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THE UNKNOWN 5

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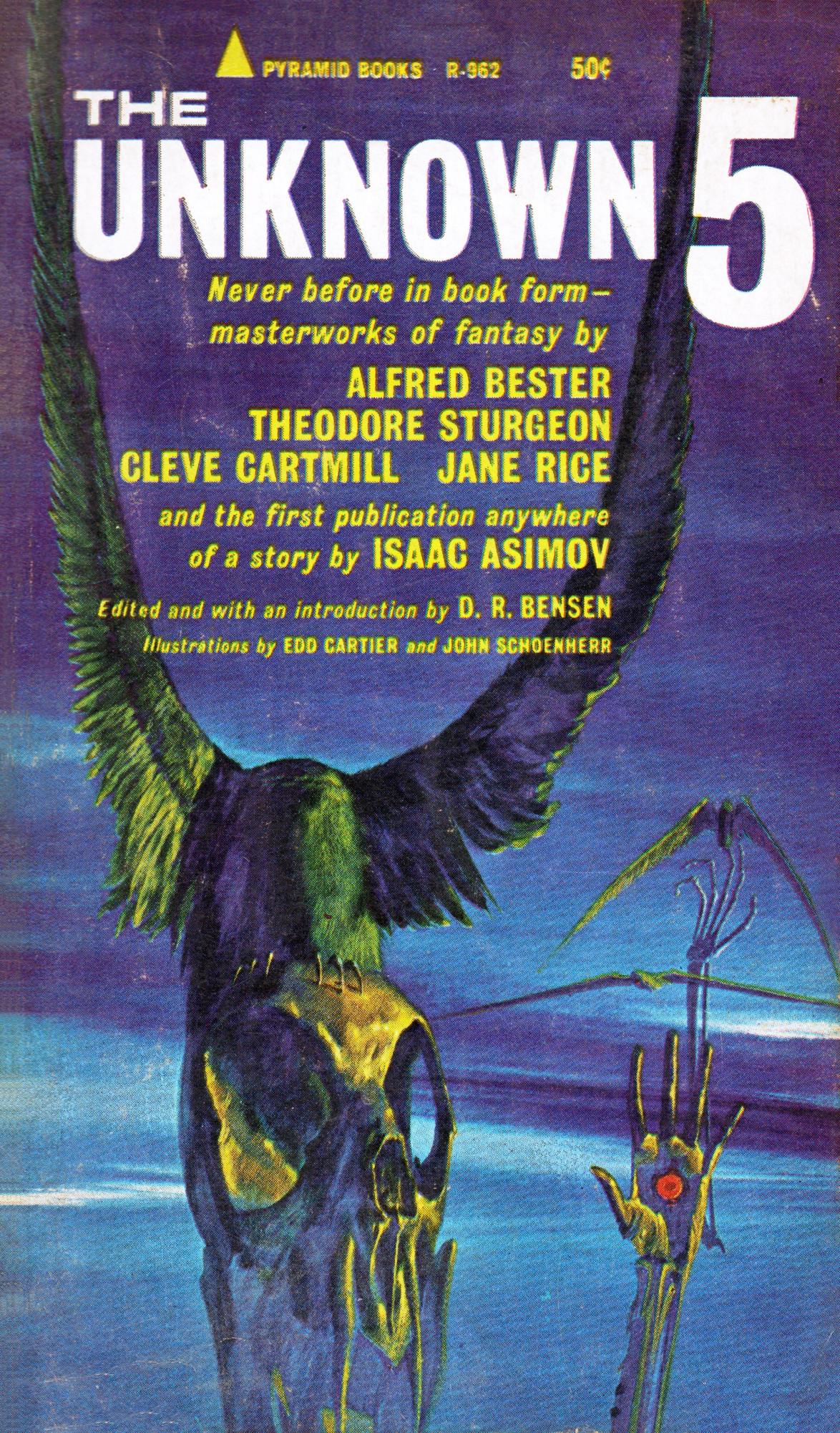
and the first publication anywhere of a story by **ISAAC ASIMOV**

Edited and with an introduction by **D. R. BENSEN**

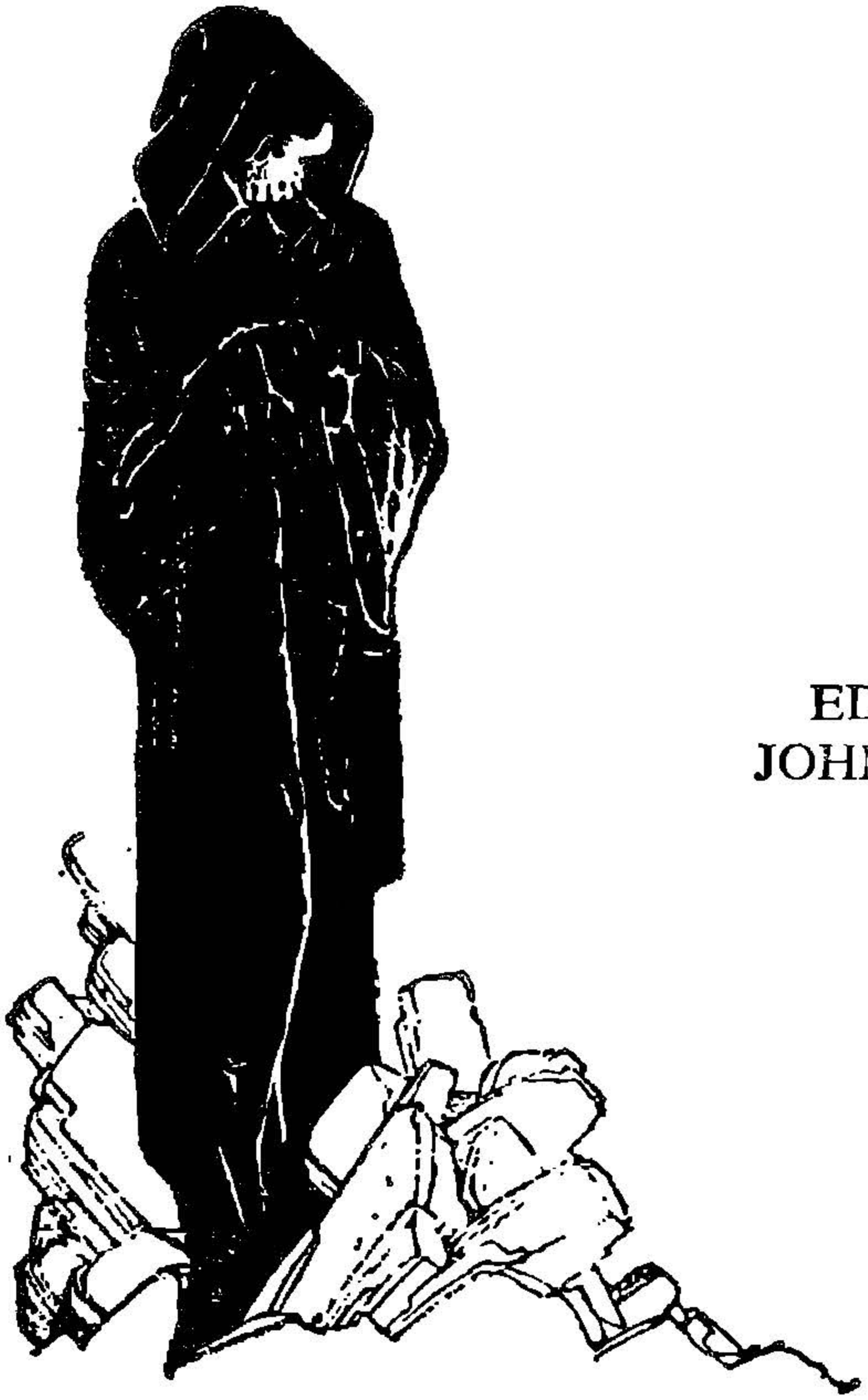
Illustrations by **EDD CARTIER** *and* **JOHN SCHOENHERR**



WHO KNOWS . . .

. . . The evil that lurks in a pleasure-mad crew
In search of sensations appalling and new?
. . . A gangster's emotion of horror and dread
That comes when his victim just will not *stay dead?*
. . . The dangers of making a bargain with Death?
. . . The plight of a writer who feels the hot breath
Of fictional *characters warming his back?*
. . . The horrors that dwell in a witch-woman's sack?
Who knows? *At the moment, the authors herein;*
But you *can find out—just buy, and begin. . . .*

The



edited by
D. R. BENSEN
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JOHN SCHOENHERR

UNKNOWN FIVE

stories of fantasy by

ISAAC ASIMOV • ALFRED BESTER

THEODORE STURGEON

CLEVE CARTMILL • JANE RICE

PYRAMID BOOKS NEW YORK

THE UNKNOWN FIVE

A PYRAMID BOOK

Published January 1964

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"Hell Is Forever" by Alfred Bester, "The Hag Séleen" by Theodore Sturgeon, "The Bargain," by Cleve Cartmill, and "The Crest of the Wave" by Jane Rice, all appeared originally in **Unknown** and **Unknown Worlds**, and are reprinted here by permission of the authors and of The Condé Nast Publications, Inc. "Author! Author!" by Isaac Asimov is printed here by permission of the author and of The Condé Nast Publications, Inc.

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EDITOR'S DEDICATION:

For my parents, who gave house room
to an awful lot of dusty magazines

contents

THE UNKNOWN FIVE

INTRODUCTION

Preparing this collection and an earlier one made up of stories from the same magazine* obliged me to go through thirty-nine issues of *Unknown* (later *Unknown Worlds*) for stories and illustrations. This was very rewarding—the stories were great, and stood up to rereading extremely well; and it allowed me a kind of personal time-travel, back to 1939-1943 when I first read them (and was a largely different person, as who isn't at around thirteen?). The stories, as I say, were as fresh as ever; but the advertisements that shared the magazine with them were what really gave the atmosphere of a different world—of the tag-ends of the Depression, of the war years.

Now the ads urge us to "live up to" luxurious cars or beers, or whatever; to spend lots and lots of money, constantly, so as to have a good time or look as if we were. Then . . . "Maybe the Going is Tough for You. But I'VE JUMPED MY PAY!—and it's No Secret How I Did it" . . . "GOVERNMENT JOBS start $1260 to $2100 Year" . . . "Seldom See an I.C.S. Graduate Out of a Job" (this one told of a business executive announcing a cut in staff—"However, all I.C.S. graduates and students will be retained . . ."). The younger members won't recall, but in those days we were *worried.* Not about Bombs or Who Owns the Moon? or What about the Population Explosion? but about how to hang onto that $30-a-week job.

And some of that feeling was reflected in the characters and settings of the stories. *Unknown* was short on king's sons, travelers, and students—the kind of heroes often featured in nineteenth-century and earlier fantasy. And the settings were not often palaces, "strange, dream-haunted manors," and so on. Instead, you followed the adventures of . . . let's see . . . psychologists, clerks, lawyers, anthropologists, merchant seamen, a correspondence-school executive, a

* *The Unknown* (Pyramid Book No. R-851)

District Attorney, newspapermen, a dictaphone repairman, a garage mechanic, hapless salesmen—a fair cross-section of white- and blue-collar America, *circa* 1940. And these adventures took place in city streets, shabby boarding-houses, on the highways and back roads even then crowded with cars. The wonder was that this fusion of realistic, contemporary characters and settings with the practice of magic produced such memorable stories. But it did, and to such effect that it has been extremely difficult to put together this collection of stories which have not appeared anywhere since they were first published in *Unknown*—an astonishing proportion of everything that ran in the magazine has been anthologized and re-anthologized.

Well . . . it was difficult, but not impossible. So far as the authors and I know, this is the first book publication of any of these pieces—hence the title. After all, any story that hasn't seen the light of day for more than twenty years can fairly be called *unknown*, no matter how famous the author. And Isaac Asimov's contribution, for reasons which will become clear to those who read the introductory note to it, could be called *completely* unknown—highly unusual for anything associated with Dr. Asimov.

Asimov's hero is a professional writer, moving in the commercial literary world of agents, publishers and contracts. Sturgeon's is also a writer, but a good deal more footloose—he probably comes closest of any in the book to the "generalist" fantasy hero. Jane Rice's lead character is one with whom we've become even more familiar lately, a leading light in Cosa Nostra, though we weren't calling it that back then. Bester's people are a mixed bag of city-dwellers; and Cleve Cartmill's Death has the personality, and something of the professional problem of a relaxed small-town sheriff, or perhaps a good insurance agent. No eldritch horrors, just normal people in everyday surroundings . . . but the chill of the uncanny is there, like the shadow in a doorway on a sunny street. . . .

As before, I am indebted to The Condé Nast Publications for their help in clearing the permissions to use these stories, and for the use of the illustrations by Edd Cartier; and to Mr. John Schoenherr for the new drawings.

D. R. B.

New York, October 1963

AUTHOR! AUTHOR!

* *Isaac Asimov*

Those of you who read the first collection of stories from *Unknown*—called, with a firm grasp on reality, *The Unknown*—will recollect Dr. Asimov's Introduction to the book. In it, after having said many nice things (all deserved) about the stories, the Good Doctor complained that he had never had a story published in the magazine. Yet . . . here he is, in a collection of *Unknown* stories. How come? Well, back in 1943, he wrote "Author! Author!" and submitted it to Editor John W. Campbell, trembling somewhat. Campbell bought it; Asimov was happy, an ambition fulfilled at last. Then the wartime paper shortage caught up with Street & Smith and, most specifically, with *Unknown,* which suspended publication—or, as we would put it today, folded—before the story could be published.

So . . . here, Gentle Readers, is the

VERY FIRST

appearance in any kind of print of a genuine, certified *Unknown* story by Isaac Asimov. (And don't worry about the references to the OPA and Selective Service—consider them as part of the historical setting, just as you would a bodkin or a furbelow in a story of an earlier time.)

IT OCCURRED TO GRAHAM DORN, AND NOT FOR THE FIRST TIME, either, that there was one serious disadvantage in swearing you'll go through fire and water for a girl, however beloved. Sometimes she takes you at your miserable word.

This is one way of saying that he had been waylaid, shanghaied and dragooned by his fiancée into speaking at her maiden aunt's Literary Society. Don't laugh! It's not funny from the speaker's rostrum. Some of the faces you have to look at!

To race through the details, Graham Dorn had been jerked onto a platform and forced upright. He had read a speech on "The Place of the Mystery Novel in American Literature" in an appalled tone. Not even the fact that his own eternally precious June had written it (part of the bribe to get him to speak in the first place) could mask the fact that it was essentially tripe.

And then when he was weltering, figuratively speaking,

in his own mental gore, the harpies closed in, for lo, it was time for the informal discussion and assorted feminine gush.

—Oh, Mr. Dorn, do you work from inspiration? I mean do you just sit down and then an idea strikes you—all at once? And you must sit up all night and drink black coffee to keep you awake till you get it down?

—Oh, yes. Certainly. (His working hours were two to four in the afternoon every other day, and he drank milk.)

—Oh, Mr. Dorn, you must do the most awful research to get all those bizarre murders. About how much must you do before you can write a story?

—About six months, usually. (The only reference books he ever used were a six-volume encyclopedia and year-before-last's World Almanac.)

—Oh, Mr. Dorn, did you make up your Reginald de Meister from a real character? You must have. He's oh, so convincing in his every detail.

—He's modeled after a very dear boyhood chum of mine. (Dorn had never known *anyone* like de Meister. He lived in continual fear of meeting someone like him. He had even a cunningly fashioned ring containing a subtle Oriental poison for use just in case he did. So much for de Meister.)

Somewhere past the knot of women June Billings sat in her seat and smiled with sickening and proprietary pride.

Graham passed a finger over his throat and went through the pantomime of choking to death as unobtrusively as possible. June smiled, nodded, threw him a delicate kiss, and did nothing.

Graham decided to pass a stern, lonely, woman-less life and to have nothing but villainesses in his stories forever after.

He was answering in monosyllables, alternating yesses and noes. Yes, he did take cocaine on occasion. He found it helped the creative urge. No, he didn't think he could allow Hollywood to take over de Meister. He thought movies weren't true expressions of real Art. Besides they were just a passing fad. Yes, he would read Miss Crum's manuscripts if she brought them. Only too glad to. Reading amateur manuscripts was such fun, and editors are really such brutes.

And then refreshments were announced, and there was a sudden vacuum. It took a split-second for Graham's head to clear. The mass of femininity had coalesced into a single specimen. She was four feet ten and about eighty-five pounds in weight. Graham was six-two and two hundred ten worth of brawn. He could probably have handled her without

difficulty, especially since both her arms were occupied with a pachyderm of a purse. Still, he felt a little delicate, to say nothing of queasy, about knocking her down. It didn't seem quite the thing to do.

