank the sun with his face, his open mouth, his nostrils. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"A bad dream," said the woman in the black suit.

"Dreams in the daytime?" he asked.

"Don't *you* ever dream in the afternoon?"

"I *never* dream," he said. "I've never had a dream in my life."

She lay there, fingers twitching, "God, I had a horrible dream!"

"What about?"

"I don't know," she said, as if she really didn't. It was so bad she had forgotten. Now, eyes shut, she tried to remember.

"It was about me," he said, lazily, stretching.

"No," she said.

"Yes," he said, smiling to himself. "I was off with another woman, that's what."

"No," she said.

"I insist," he said. "There I was, off with another woman, and you discovered us, and somehow in all the mix-up, I got shot or something."

She wrenched involuntarily. "Don't *talk* that way."

"Let's see now," he said. "What sort of woman was I with? Gentlemen prefer blondes, don't they?"

"Please don't joke," she said. "I don't feel well."

He opened his eyes. "Did it affect you that much?"

She nodded. "Whenever I dream in the daytime this way, it depresses me something terribly."

"I'm sorry." He took her hand. "Anything I can get you?"

"No."

"Ice cream cone? Eskimo pie? A coke?"

"You're a dear, but no. I'll be all right. It's just that, the last four days haven't been right. This isn't like it used to be early in the summer. Something's happened."

"Not between us," he said.

"Oh, no, of course not," she said, quickly. "But don't you feel that sometimes *places* change? Even a thing like a pier changes, and the merry-go-rounds, and all that. Even the hot dogs taste different this week."

"How do you mean?"

"They taste old and funny. It's hard to explain, but I've lost my appetite, and I wish this vacation were over. Really, what I want to do most of all is go home."

"Tomorrow's our last day; can't you stick it out? You know how much this extra week means to me."

"I'll try," she said. "If only this place didn't feel so funny and changed."

"I don't think it's changed. Places never do," he said. "But people or *things* change them. Maybe we're just tired of this beach and want to go somewhere else, some other beach?"

"I don't know. But all of a sudden I just had a feeling I wanted to get up and run."

"For why? Because of your dream? Me and my blonde and me dead all of a sudden."

"Don't," she said. "Don't talk about dying that way!"

She lay there very close to him. "If I only knew what it was."

"There, there," he petted her. "I'll protect you."

"It's not me, it's you," her breath whispered in his ear. "I had the feeling that you were tired of me and went away."

"I wouldn't do that; I love you."

"I'm silly." She forced a laugh. "God, what a silly thing I am!"

They lay quietly, the sun and sky over them like a lid.

"You know," he said, thoughtfully, "I get a little of that feeling you're talking about. This place has changed. There *is* something different."

"I'm glad you feel it, too."

He shook his head, drowsily, smiling softly, shutting his eyes, drinking the sun. "Both crazy. Both crazy." Murmuring. "Both."

The sea came in on the shore three times, softly.

The afternoon came on. The sun struck the skies a grazing blow. The yachts bobbed hot and shining white in the harbor swells. The fishermen spat and lined their baited lines off the pier. The smells of fried meat and burnt onion filled the wind. The sand whispered and stirred like an image in a vast, melting mirror.

The radio at their elbow murmured discreetly. They lay like dark arrows on the white sand. They did not move. Only their eyelids flickered with awareness, only their ears were alert. Now and again their tongues might slide along their baking lips. Sly prickles of moisture appeared on their brows to be burned away by the sun.

He lifted his head, blindly, listening in the heat.

The radio sighed.

He put his head down for a minute.

She felt him lift himself again. She opened one eye and he rested on one elbow looking around, at the pier, at the sky, at the water, at the sand.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said, lying down again.

"Something," she said.

"I thought I heard something."

"The radio."

"No, not the radio. Something else."

"Somebody *else's* radio."

He didn't answer. She felt his arm tense and relax, tense and relax. "Damn it," he said. "There it is, again."

They both lay listening.

"I don't hear anything—"

"Shh!" he cried. "For God's sake—"

The waves broke on the shore, silent mirrors, heaps of melting, whispering glass.

"Somebody singing."

"What?"

"I'd swear it was someone singing."

"Nonsense."

"No, listen."

They did that for a while.

"I don't hear a thing," she said, turning very cold.

He was on his feet. There was nothing in the sky, nothing on the pier, nothing on the sand, nothing in the hot dog stands. There was a staring silence, the wind blowing over his ears, the wind preening along the light, blowing hairs of his arms and legs.

He took a step toward the sea.

"Don't!" she said.

He looked down at her, oddly, as if she were not there. He was still listening.

She turned the portable radio up full, loud. It exploded words and rhythm and melody:

"*—I found a million dollar baby—*"

He made a wry face, raising his open palm violently, "Turn it off!"

"No, I like it!" She turned it louder. She snapped her fingers, rocking her body vaguely, trying to smile.

"*in the five and ten cent store!*"

It was two o'clock.

The sun steamed the waters. The ancient pier expanded with a loud groan in the heat. The birds were held in the hot sky, unable to move. The sun struck through the green liquors that poured about the pier; struck, caught and burnished an idle whiteness that drifted in the off-shore ripples.

The white foam, the frosted coral brain, the kelp-pip, the tide dust lay in the water, spreading, seeing.

The dark man still lay on the sand, the woman in the black suit beside him.

Music drifted up like mist from the water. It was a whispering music of deep tides and passed years, of salt and travel, of accepted and familiar strangenesses. The music sounded not unlike water on the shore, rain falling, the turn of a limb in the depths. It was very soft. It was a singing of a time-lost voice in a caverned sea shell. The hissing and sighing of tides in deserted holds of treasure ships. The sound the wind makes in an empty skull thrown out on the baked sand.

But the radio up on the blanket on the beach played louder.

The phosphorescence, light as a woman, sank down, tired, from sight. Only a few more hours. They might leave at any time. If only he would come in, for an instant, just an instant. The mists stirred silently, thinking of his face and his body in the water, deep under. She thought of him caught, held, as they sank ten fathoms down, on a sluice that bore them twisting and turning in frantic gesticulations, to the depths of a hidden gulf in the sea.

The heat of his body, the water taking fire from his warmth, and the frosted coral brain, the jeweled dusts, the salted mists feeding on his hot breath from his opened lips. The foam shivering with this thought now.

The waves moved the soft and changing thoughts into the shallows which were tepid as bath waters from the two o'clock sun.

He mustn't go away. If he goes now, he'll not return. Now. The cold coral brain drifted, drifted. *Now.* Calling across the hot spaces of windless air in the early afternoon. *Come down to the water. Now,* said the music. *Now.*

The woman in the black bathing suit twisted the radio dial.

"Attention!" screamed the radio. "Now, today, you can buy a new car at—"

"For cripe's sake!" said the man, reaching over and tuning the scream down. "Must you have it so loud!"

"I like it loud," said the woman in the black bathing suit, looking over her shoulder at the sea.

It was three o'clock. The sky was all sun. Sweating, he stood up. "I'm going in," he said.

"Get me a hot dog first, will you?" she said.

"Can't you wait until I come out? Must it be now?"

"Please." She pouted. *"Now."*

"Everything on it?"

"Yes, and bring *three* of them."

"Three? God, what an appetite!" He ran off to the small cafe.

She waited until he was gone. Then she turned the radio off. She lay listening a long time. She heard nothing. She looked at the water until the glints and shatters of sun stabbed through her head, like needles driven deep.

The sea had quieted. There was only a faint, far and fine net of ripples giving off sunlight in infinite repetition. She squinted again and again at the water, scowling.

He bounded back. "Damn, but the sand's hot; burns my feet off!" He flung himself on the blanket. "Eat 'em up!"

She took the three hot dogs and fed quietly on one of them. When she finished it she handed him the remaining two. "Here, you finish them. My eyes are bigger than my stomach."

He eyed her petulantly. "All right." He swallowed the hot dogs in silence. "Next time," he said, finishing, "don't order more than you can use. It's a helluva waste."

"Here," she said, unscrewing a thermos, "you must be thirsty. Finish our lemonade."

"Thanks." He drank. Then he slapped his hands together and said, "Well, I'll go jump in the water now." He looked anxiously at the bright sea.

"Just one more thing," she said, just remembering it. "Will you buy me a bottle of sun-tan oil? I'm all out."

"Haven't you some in your purse?"

"I used it all."

"I wish you'd told me when I was up there buying the hot dogs," he said, irritably. "But, okay." He ran back, loping steadily.

When he was gone, she took the sun-tan bottle from her purse, half full, unscrewed the cap, and poured the liquid into the sand, covering it over surreptitiously, looking out at the sea, and smiling. She rose then and went

down to the edge of the sea and looked out, searching the innumerable small and insignificant waves.

You can't have him, she thought. Whoever or whatever you are, he's mine, and you can't have him. I don't know what's going on; I don't know anything, really. All I know is we're going on a train tonight at seven if I have to take him bodily along. And we won't be here tomorrow. So you can just stay here and wait, ocean, sea, or whatever it is that's wrong here today.

She wanted to say this out loud, because she knew it was right. But she said nothing, for others might think her blazed, ruined by the odd sunlight and the quiet waters.

Do your damnedest; you're no match for me, she thought. She picked up a stone and threw it at the sea.

"There!" she cried. "You."

He was standing beside her.

"Oh?" she jumped back.

"It's only me from over the sea," he sang. "Barnacle Bill the Sailor!" He bit her neck and she thrashed playfully in his grasp. "Hey, what gives? You standing here muttering?"

"Was I?" She was surprised at herself. "Where's the sun-tan oil? Will you put it on my back?"

He poured a yellow twine of oil and massaged it onto her golden back. She looked out at the water from time to time, eyes sly, nodding at the water as if to say, "Look! You see? Ah-ha!" She purred like a kitten.