She was advancing, with admiration and fervor disgustingly clear in her eyes, and Graham felt the wall behind him. There was no doorway within armreach on either side.

"Oh, Mr. de Meister—do, do please let me call you Mr. de Meister. Your creation is so real to me, that I can't think of you as simply Graham Dorn. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, no, of course not," gargled Graham, as well as he could through thirty-two teeth simultaneously set on edge. "I often think of myself as Reginald in my more frivolous moments."

"Thank you. You can have no idea, *dear* Mr. de Meister, how I have looked *forward* to meeting you. I have read *all* your works, and I think they are wonderful."

"I'm glad you think so." He went automatically into the modesty routine. "Really nothing, you know. Ha, ha, ha! Like to please the readers, but lots of room for improvement. Ha, ha, ha!"

"But you really are, you know." This was said with intense earnestness. "I mean good, *really* good. I think it is wonderful to be an author like you. It must be almost like being God."

Graham stared blankly. "Not to editors, sister."

Sister didn't get the whisper. She continued, "To be able to create living characters out of nothing; to unfold souls to all the world; to put thoughts into words; to build pictures and create worlds. I have often thought that an author was the most gloriously gifted person in creation. Better an inspired author starving in a garret than a king upon his throne. Don't you think so?"

"Definitely," lied Graham.

"What are the crass material goods of the world to the wonders of weaving emotions and deeds into a little world of its own?"

"What, indeed?"

"And posterity, think of posterity!"

"Yes, yes. I often do."

She seized his hand. "There's only one little request. You might," she blushed faintly, "you might give poor Reginald—if you will allow me to call him that just once—a chance to marry Letitia Reynolds. You make her just a little too cruel

to him. I'm sure I weep over it for hours together sometimes. But then he is too, too real to me."

And from somewhere, a lacy frill of handkerchief made its appearance, and went to her eyes. She removed it, smiled bravely, and scurried away. Graham Dorn inhaled, closed his eyes, and gently collapsed into June's arms.

His eyes opened with a jerk. "You may consider," he said severely, "our engagement frazzled to the breaking point. Only my consideration for your poor, aged parents prevents your being known henceforward as the ex-fiancée of Graham Dorn."

"Darling, you are so noble." She massaged his sleeve with her cheek. "Come, I'll take you home and bathe your poor wounds."

"All right, but you'll have to carry me. Has your precious, loveable aunt got an axe?"

"But why?"

"For one thing she had the gall to introduce me as the brain-father, God help me, of the famous Reginald de Meister."

"And aren't you?"

"Let's get out of this creep-joint. And get this. I'm no relative, by brain or otherwise, of that character. I disown him. I cast him into the darkness. I spit upon him. I declare him an illegitimate son, a foul degenerate, and the offspring of a hound, and I'll be damned if he ever pokes his lousy patrician nose into my typewriter again."

They were in the taxi, and June straightened his tie. "All right, Sonny, let's see the letter."

"What letter?"

She held out her hand. "The one from the publishers."

Graham snarled and flipped it out of his jacket pocket. "I've thought of inviting myself to his house for tea, the damned flintheart. He's got a rendezvous with a pinch of strychnine."

"You may rave later. What does he say? Hmm—uh-huh—'doesn't quite come up to what is expected—feel that de Meister isn't in his usual form—a little revision perhaps towards—feel sure the novel can be adjusted—are returning under separate cover—' "

She tossed it aside. "I told you you shouldn't have killed off Sancha Rodriguez. She was what you needed. You're getting skimpy on the love interest."

"*You* write it! I'm through with de Meister. It's getting so club-women call me Mr. de Meister, and my picture is

printed in newspapers with the caption Mr. de Meister. I have no individuality. No one ever heard of Graham Dorn. I'm always: Dorn, Dorn, you know, the guy who writes the de Meister stuff, *you* know."

June squealed, "Silly! You're jealous of your own detective."

"I am not jealous of my own character. Listen! I hate detective stories. I never read them after I got into the two-syllable words. I wrote the first as a clever, trenchant, biting satire. It was to blast the entire false school of mystery writers. That's why I invented this de Meister. He was the detective to end all detectives. The Compleat Ass, by Graham Dorn.

"So the public, along with snakes, vipers, and ungrateful children, takes this filth to its bosom. I wrote mystery after mystery trying to convert the public—"

Graham Dorn drooped a little at the futility of it all.

"Oh, well." He smiled wanly, and the great soul rose above adversity. "Don't you see? I've got to write other things. I can't waste my life. But who's going to read a serious novel by Graham Dorn, now that I'm so thoroughly identified with de Meister."

"You can use a pseudonym."

"I will not use a pseudonym. I'm proud of my name."

"But you can't drop de Meister. Be sensible, dear."

"A normal fiancée," Graham said bitterly, "would want her future husband to write something really worthwhile and become a great name in literature."

"Well, I do want you to, Graham. But just a little de Meister once in a while to pay the bills that accumulate."

"Ha!" Graham knocked his hat over his eyes to hide the sufferings of a strong spirit in agony. "Now you say that I can't reach prominence unless I prostitute my art to that unmentionable. Here's your place. Get out. I'm going home and write a good scorching letter on asbestos to our senile Mr. MacDunlap."

"Do exactly as you want to, cookie," soothed June. "And tomorrow when you feel better, you'll come and cry on my shoulder, and we'll plan a revision of *Death on the Third Deck* together, shall we?"

"The engagement," said Graham, loftily, "is broken."

"Yes, dear. I'll be home tomorrow at eight."

"That is of no possible interest to me. Good-bye!"

Publishers and editors are untouchables, of course. Theirs

is a heritage of the outstretched hand and the well-toothed smile; the nod of the head and the slap of the back.

But perhaps somewhere, in the privacy of the holes to which authors scurry when the night falls, a private revenge is taken. There phrases may be uttered where no one can overhear, and letters may be written that need not be mailed, and perhaps a picture of an editor, smiling pensively, is enshrined above the typewriter to act the part of bulls-eye in an occasional game of darts.

Such a picture of MacDunlap, so used, enlightened Graham Dorn's room. And Graham Dorn himself, in his usual writing costume (street-clothes and typewriter), scowled at the fifth sheet of paper in his typewriter. The other four were draped over the edge of the waste-basket, condemned for their milk-and-watery mildness.

He began:

"Dear Sir—" and added slowly and viciously, "or Madam, as the case may be."

He typed furiously as the inspiration caught him, disregarding the faint wisp of smoke curling upward from the overheated keys:

"You say you don't think much of de Meister in this story. Well, I don't think much of de Meister, period. You can handcuff your slimy carcass to his and jump off the Brooklyn Bridge. And I hope they drain the East River just before you jump.

"From now on, my works will be aimed higher than your scurvy press. And the day will come when I can look back on this period of my career with the loathing that is its just—"

Someone had been tapping Graham on the shoulder during the last paragraph. Graham twitched it angrily and ineffectively at intervals.

Now he stopped, turned around, and addressed the stranger in his room courteously: "Who the devilish damnation are you? And you can leave without bothering to answer. I won't think you rude."

The newcomer smiled graciously. His nod wafted the delicate aroma of some unobtrusive hair-oil toward Graham. His lean hard-bitten jaw stood out keenly, and he said in a well-modulated voice:

"De Meister is the name. Reginald de Meister."

Graham rocked to his mental foundations and heard them creak.

"Glub," he said.

"Pardon?"

Graham recovered. "I said, 'glub,' a little code word meaning *which* de Meister."

"*The* de Meister," explained de Meister, kindly.

"My character? My detective?"

De Meister helped himself to a seat and his finely-chiseled features assumed that air of well-bred boredom so admired in the best circles. He lit a Turkish cigarette, which Graham at once recognized as his detective's favorite brand, tapping it slowly and carefully against the back of his hand first, a mannerism equally characteristic.

"Really, old man," said de Meister. "This is really excruciatin'ly funny. I suppose I am your character, y'know, but let's not work on that basis. It would be so devastatin'ly awkward."

"Glub," said Graham again, by way of rejoinder.

His mind was feverishly setting up alternatives. He didn't drink, more, at the moment, was the pity, so he wasn't drunk. He had a chrome-steel digestion and he wasn't overheated, so it wasn't a hallucination. He never dreamed, and his imagination—as befitted a paying commodity—was under strict control. And since, like all authors, he was widely considered more than half a screwball, insanity was out of the question.

Which left de Meister simply an impossibility, and Graham felt relieved. It's a very poor author indeed who hasn't learned the fine art of ignoring impossibilities in writing a book.

He said smoothly, "I have here a volume of my latest work. Do you mind naming your page and crawling back into it. I'm a busy man and God knows I have enough of you in the tripe I write."

"But I'm here on business, old chap. I've got to come to a friendly arrangement with you first. Things are deucedly uncomfortable as they are."

"Look, do you know you're bothering me? I'm not in the habit of talking to mythical characters. As a general thing, I don't pal around with them. Besides which, it's time your mother told you that you really don't exist."

"My dear fellow, I always existed. Existence is such a subjective thing. What a mind thinks exists, *does* exist. I existed in your mind, for instance, ever since you first thought of me."

Graham shuddered. "But the question is, what are you

doing *out* of my mind. Getting a little narrow for you? Want elbow room?"

"Not at all. Rather satisfact'ry mind in its way, but I achieved a more concrete existence only this afternoon, and so I seize the opportunity to engage you face to face in the aforementioned business conversation. You see, that thin sentimental lady of your society—"

"What society?" questioned Graham hollowly. It was all awfully clear to him now.

"The one at which you made a speech—" de Meister shuddered in his turn—"on the detective novel. She believed in my existence, so, naturally, I exist."

He finished his cigarette and flicked it out with a negligent twist of the wrist.

"The logic," declared Graham, "is inescapable. Now what do you want and the answer is no."

"Do you realize, old man, that if you stop writing de Meister stories, my existence will become that dull, wraith-like one of all superannuated fictional detectives. I'd have to gibber through the gray mists of Limbo with Holmes, Lecocq, and Dupin."

"A very fascinating thought, I think. A very fitting fate."

Reginald de Meister's eyes turned icy, and Graham suddenly remembered the passage on page 123 of *The Case of the Broken Ashtray:*

His eyes, hitherto lazy and unattentive, hardened into twin pools of blue ice and transfixed the butler, who staggered back, a stifled cry on his lips.

Evidently, de Meister lost none of his characteristics out of the novels he adorned.

Graham staggered back, a stifled cry on his lip.

De Meister said menacingly, "It would be better for you if the de Meister mysteries continue. Do you understand?"

Graham recovered and summoned a feeble indignation. "Now wait a while. You're getting out of hand. Remember, in a way, I'm your father. That's right. Your mental father. You can't hand me ultimatums or make threats. It isn't filial. It's lacking in the proper respect and love."

"And another thing," said de Meister, unmoved. "We've got to straighten out this business of Letitia Reynolds. It's gettin' deucedly borin', y'know."

"Now you're getting silly. My love scenes have been widely heralded as miracles of tenderness and sentiment not found in one murder mystery out of a thousand. —Wait, I'll get

you a few reviews. I don't mind your attempts to dictate my actions so much, but I'm damned if you'll criticize my writing."

"Forget the reviews. Tenderness and all that rot is what I don't want. I've been driftin' after the fair lady for five volumes now, and behavin' the most insufferable ass. This has got to stop."

"In what way?"

"I've got to marry her in your present story. Either that, or make her a good, respectable mistress. And you'll have to stop making me so damned Victorian and gentlemanly towards ladies. I'm only human, old man."

"Impossible!" said Graham, "and that includes your last remark."

De Meister grew severe. "Really, old chap, for an author, you display the most appallin' lack of concern for the well-bein' of a character who has supported you for a good many years."

Graham choked eloquently. "Supported me? In other words, you think I couldn't sell real novels, hey? Well, I'll show you. I wouldn't write another de Meister story for a million dollars. Not even for a fifty percent royalty and all television rights. How's that?"

De Meister frowned and uttered those words that had been the sound of doom to so many criminals: "We shall see, but you are not yet done with me."

With firmly jutting jaw, he vanished.

Graham's twisted face straightened out, and slowly—very slowly—he brought his hands up to his cranium and felt carefully.

For the first time in a long and reasonably ribald mental life, he felt that his enemies were right and that a good dry cleaning would not hurt his mind at all.

The *things* that existed in it!

Graham Dorn shoved the doorbell with his elbow a second time. He distinctly remembered her saying she would be home at eight.

The peep-hole shoved open. "Hello!"

"Hello!"

Silence!

Graham said plaintively, "It's raining outside. Can't I come in to dry?"

"I don't know. Are we engaged, Mr. Dorn?"

"If I'm not," was the stiff reply, "then I've been turning

down the frenzied advances of a hundred passion-stricken girls—beautiful ones, all of them—for no apparent reason."

"Yesterday, you said—"

"Ah, but who listens to what I say? I'm just quaint that way. Look, I brought you posies." He flourished roses before the peep-hole.

June opened the door. "Roses! How plebeian. Come in, cookie, and sully the sofa. Whoa, whoa, before you move a step, what have you got under the other arm? Not the manuscript of *Death on the Third Deck*?"

"Correct. Not that excrescence of a manuscript. This is something different."

June's tone chilled. "That isn't your precious novel, is it?"

Graham flung his head up, "How did you know about it?"

"You slobbered the plot all over me at MacDunlap's silver anniversary party."

"I did not. I couldn't unless I were drunk."

"Oh, but you were. Stinking is the term. And on two cocktails too."

"Well, if I was drunk, I couldn't have told you the right plot."

"Is the setting a coal-mine district?"

"—uh—yes."

"And are the people concerned real, earthy, unartificial, down-to-earth characters, speaking and thinking just like you and me? Is it a story of basic economic forces? Are the human characters lifted up and thrown down and whirled around, all at the mercy of the coal mine and mechanized industry of today?"

"—uh—yes."

She nodded her head retrospectively. "I remember distinctly. First, you got drunk and were sick. Then you got better, and told me the first few chapters. Then I got sick."

She approached the glowering author. "Graham." She leant her golden head upon his shoulder and cooed softly. "Why don't you continue with the de Meister stories? You get such pretty checks out of them."

Graham writhed out of her grasp. "You are a mercenary wretch, incapable of understanding an author's soul. You may consider our engagement broken."

He sat down hard on the sofa, and folded his arms. "Unless you will consent to read the script of my novel and give me the usual story analysis."

"May I give you my analysis of *Death on the Third Deck* first?"

"No."

"Good! In the first place, your love interest is becoming sickening."

"It is not." Graham pointed his finger indignantly. "It breathes a sweet and sentimental fragrance, as of an older day. I've got the review here that says it." He fumbled in his wallet.

"Oh, bullfeathers. Are you going to start quoting that guy in the Pillsboro (Okla.) Clarion? He's probably your second cousin. You know that your last two novels were completely below par in royalties. And *Third Deck* isn't even being sold."

"So much the better—Ow!" He rubbed his head violently. "What did you do that for?"

"Because the only place I could hit as hard as I wanted to, without disabling you, was your head. Listen! The public is tired of your corny Letitia Reynolds. Why don't you let her soak her 'gleaming golden crown of hair' in kerosene and get familiar with a match?"

"But June, that character is drawn from life. From you!"

"Graham Dorn! I am not here to listen to insults. The mystery market today is swinging towards action and hot, honest love and you're still in the sweet, sentimental stickiness of five years ago."

"But that's Reginald de Meister's character."

"Well, change his character. Listen! You introduce Sancha Rodriguez. That's fine. I approve of her. She's Mexican, flaming, passionate, sultry, and in love with him. So what do you do? First he behaves the impeccable gentleman, and then you kill her off in the middle of the story."

"Hmm, I see— You really think it would improve things to have de Meister forget himself. A kiss or so—"

June clenched her lovely teeth and her lovely fists. "Oh, darling, how glad I am love is blind! If it ever peeked one tiny little bit, I couldn't stand it. Look, you squirrel's blue plate special, you're going to have de Meister and Rodriguez fall in love. They're going to have an affair through the entire book and you can put your horrible Letitia into a nunnery. She'd probably be happier there from the way you make her sound."

"That's all *you* know about it, my sweet. It so happens that Reginald de Meister is in love with Letitia Reynolds and wants *her*, not this Rodriguez person."

"And what makes you think that?"

"He told me so."

"Who told you so?"

"Reginald de Meister."

"What Reginald de Meister?"

"*My* Reginald de Meister."

"What do you mean, your Reginald de Meister?"

"My *character,* Reginald de Meister."

June got up, indulged in some deep-breathing and then said in a very calm voice, "Let's start all over."

She disappeared for a moment and returned with an aspirin. "Your Reginald de Meister from your books, told you in person, he was in love with Letitia Reynolds?"

"That's right."

June swallowed the aspirin.

"Well, I'll explain, June, the way he explained it to me. All characters really exist—at least, in the minds of the authors. But when people really begin to believe in them, they begin to exist in reality because what people believe in, is so as far as they're concerned and what is existence anyway?"

June's lips trembled. "Oh, Gramie, please don't. Mother will never let me marry you if they put you in an asylum."

"Don't call me Gramie, June, for God's sake. I tell you he was there, trying to tell me what to write and how to write it. He was almost as bad as you. Aw, come on, Baby, don't cry."

"I can't help it. I always thought you were crazy, but I never thought you were *crazy*!"

"All right, what's the difference? Let's not talk about it, anymore. I'm never going to write another mystery novel. After all—" (he indulged in a bit of indignation)—"when it gets so that my own character—my *own* character—tries to tell me what to do, it's going too far."

June looked over her handkerchief. "How do you know it was really de Meister?"

"Oh golly. As soon as he tapped his Turkish cigarette on the back of his hand and started dropping g's like snowflakes in a blizzard, I knew the worst had come."

The telephone rang. June leaped up. "Don't answer, Graham. It's probably from the asylum. I'll tell them you're not here. Hello. Hello. Oh, Mr. MacDunlap." She heaved a sigh of relief, then covered the mouthpiece and whispered hoarsely, "It might be a trap."

"Hello, Mr. MacDunlap? . . . No, he's not here. . . . Yes, I think I can get in touch with him. . . . At Martin's tomorrow, noon. . . . I'll tell him. . . . With who? . . . With who???" She hung up suddenly.

"Graham, you're to lunch with MacDunlap tomorrow."

"At his expense! Only at his expense!"

Her great blue eyes got greater and bluer, "And Reginald de Meister is to dine with you."

"What Reginald de Meister."

"Your Reginald de Meister."

"*My* Reg—"

"Oh, Gramie, *don't*." Her eyes misted, "Don't you see, Gramie, now they'll put us both in an insane asylum—and Mr. MacDunlap, too. And they'll probably put us all in the same padded cell. Oh, Gramie, three is such a dreadful crowd."

And her face crumpled into tears.

Grew S. MacDunlap (that the S. stands for "Some" is a vile untruth spread by his enemies) was alone at the table when Graham Dorn entered. Out of this fact, Graham extracted a few fleeting drops of pleasure.

It was not so much, you understand, the presence of MacDunlap that did it, as the absence of de Meister.

MacDunlap looked at him over his spectacles and swallowered a liver pill, his favorite sweetmeat.

"Aha. You're here. What is this corny joke you're putting over on me? You had no right to mix me up with a person like de Meister without warning me he was real. I might have taken precautions. I could have hired a bodyguard. I could have bought a revolver."

"He's *not* real. God damn it! Half of him was *your* idea."

"That," returned MacDunlap with heat, "is libel. And what do you mean, he's not real? When he introduced himself, I took three liver pills at once and he didn't disappear. Do you know what three pills are? Three pills, the kind I've got (the doctor should only drop dead), could make an elephant disappear—if he weren't real. I *know*."

Graham said wearily, "Just the same, he exists only in my mind."

"In your mind, I know he exists. Your mind should be investigated by the Pure Food and Drugs Act."

The several polite rejoinders that occurred simultaneously to Graham were dismissed almost immediately as containing too great a proportion of pithy Anglo-Saxon expletives. After all—ha, ha—a publisher is a publisher however Anglo-Saxony he may be.

Graham said, "The question arises then how we're to get rid of de Meister."

"Get rid of de Meister?" MacDunlap jerked the glasses off his nose in his sudden start, and caught them in one hand. His voice thickened with emotion. "Who wants to get rid of him?"

"Do you want him around?"

"God forbid," MacDunlap said between shudders. "Next to him, my brother-in-law is an angel."

"He has no business outside my books."

"For my part, he has no business inside them. Since I started reading your manuscripts, my doctor added kidney pills and cough syrups to my medicines." He looked at his watch, and took a kidney pill. "My worst enemy should be a book publisher only a year."

"Then why," asked Graham patiently, "don't you want to get rid of de Meister?"

"Because he is publicity."

Graham stared blankly.

"Look! What other writer has a real detective. All the others are fictional. Everyone knows that. But yours—*yours* is real. We can let him solve cases and have big newspaper writeups. He'll make the Police Department look silly. He'll make—"

"That," interrupted Graham, categorically, "is by all odds the most obscene proposal I have ever had my ears manured with."

"It will make money."

"Money isn't everything."

"Name one thing it isn't. . . . Shh!" He kicked a near-fracture into Graham's left ankle and rose to his feet with a convulsive smile, "Mr. de Meister!"

"Sorry, old dear," came a lethargic voice. "Couldn't quite make it, you know. Loads of engagements. Must have been most borin' for you."

Graham Dorn's ears quivered spasmodically. He looked over his shoulder and reeled backward as far as a person could reel while in a sitting position. Reginald de Meister had sprouted a monocle since his last visitation, and his monocular glance was calculated to freeze blood.

De Meister's greeting was casual. "My dear Watson! So glad to meet you. Overjoyed deucedly."

"Why don't you go to hell?" Graham asked curiously.

"My dear fellow. Oh, my dear fellow."

MacDunlap cackled, "That's what I like. Jokes! Fun! Makes everything pleasant to start with. Now shall we get down to business?"

"Certainly. The dinner is on the way, I trust? Then I'll just order a bottle of wine. The usual, Henry." The waiter ceased hovering, flew away, and skimmed back with a bottle that opened and gurgled into a glass.

De Meister sipped delicately, "So nice of you, old chap, to make me a habitué of this place in your stories. It holds true even now and it is most convenient. The waiters all know me. Mr. MacDunlap, I take it you have convinced Mr. Dorn of the necessity of continuing the de Meister stories."

"Yes," said MacDunlap.

"No," said Graham.

"Don't mind him," said MacDunlap. "He's temperamental. You know these authors."

"Don't mind him," said Graham. "He's microcephalic. You know these publishers."

"Look, old chappie. I take it MacDunlap hasn't pointed out to you the unpleasanter side of acting stubborn."

"For instance what, old stinkie?" asked Graham, courteously.

"Well, have you ever been haunted?"

"Like coming behind me and saying, Boo!"

"My dear fellow, I say. I'm much more subtle than that. I can really haunt one in modern, up-to-date methods. For instance, have you ever had your individuality submerged?"

He snickered.

There was something familiar about that snicker. Graham suddenly remembered. It was on page 103 of *Murder Rides the Range:*

His lazy eyelids flicked down and up. He laughed lightly and melodiously, and though he said not a word, Hank Marslowe cowered. There was hidden menace and hidden power in that light laugh, and somehow the burly rancher did not dare reach for his guns.

To Graham it still sounded like a nasty snicker, but he cowered, and did not dare reach for his guns.

MacDunlap plunged through the hole the momentary silence had created.

"You see, Graham. Why play around with ghosts? Ghosts aren't reasonable things. They're not *human!* If it's more royalties, you want—"

Graham fired up. "Will you refrain from speaking of money? From now on I write only great novels of tearing human emotions."

MacDunlap's flushed face changed suddenly.

"No," he said.

"In fact, to change the subject just a moment—" and Graham's tone became surpassingly sweet, as the words got all sticky with maple syrup—"I have a manuscript here for you to look at."

He grasped the perspiring MacDunlap by the lapel firmly. "It is a novel that is the work of five years. A novel that will grip you with its intensity. A novel that will shake you to the core of your being. A novel that will open a new world. A novel that will—"

"No," said MacDunlap.

"A novel that will blast the falseness of this world. A novel that pierces to the truth. A novel—"

MacDunlap, being able to stretch his hand no higher, took the manuscript.

"No," he said.

"Why the bloody hell don't you read it?" inquired Graham.

"Now?"

"Well, start it."

"Look, supposing I read it tomorrow, or even the next day. I have to take my cough syrup now."

"You haven't coughed once since I got here."

"I'll let you know immediately—"

"This," said Graham, "is the first page. Why don't you begin it? It will grip you instantly.'"

MacDunlap read two paragraphs and said, "Is this laid in a coal-mining town?"

"Yes."

"Then I can't read it. I'm allergic to coal dust."

"But it's not real coal dust, MacIdiot."

"That," pointed out MacDunlap, "is what you said about de Meister."

Reginald de Meister tapped a cigarette carefully on the back of his hand in a subtle manner which Graham immediately recognized as betokening a sudden decision.

"That is all devastatin'ly borin', you know. Not quite gettin' to the point, you might say. Go ahead, MacDunlap, this is no time for half measures."

MacDunlap girded his spiritual loins and said, "All right, Mister Dorn, with you it's no use being nice. Instead of de Meister, I'm getting coal dust. Instead of the best publicity in fifty years, I'm getting social significance. All right, Mister Smartaleck Dorn, if in one week you don't come to terms with me, *good* terms, you will be blacklisted in every rep-

utable publishing firm in the United States and foreign parts." He shook his finger and added in a shout, "Including Scandinavian."

Graham Dorn laughed lightly, "Pish," he said, "tush. I happen to be an officer of the Author's Union, and if you try to push me around I'll have *you* blacklisted. How do you like that?"

"I like it fine. Because supposing I can prove you're a plagiarist."

Graham Dorn nearly died laughing. MacDunlap waited patiently.

"Me," gasped Graham recovering narrowly from merry suffocation. "Me, the most original writer of the decade."

"Is that so? And maybe you don't remember that in each case you write up, you casually mention de Meister's notebooks on previous cases."

"So what?"

"So he has them. Reginald, my boy, show Mister Dorn your notebook of your last case. —You see that. That's *Mystery of the Milestones* and it has, in detail, every incident in your book—and dated the year before the book was published. Very authentic."

"Again so what?"

"Have you maybe got the right to copy his notebook and call it an original murder mystery?"

"Why, you case of mental poliomyelitis, that notebook is my invention."

"Who says so? It's in de Meister's handwriting, as any expert can prove. And maybe you have a piece of paper, some little contract or agreement, you know, that gives you the right to use his notebooks?"

"How can I have an agreement with a mythical personage?"

"What mythical personage?"

"You and I know de Meister doesn't exist."

"Ah, but does the jury know? When I testify that I took three strong liver pills and he didn't disappear, what twelve men will say he doesn't exist?"

"This is blackmail."

"Certainly. I'll give you a week. Or in other words, seven days."

Graham Dorn turned desperately to de Meister. "You're in on this, too. In my books I give you the keenest sense of honor. Is this honorable?"

De Meister shrugged. "My dear fellow. All this—and haunting, too."

Graham rose.

"Where are you going?"

"Home to write you a letter." Graham's brows beetled defiantly. "And this time I'll mail it. I'm not giving in. I'll fight to the last ditch. And, de Meister, you let loose with one single little haunt and I'll rip your head out of its socket and spurt the blood all over MacDunlap's new suit."

He stalked out, and as he disappeared through the door, de Meister disappeared through nothing at all.

MacDunlap let out a soft yelp and then took a liver pill, a kidney pill, and a tablespoon of cough syrup in rapid succession.

Graham Dorn sat in June's front parlor, and having long since consumed his fingernails, was starting on the first knuckles.

June, at the moment, was not present, and this Graham felt was just as well. A dear girl; in fact, a dear, sweet girl. But his mind was not on her.

It was concerned instead with a miasmic series of flashbacks over the preceding six days:

——Say, Graham, I met your side-kick at the club yesterday. You know, de Meister. Got an awful shock. I always had the idea he was a sort of Sherlock Holmes that didn't exist. That's one on me, boy. Didn't know—— Hey, where are you going?

——Hey, Dorn, I hear your boss de Meister is back in town. Ought to have material for more stories soon. You're lucky you've got someone to grind out your plots ready-made —— Huh? Well, good-bye."

——Why, Graham, darling, wherever were you last night? Ann's affair didn't get *anywhere* without you; or at least, it wouldn't have, if it hadn't been for Reggie de Meister. He asked after you; but then, I guess he felt lost without his Watson. It must feel wonderful to Watson for such—— *Mister* Dorn! And the same to you, sir!

——You put one over on me. I thought you made up those wild things. Well, truth is stranger than fiction, ha, ha!

——Police officials deny that the famous amateur criminologist Reginald de Meister has interested himself in this case. Mr. de Meister himself could not be reached by our reporters for comment. Mr. de Meister is best known to the public for his brilliant solutions to over a dozen crimes, as

chronicled in fiction form by his so-called "Watson," Mr. Grayle Doone.

Graham quivered and his arms trembled in an awful desire for blood. De Meister was haunting him—but good. He was losing his individuality, exactly as had been threatened.

It gradually dawned upon Graham that the monotonous ringing noise he heard was not in his head, but, on the contrary, from the front door.

Such seemed likewise the opinion of Miss June Billings whose piercing call shot down the stairs and biffed Graham a sharp uppercut to the ear-drums.

"Hey, dope, see who's at the front door, before the vibration tears the house down. I'll be down in half an hour."

"Yes, dear!"

Graham shuffled his way to the front door and opened it.

"Ah, there. Greetin's," said de Meister, and brushed past.

Graham's dull eyes stared, and then fired high, as an animal snarl burst from his lips. He took up that gorilla posture, so comforting to red-blooded American males at moments like this, and circled the slightly-confused detective.

"My dear fellow, are you ill?"

"I," explained Graham, "am not ill, but you will soon be past all interest in that, for I am going to bathe my hands in your heart's reddest blood."

"But I say, you'll only have to wash them afterwards. It would be such an obvious clue, wouldn't it?"

"Enough of this gay banter. Have you any last words?"

"Not particularly."

"It's just as well. I'm not interested in your last words."

He thundered into action, bearing down upon the unfortunate de Meister like a bull elephant. De Meister faded to the left, shot out an arm and a foot, and Graham described a parabolic arc that ended in the total destruction of an end table, a vase of flowers, a fish-bowl, and a five-foot section of wall.

Graham blinked, and brushed away a curious goldfish from his left eyebrow.

"My dear fellow," murmured de Meister, "oh, my dear fellow."

Too late, Graham remembered that passage in *Pistol Parade:*

De Meister's arms were whipcord lightning, as with sure rapid thrusts, he rendered the two thugs helpless. Not by brute force, but by his expert knowledge of judo, he de-

feated them easily without hastening his breath. The thugs groaned in pain.

Graham groaned in pain.

He lifted his right thigh an inch or so to let his femur slip back into place.

"Hadn't you better get up, old chap?"

"I will stay here," said Graham with dignity, "and contemplate the floor in profile view, until such time as it suits me or until such time as I find myself capable of moving a muscle. I don't care which. And now, before I proceed to take further measures with you, what the hell do you want?"

Reginald de Meister adjusted his monocle to a nicety. "You know, I suppose, that MacDunlap's ultimatum expires tomorrow?"

"And you and he with it, I trust."

"You will not reconsider."

"Ha!"

"Really," de Meister sighed, "this is borin' no end. You have made things comfortable for me in this world. After all, in your books, you've made me well-known in all the clubs and better restaurants, the bosom friend, y'know, of the mayor and commissioner of police, the owner of a Park Avenue penthouse and a magnificent art collection. And it all lingers over, old chap. Really quite affectin'."

"It is remarkable," mused Graham, "the intensity with which I am not listening and the distinctness with which I do not hear a word you say."

"Still," said de Meister, "there is no denyin' my book world suits me better. It is somehow more fascinatin', freer from dull logic, more apart from the necessities of the world. In short, I must go back, and to active participation. You have till tomorrow!"

Graham hummed a gay little tune with flat little notes.

"Is this a new threat, de Meister?"

"It is the old threat intensified. I'm going to rob you of every vestige of your personality. And eventually public opinion will force you to write as, to paraphrase you, de Meister's Compleat Stooge. Did you see the name the newspaper chappies pinned on you today, old man?"

"Yes, Mr. Filthy de Meister, and did you read a half-column item on page ten in the same paper. I'll read it *for* you: 'Noted Criminologist in 1-A. Will be inducted shortly, draft board says.' "

For a moment, de Meister said and did nothing. And

then one after another, he did the following things: removed his monocle slowly, sat down heavily, rubbed his chin abstractedly, and lit a cigarette after long and careful tamping. Each of these, Graham Dorn's trained authorial eye recognized as singly representing perturbation and distress on the part of his character.