"There." He gave her the bottle.

He was half into the water before she screamed.

"Where are you going! Come here!"

He turned as if she were someone he didn't know. "For God's sake, what's wrong?"

"Why, you just finished your hot dogs and lemonade—you can't go in the water now and get cramps."

He scoffed. "Old wives' tales."

"Just the same, you come back up on the sand and wait an hour before you go in, do you hear? I won't have you getting a cramp and drowning."

"Ah," he said, disgusted.

"Come along." She turned, and he followed, looking back at the sea.

Three o'clock. Four.

The change came at four-ten. Lying on the sand, the woman in the black suit saw it coming and relaxed. The clouds had been forming since three. Now, with a sudden rush, the fog came in from off the bay. Where it had been warm, now it was cold. A wind blew up out of the nothing. Darker clouds moved it.

"It's going to rain," she said, proudly.

"You sound absolutely pleased," he observed, sitting with arms folded. "Maybe our last day, and you sound pleased because it's clouding up."

"The weather man," she confided, "said there'd be thunder showers all tonight and tomorrow. It might be a good idea to leave tonight."

"We'll stay, just in case it clears. I want to get one more day of swimming in, anyway," he said. "I haven't been in the water yet today."

"We've had so much fun talking and eating, time passes."

"Yeah," he said, looking at his hands.

The fog flailed across the sand in soft strips.

"There," she said. "That was a raindrop on my nose!" She laughed ridiculously at it. Her eyes were bright and young again. She was almost triumphant. "Good old rain."

"Why are you so pleased?" he demanded. "You're an odd duck!"

"Come on, rain!" she said. "Well, help me with these blankets. We'd better run!"

He picked up the blankets slowly, pre-occupied. "Not even one last swim, damn it."

"I've a mind to take just one dive." He smiled at her. "Only a minute!"

"No." Her face paled. "You'll catch cold and I'll have to nurse you!"

"Okay, okay." He turned away from the sea. Gentle rain began to fall.

Marching ahead of him, she headed for the hotel. She was singing softly to herself.

"Hold on!" he said.

She halted. She did not turn. She only listened to his voice far away.

"Why, there's someone out there, in the water!" he cried. "Drowning!"

She couldn't move. She heard his feet running.

"Wait here!" he shouted. "I'll be right back! There's someone there! A woman, I think!"

"Let the lifeguards get her!" cried the woman in the black suit, whirling.

"Aren't any! Off duty; late!" He ran down to the shore, the sea, the waves.

"Come back!" she screamed. "There's no one out there! Don't oh, don't!"

"Don't worry, I'll be right back!" he called. "She's drowning out there, see?"

The fog came in, the rain pattered down, a white flashing light raised in the waves. He ran, and the woman in the black suit ran after him, scattering beach implements behind her, crying, tears rushing from her eyes. "Don't!" she said. She put out her hands.

He leaped into an onrushing dark wave.

The woman in the black bathing suit waited in the rain. At six o'clock the sun set somewhere behind black clouds. The rain rattled softly on the water, a distant drum snare.

Under the sea, a move of illuminant white.

The soft shape, the foam, the weed lay in the shallows. Among the stirring glitter, deep under, was the man.

Fragile. The foam bubbled and broke. The frosted coral brain rang against a pebble with hidden thought. Fragile men. So fragile. Like dolls, they break. Nothing, nothing to them. A minute under water and they're sick and pay no attention and they vomit out and kick and then, suddenly just lie there, doing nothing. Doing nothing at all. How strange and how disappointing, after all the days of waiting.

What to do with him now? His head lolls, his mouth opens, his eyelids loosen, his eyes stare, his skin pales. Silly man, wake up! Wake up!

The water raced about him.

The man hung limply, loosely, mouth agape.

The phosphorescence, the green hair weed withdrew.

He was released. A wave carried him back to the

silent shore. Back to his wife, who was waiting for him there in the cold rain.

The rain poured over the black waters.

Distantly, under the leaden skies, from the twilight shore, a woman screamed.

Ah—the ancient dusts stirred sluggishly in the water—isn't that *like* a woman?

Now, *she* doesn't want him, *either!*

At seven o'clock the rain fell thick. It was night and very cold and the hotels all along the sea had to turn on the heat.

SURPRISE!

by RONALD BRADFORD

If one reads enough biographies of musicians, one is likely to conclude that to become a successful composer one must begin as a lawyer. There is a similar pattern in the lives of writers. Almost all of them began as artists, failed or lost interest and took up writing as (so they thought at the time) a second choice. Which is to say that Ronald Bradford's being an artist does not make him unique. What makes him unique, apart from the fact that he is one of the country's more successful illustrators and designers, is that his prose is entirely debt-free. I was not able to discern the slightest influence in SURPRISE! and I don't think you will, either.

It was the hottest day in the history of Beaglesville.

The sun burned behind the trees, sparkling between leaves, quiet and bright. It moved only when he moved. Mr. Winkin squinted and stretched toward the giant green boughs. Little drops swarmed like rain on a window and ran down the back of his neck. He put his hand like a plane flying over the hedge and skimmed and swooped at the leaves. The stripped stems still quivered when he let the petals slide from his hand toward the ground they never quite reached. The leaves flippity-flopped and stayed in the air and swirled over large tortoise back stones. They blew across blooming patches of yellow and red, through a gnarled flower mass, right into Henry's whortleberries.

Henry didn't know he had whortleberries. He didn't know he had grass. He knew he had a bookshop, a private library, his lovely, adopted niece Julie (since his poor brother's fatal accident ten years ago), and his wife.

The grass that Henry did not know grew in abundance. It grew so thick and full and high, that Julie appeared to be partly floating, partly submerged, in the middle of

a green shallow sea. Mr. Winkin watched her sleeping in the grass, with a book on the blanket in the sun.

Julie liked the grass. She liked her aunt, loved her Uncle Henry, adored his little bookshop and had an absolute passion for whortleberries. She thought Mr. Winkin was an "indefectable" chess player, a person of "precious" profundity, and "cute." She had always greeted him with an affectionate kiss on the cheek and he had always protested—especially now that she was grown. On the last day of sweet sixteen, Julie was a newly ripe, childlike, socially naive, embroidered white star spangled Victorian innocent, whose excitable heart still throbbed to the tear sprinkled "founded on fact," 1811 Poughkeepsie novel likes of "Alonzo and Melissa."

Everyone liked Julie. Her tender and sincere way of doing things made everyone feel the absolute charm and certainty of her love and affection. Mr. Winkin was no exception, although he did find her insistent neglect of adult protocol annoying. He ignored this, however—a thing he had done often of late, and did again when he noticed her light summer dress well above her knees. He concentrated instead upon the breast bobbing book moving up and down across her chest, and wondered which of Henry's rare books she had this time. Henry never loaned books except to his niece. When Mr. Winkin saw her reading the "Wizard of Oz" at a public park, he recalled it had been a first edition with all the textual variants. A similar copy had brought $875.00 at the Parke-Bernet Galleries sale. Since Mr. Winkin bought all his books at Henry's bookshop, he had always felt a little put out over Henry's book lending eccentricities, but he never said anything.

Julie's book was a small edition, very old and dilapidated. The backbone was badly cracked and the gold stamped title was disproportionately small and faded. It was so generally worn and shabby, he imagined its value very little. Nonetheless his book fancier's curiosity had been aroused. He stepped through the privet, bent over the book to make out the title, and noticed two brown eyes staring back. They were surrounded by a very pretty face that sprang up and kissed him on the cheek. Mr. Winkin fussed, fumed, protested, moralized, snorted, and

noticed quietly to himself that her dress was still too high above her knees. Julie giggled at her joke and handed him the book, whose title he finally saw was "Paradise Lost."

Mr. Winkin had a particular affection for Paradise Lost. Of all the utopias he had collected, it was his prized example. The problem confronting most utopias was that paradise for one was not necessarily paradise for the other. Milton's book replaced perfect people makers with an irrefutable, acceptable to all, plan. Man's mind was mesmerized by God to accept as paradise an uncultivated serene plot of land known as the Garden of Eden. This holy brainwashing guaranteed paradise for man for all time. With all utopias, however, even Godmade ones, there is always a pitfall. In the case of Eden, it was deceit in the guise of an apple—deceit, like all deceit, deservingly punished. Mr. Winkin vividly recalled the traumatic result—God had become melancholy, and all the streams and rivers and seasons turned harsh and oppressive. Satan returned to hell, smug and proud over his triumphant mockery of man and God. He stood high in the crowd of his fellow demons and in an exultant tone, bragged how he put one over. In that moment, in that grand illusion of achievement, expecting to be applauded for his deceit, he heard instead strange hissing sounds and felt his arms drawn into his sides. In that instant of fatal boasting God struck him down and turned him into a snake.

Mr. Winkin closed the book. Shadows filled the sun spaced spots and a blue light settled like smoke. Fancy merged with reality until both were discordantly pierced.

"J-U-L-I-E!"

Julie's aunt cried out like a vampire rammed by a stake. She rented the air with sounds that shook and trembled the big glass panes in the big bay windows where they began around the side of Henry's house.

"J-U-L-I-E! It's nearly seven, dear, and your uncle set the clock for nine! Hurry up now, and remember—you're not to leave the library until it plays—and don't forget my dress at Mrs. Skinner's or I won't have a thing for tomorrow."

Mr. Winkin looked at Julie.

"I broke Uncle Henry's musical clock. It plays every

time except when it's supposed to. I never saw him so mad. He made me promise to stay in the library all night to make sure it wørks right."