And never, in any of his books, did Graham remember a time when de Meister had gone through all four consecutively.

Finally, de Meister spoke. "Why you had to bring up draft registrations in your last book, I really don't know. This urge to be topical; this fiendish desire to be up to the minute with the news is the curse of the mystery novel. A true mystery is timeless; should have no relation to current events; should—"

"There is one way," said Graham, "to escape induction—"

"You might at least have mentioned a deferred classification on some vital ground."

"There is one way," said Graham, "to escape induction—"

"Criminal negligence," said de Meister.

"Look! Go back to the books and you'll never be filled with lead."

"Write them and I'll do it."

"Think of the war."

"Think of your ego."

Two strong men stood face to face (or would have, if Graham weren't still horizontal) and neither flinched.

Impasse!

And the sweet, feminine voice of June Billings interrupted and snapped the tension:

"May I ask, Graham Dorn, what you are doing on the floor. It's been swept today and you're not complimenting me by attempting to improve the job."

"I am not sweeping the floor. If you looked carefully," replied Graham gently, "you would see that your own adored fiancé is lying here a mass of bruises and a hotbed of pains and aches."

"You've ruined my end table!"

"I've broken my leg."

"And my best lamp."

"And two ribs."

"And my fishbowl."

"And my Adam's apple."

"And you haven't introduced your friend."

"And my cervical verte——What friend?"

"This friend."

"Friend! Ha!" And a mist came over his eyes. She was so young, so fragile to come into contact with hard, brutal facts of life. "This," he muttered brokenly, "is Reginald de Meister."

De Meister at this point broke a cigarette sharply in two, a gesture pregnant with the deepest emotion.

June said slowly, "Why—why, you're different from what I had thought."

"How had you expected me to look?" asked de Meister, in soft, thrilling tones.

"I don't know. Differently than you do,—from the stories I heard."

"You remind me, somehow, Miss Billings, of Letitia Reynolds."

"I think so. Graham said he drew her from me."

"A very poor imitation, Miss Billings. Devastatin'ly poor."

They were six inches apart now, eyes fixed with a mutual glue, and Graham yelled sharply. He sprang upright as memory smote him a nasty smite on the forehead.

A passage from *Case of the Muddy Overshoe* occurred to him. Likewise one from *The Primrose Murders.* Also one from *The Tragedy of Hartley Manor, Death of a Hunter, White Scorpion* and, to put it in a small nutshell, from every one of the others.

The passage read:

There was a certain fascination about de Meister that appealed irresistibly to women.

And June Billings was—as it had often, in Graham's idler moments, occurred to him—a woman.

And fascination simply gooed out of her ears and coated the floor six inches deep.

"Get out of this room, June," he ordered.

"I will not."

"There is something I must discuss with Mr. de Meister man to man. I demand that you leave this room."

"Please go, Miss Billings," said de Meister.

June hesitated, and in a very small voice said, "Very well."

"Hold on," shouted Graham. "Don't let him order you about. I demand that you stay."

She closed the door very gently behind her.

The two men faced each other. There was that in either

pair of eyes that indicated a strong man brought to bay. There was stubborn, undying antagonism; no quarter; no compromise. It was exactly the sort of situation Graham Dorn always presented his readers with, when two strong men fought for one hand, one heart, one girl.

The two said simultaneously, "Let's make a deal!"

Graham said, "You have convinced me, Reggie. Our public needs us. Tomorrow I shall begin another de Meister story. Let us shake hands and forget the past."

De Meister struggled with his emotion. He laid his hand on Graham's lapel, "My dear fellow, it is I who have been convinced by your logic. I can't allow you to sacrifice yourself for me. There are great things in you that must be brought out. Write your coal-mining novels. They count, not I."

"I couldn't, old chap. Not after all you've done for me, and all you've meant to me. Tomorrow we start anew."

"Graham, my—my spiritual father, I couldn't allow it. Do you think I have no feelings, *filial* feelings—in a spiritual sort of way."

"But the war, think of the war. Mangled limbs. Blood. All that."

"I must stay. My country needs me."

"But if I stop writing, eventually you will stop existing. I can't allow that."

"Oh, that!" De Meister laughed with a careless elegance. "Things have changed since. So many people believe in my existence now that my grip upon actual existence has become too firm to be broken. I don't have to worry about Limbo any more."

"Oh." Graham clenched his teeth and spoke in searing sibilants: "So that's your scheme, you snake. Do you suppose I don't see you're stuck on June?"

"Look here, old chap," said de Meister haughtily. "I can't permit you to speak slightingly of a true and honest love. I love June and she loves me—I know it. And if you're going to be stuffy and Victorian about it, you can swallow some nitro-glycerine and tap yourself with a hammer."

"I'll nitro-glycerine you! Because I'm going home tonight and beginning another de Meister story. You'll be part of it and you'll get back into it, and what do you think of that?"

"Nothing, because you can't write another de Meister story. I'm too real now, and you can't control me just like *that*. And what do you think of that?"

It took Graham Dorn a week to make up his mind what to think of that, and then, his thoughts were completely and startlingly unprintable.

In fact, it was impossible to write.

That is, startling ideas occurred to him for great novels, emotional dramas, epic poems, brilliant essays—but he couldn't write anything about Reginald de Meister.

The typewriter was simply fresh out of Capital R's.

Graham wept, cursed, tore his hair, and anointed his finger tips with liniment. He tried typewriter, pen, pencil, crayon, charcoal, and blood.

He could not write.

The doorbell rang, and Graham threw it open.

MacDunlap stumbled in, falling over the first drifts of torn paper directly into Graham's arms.

Graham let him drop. "Hah!" he said, with frozen dignity.

"My heart!" said MacDunlap, and fumbled for his liver pills.

"Don't die there," suggested Graham, courteously. "The management won't permit me to drop human flesh into the incinerator."

"Graham, my boy," MacDunlap said, emotionally, "no more ultimatums! No more threats! I come now to appeal to your finer feelings, Graham—" he went through a slight choking interlude—"I love you like a son. This skunk, de Meister must disappear. You must write more de Meister stories for my sake. Graham—I will tell you something in private. My wife is in love with this detective. She tells me I am not romantic. I! Not romantic! Can you understand it?"

"I can," was the tragic response. "He fascinates all women."

"With that face? With that monocle?"

"It says so in all my books."

MacDunlap stiffened. "Ah ha. You again. Dope! If only you ever stopped long enough to let your mind know what your typewriter was saying."

"You insisted. Feminine trade." Graham didn't care any more. Women! He snickered bitterly. Nothing wrong with any of them that a block-buster wouldn't fix.

MacDunlap hemmed. "Well, feminine trade. Very necessary. —But Graham, what shall I do? It's not only my wife. She owns fifty shares in MacDunlap, Inc. in her own name. If she leaves me, I lose control. Think of it, Graham. The catastrophe to the publishing world."

"Grew, old chap," Graham sighed a sigh so deep, his toe-

nails quivered sympathetically. "I might as well tell you. June, my fiancée, you know, loves this worm. And he loves her because she is the prototype of Letitia Reynolds."

"The what of Letitia?" asked MacDunlap, vaguely suspecting an insult.

"Never mind. My life is ruined." He smiled bravely and choked back the unmanly tears, after the first two had dripped off the end of his nose.

"My poor boy!" The two gripped hands convulsively.

"Caught in a vise by this foul monster," said Graham.

"Trapped like a German in Russia," said MacDunlap.

"Victim of an inhuman fiend," said Graham.

"Exactly," said MacDunlap. He wrung Graham's hand as if he were milking a cow. "You've got to write de Meister stories and get him back where, next to Hell, he most belongs. Right?"

"Right! But there's one little catch."

"What?"

"I can't write. He's so real now, I *can't* put him into a book."

MacDunlap caught the significance of the massed drifts of used paper on the floor. He held his head and groaned, "My corporation! My wife!"

"There's always the army," said Graham.

MacDunlap looked up. "What about *Death on the Third Deck*, the novel I rejected three weeks ago."

"That doesn't count. It's past history. It's already affected him."

"Without being published?"

"Sure. That's the story I mentioned his draft board in. The one that put him in 1-A."

"I could think of better places to put him."

"MacDunlap!" Graham Dorn jumped up, and grappled MacDunlap's lapel. "Maybe it can be revised."

MacDunlap coughed hackingly, and stifled out a dim grunt.

"We can put anything we want into it."

MacDunlap choked a bit.

"We can fix things up."

MacDunlap turned blue in the face.

Graham shook the lapel and everything thereto attached, "Say something, won't you?"

MacDunlap wrenched away and took a tablespoon of cough syrup. He held his hand over his heart and patted it a bit. He shook his head and gestured with his eyebrows.

Graham shrugged. "Well, if you just want to be sullen, go ahead. I'll revise it without you."

He located the manuscript and tried his fingers gingerly on the typewriter. They went smoothly, with practically no creaking at the joints. He put on speed, more speed, and then went into his usual race, with the portable jouncing along merrily under the accustomed head of steam.

"It's working," he shouted. "I can't write new stories, but I can revise old, unpublished ones."

MacDunlap watched over his shoulder. He breathed only at odd moments.

"Faster," said MacDunlap, "faster!"

"Faster than thirty-five?" said Graham, sternly. "OPA* forbid! Five more minutes."

"Will he be there?"

"He's always there. He's been at her house every evening this week." He spat out the fine ivory dust into which he had ground the last inch of his incisors. "But God help you if your secretary falls down on the job."

"My boy, on my secretary you can depend."

"She's got to read that revision by nine."

"If she doesn't drop dead."

"With my luck, she will. Will she believe it?"

"Every word. She's seen de Meister. She *knows* he exists."

Brakes screeched, and Graham's soul cringed in sympathy with every molecule of rubber frictioned off the tires.

He bounded up the stairs, MacDunlap hobbling after.

He rang the bell and burst in at the door. Reginald de Meister standing directly inside received the full impact of a pointing finger, and only a rapid backward movement of the head kept him from becoming a one-eyed mythical character.

June Billings stood aside, silent and uncomfortable.

"Reginald de Meister," growled Graham, in sinister tones, "prepare to meet your doom."

"Oh, boy," said MacDunlap, "are you going to get it."

"And to what," asked de Meister, "am I indebted for your dramatic but unilluminatin' statement. Confusin', don't you know." He lit a cigarette with a fine gesture and smiled.

"Hello, Gramie," said June, tearfully.

"Scram, vile woman."

* The Office of Price Administration was in charge of gasoline rationing at this period. Remember "A" stickers? D.R.B.

June sniffed. She felt like a heroine out of a book, torn by her own emotions. Naturally, she was having the time of her life.

So she let the tears dribble and looked forlorn.

"To return to the subject, what is this all about?" asked de Meister, wearily.

"I have rewritten *Death on the Third Deck.*"

"Well?"

"The revision," continued Graham, "is at present in the hands of MacDunlap's secretary, a girl on the style of Miss Billings, my fiancée that was. That is, she is a girl who aspires to the status of a moron, but has not yet quite attained it. She'll believe every word."

"Well?"

Graham's voice grew ominous, "You remember, perhaps, Sancha Rodriguez?"

For the first time, Reginald de Meister shuddered. He caught his cigarette as it dropped. "She was killed by Sam Blake in the sixth chapter. She was in love with me. Really, old fellow, what messes you get me into."

"Not half the mess you're in now, old chap. Sancha Rodriguez did *not* die in the revision."

"Die!" came a sharp, but clear female voice, "I'll show him if I died. And where have *you* been this last month, you two-crosser?"

De Meister did not catch his cigarette this time. He didn't even try. He recognized the apparition. To an unprejudiced observer, it might have been merely a svelte Latin girl equipped with dark, flashing eyes, and long, glittering fingernails, but to de Meister, it was Sancha Rodriguez—*undead!*

MacDunlap's secretary had read and believed.

"Miss Rodriguez," throbbed de Meister, charmingly, "how fascinatin' to see you."

"Mrs. de Meister to you, you double-timer, you two-crosser, you scum of the ground, you scorpion of the grass. And who is this woman?"

June retreated with dignity behind the nearest chair.

"*Mrs.* de Meister," said Reginald pleadingly, and turned helplessly to Graham Dorn.

"Oh, you have forgotten, have you, you smooth talker, you low dog. I'll show you what it means to deceive a weak woman. I'll make you mince-meat with my fingernails."

De Meister back-pedaled furiously. "But darling—"

"Don't you make sweet talk. What are you doing with this woman?"

"But, darling——"

"Don't give me any explanations. What are you doing with this woman?"

"But darling—"

"Shut up! What are you doing with this woman?"

Reginald de Meister was up in a corner, and Mrs. de Meister shook her fists at him. "Answer me!"

De Meister disappeared.

Mrs. de Meister disappeared right after him.

June Billings collapsed into real tears.

Graham Dorn folded his arms and looked sternly at her.

MacDunlap rubbed his hands and took a kidney pill.

"It wasn't my fault, Gramie," said June. "You said in your books he fascinated all women, so I couldn't help it. Deep inside, I hated him all along. You believe me, don't you?"

"A likely story!" said Graham, sitting down next to her on the sofa. "A likely story. But I forgive you, maybe."

MacDunlap said tremulously, "My boy, you have saved my stocks. Also, my wife, of course. And remember—you promised me one de Meister story each year.

Graham gritted, "Just one, and I'll henpeck him to death, and keep one unpublished story forever on hand, just in case. And you're publishing my novel, aren't you, Grew, old boy?"

"Glug," said MacDunlap.

"Aren't you?"

"Yes, Graham. Of course, Graham. Definitely, Graham. Positively, Graham."

"Then leave us now. There are matters of importance I must discuss with my fiancée."

MacDunlap smiled and tiptoed out the door.

Ah, love, love, he mused, as he took a liver pill and followed it up by a cough-syrup chaser.

THE BARGAIN

* *Cleve Cartmill*

As black, though the absence of color, has for many people a stronger emotional impact than any one of the actual colors, so death has often seemed more of a "live" force than many living things. Two plays of the 1930s, *On Borrowed Time* and *Death Takes a Holiday,* helped fix the image of Death as a character in the American mind, much as Dürer's "Dance of Death" drawings did for an earlier age. Here, Cleve Cartmill (who contributed many very odd stories indeed to *Unknown*) presents a "folksy" Death, and a predictable outcome of his encounter with mortals. Only . . . the predictable solution is not what happens, after all. . . .

NO, I CAN'T STOP YOU. I ADMIT IT. IF A MAN HAS ANY RIGHTS at all, the first is the right to take his own life.

So I can't keep you from it if you're bound to. Don't aim to try. The business office would raise hell with me, even if it did play hob with their bookkeepin'. But I can point out a thing or two if you just leave that gun in the drawer and relax for a minute.

Paul Roberts, aren't you? Your name on the door, is how I know. Got a rotten memory for names. Used to carry my accounts around in my head, but that was when only Adam, and Eve, and Cain, and Enoch, and Irad, and Methujael, and a few more made up the list.

Can't remember 'em all any more, what with so many, and me gettin' along, too.

Oh, I could fit you in, Paul. It's not laziness that brings me here. No, you'll find me accommodatin', if nothing else, even with a full schedule like I got these days.

It's just not your time, that's all. You got a lot of things ahead of you, and if you don't shoot yourself again, you'll be able to live 'em. That first shot wasn't quite enough, and surgery bein' what it is, won't leave much of a scar.

No, I can't tell you what those things might be. The rules are pretty rigid, and I got to live up to 'em, seein' as I made 'em in the first place. If I get slack, you can see what it would do to the staff.

Can't give you a look, either, at what you'd be runnin' into. Adam wanted that. But I couldn't break the rules even for him. Couldn't even tell him if he'd see Abel. So he held out long after his time. Kept me waitin' around for darned near a thousand years. Cheated me for all he was worth.

Got my scythe right after that. That stopped 'em from cheatin'. Smack 'em a couple of times with it and they come along like sheep, right on schedule.

I'll stand it here in the corner till we see if you're goin' to need it. Some says I ought to throw it away, that it's outdated. But it's like a friend to me, and it always works. Which is more than you can say of that electric clock my efficiency man had.

It was right after Hitler started for Paris. My whole staff was workin' overtime, and I was personally supervisin' the job in Europe. We had to bring the regulars over from America to help, and I had nobody but green apprentices to replace 'em with. Would've worked out all right, if one of 'em hadn't started his survey.

Well, you know. New man on the job, wants to make a name right off. He was right, too, in a way. And I did sort of tell him to go ahead.

"Chief," he says to me just before he started for that part of the country called California or something like that, "chief, many of them suffer past their time. That isn't efficient. I'd like permission to improve the system."

"Son," I told him, "you'd have to begin with the bookkeepin' department, and you know the business offices won't stand for it. Then, when you got it straightened out, if they'd let you work on it, you'd find the field staff wasn't big enough."

That's where the real trouble always has been. We just can't get to 'em all the time, right on the dot. Was a time, 'way back when, that we could handle the job. But they kept increasin' so fast that pretty soon we were understaffed and a lot of 'em just had to wait overtime till we could get around to 'em.

Course, there was a mistake now and then that wasn't our fault. A card would come out, and we'd pick up that person only to find out too late that some clerk had sent out the wrong card.

But I admitted that our efficiency wasn't a hundred percent, and told this apprentice so.

"Things are slack in America," I said. "If you want to try out something, I got no strong objections. How do you figure to go at it, son?"'

He shows me this clock, then. Electric, with curved blades for hands. Pretty, it was, and silent.

"I made it," he says, sort of proud. "I put a batch of cards in here, you see, and when the hands reach the time marked in the right-hand corner, out pops the card. If I can't take the call myself, I can relay it to somebody not so busy."

"I don't hold with such things, myself," I says. "If they break down at the wrong time, you're in a mess right. Now would be a good time to try it, though. I won't tell you to go ahead, but I won't tell you not to, either."

I don't know what it was happened. Maybe the wrong cycle or something, but, anyway, this clock got three days behind. He didn't tell me till a state of emergency come up. Said he didn't want to bother me, busy as I was twenty-four hours a day with the overload in Europe.

Well, I dropped everything and come over quick. Sure enough, it was a real emergency. All on account of that clock, a scientist in one of the colleges had been able to complete an experiment and work out the secret of immortality.

Jensen, Jannings, Bronson—I forget his name. Don't matter, anyway. Course, we all knew he was workin' on it. Knew he'd find it, too, if he was let alone.

His card come out from the business office, with all the dope on it and the exact time to take him, just before he hit on the last factor. But the apprentice was fiddlin' with his clock tryin' to get it back to shape, and overlooked his job. Wouldn't 've happened if he'd stuck to the old way.

Well, I took over. I dropped in to see this professor. He hadn't told the papers yet, and I had to see that all his notes were destroyed.

He was in his office, just beginnin' to write an article. I waited till he put the title down. It was "Now We Are Immortal." Then I showed myself. He was like a tethered lamb lookin' at a tiger, tremblin' and shiverin'.

But he had a funny kind of spunk, too, that little man. Even while he was shakin', and his eyes pretty near as big as

his glasses, he grinned. A kind of be-damned-to-you grin, like he had something I couldn't touch.

He was right.

But I didn't find that out till later. Right then I eased his head over on that paper, with its "Now We Are Immortal," and looked around for his notes.

I found 'em, what he'd been workin' on for three years. Formulas and equations. Everything, and all of it wrong. Everything except that one little fact which anybody could use to make himself immortal.

Well, I went over the office again to be sure I hadn't missed it. Then I left him, with his pen tight in his dead hand. It wasn't there, and I had to find it. Electric clocks! Efficiency!

The business department didn't like to send out a special investigator on what ought to have been a routine case. I didn't like to ask for one, either. But I had to find the thing and see it destroyed. Otherwise there would be the devil and all to pay.

That was when Miss Lucy Walburn come into it. Oh, I know her name, all right. You don't forget Miss Lucy.

The investigator gave me the facts and I went out to call on her, dressed like I was from an insurance company, with a satchel and a pocket full of fountain pens.

She was weedin' a bed of flowers around one of the trees in her yard, and when I come up her flagstone walk she stood up and took off her gardenin' gloves.

It was easy to see why that little professor grinned even when he knew it was his time. If you had something you wanted kept safe, Miss Lucy was the one to give it to. She had keen and honest eyes, sort of grayish, and she walked like she wasn't ashamed of anything as she come across the lawn.

"Yes?" she says.

I put on a face for her. "I am afraid, Miss Walburn," I says, "that I bring sad news. If we might go inside—"

"Tell me," she says. No fuss and bother, and no goin' inside yet, either.

So I told her about her professor friend, and how he left his estate, and I needed her signature. Well, it was true, and a real insurance man would call on her the next day. Even at that, though, I felt sort of guilty about the deep hurt I gave her.

I could tell. It was 'way down inside, and not the hurt a young woman gets. She didn't start thinkin' about who

would take his place. No, she took it like a woman right at the top of her prime; she'd lost a friend.

"I'm terribly sorry," she says. "Come in."

Inside it was like her yard, neat and cheerful. A few seeds scattered around under the canary's cage was a friendly touch.

She waved me into a chair. "How did it happen?" she says.

I told her a story, soothin'like, and pretty soon her hands are not tight fists any longer. She looked at the canary as he filled his throat with song, and smiled.

"Jackie was the last present he gave me," she says.

Which gave me an openin'. "There was a paper, Miss Walburn. I have his authorization to take it."

I pulled the order out of my satchel and gave it to her. She put on her glasses and looked it over careful. Lines come back to her forehead, just under her brown hair, and she didn't say anything for a long time.

"No," she says finally. "It isn't true."

"What, ma'am?"

"This authorization. It is exactly contrary to what he told me to do in case of his death. I am to read the document referred to here, and turn it over to the proper authorities. Therefore, I shall not surrender it to you."

"I'm sorry, Miss Walburn," I says, "but you must. A court will order it."

"Let the courts order. I'll admit this looks like his signature, but I also know how much that paper meant to him. And this is exactly opposite to his instructions to me. He repeated them last night. 'Lucy,' he said, 'I've come through another day. But remember, if I should get killed before I see you again, don't let that envelope out of your hands till you've read what's inside. It will turn the course of civilization.' Those were almost his exact words. You can see how foolish that makes this scrap of paper."

Well, it was time for her to see how things stood, so I showed her who I was. Her eyes got a little wider for a minute, then she laid her glasses aside and folded her hands.

"So," she says. "So."

"Yes, Miss Lucy. You're bound to give that paper to me, now."

"He found out, didn't he?"

"Yes'm."

"How to live forever. That's what the paper is. Oh, what

a farce!" she cries, her eyes bitter and her pretty mouth all twisted. "What rotten unfairness!"

"How's that, Miss Lucy?"

"To let us slave, and sweat, and drive ourselves to learn how to live, and come to nothing in the end! To let a splendid man like him find life only to have it snatched away! You—obnoxious old man!"

"Why, it's not my fault, Miss Lucy," I says. "I guess I get around to most everybody sometime, but not because I wish 'em harm. It's my *job,* Miss Lucy. I got my orders, same as anybody."

"Well, it's silly!" she snaps.

"But it's regulations, ma'am."

"Then it's a rotten trick," she says. "We are allowed to hope that we are masters of our fate. We conquer the world, make it safe and productive. The noblemen—yes, noblemen! —devote their lives to man's last enemy, death. One by one, thousands of them, they lie down on the last great altar, each leaving behind a step toward the goal. Then, to reach it at last only to find that all have been the victims of a bitter jest—that is unforgivable. That is the vicious insult of the person, or thing, or being, or force, who toys with his painted puppets."

"Miss Lucy," I broke in, "I can't tell you why this is. I'm forbidden to. And I don't want to argue. All I want is the envelope."

She tipped her head back and gave me a level stare. "Do your worst, old crooked man," she says. "With Koch, and Lister, and Ehrlich, and Pasteur and all the rest, I'll keep the trust I have been given."

Well, I just naturally got to make her start thinkin' straight, so I says, "Look here, Miss Lucy, you don't want that information to become public property."

"Don't I?" she asks. "Why?"

"Well, ma'am, even without considerin' my job and how it would wipe out my whole department, it would be one of the worst things you could do."

"How is that?" she says.

"Man bein' what he is," I tell her, "he fights and kills his own kind. Well, now, just suppose he gets to be immortal. Why, ma'am, it would just be war forever, and no happiness anywhere. Way it is, mostly the ones who rule have done more harm than good, what with wars and conquest. If they couldn't die off and give the human race a breathin'

spell now and then, it would just be stinkin' awful, beggin' your pardon."

"Yes," she says, thoughtful, "I can see your point." Then she gives me a shrewd look. "I've got something you want, and you'd have killed me if you could get it without my co-operation, wouldn't you?"

"I wouldn't say that's exactly right, ma'am."

"Then why don't you kill me and get it over with? I'm not afraid of you."

"Well, Miss Lucy, it's not your time yet. I can't just take you, lessn I got a notice from the business office."

"Then why don't you just destroy that envelope?"

"There are some things I can't tell you, ma'am. But I can tell you this—I got to see you destroy it yourself without showin' it to anybody else."

"Suppose I refuse. What then?"

"I'm not goin' to let anybody, not even you, see what's in that envelope, Miss Lucy. Even if I do have to take you before your time, I'll do it. You and anybody else who might get hold of it."

"It's in my safety-deposit box at the bank."

"Yes, ma'am. I know."

"And you can't get it out, can you?"

"Miss Lucy," I says, "don't press me."

"It's obvious that you can't," she says. "Otherwise you wouldn't have come here at all. You'd have gone straight to the bank. Well! Let me think."

Well, she picked up her glasses and whirls 'em with one hand, hummin' a pretty tune to herself. This starts the canary singin' again, and between the two of 'em it's right nice in that cool little room. I changed back to the insurance man, and set down in the chair again while she goes right on hummin'. Pretty soon she lays down the glasses and looks at me, smilin' a little.

"I'll make you a bargain, old crooked man."

"I reckon you didn't understand me, Miss Lucy," I says. "I come after that envelope."

"Exactly." She smiles. "But you can't get it unless I help. If you kill me for refusing to help, then you'll have to stand guard over that deposit vault and kill every person who starts to open it. Right?"

I didn't make her an answer, but she goes right on.

"As time goes on, the dead will pile up around that bank. You'll be forced to kill and kill, but eventually somebody

will get it, or you must kill off the entire human race. For you know as well as I that when the first few die, the curiosity of others will be around. And once you have made people curious, they will die right down to the last man to satisfy that curiosity."

That is exactly what I was thinkin', but I don't let on.

"Will you listen to my bargain?" she asks.

"I can listen," I say, "but I can't make a bargain with a human bein'."

"Bring my professor back to life," she says. "We'll destroy the envelope, and he'll forget his secret. We'll be happier, then, as long as we live, knowing that he was working against stacked cards. We can forget his work, and think of ourselves."

"Miss Lucy," I says, "I've been too kindly with you. I've been gabbin' like a old woman. This is serious, and your proposition don't flatter your intelligence any. Such a thing is completely impossible. The little professor is gone, and I can't bring him back."

"But other people have come back to life," she insists, and points out a couple.

"It was out of my hands," I explains. "I had done my job, and done it handsome. Lazarus was dead, right on schedule. Anything happened after that was out of my department. Same with the widow's son. I had nothin' to do with it."

"All right, then. Make me immortal!"

It wasn't the first time I'd had that request, but it gave me a start just the same. You'd have expected her, maybe, to ask me to take her, so she could be with the professor, or at least because she'd think she'd be with him. But you wouldn't expect anybody who thinks twice about it to ask to be made immortal.

Reason is there's nothing that rightly equals the lonesomeness of growin' older after all your friends die off. Nobody to talk to, lessn it's little tots, because the grown-ups don't want to hear about the good old days, and they don't want to take you with 'em social.

I've seen a few, where somebody slipped up and their cards didn't come out. They just kept right on livin', more and more lonesome each day. Mostly when I went after 'em, they was so glad to see me they cried and reached out their hands. No, there's nothin' much worse, I reckon, and I didn't expect Miss Lucy to ask it.

I pointed out the drawbacks, and she says, "But I don't want to grow any older. I'm at a nice age. Any attention I get now is from persons what are interested in me in the large sense, not in the narrower sense which causes young men and boys to cluster around women. No, old man, my proposal is that I stay at about this age forever."

"Miss Lucy," I says, "I won't do it."

"Very well," she answered. "Kill me, then. For I won't give you the envelope, otherwise."

"Tell you what I will do, though," I says. "You give me your word you won't touch that envelope, and I'll prove to you that you don't want to be immortal."

"I'll give you my word," she says, "but you can't prove that, I'm sure. Think of it, you funny old man! Think of watching the world march, and march! Think of being able to start a flower garden you're certain you can finish! We don't really take much interest in the world and our opportunities to grow, because we know everything ends in death. That knowledge fills our lives with frenzy, a frantic rushing through as many experiences as possible before the inevitable end. With immortality I could relax, and learn to live, and that is the sum of all knowledge, I think."

"But after a hundred years, Miss Lucy, all your friends will be dead, and every place the faces will be strange. You'll be lonesome as all get out. You won't like it. I know."

"I'm willing to chance it," she says. "A person could learn to live with grace, and beauty, if he could spend eternity at it. Aside from that, I have nothing to lose. Your arguments don't frighten me. I have no relatives, and I had only one friend. Strange faces, old man? I'll learn to know them."

"I'll show you, ma'am," I says, and went away.

I checked with the main office on Miss Lucy Walburn. She told me the truth. She's all by herself, except for her bird, and she's got nobody she's close to but a little girl next door, about five. She is a little curly-haired tyke who calls on Miss Lucy every day, and they play house. And Miss Lucy buys her a new dress now and then, or a hair ribbon.

She's got practically nothing to live for, you might say, and yet she wants to live forever. Me, I got to stop that, not only for her sake, but for mine. Oh, I could get away with it, but it would cause trouble, especially if Miss Lucy should get herself famous later on.

On top of that, I got to get that envelope destroyed, no

matter what. That's one thing the front office is really touchy about, immortality bein' solved by man.

So I got blank requisitions for the little girl and her family. And I got some help from another department, to wither up her flowers and kill her grass and trees.

I kept busy on routine for a few days, waitin' for all the green things on her place to die. Then I sent an assistant after the little girl, and told him to take the canary in passin'.

I got out to her house a little later, and I must say the fire and pestilence department was literal-minded about the trees and flowers. People drivin' by in cars would stop and look at Miss Lucy's place for a while, then drive on shakin' their heads.

I started to knock, as I was the insurance man again, but I waited when I heard her little song. She had just found out her bird was dead. In the bustle about the little girl, I guess she had overlooked it till then. From the way it sounded, she was tryin' to make him sing again.

Well, I guess I've heard about all the music there is, from the early chantin' right up to date. But even the heavenly choir, back in the beginnin' when it still had zip, never sung like that, like Miss Lucy to her dead canary.

After a while, I knocked.

She came to the door, and her eyes were big and solemn gray. But she wasn't cryin', though I could see down deep to the scars left by the flowers, and the fresher scars. She just opened the door without a word, and showed me to a chair.

After a long time, I broke the quiet. "Miss Lucy," I says. "You can see, now, how it would be."

She studied on this. Then she looked at me like I was a spoiled egg she had just popped in a frying pan.

"You cheated," she says. "You tried to trick me. God help me, I almost didn't see through it. I can see how it would be, you say. Indeed! How can I see? I am mortal still. How can I tell what my reactions would be if I were eternal?"

"I don't get you, ma'am," I says.

"Really! Can I say," she asks, "what I would do if I were somebody else? Obviously I cannot, for I am not that person. These events which you have caused in the past few days have hurt me deeply, I'll admit. But they hurt because I am adjusted to the slow process of dying. Like every mortal, I feel a sharp sense of loss when someone dear to me is cut down by the insensate sword of time. We know, with a dull and dread certainty, that we cannot replace them. We have so little time!"

"Well—"

"But," she cuts in, "if we knew that the resistless creep of death was stopped, if your advance was blocked, how would we feel? I cannot say certainly, for I do not have that knowledge, but I mean to have it, old man, I mean to have it!"

"Miss Lucy, you're askin' for eternal heartbreak, and I don't like it, a nice lady like you! I won't give it to you."

She opens her hands and puts them hard against her cheeks.

"Then kill me, for Heaven's sake! Kill me and get it over. You will get no envelope from me, except by paying for it."

I didn't say anything for a while, thinkin' about all the people who would have to be taken before their time at the bank, and tryin' to figure some way to avoid it.

Then I says, "I got one more thing to show you, Miss Lucy. If it proves what I say about immortality, will you tear up the envelope?"

"If it's proof, yes."

"And if you still want it after that, Miss Lucy, I'll make a trade with you. Eternal life to destroy the secret."