Mr. Winkin had never known Henry to be mad at Julie. Possibly Henry had come to his senses. Henry's library wasn't a toy shop. His collection of books and antiques were worth a fortune. How he could let her use books worth hundreds of dollars and not loan him a valueless book overnight was beyond his comprehension. Julie complained that she wouldn't be able to set her hair in the library and how would she look without her hair set? He didn't really know of course, although he imagined very well. Maybe he could borrow one of Henry's first editions—anyway, there wasn't too much he could do about her hair, so he said good night and watched her as she walked into the dark that was too dark to see anything.

Mr. Winkin took off his clothes and stayed in the shower until the cold water splashing down had turned his hands into a withering, acidy, wrinkly white. He stepped out, wrapped a big towel around his skinny waist and plopped down on the couch next to the open window. The lights were off. The air was black and still and hot. Smoke from his cigarette clung to new sweat like morning mist. Henry's library windows were wide open. A small lamp glowed in the shadows. Their library was an elegant boomville parlor with walls of books. The entire house overflowed with electrically wired gas lamps, foot warmers, oriental rugs, hand knit lace on horsehair sofas, bird-cages without birds, brass pots, stereopticons, stuffed animals, butterflies and daguerrotypes—but the library was its finest example. The library was a special room. It hadn't changed in seventy years. Henry kept everything exactly as his father left it when he died. The house had stood thirty years then. It had already held one generation of living. A generation that watched slow moving wagons and carriages on dusty roads and water being pumped in the kitchen. Things had changed outside. Inside, it was still the same. Inside the library Henry still lived in that time.

The musical clock stood in the corner. Its hand en-

graved fruitwood and gilt cherubs surrounded a face that indicated the time, day, month and year. For one minute, as the hours were struck, every day of every month through all the years he had known Henry, the queer clicks and clanks and whir of machinery accompanied the piercing sweet "Mononstey Bells" melody.

As Mr. Winkin watched, the clock disappeared in a shadow. Elongated arms and legs climbed up the walls and swelled against shelves lined with books. They danced at the top of the bookseller's ladder Julie used to poke through the shelves. She took a step up, and pulled down a book which she carefully placed on the sofa. Then starting in a line at her breasts going down, she undid the row of tiny buttons. It was done in a second. The unfastened dress slipped down her legs and lay on the floor at her feet. She stepped over it, completely naked.

Mr. Winkin blushed but didn't move. Her full breasts pushed out like two balloons tied up in a pair of knotted nipples. The navel retreated like a hole made in dough with the round tip of a finger. She stretched her arms between her legs, placed the book on her belly and thighs, and curled around the pillows. The pages bent back when they slid off the tips of her breasts. In a matter of minutes she had closed her eyes, put the book on a cushion, reached out and turned off the light.

Henry's library windows were protected on either side by eight foot privets. They formed a near pocket between the two houses. Expect for the path going through them it was virtually impregnable.

Still you never knew.

Suppose someone had been planning to burglarize Henry's house. There were lots of rooms to burglarize. No one could see them. He pulled himself beside the ledge and peered into the dark. *Suppose* someone was lurking in the brush at this very moment and had seen Julie. Mr. Winkin felt a queer tingly feeling surge throughout his body. His arms twitched and his legs throbbed. It would be up to him to save Julie. He would have to be careful of course. Julie couldn't know. She might panic and scream or run and fight. No one could know. He would have to sneak up behind her, cover her mouth, hold her and whisper so they wouldn't hear. *Suppose* . . .

Mr. Winkin watched a dark, motioning shadowy figure of a man signal to others and head for the back of Henry's house.

When Mr. Winkin reached Henry's screen door, it was already unlatched. The towel had slipped from his waist as he ran through the garden, but there was no time to turn back. All the lights were off. He stood listening, stark naked. He knew Henry's house as well as his own, but there were twenty-three rooms besides the library. They might be in any one—still, she was helpless by herself. The thought jarred inside. It shattered and echoed inside his head while he stole through the corridors and halls. A few feet from the library door he heard a noise. Like heavy breathing. A grumbling stomach . . . His hands wrapped slowly around the cool metal knob and the door slipped open. He wasn't more than twenty feet from the high back of the old couch silhouetted against the library windows.

"Julie," he whispered, a faint whisper that was slightly less than breathing. "Julie"—"Julie"—

The words started to come but they stuck in his mouth. They sank down and boiled up till they slithered out and hissed off his tongue. They lashed out of a leather body that slid across the thick carpet, past the walls lined with books, to the front of the high back old couch. It coiled around Julie's body while it caressed in a whispering hiss. It squeezed out her screams as the music clock played and the unearthly voices sang out—

"SURPRISE! SURPRISE! SURPRISE! HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO—"

No one had an explanation when they carted it away. Not the Circus or the Policemen or the Firemen or the Zoo. Six foot serpents were unheard of in Beaglesville.

MUTE

by RICHARD MATHESON

The theme of the Strange Child is not new to literature. What is new is Richard Matheson's treatment of the theme. For somehow, in MUTE, he has managed to make of his Child's condition a thing neither fearful nor pitiable but, instead, highly desirable. Indeed, the boy Paal may be the only 'normal' person in the story . . .

The man in the dark raincoat arrived in German Corners at two-thirty that Friday afternoon. He walked across the bus station to a counter behind which a plump, grey-haired woman was polishing glasses.

"Please," he said, "Where might I find authority?"

The woman peered through rimless glasses at him. She saw a man in his late thirties, a tall, good-looking man.

"Authority?" she asked.

"Yes—how do you say it? The constable? The—?"

"Sheriff?"

"Ah." The man smiled. "Of course, The sheriff. Where might I find him?"

After being directed, he walked out of the building into the overcast day. The threat of rain had been constant since he'd woken up that morning as the bus was pulling over the mountains into Casca Valley. The man drew up his collar, then slid both hands into the pockets of his raincoat and started briskly down Main Street.

Really, he felt tremendously guilty for not having come sooner; but there was so much to do, so many problems to overcome with his own two children. Even knowing that something was wrong with Holger and Fanny, he'd been unable to get away from Germany until now—almost a year since they'd last heard from the Nielsens. It was a shame that Holger had chosen such an out of the way place for his corner of the four-sided experiment.

Professor Werner walked more quickly, anxious to find out what had happened to the Nielsens and their son.

Their progress with the boy had been phenomenal—really an inspiration to them all. Although, Werner felt, deep within himself, that something terrible had happened he hoped they were all alive and well. Yet, if they were, how to account for the long silence?

Werner shook his head worriedly. Could it have been the town? Elkenberg had been compelled to move several times in order to avoid the endless prying—sometimes innocent, more often malicious—into *his* work. Something similar might have happened to Nielsen. The workings of the small town composite mind could sometimes be a terrible thing.

The sheriff's office was in the middle of the next block. Werner strode more quickly along the narrow sidewalk, then pushed open the door and entered the large, warmly heated room.

"Yes?" the sheriff asked, looking up from his desk.

"I have come to inquire about a family," Werner said, "The name of Nielsen."

Sheriff Harry Wheeler looked blankly at the tall man.

Cora Wheeler was pressing Paal's trousers when the call came. Setting the iron on its stand, she walked across the kitchen and lifted the receiver from the wall telephone.

"Yes?" she said.

"Cora, it's me."

Her face tightened. "Is something wrong, Harry?"

He was silent.

"Harry?"

"The one from Germany is here."

Cora stood motionless, staring at the calendar on the wall, the numbers blurred before her eyes.

"Cora, did you hear me?"

She swallowed dryly. "Yes."

"I . . . I have to bring him out to the house," he said.

She closed her eyes.

"I know," she murmured and hung up.

Turning, she walked slowly to the window. It's going to rain, she thought. Nature was setting the scene well.

Abruptly, her eyes shut, her fingers drew in tautly, the nails digging at her palms.

"No." It was almost a gasp. *"No."*

After a few moments she opened her tear-glistening eyes and looked out fixedly at the road. She stood there numbly, thinking of the day that Paal had come to her.

If the house hadn't burned in the middle of the night there might have been a chance. It was twenty-one miles from German Corners but the state highway ran fifteen of them and the last six—the six miles of dirt road that led north into the wood-sloped hills—might have been navigated had there been more time.

As it happened, the house was a night-lashing sheet of flame before Bernhard Klaus saw it.

Klaus and his family lived some five miles away on Skytouch Hill. He had gotten out of bed around one-thirty to get a drink of water. The window of the bathroom faced north and that was why, entering, Klaus saw the tiny flaring blaze out in the darkness.

"*Gott'n'immel!*" he slung startled words together and was out of the room before he'd finished. He thumped heavily down the carpeted steps, then, feeling at the wall for guidance, hurried for the living room.

"Fire at Nielsen house!" he gasped after agitated cranking had roused the night operator from her nap.

The hour, the remoteness and one more thing doomed the house. German Corners had no official fire brigade. The security of its brick and timbered dwellings depended on voluntary effort. In the town itself this posed no serious problem. It was different with those houses in the outlying areas.

By the time Sheriff Harry Wheeler had gathered five men and driven them to the fire in the ancient truck, the house was lost. While four of the six men pumped futile streams of water into the leaping, crackling inferno, Sheriff Wheeler and his deputy, Max Ederman, circuited the house.

There was no way in. They stood in back, raised arms warding off the singeing buffet of heat, grimacing at the blaze.

"They're done for!" Ederman yelled about the wind-swept roar.

Sheriff Wheeler looked sick. "The *boy*," he said but Ederman didn't hear.

Only a waterfall could have doused the burning of the old house. All the six men could do was prevent ignition of the woods that fringed the clearing. Their silent figures prowled the edges of the glowing area, stamping out sparks, hosing out the occasional flare of bushes and tree foliage.

They found the boy just as the eastern hill peaks were being edged with grey morning.