As I was goin' away, I saw one of my apprentices comin', the one that made the clock and started all the trouble.

"Wait a minute, son," I calls as he turns into Miss Lucy's. "Where you goin'?"

"Oh, hello, chief," he says. "I didn't recognize you. Oh, this is just a routine call." He looks at the card. "Lucy Walburn, spinster, forty-six, at this address. No need to bother you with it."

"Let me see that card, son. When did it come out?"

"Just a few minutes ago."

I took the card. "You run along and tend to your knittin', boy," I says. "I'll handle this one."

Can't say I relished it much, bein' rushed for time that way. But even as I hurried off after Finklestein, I was thinkin' how lucky I was to be there when Miss Lucy was sent for. A body can't think of everything, and that was one I'd overlooked. Course, I'd be a little late in accountin' for her, but with the whole staff overworkin' in Europe it would be understandable.

Anyway, I had her card and was sure she'd be there when I brought Finklestein to see her. If he'd do it, of course.

Can't say I was ever rightly comfortable around him. Not that he wasn't nice to me. After that one time he broke

down, takin' on something terrible, he never asked me again to take him. That was about five hundred years after the curse was put on him, and he hadn't yet got the feel, you might say, of eternity.

No, after that we got along all right. Not friends, of course. I kept my distance. But I did a couple of favors for him, about wives, and I guess he hadn't called me a clumsy old fool for several centuries.

As I say, though, I never did feel right around him. It was better after he got the dark glasses, but still there was something about him. Maybe it was because he made me see how *necessary* my job is, and what a responsibility I got.

He had a tailor shop again, and I told him what I wanted him to do. He put on a hat and locked the door, and we went back to Miss Lucy's.

"This is Mr. Finklestein," I says.

"Sit down, gentlemen," Miss Lucy says. "If the light is too strong for your eyes, Mr. Finklestein, I can draw the shades."

"I wear these glasses for another reason," he says. "Miss Walburn, do you know who I am?"

Miss Lucy studies him. "No," she says, "I've never seen you before. You might be any moderately successful businessman, well preserved and healthy. But . . . there *is* something about your mouth. It's—well, bitter."

"And well it may be," he says, quietlike.

Miss Lucy puts her hand to her mouth. "Finklestein. You're not—"

He nods his head. "I am."

She begins to feel that thing in Finklestein that makes you uncomfortable. Her hands are tight shut, but her jaw is still set, and she waits for him to say something.

"I understand," he says, "that you have heard all the conventional arguments against immortality."

"Yes," she answers.

"I won't repeat them, then. I can only tell you this. If you become immortal, you cease to live, in the psychological sense, before many centuries have passed."

"Rubbish," says Miss Lucy.

"Not so, Miss Walburn. Consider this. The creed of man in general is that life is merely preparation for something beyond. His whole existence is based on the certainty of death and consequent existence on another plane. That is why he endures pain and sorrow, hardship and disappointment, to fit

himself better for that next life. That is why he does not take his own life, for by the taking of it he cuts short that necessary training period." He looked at me. "Isn't that true?"

"Well," I says, "there are some things I can't tell you. But I'm agin' suicide."

"And for what other reason?" Finklestein says. "Very well, consider what happens when that entire philosophy is blasted by immortality. You are unable to die, and, therefore, have no reason to live."

"I don't believe you," Miss Lucy says. "Oh, I don't doubt that it has affected you that way, Mr. Finklestein, and I sympathize with you. But you must remember that you began with handicaps which I don't have. In the first place, you are of a persecuted race and have seen that persecution flare up now and then. That alone would give you a twisted perspective, would prevent your thinking—living—on a broad psychological base. No reason to live, you say? What better reason than to watch the world grow, and advance?"

"Advance?" says Finklestein. "You will see only repetitions of cycles that began with Columbus. Men will pioneer other planets, set up new civilizations which will come under the domination of a few and enslave the majority. When these are overcrowded with labor because of technological progress, they will pioneer yet new planets and set up civilizations which will duplicate what we have now. And so on through eternity. The novelty wears thin, I assure you."

Miss Lucy stood up and looked at us. "When I asked for immortality," she says, "I had given the problem little thought. It was a spur-of-the-moment request. But, after thinking on it, I believe the advantage of being able to grow forever, in the psychological sense, outweighs the disadvantages of loss of friends, boredom, and the vicious circle you so blackly draw. Furthermore, there is one argument you can't answer. If you can, I shall accede to the old man's wish. I'll tear up the envelope and live my life to its normal end."

I fingered her card, then. She was already overdue.

"If you can't answer it, however," she goes on, "I shall insist on eternal life—on my terms. I have the power to do so, or demand that I die now. My point is this: neither you nor anybody else can say how I would react to certainty of life forever. I can't even guess how I would behave, for my whole psychology is geared to dying. I have been dying, as all men have, since I drew my first breath. That knowledge

governs my attitude toward life. But if I were immortal, I believe that I should maintain a growing interest in life forever, and I do not think that you can shake that belief. You have reacted in the manner you described, but you are not I. You cannot say how I would react."

Finklestein studied on this for a while. Then he got to his feet, too, and stood facing Miss Lucy. They didn't move for maybe half a minute. Finally, Finklestein reaches for his glasses.

"I have one argument left," he says. "Look!"

And he takes off his dark glasses.

Well, it shakes Miss Lucy, that look in his eyes. Nineteen centuries of bitterness is there for her to see. She turns white, bites her lip, and looks away.

Finklestein put on his glasses, nodded at me, and went out.

I waited for Miss Lucy to speak, waited quite awhile before she looked up from the floor.

"But he isn't Lucy Walburn!" she cries. "It wouldn't do that to me . . . would it?"

I can't answer that one.

"Still," she says, thoughtful, "it might, it might. So, therefore . . . I want your assurance that if I ever want to die, if I find life no longer desirable, if it becomes unendurable—I want your promise that you will kill me, for I will not let time do that to my eyes."

"You're just naturally bound to try it, ma'am?"

"Yes," she says.

"All right, I promise. The front office won't like this," I says, and tears up her card.

She watches the scraps fall to the floor, like I watch the pieces of the envelope a little later at the bank.

She was in a lot worse way than you, Paul Roberts. You've tried to take your own life for reasons that seem good to you, but they don't compare with hers. She didn't have nothing, but she not only wanted to keep on livin', she wanted to live forever.

You're comin' out of it now, so I'm takin' my scythe and goin' about my business. You think on it tomorrow, and you'll see that Miss Lucy had a lot of nerve. She knew what she was runnin' up against, and sometimes it's a lot harder to keep goin' when you know what's comin' than if you don't.

Like you. You don't know what life's got in store for you, but you can bet it'll be something. It always has been.

Paul Roberts spoke: "What happened to her? How long did she last?"

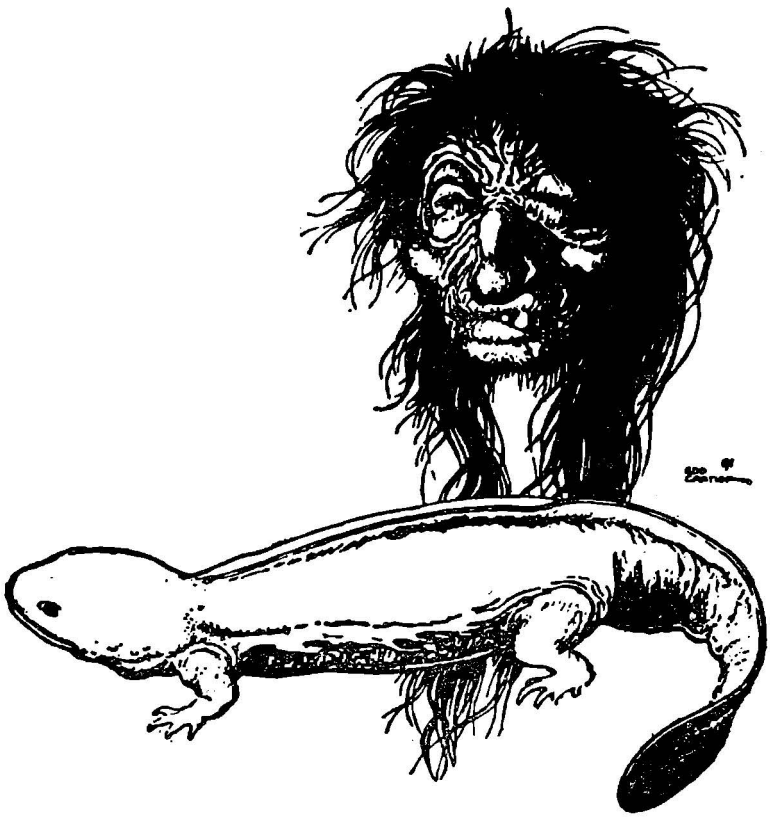
"She's still goin' strong, son," Death replied. "And that was three thousand years ago."

THE HAG SELEEN

* *Theodore Sturgeon*

When it appeared in *Unknown Worlds* (December, 1942), this story was listed as "by Theodore Sturgeon and James H. Beard." All the same, it's a Sturgeon story—Beard, who collaborated sometimes with Sturgeon on other pieces, supplied the background information for this one, and Sturgeon did the writing. And you can tell it, all right: who else could convey a sense of tenderness and the bright fire of childhood in a story rooted in slime and foulness?

(For *Mad* Magazine readers: the mud puppy in the illustration is what an axolotl grows up to be. Now you know. Are you any happier?)



IT WAS WHILE WE WERE FISHING ONE AFTERNOON, PATTY AND I, that we first met our friend the River Spider. Patty was my daughter and Anjy's. Tacitly, that is. Figuratively she had originated in some hot corner of hell and had left there with such incredible violence that she had taken half of heaven with her along her trajectory and brought it with her.

I was sprawled in the canoe with the nape of my neck on the conveniently curved cedar stern piece of the canoe, with a book of short stories in my hands and my fish pole tucked under my armpit. The only muscular energy required to fish that way is in moving the eyes from the page to the float and back again, and I'd have been magnificently annoyed if I'd had a bite. Patty was far more honest about it; she was fast asleep in the bilges. The gentlest of currents kept my mooring line just less than taut between the canoe and a half-sunken snag in the middle of the bayou. Louisiana heat

and swampland mosquitoes tried casually to annoy me, and casually I ignored them both.

There was a sudden thump on the canoe and I sat upright just as a slimy black something rose out of the muddy depths. It came swiftly until the bow of the canoe rested on it, and then more slowly. My end of the slender craft sank and a small cascade of blood-warm water rushed on, and down, my neck. Patty raised her head with a whimper; if she moved suddenly I knew the canoe would roll over and dump us into the bayou. "Don't move!" I gasped.

She turned puzzled young eyes on me, astonished to find herself looking downward. "Why, daddy?" she asked, and sat up. So the canoe did roll over and it did dump us into the bayou.

I came up strangling, hysterical revulsion numbing my feet and legs where they had plunged into the soft ooze at the bottom. "Patty!" I screamed hoarsely.

She popped up beside me, trod water while she knuckled her eyes. "I thought we wasn't allowed to swim in the bayou, daddy," she said.

I cast about me. Both banks presented gnarled roots buried in rich green swamp growth, and I knew that the mud there was deep and sticky and soft. I knew that that kind of mud clutches and smothers. I knew that wherever we could find a handhold we could also find cottonmouth moccasins. So I knew that we had to get into our canoe again, but fast!

Turning, I saw it, one end sunken, the other high in the air, one thwart fouled in the black tentacles of the thing that had risen under us. It was black and knotted and it dripped slime down on us, and for one freezing second I thought it was alive. It bobbed ever so slowly, sluggishly, in the disturbed water. It was like breathing. But it made no further passes at us. I told Patty to stay where she was and swam over to what I could reach of the canoe and tugged. The spur that held it came away rottenly and the canoe splashed down, gunwale first, and slowly righted itself half full of water. I heard a shriek of insane laughter from somewhere in the swamp but paid no attention. I could attend to that later.

We clung to the gunwales while I tried to think of a way out. Patty kept looking up and down the bayou as if she thought she hadn't enough eyes. "What are you looking for, Patty?"

"Alligators," she said.

Yeah, I mused, that's a thought. We've got to get out of

here! I felt as if I were being watched and looked quickly over my shoulder. Before my eyes could focus on it, something ducked behind a bush on the bank. The bush waved its fronds at me in the still air. I looked back at Patty—

"Patty! Look out!"

The twisted black thing that had upset us was coming down, moving faster as it came, and as I shrieked my warning its tangled mass came down on the child. She yelped and went under, fighting the slippery fingers.

I lunged toward her. "Patty!" I screamed. "Pat—"

The bayou bubbled where she had been. I dived, wrenching at the filthy thing that had caught her. Later—it seemed like minutes later, but it couldn't have been more than five seconds—my frantic hand closed on her arm. I thrust the imprisoning filth back, hauled her free, and we broke surface. Patty, thank Heaven, remained perfectly still with her arms as far around me as they would go. Lord knows what might have happened if she had struggled.

We heard the roar of a bull alligator and that was about all we needed. We struck out for the bank, clawed at it. Fortunately Patty's hands fell on a root, and she scuttled up it like a little wet ape. I wasn't so lucky—it was fetid black mud that I floundered through. We lay gasping, at last on solid ground.

"Mother's gonna be mad," said Patty after a time.

"Mother's going to gnash her teeth and froth at the mouth," I said with a good deal more accuracy. We looked at each other and one of the child's eyes closed in an eloquent wink. "Oh, yeah," I said, "and how did we lose the canoe?"

Patty thought hard. "We were paddling along an' a big fella scared you with a gun and stoled our canoe."

"How you talk! I wouldn't be scared!"

"Oh, *yes* you would," she said with conviction.

I repressed an unpaternal impulse to throw her back into the bayou. "That won't do. Mother would be afraid to have a man with a gun stompin' around the bayou. Here it is. We saw some flowers and got out to pick them for mother. When we came back we found the canoe had drifted out into the bayou, and we knew she wouldn't want us to swim after it, so we walked home."

She entered into it with a will. "Silly of us, wasn't it?" she asked.

"Sure was," I said. "Now get those dungarees off so's I can wash the mud out of 'em."

A sun suit for Patty and bathing trunks for me were our

household garb; when we went out for the afternoon we pulled on blue denim shirts and slacks over them to ward off the venomous mosquitoes. We stripped off the dungarees and I searched the bank and found a root broad enough for me to squat on while I rinsed off the worst of the filth we had picked up in our scramble up the bank. Patty made herself comfortable on a bed of dry Spanish moss that she tore out of the trees. As I worked, a movement in midstream caught my eye. A black tentacle poked up out of the water, and, steadily then, the slimy branches of the thing that had foundered us came sloshing into the mottled sunlight. It was a horrible sight, the horror of which was completely dispelled by the sight of the sleek green flank of the canoe which bobbed up beside it.

I ran back up my root, tossed the wet clothes on a convenient branch, broke a long stick off a dead tree and reached out over the water. I could just reach one end of the canoe. Slowly I maneuvered it away from its black captor and pulled it to me. I went into mud up to my knees in the process but managed to reach it; and then it was but the work of a moment to beach it, empty out the water and set it safely with its stern on the bank. Then I pegged out our clothes in a patch of hot sunlight and went back to Patty.

She was lying on her back with her hands on her eyes, shielding them from the light. Apparently she had not seen me rescue the canoe. I glanced at it and just then saw the slimy mass in mid-bayou start sinking again.

"Daddy," she said drowsily, "what was that awful thing that sinked us?"

"What they call a sawyer," I said. "It's the waterlogged butt of a cypress tree. The bottom is heavy and the top is light, and when the roots catch in something on the bottom the current pushes the top under. Then one of the branches rots and falls off, and the top end gets light again and floats up. Then the current will push it down again. It'll keep that up for weeks."

"Oh," she said. After a long, thoughtful pause she said, "Daddy—"

"What?"

"Cover me up." I grinned and tore down masses of moss with which I buried her. Her sleepy sigh sounded from under the pile. I lay down in the shade close by, switching lazily at mosquitoes.

I must have dozed for a while. I woke with a start,

fumbling through my mind for the thing that had disturbed me. My first glance was at the pile of moss; all seemed well there. I turned my head. About eight inches from my face was a pair of feet.

I stared at them. They were bare and horny and incredibly scarred. Flat, too—splayed. The third toe of each foot was ever so much longer than any of the others. They were filthy. Attached to the feet was a scrawny pair of ankles; the rest was out of my range of vision. I debated sleepily whether or not I had seen enough, suddenly realized that there was something not quite right about this, and bounced to my feet.