Sheriff Wheeler was trying to get close enough to see into one of the side windows when he heard a shout. Turning, he ran toward the thick woods that sloped downward a few dozen yards behind the house. Before he'd reached the underbrush, Tom Poulter emerged from them, his thin frame staggering beneath the weight of Paal Nielsen.

"Where'd you find him?" Wheeler asked, grabbing the boy's legs to ease weight from the older man's back.

"Down the hill," Poulter gasped, "Lyin' on the ground."

"Is he burned?"

"Don't look it. His pajamas ain't touched."

"Give him here," the sheriff said. He shifted Paal into his own strong arms and found two large, green-pupiled eyes staring blankly at him.

"You're awake," he said, surprised.

The boy kept staring at him without making a sound.

"You all right, son?" Wheeler asked. It might have been a statue he held, Paal's body was so inert, his expression so dumbly static.

"Let's get a blanket on him," the sheriff muttered aside and started for the truck. As he walked he noticed how the boy stared at the burning house now, a look of mask-like rigidity on his face.

"Shock," murmured Poulter and the sheriff nodded grimly.

They tried to put him down on the cab seat, a blanket over him but he kept sitting up, never speaking. The coffee Wheeler tried to give him dribbled from his lips and across his chin. The two men stood beside the truck while Paal stared through the windshield at the burning house.

"Bad off," said Poulter, "Can't talk, cry nor nothin'."

"He isn't burned," Wheeler said, perplexed, "How'd he get out of the house without getting burned?"

"Maybe his folks got out too," said Poulter.

"Where are they then?"

The older man shook his head. "Dunno, Harry."

"Well, I better take him home to Cora," the sheriff said, "Can't leave him sitting out here."

"Think I'd better go with you," Poulter said, "I have t'get the mail sorted for delivery."

"All right."

Wheeler told the other four men he'd bring back food and replacements in an hour or so. Then Poulter and he climbed into the cab beside Paal and he jabbed his boot toe on the starter. The engine coughed spasmodically, groaned over, then caught. The sheriff raced it until it was warm, then eased it into gear. The truck rolled off slowly down the dirt road which led to the highway.

Until the burning house was no longer visible, Paal stared out the back window, face still immobile. Then, slowly, he turned, the blanket slipping off his thin shoulders. Tom Poulter put it back over him.

"Warm enough?" he asked.

The silent boy looked at Poulter as if he'd never heard a human voice in his life.

As soon as she heard the truck turn off the road, Cora Wheeler's quick right hand moved along the stove-front switches. Before her husband's bootfalls sounded on the back porch steps the bacon lay neatly in strips across the frying pan, white moons of pancake batter were browning on the griddle and the already brewed coffee was heating.

"Harry."

There was a sound of pitying shock in her voice as she saw the boy in his arms. She hurried across the kitchen.

"Let's get him to bed," Wheeler said, "I think maybe he's in shock."

The slender woman moved up the stairs on hurried feet, threw open the door of what had been David's room and moved to the bed. When Wheeler passed through the doorway she had the covers peeled back and was plugging in an electric blanket.

"Is he hurt?" she asked.

"No." He put Paal down on the bed.

"Poor darling," she murmured, tucking in the bedclothes around the boy's frail body. "Poor little darling." She stroked back the soft blond hair from his forehead and smiled down at him.

"There now, go to sleep, dear. It's all right. Go to sleep."

Wheeler stood behind her and saw the seven-year-old boy staring up at Cora with that same, dazed, lifeless expression. It hadn't changed once since Tom Poulter had brought him out of the woods.

The sheriff turned and went down to the kitchen. There he phoned for replacements, then turned the pancakes and bacon and poured himself a cup of coffee. He was drinking it when Cora came down the back stairs and returned to the stove.

"Are his parents . . .?" she began.

"I don't know," Wheeler said, shaking his head, "We couldn't get near the house."

"But the boy—?"

"Tom Poulter found him outside."

"*Outside.*"

"We don't know how he got out," he said, "All we know's he was there."

His wife grew silent. She slid pancakes on a dish and put the dish in front of him. She put her hand on his shoulder.

"You look tired," she said, "Can you go to bed?"

"Later," he said.

She nodded, then, patting his shoulder, turned away. "The bacon will be done directly," she said.

He grunted. Then, as he poured maple syrup over the stack of cakes, he said, "I expect they are dead, Cora. It's an awful fire; still going when I left. Nothing we could do about it."

"That poor boy," she said.

She stood by the stove watching her husband eat wearily.

"I tried to get him to talk," she said, shaking her head, "But he never said a word.

"Never said a word to us either," he told her, "Just stared."

He looked at the table, chewing thoughtfully.

"Like he didn't even know how to talk," he said.

A little after ten that morning the waterfall came—a waterfall of rain—and the burning house sputtered and hissed into charred, smoke-fogged ruins.

Red-eyed and exhausted, Sheriff Wheeler sat motionless in the truck cab until the deluge had slackened. Then, with a chest-deep groan, he pushed open the door and slid to the ground. There, he raised the collar of his slicker and pulled down the wide-brimmed Stetson more tightly on his skull. He walked around to the back of the covered truck.

"Come on," he said, his voice hoarsely dry. He trudged through the clinging mud toward the house.

The front door still stood. Wheeler and the other men by-passed it and clambered over the collapsed living room wall. The sheriff felt thin waves of heat from the still glowing timbers and the throat-clogging reek of wet, smoldering rugs and upholstery turned his edgy stomach.

He stepped across some half-burned books on the floor and the roasted bindings crackled beneath his tread. He kept moving into the hall, breathing through gritted teeth, rain spattering off his shoulders and back. I hope they got out, he thought, I hope to God they got out.

They hadn't. They were still in their bed, no longer human; blackened to a hideous, joint-twisted crisp. Sheriff Wheeler's face was tautly pale as he looked down at them.

One of the men prodded a wet twig at something on the mattress.

"Pipe," Wheeler heard him say above the drum of rain, "Must have fell asleep smokin'."

"Get some blankets," Wheeler told them, "Put them in the back of the truck."

Two of the men turned away without a word and Wheeler heard them clump away over the rubble.

He was unable to take his eyes off Professor Holger Nielsen and his wife Fanny; scorched into grotesque mockeries of the handsome couple he remembered—the tall, big-framed Holger, calmly imperious; the slender, auburn-haired Fanny, her face a soft, rose-cheeked—

Abruptly, the sheriff turned and stumbled from the room, almost tripping over a fallen beam.

The boy; what would happen to the boy now? That day was the first time Paal had ever left this house in his life. His parents were the fulcrum of his world; Wheeler knew that much. No wonder there had been that look of shocked incomprehension on his face.

Yet how did he know his mother and father were dead?

As the sheriff crossed the living room, he saw one of the men looking at a partially charred book.

"Look at this," the man said, holding it out.

Wheeler glanced at it, his eyes catching the title *The Unknown Mind.*

He turned away tensely. "Put it down!" he snapped, quitting the house with long, anxious strides. The memory of how the Nielsens looked went with him; and something else. A question.

How did Paal get out of the house?

Paal woke up.

For a long moment he stared up at the formless shadows that danced and fluttered across the ceiling. It was raining out. The wind was rustling tree boughs outside the window, causing shadow movements in this strange room. Paal lay motionless in the warm center of the bed, air crisp in his lungs, cold against his pale cheeks.

Where were they? Paal closed his eyes and tried to sense their presence. They weren't in the house. Where then? Where were his mother and father?

Hands of my mother. Paal washed his mind clean of all but the trigger symbol. They rested on the ebony velvet of his concentration—pale, lovely hands, soft to touch and be touched by. The mechanism which could raise his mind to the needed level of clarity.

In his own home it would be unnecessary. His own home was filled with the sense of them. Each object touched by them possessed a power to bring their minds close. The very air seemed charged with their consciousness; filled with a constancy of devotion.

Not here. He needed to lift himself above the alien drag of here.

Therefore, I am convinced that each child is born with

this instinctive ability. Words given to him by his father appearing again like dew-jeweled spider web across the fingers of his mother's hands. He stripped it off. The hands were free again, stroking slowly at the darkness of his mental focus. His eyes were shut; a tracery of lines and ridges scarred his brow, his tightened jaw was bloodless. The level of awareness, like waters, rose.

His senses rose along, unbidden.

Sound revealed its woven maze—the rushing, thudding, drumming, dripping rain; the tangled knit of winds through air and tree and gables eave; the crackling settle of the house; each whispering transcience of process.

Sense of smell expanded to a cloud of brain-filling odors—wood and wool, damp brick and dust and sweet starched linens. Beneath his tensing fingers weave became apparent—coolness and warmth, the weight of covers, the delicate, skin-scarring press of rumpled sheet. In his mouth the taste of cold air, old house. Of sight; only the hands.

Silence; lack of response. He'd never had to wait so long for answers before. Usually, they flooded on him easily. His mother's hands grew clearer. They pulsed with life. Unknown, he climbed beyond. *This bottom level sets the stage for more important phenomena.* Words of his father. He'd never gone above that bottom level until now.

Up, up. Like cool hands drawing him to rarified heights. Tendrils of acute consciousness rose toward the peak, searching desperately for a holding place. The hands began breaking into clouds. The clouds dispersed.

It seemed he floated toward the blackened tangle of his home, rain a glistening lace before his eyes. He saw the front door standing, waiting for his hand. The house drew closer. It was engulfed in licking mists. Closer, closer—

Paal, no.

His body shuddered on the bed. Ice frosted his brain. The house fled suddenly, bearing with itself a horrid image of two black figures lying on—

Paal jolted up, staring and rigid. Awareness maelstromed into its hiding place. One thing alone remained. He knew that they were gone. He knew that they had guided him, sleeping, from the house.

Even as they burned.

That night they knew he couldn't speak.

There was no reason for it, they thought. His tongue was there, his throat looked healthy. Wheeler looked into his opened mouth and saw that. But Paal did not speak.

"So *that's* what it was," the sheriff said, shaking his head gravely. It was near eleven. Paal was asleep again.

"What's that, Harry?" asked Cora, brushing her dark blonde hair in front of the dressing table mirror.

"Those times when Miss Frank and I tried to get the Nielsen's to start the boy in school." He hung his pants across the chair back. "The answer was always no. Now I see why."

She glanced up at his reflection. "There must be something wrong with him, Harry," she said.

"Well, we can have Doc Steiger look at him but I don't think so."

"But they were college people," she argued, "There was no earthly reason why they shouldn't teach him how to talk. Unless there was some reason he *couldn't.*"

Wheeler shook his head again.

"They were strange people, Cora," he said, "Hardly spoke a word themselves. As if they were too good for talking—or something." He grunted disgustedly. "No wonder they didn't want that boy to school."

He sank down on the bed with a groan and shucked off boots and calf-high stockings. "What a day," he muttered.

"You didn't find anything at the house?"

"Nothing. No identification papers at all. The house is burned to a cinder. Nothing but a pile of books and they don't lead us anywhere."

"Isn't there any way?"

"The Nielsens never had a charge account in town. And they weren't even citizens so the Professor wasn't registered for the draft."

"Oh." Cora looked a moment at her face reflected in the oval mirror. Then her gaze lowered to the photograph on the dressing table; David as he was when he was nine. The Nielsen boy looked a great deal like David, she thought. Same height and build. Maybe David's hair was a trifle darker but—

"What's to be done with him?" she asked.

"Couldn't say, Cora," he answered, "we have to wait till the end of the month, I guess. Tom Poulter says the Nielsens got three letters the end of every month. Come from Europe, he said. We'll just have to wait for them, then write back to the addresses on them. Maybe the boy has relations over there."

"Europe," she said, almost to herself, "that far away."

Her husband grunted, then pulled the covers back and sank down heavily on the mattress.

"Tired," he muttered.

He stared at the ceiling. "Come to bed," he said.

"In a little while."

She sat there brushing distractedly at her hair until the sound of his snoring broke the silence. Then, quietly, she rose and moved across the hall.

There was a river of moonlight across the bed. It flowed over Paal's small, motionless hands. Cora stood in the shadows a long time looking at the hands. For a moment she thought it was David in his bed again.

It was the sound.

Like endless club strokes across his vivid mind, it pulsed and throbbed into him in an endless, garbled din. He sensed it was communication of a sort but it hurt his ears and chained awareness and locked incoming thoughts behind dense, impassable walls.

Sometimes, in an infrequent moment of silence he would sense a fissure in the walls and, for that fleeting moment, catch hold of fragments—like an animal snatching scraps of food before the trap jaws clash together.

But then the sound would start again, rising and falling in rhythmless beat, jarring and grating, rubbing at the live, glistening surface of comprehension until it was dry and aching and confused.

"Paal," she said.

A week had passed; another week would pass before the letters came.

"Paal, didn't they ever talk to you? Paal?"

Fists striking at delicate acuteness. Hands squeezing sensitivity from the vibrant ganglia of his mind.

"Paal, don't you know your name? Paal? *Paal.*"

There was nothing physically wrong with him. Doctor Steiger had made sure of it. There was no reason for him not to talk.

"We'll teach you, Paal. It's all right, darling. We'll teach you." Like knife strokes across the weave of consciousness. *"Paal. Paal."*

Paal. It was himself; he sensed that much. But it was different in the ears; a dead, depressive sound standing alone and drab, without the host of linked associations that existed in his mind. In thought, his name was more than letters. It was *him;* every facet of his person and its meaning to himself, his mother and his father, to his life. When they had summoned him or thought his name it had been more than just the small hard core which sound made of it. It had been everything interwoven in a flash of knowing, unhampered by sound.

"Paal, don't you understand? It's your name. Paal Nielsen. Don't you understand?"

Drumming, pounding at raw sensitivity. Paal. The sound kicking at him. *Paal. Paal.* Trying to dislodge his grip and fling him into the maw of sound.

"Paal. Try, Paal. Say it after me. Pa-al. *Pa-al."*

Twisting away, he would run from her in panic and she would follow him to where he cowered by the bed of her son.

Then, for long moments, there would be peace. She would hold him in her arms and, as if she understood, would not speak. There would be stillness and no pounding clash of sound against his mind. She would stroke his hair and kiss away sobless tears. He would lie against the warmth of her, his mind, like a timid animal, emerging from its hiding place again—to sense a flow of understanding from this woman. Feeling that needed no sound.

Love; wordless, unencumbered and beautiful.

Sheriff Wheeler was just leaving the house that morning when the phone rang. He stood in the front hallway, waiting until Cora picked it up.

"Harry!" he heard her call, "Are you gone yet?"

He came back into the kitchen and took the receiver from her. "Wheeler," he said into it.

"Tom Poulter, Harry," the postmaster said, "Them letters is in."

"Be right there," Wheeler said and hung up.

"The letters?" his wife asked.

Wheeler nodded.

"*Oh,*" she murmured so that he barely heard her.

When Wheeler entered the post office twenty minutes later, Poulter slid the three letters across the counter. The sheriff picked them up.

"Switzerland," he read the postmarks, "Sweden. Germany."

"That's the lot," Poulter said, "Like always. On the thirtieth of the month."

"Can't open them, I suppose," Wheeler said.

"Y'know I'd say yes if I could, Harry," Poulter answered, "But law's law. You know that. I got t'send them back unopened. That's the law."

"All right." Wheeler took out his pen and copied down the return addresses in his pad. He pushed the letters back. "Thanks."

When he got home at four that afternoon, Cora was in the front room with Paal. There was a look of confused emotion on Paal's face—a desire to please coupled with a frightened need to flee the disconcertion of sound. He sat beside her on the couch looking as if he were about to cry.

"Oh, *Paal,*" she said as Wheeler entered. She put her arms around the trembling boy. "There's nothing to be afraid of, darling."

She saw her husband.

"What did they *do* to him?" she asked, unhappily.

He shook his head. "Don't know," he said, "He should have been put in school though."

"We can't very well put him in school when he's like *this,*" she said.

"We can't put him anywhere till we see what's what," Wheeler said, "I'll write to those people tonight."

In the silence, Paal felt a sudden burst of emotion in the woman and he looked up quickly at her stricken face.

Pain. He felt it pour from her like blood from a mortal wound.

And while they ate supper in an almost silence, Paal

kept sensing tragic sadness in the woman. It seemed he heard sobbing in a distant place. As the silence continued he began to get momentary flashes of remembrance in her pain-opened mind. He saw the face of another boy. Only it swirled and faded and there was *his* face in her thoughts. The two faces, like contesting wraiths, lay and overlay upon each other as if fighting for the dominance of clarity in her mind.

All fleeing, locked abruptly behind black doors as she said, "You have to write to them, I suppose."

"You know I do, Cora," Wheeler said.

Silence. Pain again. And when she tucked him into bed, he looked at her with such soft, apparent pity on his face that she turned quickly from the bed and he could feel the waves of sorrow break across his mind until her footsteps could no longer be heard. And, even then, like the faint fluttering of bird wings in the night, he felt her pitiable despair moving in the house.

"What are you writing?" she asked.

Wheeler looked over from his desk as midnight chimed its seventh stroke in the hall. Cora came walking across the room and set the tray down at his elbow. The steamy fragrance of freshly brewed coffee filled his nostrils as he reached for the pot.

"Just telling them the situation," he said, "about the fire, the Nielsens dying. Asking them if they're related to the boy or know any of his relations over there."

"And what if his relations don't do any better than his parents?"

"Now, Cora," he said, pouring cream. "I thought we'd already discussed that. It's not our business."

She pressed pale lips together.

"A frightened child *is* my business," she said angrily, "Maybe you—"

She broke off as he looked up at her patiently, no argument in his expression.

"*Well,*" she said, turning from him, "It's true."

"It's not our business Cora." He didn't see the tremor of her lips.

"So he'll just go on not talking, I suppose! Being afraid

of shadows!" She whirled. "It's *criminal!*" she cried, love and anger bursting from her in a twisted mixture.

"It's got to be done, Cora." He said it quietly. "It's our duty."

"Duty." She echoed it with an empty lifelessness in her voice.

She didn't sleep. The liquid flutter of Harry's snoring in her ears, she lay staring at the jump of shadows on the ceiling, a scene enacted in her mind.

A summer's afternoon; the back doorbell ringing. Men standing on the porch, John Carpenter among them, a blanket-covered stillness weighing down his arms, a blank look on his face. In the silence, a drip of water on the sunbaked boards—slowly, unsteadily, like the beats of a dying heart. *He was swimming in the lake, Miz Wheeler and—*

She shuddered on the bed as she had shuddered then—numbly, mutely. The hands beside her were a crumpled whiteness, twisted by remembered anguish. All these years waiting, waiting for a child to bring life into her house again.

At breakfast she was hollow-eyed and drawn. She moved about the kitchen with a willful tread, sliding eggs and pancakes on her husband's plate, pouring coffee, never speaking once.

Then he had kissed her goodbye and she was standing at the living room window watching him trudge down the path to the car. Long after he'd gone, staring at the three envelopes he'd stuck into the side clip of the mailbox.

When Paal came downstairs he smiled at her. She kissed his cheek, then stood behind him, wordless and watching, while he drank his orange juice. The way he sat, the way he held his glass; it was so like—

While Paal ate his cereal she went out to the mailbox and got the three letters, replacing them with three of her own—just in case her husband ever asked the mailman if he'd picked up three letters at their house that morning.