I found myself staring into the blazing eye of the most disgusting old hag that ever surpassed imagination. She looked like a Cartier illustration. Her one good eye was jaundiced and mad; long, slanted—feline. It wasn't until long afterward that I realized that her pupil was not round but slitted—not vertically like a cat's eyes, but horizontally. Her other eye looked like—well, I'd rather not say. It couldn't possibly have been of any use to her. Her nose would have been hooked if the tip were still on it. She was snaggle-toothed, and her fangs were orange. One shoulder was higher than the other, and the jagged lump on it spoke of a permanent dislocation. She had enough skin to adequately cover a sideshow fat lady, but she couldn't have weighed more than eighty pounds or so. I never saw great swinging wattles on a person's upper arms before. She was clad in a feathered jigsaw of bird and small animal skins. She was diseased and filthy and—and evil.

And she spoke to me in the most beautiful contralto voice I have ever heard.

"How you get away from River Spider?" she demanded.

"River Spider?"

She pointed, and I saw the sawyer rising slowly from the bayou. "Oh—that." I found that if I avoided that baleful eye I got my speech back. I controlled an impulse to yell at her, chase her away. If Patty woke up and saw that face—

"What's it to you?" I asked quietly, just managing to keep my voice steady.

"I send River Spider for you," she said in her Cajun accent.

"Why?" If I could mollify her—she was manifestly furious at something, and it seemed to be me—perhaps she'd go her way without waking the child.

"Because you mus' go!" she said. "This my countree. This

swamp belong Séleen. Séleen belong this swamp. Wan man make *p'tit cabane* in bayou, Séleen *l'enchante.* Man die far away, smash."

"You mean you haunted the man who had my cabin built and he died?" I grinned. "Don't be silly."

"Man is dead, no?"

I nodded. "That don't cut ice with me, old lady. Now look—we aren't hurting your old swamp. We'll get out of it, sure; but we'll go when we're good and ready. You leave us alone and we'll sure as hell"—I shuddered, looking at her—"leave you alone."

"You weel go *now—ce jour!*" She screamed the last words, and the pile of moss behind me rustled suddenly.

"I won't go today or tomorrow or next week," I snapped. I stepped toward her threateningly. "Now beat it!"

She crouched like an animal, her long crooked hands half raised. From behind me the moss moved briskly, and Patty's voice said, "Daddy, what . . . oh. *Ohh!*"

That does it, I said to myself, and lunged at the old woman with some crazy idea of shoving her out of the clearing. She leaped aside like a jackrabbit and I tripped and fell on my two fists, which dug into my solar plexus agonizingly. I lay there mooing "uh! uh! u-u-uh!" trying to get some wind into my lungs, and finally managed to get an elbow down and heave myself over on my side. I looked, and saw Séleen crouched beside Patty. The kid sat there, white as a corpse, rigid with terror, while the old nightmare crooned to her in her lovely voice.

"Ah! C'est une jolie jeune fille, ça! Ah, ma petite, ma fleur douce, Séleen t'aime, trop, trop—" and she put out her hand and stroked Patty's neck and shoulder.

When I saw the track of filth her hand left on the child's flesh, a white flame exploded in my head and dazzled me from inside. When I could see again I was standing beside Patty, the back of one hand aching and stinging; and Séleen was sprawled eight feet away, spitting out blood and yellow teeth and frightful curses.

"Go away." I whispered it because my throat was all choked up. "Get—out—of—here—before—I—kill you!"

She scrambled to her knees, her blazing eye filled with hate and terror, shook her fist and tottered swearing away into the heavy swamp growth.

When she had gone I slumped to the ground, drenched with sweat, cold outside, hot inside, weak as a newborn babe

from reaction. Patty crawled to me, dropped her head in my lap, pressed the back of my hand to her face and sobbed so violently that I was afraid she would hurt herself. I lifted my hand and stroked her hair. "It's all right, now, Patty—don't be a little dope, now—come on," I said more firmly, lifting her face by its pointed chin and holding it until she opened her eyes. "Who's Yehudi?"

She gulped bravely. "Wh-who?" she gasped.

"The little man who turns on the light in the refrigerator when you open the door," I said. "Let's go find out what's for dinner."

"I . . . I—" She puckered all up the way she used to do when she slept in a bassinet—what I used to call "baby's slow burn." And then she wailed the same way. "I don' want dinno-o-o!"

I thumped her on the back, picked her up and dropped her on top of her dungarees. "Put them pants on," I said, "and be a man." She did, but she cried quietly until I shook her and said gently, "Stop it now. I didn't carry on like that when I was a little girl." I got into my clothes and dumped her into the bow of the canoe and shoved off.

All the way back to the cabin I forced her to play one of our pet games. I would say something—anything—and she would try to say something that rhymed with it. Then it would be her turn. She had an extraordinary rhythmic sense, and an excellent ear.

I started off with "We'll go home and eat our dinners."

"An' Lord have mercy on us sinners," she cried. Then, "Let's see you find a rhyme for 'month'!"

"I bet I'll do it . . . jutht thith onth," I replied. "I guess I did it then, by cracky."

"Course you did, but then you're wacky. Top that, mister funny-lookin'!"

I pretended I couldn't, mainly because I couldn't, and she soundly kicked my shin as a penance. By the time we reached the cabin she was her usual self, and I found myself envying the resilience of youth. And she earned my undying respect by saying nothing to Anjy about the afternoon's events, even when Anjy looked us over and said, "Just look at you two filthy kids! What have you been doing—swimming in the bayou?"

"Daddy splashed me," said Patty promptly.

"And you had to splash him back. Why did he splash you?"

" 'Cause I spit mud through my teeth at him to make him mad," said my outrageous child.

"Patty!"

"Mea culpa," I said, hanging my head. " 'Twas I who spit the mud."

Anjy threw up her hands. "Heaven knows what sort of a woman Patty's going to grow up to be," she said, half angrily.

"A broad-minded and forgiving one like her lovely mother," I said quickly.

"Nice work, bud," said Patty.

Anjy laughed. "Outnumbered again. Come in and feed the face."

On my next trip into Minette I bought a sweet little S. & W. .38 and told Anjy it was for alligators. She was relieved.

I might have forgotten about the hag Séleen if it were not for the peculiar chain of incidents which had led to our being here. We had started with some vague idea of spending a couple of months in Natchez or New Orleans, but a gas station attendant had mentioned that there was a cabin in the swamps for rent very cheap down here. On investigation we found it not only unbelievably cheap, but deep in real taboo country. Not one of the natives, hardened swamp runners all, would go within a mile of it. It had been built on order for a very wealthy Northern gentleman who had never had a chance to use it, due to a swift argument he and his car had had one day when he turned out to pass a bridge. A drunken rice farmer told me that it was all the doing of the Witch of Minette, a semimythological local character who claimed possession of that corner of the country. I had my doubts, being a writer of voodoo stories and knowing therefore that witches and sech are nonsense.

After my encounter with Séleen I no longer doubted her authenticity as a horrid old nightmare responsible for the taboo. But she could rant, chant, and ha'nt from now till a week come Michaelmas—when *is* Michaelmas, anyway?—and never pry me loose from that cabin until I was ready to go. She'd have to fall back on enchantment to do it, too—of that I was quite, quite sure. I remembered her blazing eye as it had looked when I struck her, and I knew that she would never dare to come within my reach again. If she as much as came within my sight with her magics I had a little hocus-pocus of my own that I was sure was more powerful than anything she could dream up. I carried it strapped to my waist, in a holster, and while it couldn't call

up any ghosts, it was pretty good at manufacturing 'em.

As for Patty, she bounced resiliently away from the episode. Séleen she dubbed the Witch of Endor, and used her in her long and involved games as an archvillain in place of Frankenstein's monster, Adolf Hitler, or Miss McCauley, her schoolteacher. Many an afternoon I watched her from the hammock on the porch, cooking up dark plots in the witch's behalf and then foiling them in her own coldbloodedly childish way. Once or twice I had to put a stop to it, like the time I caught her hanging the Witch of Endor in effigy, the effigy being a rag doll, its poor throat cut with benefit of much red paint. Aside from these games she never mentioned Séleen, and I respected her for it. I saw to it that she didn't stray alone into the swamp and relaxed placidly into my role of watchful skeptic. It's nice to feel oneself superior to a credulous child.

Foolish, too. I didn't suspect a thing when Patty crept up behind me and hacked off a lock of my hair with my hunting knife. She startled me and I tumbled out of the hammock onto my ear as she scuttled off. I muttered imprecations at the little demon as I got back into the hammock, and then comforted myself by the reflection that I was lucky to have an ear to fall on—that knife was sharp.

A few minutes later Anjy came out to the porch. Anjy got herself that name because she likes to wear dresses with masses of tiny pleats and things high on her throat, and great big picture hats. So *ingenue* just naturally became Anjy. She is a beautiful woman with infinite faith and infinite patience, the proof of which being that: a—she married me and, b—she stayed married to me.

"Jon, what sort of crazy game is your child playing?" She always said "your child" when she was referring to something about Patty she didn't like.

"S'matter?"

"Why, she just whipped out that hog-sticker of yours and made off with a hank of my hair."

"No! Son of a gun! What's she doing—taking up barbering? She just did the same thing to me. Thought she was trying to scalp me and miscalculated, but I must have been wrong—she wouldn't miss twice in a row."

"Well, I want you to take that knife away from her," said Anjy. "It's dangerous."

I got out of the hammock and stretched. "Got to catch her first. Which way'd she go?"

After a protracted hunt I found Patty engaged in some

childish ritual of her own devising. She pushed something into a cleft at the foot of a tree, backed off a few feet, and spoke earnestly. Neither of us could hear a word she said. Then she backed still farther away and squatted down on her haunches, watching the hole at the foot of the tree carefully.

Anjy clasped her hands together nervously, opened her mouth. I put my hands over it. "Let me take care of it," I whispered, and went out.

"Whatcha doin', bud?" I called to Patty as I came up. She started violently and raised one finger to her lips. "Catchin' rabbits?" I asked as loudly as I could without shouting. She gestured me furiously away. I went and sat beside her.

"Please, daddy," she said, "I'm making a magic. It won't work if you stay here. Just this once—please!"

"Nuts," I said bluntly. "I chased all the magic away when I moved here."

She tried to be patient. "Will you *please* go away? Oh, daddy. Daddy, PLEASE!"

It was rough but I felt I had to do it. I lunged for her, swept her up, and carried her kicking and squalling back to the cabin. "Sorry, kiddo, but I don't like the sort of game you're playing. You ought to trust your dad."

I meant to leave her with Anjy while I went out to confiscate that bundle of hair. Not that I believe in such nonsense. But I'm the kind of unsuperstitious apple that won't walk under a ladder *just in case* there's something in the silly idea. But Patty really began to throw a whingding, and there was nothing for me to do but to stand by until it had run its course. Patty was a good-natured child, and only good-natured children can work themselves up into that kind of froth. She screamed and she bit, and she accused us of spoiling everything and we didn't love her and she wished she was dead and why couldn't we leave her alone—"Let me alone," she shrieked, diving under the double bed and far beyond our reach. "Take your *hands* off me!" she sobbed when she was ten feet away from us and moving fast. And then her screams became wordless and agonized when we cornered her in the kitchen. We had to be rough to hold her, and her hysteria was agony to us. It took more than an hour for her fury to run its course and leave her weeping weak apologies and protestations of love into her mother's arms. Me, I was bruised outside and in, but inside it hurt the worst. I felt like a heel.

I went out then to the tree. I reached in the cleft for the

hair but it was gone. My hand closed on something far larger, and I drew it out and stood up to look at it.

It was a toy canoe, perhaps nine inches long. It was an exquisite piece of work. It had apparently been carved painstakingly from a solid piece of cedar, so carefully that nowhere was the wood any more than an eighth of an inch thick. It was symmetrical and beautifully finished in brilliant colors. They looked to me like vegetable stains—dyes from the swamp plants that grew so riotously all around us. From stem to stern the gunwales were pierced, and three strips of brilliant bark had been laced and woven into the close-set holes. Inside the canoe were four wooden spurs projecting from the hull, the end of each having a hole drilled through it, apparently for the purpose of lashing something inside.

I puzzled over it for some minutes, turning it over and over in my hands, feeling its velvet smoothness, amazed by its metrical delicacy. Then I laid it carefully on the ground and regarded the mysterious tree.

Leafless branches told me it was dead. I got down on my knees and rummaged deep into the hole between the roots. I couldn't begin to touch the inside wall. I got up again, circled the tree. A low branch projected, growing sharply upward close to the trunk before it turned and spread outward. And around it were tiny scuff marks in the bark. I pulled myself up onto the branch, cast about for a handhold to go higher. There was none. Puzzled, I looked down—and there, completely hidden from the ground, was a gaping hole leading into the hollow trunk!

I thrust my head into it and then clutched the limb with both arms to keep from tottering out of the tree. For that hole reeked with the most sickly, noisome smell I had encountered since . . . since Patty and I—

Séleen!

I dropped to the ground and backed away from the tree. The whole world seemed in tune with my revulsion. What little breeze there had been had stopped, and the swampland was an impossible painting in which only I moved.

Never taking my eyes off the tree, I went back step by step, feeling behind me until my hand touched the wall of the cabin. My gaze still riveted to the dead hole of the tree, I felt along the wall until I came to the kitchen door. Reaching inside, I found my ax and raced back. The blade was keen and heavy, and the haft of it felt good to me. The wood was rotten, honeycombed, and the clean blade bit almost noiselessly into it. *Thunk!* How dare she, I thought.

What does she mean by coming so near us! *Thunk!* I prayed that the frightful old hag would try to fight, to flee, so that I could cut her down with many strokes. It was my first experience with the killer instinct and I found it good.

The sunlight faded out of the still air and left it hotter.

At the uppermost range of my vision I could see the trunk trembling with each stroke of the ax. Soon, now—soon! I grinned and my lips cracked; every other inch of my body was soaking wet. She who would fill Patty's clean young heart with her filthy doings! Four more strokes would do it; and then I remembered that skinny hand reaching out, touching Patty's flesh; and I went cold all over. I raised the ax and heard it hiss through the thick air; and my four strokes were one. Almost without resistance that mighty stroke swished into and through the shattered trunk. The hurtling ax head swung me around as the severed tree settled onto its stump. It fell, crushing its weight into the moist earth, levering itself over on its projecting root; and the thick bole slid toward me, turned from it as I was, off balance. It caught me on the thigh, kicking out at me like a sentient, vicious thing. I turned over and over in the air and landed squashily at the edge of the bayou. But I landed with my eyes on the tree, ready to crawl, if need be, after whatever left it.

Nothing left it. Nothing. There had been nothing there, then, but the stink of her foul body. I lay there weakly, weeping with pain and reaction. And when I looked up again I saw Séleen again—or perhaps it was a crazed vision. She stood on a knoll far up the bayou, and as I watched she doubled up with silent laughter. Then she straightened and lifted her arm; and, dangling from her fingers, I saw the tiny bundle of hair. She laughed again though I heard not a sound. I knew then that she had seen every bit of it—had stood there grinning at my frantic destruction of her accursed tree. I lunged toward her, but she was far away, and across the water; and at my movement she vanished into the swamp.

I dragged myself to my feet and limped toward the cabin. I had to pass the tree, and as I did the little canoe caught my eye. I tucked it under my arm and crept back to the cabin. I tripped on the top step of the porch and fell sprawling, and I hadn't strength to rise. My leg was an agony, and my head spun and spun.

Then I was inside and Anjy was sponging off my head, and she laughed half hysterically when I opened my eyes.

"Jon, Jon, beloved, what have you done? Who did this to you?"

"Who . . . heh!" I said weakly. "A damn fool, sweetheart. Me!" I got up and stood rockily. "How's Pat?"

"Sleeping," said Anjy. "Jon, what on earth is happening?"

"I don't know," I said slowly, and looked out through the window at the fallen tree. "Anjy, the kid took that hair she swiped and probably some of her own and poked it all into that tree I just cut down. It—seems important for me to get it back. Dunno why. It . . . anyway, I got out there as soon as we had Pat quieted, but the hair had disappeared in the meantime. All I found was this." I handed her the canoe.

She took it absently. "Pat told me her story. Of course it's just silly, but she says that for the past three days that tree has been talking to her. She says it sang to her and played with her. She's convinced it's a magic tree. She says it promised her a lovely present if she would poke three kinds of hair into a hole at the roots, but if she told anyone the magic wouldn't work." Anjy looked down at the little canoe and her forehead puckered. "Apparently it worked," she whispered.