While Paal was eating his eggs, she went down into the cellar and threw the letters into the furnace. The one to Switzerland burned; the ones to Germany and Sweden.

She stirred them with a poker until the pieces broke and disappeared like black confetti in the flames.

Weeks passing; and, with every day, the service of his mind grew weaker.

"Paal, dear, don't you understand?" The patient, loving voice of the woman he needed but feared. "Won't you say it once for me? Just for me? *Paal?*"

He knew there was only love in her but sound would destroy him. It would chain his thoughts—like putting shackles on the wind.

"Would you like to go to school, Paal? Would you? *School?*"

Her face a mask of worried devotion.

"Try to talk, Paal. Just *try.*"

He fought it off with mounting fear. Silence would bring his scraps of meaning from her mind. Then sound returned and grossed each meaning with unwieldy flesh. Meanings joined with sounds. The links formed quickly, frighteningly. He struggled against them. Sounds could cover fragile, darting symbols with a hideous, restraining dough. Dough that would be baked in ovens of articulation, then chopped into the stunted lengths of words.

Afraid of the woman, yet wanting to be near the warmth of her, protected by her arms. Like a pendulum he swung from dread to need and back to dread again.

And still the sounds kept shearing at his mind.

"We can't wait any longer to hear from them," Harry said, "He'll have to go to school, that's all."

"No." she said.

He put down his newspaper and looked across the living room at her. She kept her eyes on the movements of her knitting needles.

"What do you mean, no?" he asked, irritably, "Every time I mention school you say no. Why *shouldn't* he go to school?"

The needles stopped and were lowered to her lap. Cora stared at them.

"I don't know," she said, "It's just that . . ." A sigh emptied from her. "I don't know," she said.

"He'll start on Monday." Harry said.

"But he's frightened," she said.

"Sure he's frightened. You'd be frightened too if you couldn't talk and everybody around you was talking. He needs education, that's all."

"But he's not *ignorant.* Harry. I—I swear he understands me sometimes. *Without* talking."

"How?"

"I don't know. But . . . well, the Nielsens weren't stupid people. They wouldn't just *refuse* to teach him."

"Well, whatever they taught him," Harry said, picking up his paper. "It sure doesn't show."

When they asked Miss Edna Frank over that afternoon to meet the boy she was determined to be impartial.

That Paal Nielsen had been reared in miserable fashion was beyond cavil but the maiden teacher had decided not to allow the knowledge to affect her attitude. The boy needed understanding. The cruel mistreatment of his parents had to be undone and Miss Frank had elected herself to the office.

Striding with a resolute quickness down German Corner's main artery she recalled that scene in the Nielsen house when she and Sheriff Wheeler had tried to persuade them to enter Paal in school.

And such a smugness in their faces, thought Miss Frank, remembering. Such a polite disdain. *We do not wish our boy in school,* she heard Professor Nielsen's words again. Just like that, Miss Frank recalled. Arrogant as you please. *We do not wish* . . . Disgusting attitude.

Well, at least the boy was out of it now. That fire was probably the blessing of his life, she thought.

"We wrote to them four, five weeks ago," the sheriff explained, "and we haven't gotten an answer yet. We can't just let the boy go on the way he is. He needs schooling."

"He most certainly does," agreed Miss Frank, her pale features drawn into their usual sum of unyielding dogmatism. There was a wisp of mustache on her upper lip, her chin came almost to a point. On Halloween the children of German Corners watched the sky above her house.

"He's very shy," Cora said, sensing that harshness in the middle-aged teacher. "He'll be terribly frightened. He'll need a lot of understanding."

"He shall receive it," Miss Frank declared, "But let's see the boy."

Cora led Paal down the steps speaking to him softly. "Don't be afraid, darling. There's nothing to be afraid of."

Paal entered the room and looked into the eyes of Miss Edna Frank.

Only Cora felt the stiffening of his body—as though, instead of the gaunt virgin, he had looked into the petrifying gaze of the Medusa. Miss Frank and the sheriff did not catch the flare of iris in his bright, green eyes, the minute twitching at one corner of his mouth. None of them could sense the leap of panic in his mind.

Miss Frank sat smiling, holding out her hand.

"Come here, child," she said and, for a moment, the gates slammed shut and hid away the shimmering writhe.

"Come on, darling," Cora said, "Miss Frank is here to help you." She led him forward, feeling, beneath her fingers, the shuddering of terror in him.

Silence again. And, in the moment of it, Paal felt as though he were walking into a century-sealed tomb. Dead winds gushed out upon him, creatures of frustration slithered on his heart, strange flying jealousies and hates rushed by—all obscured by clouds of twisted memory. It was the purgatory that his father had pictured to him once in telling him of myth and legend. This was no legend though.

Her touch was cool and dry. Dark wrenching terrors ran down her veins and poured into him. Inaudibly, the fragment of a scream tightened his throat. Their eyes met again and Paal saw that, for a second, the woman seemed to know that he was looking at her brain.

Then she spoke and he was free again, limp and staring.

"I think we'll get along just fine," she said.

Maelstrom!

He lurched back on his heels and fell against the sheriff's wife.

All the way across the grounds, it had been growing, growing—as if he were a geiger counter moving toward some fantastic pulsing strata of atomic force. Closer, yet closer, the delicate controls within him stirring, glowing, trembling, reacting with increasing violence to the nearness

of power. Even though his sensitivity had been weakened by over three months of sound he felt this now, strongly. As though he walked into a center of vitality.

It was *the young.*

Then the door opened, the voices stopped and all of it rushed through him like a vast, electric current—all wild and unharnessed. He clung to her, fingers rigid in her skirt, eyes widened, quick breaths falling from his parted lips. His gaze moved shakily across the rows of staring children faces and waves of distorted energies kept bounding out from them in a snarled, uncontrolled network.

Miss Frank scraped back her chair, stepped down from her six-inch eminence and started down the aisle toward them.

"Good morning," she said, crisply, "We're just about to start our classes for the day."

"I . . . do hope everything will be all right," Cora said. She glanced down. Paal was looking at the class through a welling haze of tears. "Oh, *Paal.*" She leaned over and ran her fingers through his blonde hair, a worried look on her face. "Paal, don't be afraid, dear," she whispered.

He looked at her blankly.

"Darling, there's nothing to be—"

"Now just you leave him here," Miss Frank broke in, putting her hand on Paal's shoulder. She ignored the shudder that rippled through him. "He'll be right at home in no time, Mrs. Wheeler. But you've got to leave him by himself."

"Oh, but—" Cora started.

"No, believe me, it's the only way," Miss Frank insisted. "As long as you stay he'll be upset. Believe me. I've seen such things before."

At first he wouldn't let go of Cora but clung to her as the one familiar thing in this whirlpool of frightening newness. It was only when Miss Frank's hard, thin hands held him back that Cora backed off slowly, anxiously, closing the door and cutting off from Paal the sight of her soft pity.

He stood there trembling, incapable of uttering a single word to ask for help. Confused, his mind sent out tenuous shoots of communication but in the undisciplined tangle they were broken off and lost. He drew back quickly and

tried, in vain, to cut himself off. All he could manage to do was let the torrent of needling thoughts continue unopposed until they had become a numbling, meaningless surge.

"Now, Paal," he heard Miss Frank's voice and looked up gingerly at her. The hand drew him from the door. *"Come along."*

He didn't understand the words but the brittle sound of them was clear enough, the flow of irrational animosity from her was unmistakable. He stumbled along at her side, threading a thin path of consciousness through the living undergrowth of young, untrained minds; the strange admixture of them with their retention of born sensitivity overlaid with the dulling coat of formal inculcation.

She brought him to the front of the room and stood him there, his chest laboring for breath as if the feelings around him were hands pushing and constraining on his body.

"This is Paal Nielsen, class," Miss Frank announced; and sound drew a momentary blade across the stunted weave of thoughts. "We're going to have to be very patient with him. You see his mother and father never taught him how to talk."

She looked down at him as a prosecuting lawyer might gaze upon exhibit A.

"He can't understand a word of English," she said.

Silence a moment, writhing. Miss Frank tightened her grip on his shoulder.

"Well, we'll help him learn, won't we, class?"

Faint mutterings arose from them; one thin, piping, *"Yes,* Miss Frank."

"Now, Paal," she said, He didn't turn. She shook his shoulder. *"Paal,"* she said.

He looked at her.

"Can you say your name?" she asked. "Paal? Paal Nielsen? Go ahead. Say your name."

Her fingers drew in like talons.

"Say it. Paal. *Pa-al."*

He sobbed. Miss Frank released her hand.

"You'll learn," she said, calmly.

It was not encouragement.

He sat in the middle of it like hooked bait in a current

that swirled with devouring mouths, mouths from which, endlessly, came mind-deadening sounds.

"This is a boat. A boat sails on the water. The men who live on the boat are called sailors."

And, in the primer, the words about the boat printed under a picture of one.

Paal remembered a picture his father had shown him once. It had been a picture of a boat too; but his father had not spoken futile words about the boat. His father had created about the picture every sight and sound heir to it. Great blue rising swells of tide. Grey-green mountain waves, their white tops lashing. Storm winds whistling through the rigging of a bucking, surging, shuddering vessel. The quiet majesty of an ocean sunset, joining, with a scarlet seal, sea and sky.

"This is a farm. Men grow food on the farm. The men who grow food are called farmers."

Words. Empty, with no power to convey the moist, warm feel of earth. The sound of grain fields rustling in the wind like golden seas. The sight of sun setting on a red barn wall. The smell of soft lea winds carrying, from afar, the delicate clank of cowbells.

"This is a forest. A forest is made of trees."

No sense of presence in those black, dogmatic symbols whether sounded or looked upon. No sound of winds rushing like eternal rivers through the high green canopies. No smell of pine and birch, oak and maple and hemlock. No feel of treading on the century-thick carpet of leafy forest floors.

Words. Blunt, sawed-off lengths of hemmed-in meaning; incapable of evocation, of expansion. Black figures on white. This is a cat. This is a dog. Cat, dog. This is a man. This is a woman. Man, woman. Car. Horse. Tree. Desk. Children. Each word a trap, stalking his mind. A snare set to enclose fluid and unbounded comprehension.

Every day she stood him on the platform.

"Paal," she would say, pointing at him, "Paal. Say it. Paal."

He couldn't. He stared at her, too intelligent not to make the connection, too much afraid to seek further.

"Paal." A bony finger prodding at his chest. "Paal. Paal. *Paal.*"

He fought it. He had to fight it. He blanked his gaze and saw nothing of the room around him, concentrating only on his mother's hands. He knew it was a battle. Like a jelling of sickness he had felt each new encroachment on his sensitivity.

"You're not listening, Paal Nielsen!" Miss Frank would accuse, shaking him, "You're a stubborn, ungrateful boy. Don't you want to be like *other* children?"

Staring eyes; and her thin, never-to-be-kissed lips stirring, pressing in.

"Sit down," she'd say. He didn't move. She'd move him off the platform with rigid fingers.

"Sit *down,*" she'd say as if talking to a mulish puppy. Every day.

She was awake in an instant; in another instant on her feet and hurrying across the darkness of the room. Behind her, Harry slept with laboring breaths. She shut away the sound and let her hand slip off the door knob as she started across the hall.

"Darling."

He was standing by the window looking out. As she spoke he whirled and, in the faint illumination of the night light, she could see the terror written on his face.

"Darling, come to bed." She led him there and tucked him in, then sat beside him, holding his thin, cold hands.

"What is it, dear?"

He looked at her with wide, pained eyes.

"Oh . . ." She bent over and pressed her warm cheek to his. "What are you afraid of?"

In the dark silence it seemed as if a vision of the schoolroom and Miss Frank standing in it crossed her mind.

"Is it the school?" she asked, thinking it only an idea which had occurred to her.

The answer was in his face.

"But school is nothing to be afraid of, darling," she said, "You—"

She saw tears welling in his eyes and, abruptly, she drew him up and held him tightly against herself. *Don't be*

afraid, she thought. *Darling, please don't be afraid. I'm here and I love you just as much as they did. I love you even more . . .*

Paal drew back. He stared at her as if he didn't understand.

As the car pulled up in back of the house Werner saw a woman turn away from the kitchen window.

"If we'd only heard from you," said Wheeler, "but there was never a word. You can't blame us for adopting the boy. We did what we thought was best."

Werner nodded with short, distracted movements of his head.

"I understand," he said quietly, "we received no letters however."

They sat in the car in silence, Werner staring through the windshield, Wheeler looking at his hands.

Holger and Fanny *dead,* Werner was thinking. A horrible discovery to make. The boy exposed to the cruel blunderings of people who did not understand. That was, in a way, even more horrible.

Wheeler was thinking of those letters and of Cora. He should have written again. Still, those letters should have reached Europe. Was it possible they were all missent?

"Well," he said, finally, "You'll . . . want to see the boy."

"Yes," said Werner.

The two men pushed open the car doors and got out. They walked across the back yard and up the wooden porch steps. Have you taught him how to speak?—Werner almost said but couldn't bring himself to ask. The concept of a boy like Paal exposed to the blunt, deadening forces of usual speech was something he felt uncomfortable thinking about.

"I'll get my wife," said Wheeler, "The living room's in there."

After the sheriff had gone up the back stairs, Werner walked slowly through the hall and into the front room. There he took off his raincoat and hat and dropped them over the back of a wooden chair. Upstairs he could hear the faint sound of voices—a man and woman. The woman sounded upset.

When he heard footsteps, he turned from the window. The sheriff's wife entered beside her husband. She was smiling politely but Werner knew she wasn't happy to see him there.

"Please sit down," she said.

He waited until she was in a chair, then settled down on the couch.

"What is it you want?" asked Mrs. Wheeler.

"Did your husband tell you—?"

"He told me who you were," she interrupted, "but not why you want to see Paul."

"Paul?" asked Werner, surprised.

"We—" Her hands sought out each other nervously. "—we changed it to Paul. It—seemed more appropriate. For a Wheeler, I mean."

"I see." Werner nodded politely.

Silence.

"Well," Werner said then, "You wish to know why I am here to see—the boy. I will explain as briefly as possible."

"Ten years ago, in Heidelburg, four married couples—the Elkenbergs, the Kalders, the Nielsens and my wife and I—decided to try an experiment on our children—some not yet born. An experiment of the mind.

"We had accepted, you see, the proposition that ancient man, deprived of the dubious benefit of language, had been telepathic."

Cora started in her chair.

"Further," Werner went on, not noticing, "that the basic organic source of this ability is still functioning though no longer made use of—a sort of ethereal tonsil, a higher appendix—not used but neither useless.

"So we began our work; each searching for physiological facts while, at the same time, developing the ability in our children. Monthly correspondence was exchanged, a systematic methodology of training was arrived at slowly. Eventually, we planned to establish a colony with the grown children; a colony to be gradually consolidated until these abilities would become second nature to its members.

"Paal is one of these children."

Wheeler looked almost dazed.

"This is a *fact?"* he asked.

"A fact," said Werner.

Cora sat numbly in her chair staring at the tall German. She was thinking about the way Paal seemed to understand her without words. Thinking of his fear of the school and Miss Frank. Thinking of how many times she had woken and gone to him even though he didn't make a sound.

"What?" she asked, looking up as Werner spoke.

"I say—may I see the boy now?"

"He's in school," she said, "He'll be home in—"

She stopped as a look of almost revulsion crossed Werner's face.

"School?" he asked.

"Paal Nielsen, stand."

The young boy slid from his seat and stood beside the desk. Miss Frank gestured to him once and, more like an old man than a boy, he trudged up to the platform and stood beside her as he always did.

"Straighten up," Miss Frank demanded, "Shoulders back."

The shoulders moved, the back grew flat.

"What's your name?" asked Miss Frank.

The boy pressed his lips together slightly. His swallowing made a dry-rattling noise.

"What is your name?"

Silence in the classroom except for the restive stirring of the young. Erratic currents of their thought deflected off him like random winds.

"Your name," she said.

He made no reply.

The virgin teacher looked at him and, in the moment that she did, through her mind ran memories of her childhood. Of her gaunt, mania-driven mother keeping her for hours at a time in the darkened front parlor, sitting at the great round table, her fingers arched over the smoothly worn ouija board—making her try to communicate with her dead father.

Memories of those terrible years were still with her—always with her. Her minor sensitivity being abused and twisted into knots until she hated every single thing about perception. Perception was an evil, full of suffering and anguish.

The boy must be freed of it.

"Class," she said, "I want you all to think of Paal's name. (This was his name no matter what Mrs. Wheeler chose to call him.) Just think of it. Don't say it. Just think: Paal, Paal, Paal. When I count three. Do you understand?"

They stared at her, some nodding. *"Yes,* Miss Frank," piped up her only faithful.

"All right," she said, "One—two—*three."*

It flung into his mind like the blast of a hurricane, pounding and tearing at his hold on wordless sensitivity. He trembled on the platform, his mouth fallen ajar.

The blast grew stronger, all the power of the young directed into a single, irresistible force. Paal, *Paal, PAAL!!* it screamed into the tissues of his brain.

Until, at the very peak of it, when he thought his head would explode, it was all cut away by the voice of Miss Frank scalpeling into his mind.

"Say it! Paal!"

"Here he comes," said Cora. She turned from the window. "Before he gets here, I want to apologize for my rudeness."

"Not at all," said Werner, distractedly, "I understand perfectly. Naturally, you would think that I had come to take the boy away. As I have said, however, I have no legal powers over him—being no relation. I simply want to see him as the child of my two colleagues—whose shocking death I have only now learned of."

He saw the woman's throat move and picked out the leap of guilty panic in her mind. She had destroyed the letters her husband wrote. Werner knew it instantly but said nothing. He sensed that the husband also knew it; she would have enough trouble as it was.

They heard Paal's footsteps on the bottom step of the front porch.

"I *will* take him out of school," Cora said.

"Perhaps not," said Werner, looking toward the door. In spite of everything he felt his heartbeat quicken, felt the fingers of his left hand twitch in his lap. Without a word, he sent out the message. It was a greeting the four couples had decided on; a sort of pass-word.

Telepathy, he thought, *is the communication of im-*

pressions of any kind from one mind to another independently of the recognized channels of sense.

Werner sent it twice before the front door opened.

Paal stood there, motionless.

Werner saw recognition in his eyes; but, in the boy's mind, was only confused uncertainty. The misted vision of Werner's face crossed it. In his mind, all the people had existed—Werner, Elkenberg, Kalder, all their children. But now it was locked up and hard to capture. The face disappeared.

"Paul, this is Mister Werner," Cora said.

Werner did not speak. He sent the message out again—with such force that Paal could not possibly miss it. He saw a look of uncomprehending dismay creep across the boy's features; as if Paal suspected that something was happening yet could not imagine what.

The boy's face grew more confused. Cora's eyes moved concernedly from him to Werner and back again. Why didn't Werner speak? She started to say something, then remembered what the German had said.

"Say, what—?" Wheeler began until Cora waved her hand and stopped him.

Paal, think!—Werner thought desperately—*Where is your mind?*

Suddenly, there was a great, wracking sob in the boy's throat and chest. Werner shuddered.

"My name is Paal," the boy said.

The boy's voice made Werner's flesh crawl. It was unfinished; like a puppet voice, thin, wavering and brittle.

"My name is Paal."

He couldn't stop saying it. It was as if he were whipping himself on, knowing what had happened and trying to suffer as much as possible with the knowledge.

"My name is Paal. My name is Paal." An endless, frightening babble; in it, a panic-stricken boy seeking out an unknown power which had been torn from him.

"My name is Paal." Even held tightly in Cora's arms, he said it. "My name is Paal." Angrily, pitiably, endlessly. *"My name is Paal. My name is Paal."*

Werner closed his eyes.

Lost.

Wheeler offered to take him back to the bus station but Werner told him he'd rather walk. He said goodbye to the sheriff and asked him to relay his regrets to Mrs. Wheeler who had taken the sobbing boy up to his room.

Now, in the beginning fall of a fine, mist-like rain, Werner walked away from the house, from Paal.

It was not something easily judged, he was thinking. There was no right and wrong of it. Definitely, it was not a case of evil versus good. Mrs. Wheeler, the sheriff, the boy's teacher, the people of German Corners—they had, probably, all meant well. Understandably, they had been outraged at the idea of a seven-year-old boy not having been taught to speak by his parents. Their actions were, in light of that, justifiable and good.

It was simply that, so often, evil could come of misguided good.

No, it was better left as it was. To take Paal back to Europe—back to the others—would be a mistake. He could if he wanted to; all the couples had exchanged papers giving each other the right to take over rearing of the children should anything happen to the parents. But it would only confuse Paal further. He had been a trained sensitive, not a born one. Although, by the principle they all worked on, all children were born with the atavistic ability to telepath, it was so easy to lose, so difficult to recapture.

Werner shook his head. It was a pity. The boy was without his parents, without his talent, even without his name.

He had lost everything.

Well, perhaps, not everything.

As he walked, Werner sent his mind back to the house to discover them standing at the window of Paal's room, watching sunset cast its fiery light on German Corners. Paal was clinging to the sheriff's wife, his cheek pressed to her side. The final terror of losing his awareness had not faded but there was something else counter-balancing it. Something Cora Wheeler sensed yet did not fully realize.

Paal's parents had not loved him. Werner knew this. Caught up in the fascination of their work they had not had the time to love him as a child. Kind, yes, affectionate, always; still, they had regarded Paal as their experiment in flesh.

Which was why Cora Wheeler's love was, in part, as strange a thing to Paal as all the crushing horrors of speech. It would not remain so. For, in that moment when the last of his gift had fled, leaving his mind a naked rawness, she had been there, with her love, to soothe away the pain. And always would be.

"Did you find who you were looking for?" the grey-haired woman at the counter asked Werner as she served him coffee.

"Yes. Thank you," he said.

"Where was he?" asked the woman.

Werner smiled.

"At home," he said.

The reason for

BALLANTINE'S CHAMBER OF HORRORS

Man's interest in the mysterious, the occult, the supernatural is timeless.

For most of its history, the human race has based its various cultures on a thoroughly grounded, work-a-day belief in the supernatural, in devils, spirits, powers beyond the understanding of humble humans. Habitually, small fearful propitiations were made to ward off the evil eye, worldly goods were buried with the dead in the hope that they would lie quietly, not coming back to harass and terrify the vulnerable living: men based their whole way of life on readings of dry bones, entrails, tealeaves and a weird assortment of other, less mentionable portents.

What moved them was fear. And however strange its manifestation, the fear was real—fear of the unknown.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have seen a spectacular reduction in the unknown: science and psychology have explained away much that used to send men shuddering to hide behind closed doors; education has created generations of scoffers who laugh at old-fashioned superstition—but who still flock to the theaters to be thrilled, frightened, titillated by the remakes of such magnificent old "standbys" as DRACULA and other bloodily technicolored horror movies.

What could be more anachronistic? Seated in a theater watching a show which is itself a marvel of modern mechanics, surrounded by all the appurtenances of civilization, neon, popcorn, plastic, reminded constantly that they are in the here and now, safe, secure . . . *Still* the audiences react to the ancient tales of terror, still they scream when the evil powers threaten, still they huddle, start, grip hands a little harder, nervously, self-consciously, gigglingly reassuring themselves that all is well, it's just a movie, it's not real.

It's not *real.*

But all the way home they avoid dark corners.

Why? If one genuinely believes that death is oblivion, that supernatural powers don't exist, that evil is not an entity and a force in itself, why then be frightened by ancient legends brought to spurious life on a screen or in a book? All right, so it only seems real, just for a little while. It's fun, something you can laugh about later—in the broad, clear light of day.

But dark comes again. And maybe sometime you'll be alone, not in a crowded theater. Just by yourself in a house that's quiet. What's that noise? Must be the refrigerator. Have a snack and settle down with a good horror book. Better switch on more lights, it's kind of gloomy around here. What's bothering the cat? She keeps watching something. There's nothing there but she's watching it all right, following it relentlessly around the room with her slit eyes. Queer about cats. Nobody's ever figured out what really makes them tick; they seem so independent—as though they belong to another world and only use this one as a favor. Wonder why witches always had cats? Sometimes it was a toad or a frog or something creepy, but usually it was cats. Why *cats?* Let her out, neighbor. Her and the things she's watching. They both like it better out there in the dark.

And there it is. Cats like the dark. People don't. Cats see certain things. People don't. Not always, that is.

The chances are you have never been in a haunted house. Nor talked with a ghost. Not knowingly anyway. Like the two boys—and this is personal experience—who came on the town drunk staggering along, muttering. As boys will, they hooted epithets. He swore at them. One of them threw a couple of small stones. Presently the unfortunate man stumbled on up the hill and fell into a ditch. The boys ran home late for supper. They explained that they had been held up by the town drunk who had cursed and sworn at them—and were bawled out as liars. Because in fact the previous evening the drunk had staggered up the hill, fallen in the ditch and broken his neck.

It's little things like this that give one pause. Sure, there

must be some explanation. An electrical disturbance of some kind, perhaps. But still . . .

It's the very ordinariness of the incident that makes it absurd for anyone to have bothered with making it up. There are so many seemingly unimportant, harmless, even mundane stories of this kind. And no science, no psychology, and no amount of education has yet explained them.

Or ever will.

Because with all the charlatanry, the hocus-pocus, the fakery that undoubtedly surrounds the world of the occult, there still remains a core, a very basic sense in all humans that not all things in this world are of this world.

Sometimes this sense is clearer in children than in adults. But in a few humans, this sense remains much stronger, much clearer, than it does in others. These are the ones who become the interpreters for the less gifted—or the more lucky. These are the ones who write down the stories, who recreate the horror, who perpetuate the legends so that the cheap overlay of modern civilization is exposed —a thin veneer covering centuries, eons of dark powers in the face of which humankind should indeed feel terrified.

So, gentle reader, feast yourself on horror. Read all the books. Learn all you can.

You never know when it might come in handy.

From BALLANTINE'S CHAMBER OF HORRORS

"SARBAN"—one of the most distinguished chroniclers of the occult. Here is what the **New York Times** said of his first book, **THE SOUND OF HIS HORN:** ". . . this short horror-novel reaches a haunting intensity. Some may call it black poetry; some off-beat science-fiction; some a plain marrow-chiller—but no matter what the terminology, its impact is sometimes equal to that of Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery' . . . a stunning **tour-de-force,** a horror-thriller with depth."

All of "Sarban's" books have been greeted with similar reviews. His second, **THE DOLL MAKER,** is a story of a young girl, caught in the dreadful fascination of willing slavery, the agony of a conscious victim who cannot escape the mordant mastery of an egomaniac practicing unknown horrors.

And the third, **RINGSTONES,** is a tale buried deep in the reaches of vast antiquity, in the ancient customs, vicious 'games' and the laws that governed privileged and slave.

"Sarban's" preoccupation is chiefly with the remote brooding past which, in certain circumstances, refuses to die, but jealously invades the present through the life and sanity of some unsuspecting, healthily enlightened young modern.

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"Pathetic, searing and ghastly, it tells the story of a hideously abused boy (of Hungarian parentage) from the Kentucky mining country who develops a compulsion more horrible, surely, than even necrophilia. Magnificently written though it is . . . it is not to be read when you are in the house alone, and not to be read at all unless there are some Strauss waltz records and laughing children nearby to cleanse away the psychic after-effects of the incredible ending."

Martha Wilson

441K THE VICTORIAN CHAISE LOUNGE
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"A jewel of horror." *San Francisco Chronicle*

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ANY THREE FOR A DOLLAR

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THE ORIGINS OF HORROR...

In the lonely darkness of your bed, have you ever started up trembling, sweating—knowing you have been wakened by something, unable to discover what?

This is outside horror—terror you can dispel with a light.

But in the long reaches of the night, have you ever cringed in a knot, curdled with terror at something remembered, something you nearly did, or wanted to do?
You are getting a little closer.

For horror comes from somewhere. Skeptics claim it is the invention, or the result, of over-heated imaginations. And in doing so they prove the worst horror of all — that the real roots of abysmal terror and monstrous evil lie in the human mind.

This is the fiend in you...

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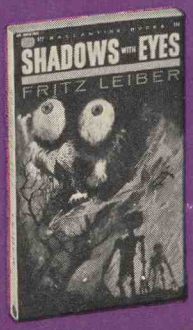

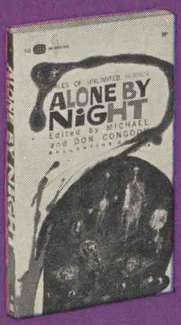

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