I couldn't comment without saying something about Séleen, and I didn't want that on Anjy's mind, so I turned my back on her and stood looking out into the thick wet heat of the swamp.

Behind me I heard Patty stir, shriek with delight as she saw the canoe. "My present . . . my pretty present! It was a *real* magic!" And Anjy gave it to her.

I pushed down an impulse to stop her. As long as Séleen had the hair the harm was done.

Funny, how suddenly I stopped being a skeptic.

The silence of the swamp was shattered by a great cloud of birds—birds of every imaginable hue and size, screaming and cawing and chuckling and whirring frantically. They startled me and I watched them for many minutes before it dawned on me that they were all flying one way. The air grew heavier after they had gone. Anjy came and stood beside me.

I have never seen such rain, never dreamed of it. It thundered on the shingles, buckshotted the leaves of the trees, lashed the mirrored bayou and the ground alike, so that the swamp was but one vast brown steam of puckered mud.

Anjy clutched my arm. "Jon, I'm frightened!" I looked at

her and knew that it wasn't the rain that had whitened her lips, lit the fires of terror in her great eyes. "Something out there—*hates* us," she said simply.

I shook her off, threw a poncho over me. "Jon—you're not—"

"I got to," I gritted. I went to the door, hesitated, turned back and pressed the revolver into her hand. "I'll be all right," I said, and flung out into the storm. Anjy didn't try to stop me.

I knew I'd find the hag Séleen. I knew I'd find her unharmed by the storm, for was it not a thing of her own devising? And I knew I must reach her—quickly, before she used that bundle of hair. Why, and how did I know? Ask away. I'm still asking myself, and I have yet to find an answer.

I stumbled and floundered, keeping to the high ground, guided, I think, by my hate. After a screaming eternity I reached a freakish rocky knoll that thrust itself out of the swamp. It was cloven and cracked, full of passages and potholes; and from an opening high on one side I saw the guttering glare of firelight. I crept up the rough slope and peered within.

She crouched over the flames, holding something to her withered breast and crooning to it. The rock walls gathered her lovely, hateful voice and threw it to me clear and strong —to me and to the turgid bayou that seethed past the cleft's lower edge.

She froze as my eyes fell upon her, sensing my presence; but like many another animal she hadn't wit enough to look upward. In a moment she visibly shrugged off the idea, and she turned and slid and shambled down toward the bayou. Above her, concealed by the split rock, I followed her until we were both at the water's edge with only a four-foot stone rampart between us. I could have reached her easily then, but I didn't dare attack until I knew where she had hidden that bundle of hair.

The wind moaned, rose an octave. The rain came in knives instead of sheets. I flattened myself against the rock while Séleen shrank back into the shelter of the crevice. I will never know how long we were there, Séleen and I, separated by a few boulders, hate a tangible thing between us. I remember only a shrieking hell of wind and rubble, and then the impact of something wet and writhing and whimpering against me. It had come rolling and tumbling down the rocky slope and it lodged against me. I was filled

with horror until I realized that it sheltered me a little against the blast. I found the strength to turn and look at it finally. It was Patty.

I got her a little under me and stuck it out till the wind had done its work and was gone, and with it all the deafening noise—all but the rush of the bayou and Séleen's low chuckle.

"Daddy—" She was cut and battered. "I brought my little boat!" She held it up weakly.

"Yes, butch. Sure. That's dandy. Patty—what happened to mother?"

"She's back there," whimpered Patty. "The cabin sagged, like, an' began m-movin', an' then it just fell apart an' the bits all flew away. I couldn' find her so I came after you."

I lay still, not breathing. I think even my heart stopped for a little while.

Patty's whisper sounded almost happy. "'Daddy—I—hurt—all—over—"

Anjy was gone then. I took my hatred instead, embraced it and let it warm me and give me life and hope and strength the way she used to. I crawled up the rock and looked over. I could barely see the hag, but she was there. Something out in the bayou was following the rhythmic movement of her arms. Something evil, tentacled, black. Her twisted claws clutched a tiny canoe like the one she had left in the tree for Patty. And she sang:

"River Spider, black and strong,
Folks 'bout here have done me wrong.
Here's a gif' I send to you,
Got some work for you to do.

"If Anjy-woman miss the flood,
River Spider, drink her blood.
Little one was good to me,
Drown her quick and let her be.

"River Spider, Jon you know,
Kill that man, and—kill—him—slow!"

And Séleen bent and set the canoe on the foaming brown water. Our hair was tied inside it.

Everything happened fast then. I dived from my hiding place behind and above her, and as I did so I sensed that Patty had crept up beside me, and that she had seen and

heard it all. And some strange sense warned Séleen, for she looked over her crooked shoulder, saw me in midair, and leaped into the bayou. I had the terrified, malevolent gleam of her single eye full in my face, but I struck only hard rock, and for me even that baleful glow went out.

Patty sat cross-legged with my poor old head in her lap. It was such a gray morning that the wounds on her face and head looked black to me. I wasn't comfortable, because the dear child was rolling my head back and forth frantically in an effort to rouse me. The bones in my neck creaked as she did it and I knew they could hear it in Scranton, Pennsylvania. I transmitted a cautionary syllable but what she received was a regular houn'-dawg howl.

"Owoo! Pat—"

"Daddy! Oh, you're awake!" She mercifully stopped gyrating the world about my tattered ears.

"What happened?" I moaned, half sitting up. She was so delighted to see my head move that she scrambled out from under so that when the ache inside it pounded it back down, it landed stunningly on the rock.

"Daddy darling, I'm sorry. But you got to stop layin' around like that. It's time to get up!"

"Uh. How you know?"

"I'm hungry, that's how, so there."

I managed to sit up this time. I began to remember things and they hurt so much that the physical pain didn't matter any more. "Patty! We've got to get back to the cabin!"

She puckered up. I tried to grin at her and she tried to grin back, and there is no more tragedy left in the world for me after having seen that. I did a sort of upward totter and got what was left of my feet and legs under me. Both of us were a mess, but we could navigate.

We threaded our way back over a new, wrecked landscape. It was mostly climbing and crawling and once when Patty slipped and I reached for her I knocked the little canoe out of her hand. She actually broke and ran to pick it up. "Daddy! You got to be careful of this!"

I groaned. It was the last thing in the world I ever wanted to see. But then—Anjy had said that she should have it. And when she next dropped it I picked it up and handed it back to her. And then snatched it again.

"Patty! What's this?" I pointed to the little craft's cargo: a tiny bundle of hair.

"That's the little bag from the tree, silly."

"But how . . . where . . . I thought—"

"I made a magic, she said with finality. "Now please, daddy, don't stand here and talk. We have to get back to . . . y-you know."

If you don't mind, I won't go into detail about how we dragged trees and rubbish away to find what was left of our cabin, and how we came upon the pathetic little heap of shingles and screening and furniture and how, wedged in the firm angle of two mortised two-by-fours, we found Anjy. What I felt when I lifted her limp body away from the rubble, when I kissed her pale lips—that is mine to remember. And what I felt when those lips returned my kiss—oh, so faintly and so tenderly—that, too, is mine.

We rested, the three of us, for five days. I found part of our store of canned goods and a fishing line, though I'm sorry now that we ate any of the fish, after what happened. And when the delirium was over, I got Patty's part of the story. I got it piecemeal, out of sequence, and only after the most profound cross-questioning. But the general drift was this:

She had indeed seen that strange performance in the rocky cleft by the bayou; but what is more, by her childish mysticism, she understood it. At least, her explanation is better than anything I could give. Patty was sure that the River Spider that had attacked us that time in the bayou was sent by Séleen, to whom she always referred as the Witch of Endor. "She did it before, daddy, I jus' betcha. But she didn't have anythin' strong enough for to put on the canoe." I have no idea what she did use—flies, perhaps, or frogs or cray-fish. "She hadda have some part of us to make the magic, an' she made me get it for her. She was goin' to put that li'l' ol' hair ball in a canoe, an' if a River Spider caught it then the Spider would get us, too."

When I made that crazed leap for the old woman she had nowhere to go but into the bayou. Pat watched neither of us. She watched the canoe. She always claimed that she hooked it to shore with a stick, but I have a hunch that the little idiot plunged in after it. "They was one o' those big black sawyer things right there," she said, "an' it almos' catched the canoe. I had a lot of trouble." I'll bet she did.

"You know," she said pensively, "I was mad at that ol' Witch of Endor. That was a mean thing she tried to do to us. So I did the same thing to her. I catched the ugliest thing I could find—all crawly and nasty an' bad like the Witch of Endor. I found a nice horrid one, too, you betcha. An' I tied

him into my canoe with your shoelaces, daddy. You di'n' say not to. An' I singed to it:

"Ol' Witch of Endor is your name,
An' you an' Witchie is the same;
Don't think it's a game."

She showed me later what sort of creature she had caught for her little voodoo boat. Some call it a mud puppy and some call it a hellbender, but it is without doubt the homeliest thing ever created. It is a sort of aquatic salamander, anywhere from three inches to a foot and a half in length. It has a porous, tubercular skin with two lateral streamers of skin on each side; and these are always ragged and torn. The creature always looks as if it is badly hurt. It has almost infinitesimal fingered legs, and its black shoe-button eyes are smaller than the head of a hatpin. For the hag Séleen there could be no better substitute.

"Then," said Patty complacently, "I singed that song the way the Witch of Endor did:

"River Spider, black an' strong,
Folks 'bout here have done me wrong.
Here's a gif' I send to you,
Got some work for you to do."

"The rest of the verse was silly," said Pat, "but I had to think real fast for a rhyme for 'Witch of Endor' an' I used the first thing that I could think of quicklike. It was somepin I read on your letters, daddy, an' it was silly."

And that's all she would say for the time being. But I do remember the time she called me quietly down to the bayou and pointed out a sawyer to me, because it was the day before Carson came in a power launch from Minette to see if we had survived the hurricane; and Carson came six days after the big blow. Patty made absolutely sure that her mother was out of hearing, and then drew me by the hand down to the water's edge. "Daddy," she said, "we got to keep this from mother on account of it would upset her," and she pointed.

Three or four black twisted branches showed on the water, and as I watched they began to rise. A huge sawyer, the biggest I'd ever seen, reared up and up—and tangled in its coils was a . . . a *something.*

Séleen had not fared well, tangled in the whips of the

River Spider under water for five days, in the company of all those little minnows and crawfish.

Patty regarded it critically while my stomach looped itself around violently and finally lodged between my spine and the skin of my back. "She ain't pretty a-*tall*!" said my darling daughter. "She's even homelier'n a mud puppy, I betcha."

As we walked back toward the lean-to we had built, she prattled on in this fashion: "Y'know, daddy, that was a real magic. I thought my verse was a silly one but I guess it worked out right after all. Will you laugh if I tell you what it was?"

I said I did not feel like laughing.

"Well," said Patty shyly, "I said:

> "Spider, kill the Witch of Endor.
> If five days lapse, return to sender."

That's my daughter.

HELL IS FOREVER

* *Alfred Bester*

One thing about *Unknown*, you got your money's worth—whether for the twenty cents the magazine started at, or the quarter it finally went to. Each issue had one huge novel, plus a bunch of short stories. This book is only slightly longer than a late issue of *Unknown* (but represents the cream of the crop, remember). Most of the novels were written by regulars—Ron Hubbard, de Camp and Pratt, Cleve Cartmill—but, every so often, a newcomer would newcome, and, as often as not, knock the readers sideways. One such was Alfred Bester, who, close to ten years before stunning science-fiction readers with *The Demolished Man*, turned out this complex and chilling fantasy.

Round and round the shutter'd Square
I stroll'd with the Devil's arm in mine.
No sound but the scrape of his hoofs was there
And the ring of his laughter and mine.
We had drunk black wine.

I screamed, "I will race you, Master!"
"What matter," he shriek'd, "tonight
Which of us runs the faster?
There is nothing to fear tonight
In the foul moon's light!"

Then I look'd him in the eyes,
And I laughed full shrill at the lie he told
And the gnawing fear he would fain disguise.
It was true, what I'd time and again been told
He was old—old.

From "Fungoids," by Enoch *Soames*

THERE WERE SIX OF THEM AND THEY HAD TRIED EVERYTHING. They began with drinking and drank until they had exhausted the sense of taste. Wines—Amontillado, Beaune, Kirschwasser, Bordeaux, Hock, Burgundy, Medoc and Chambertin; whiskey, Scotch, Irish, usquebaugh and Schnapps; brandy, gin and rum. They drank them separately and together; they mixed the tart alcohols and flavors into stupendous punches, into a thousand symphonies of taste; they experimented, created, invented, destroyed—and finally they were bored.

Drugs followed. The milder first, then the more potent. Crisp brown licoricelike opium, toasted and rolled into pellets for smoking in long ivory pipes: thick green absinthe sipped bitter and strong, without sugar or water; heroin and cocaine in rustling snow crystals: marijuana rolled loosely in brown-paper cigarettes; hashish in milk-white curds to be eaten or tarry plugs of Bhang that were chewed and

stained the lips deep tan—and again they were bored.

Their search for sensation became frantic with so much of their senses already dissipated. They enlarged their parties and turned them into festivals of horror. Exotic dancers and esoteric half-human creatures crowded the broad low room and filled it with their incredible performances. Pain, fear, desire, love and hatred were torn apart and exhibited to the least quivering detail like so many laboratory specimens.

The cloying odor of perfume mingled with the knife-sharp sweat of excited bodies; the anguished screams of tortured creatures merely interrupted their swift, never-ceasing talk—and so in time this, too, palled. They reduced their parties to the original six and returned each week to sit, bored and still hungry for new sensations. Now, languidly and without enthusiasm, they were toying with the occult; turning the party room into a necromancer's studio.

Offhand you would not have thought it was a bomb shelter. The room was large and square, the walls paneled with imitation-grained soundproofing, the ceiling low-beamed. To the right was an inset door, heavy and bolted with an enormous wrought-iron lock. There were no windows, but the air-conditioning inlets were shaped like the arched slits of a Gothic monastery. Lady Sutton had paned them with stained glass and set small electric bulbs behind them. They threw showers of sullen color across the room.

The flooring was of ancient walnut, high polished and gleaming like metal. Across it were spread a score of lustrous Oriental scatter rugs. One enormous divan, covered with Indian Batik, ran the width of the shelter against a wall. Above, were tiers of book shelves, and before it was a long trestle table piled with banquet remains. The rest of the shelter was furnished with deep, seductive chairs, soft, quilted and inviting.

Centuries ago this had been the deepest dungeon of Sutton Castle, hundreds of feet beneath the earth. Now—drained, warmed, air-conditioned and refurnished, it was the scene of Lady Sutton's sensation parties. More—it was the official meeting place of the Society of Six. The Six Decadents, they called themselves.

"We are the last spiritual descendants of Nero—the last of the gloriously evil aristocrats," Lady Sutton would say. "We were born centuries too late, my friends. In a world that is no longer ours we have nothing to live for but ourselves. We are a race apart—we six."

And when unprecedented bombings shook England so

catastrophically that the shudders even penetrated to the Sutton shelter, she would glance up and laugh: "Let them slaughter each other, those pigs. This is no war of ours. We go our own way, always, eh? Think, my friends, what a joy it would be to emerge from our shelter one bright morning and find all London dead—all the world dead—" And then she laughed again with her deep hoarse bellow.

She was bellowing now, her enormous fat body sprawled half across the divan like a decorated toad, laughing at the program that Digby Finchley had just handed her. It had been etched by Finchley himself—an exquisite design of devils and angels in grotesque amorous combat encircling the cabalistic lettering that read:

THE SIX PRESENT
ASTAROTH WAS A LADY
By Christian Braugh
Cast:
(In order of appearance)

A Necromancer ..... Christian Braugh
A Black Cat ..... Merlin
(By courtesy of Lady Sutton)
Astaroth ..... Theone Dubedat
Nebiros, an Assistant Demon ..... Digby Finchley
Costumes ..... Digby Finchley
Special Effects ..... Robert Peel
Music ..... Sidra Peel

Finchley said: "A little comedy *is* a change, isn't it?"

Lady Sutton shuddered with uncontrolled laughter. "Astaroth was a lady! Are you sure you wrote it, Chris?"

There was no answer from Braugh, only the buzz of preparations from the far end of the room, where a small stage had been erected and curtained off.

She bellowed in her broken bass: "Hey, Chris! Hey, there—"

The curtain split and Christian Braugh thrust his albino head through. His face was partially made up with red eyebrows and beard and dark-blue shadows around the eyes. He said: "Beg pardon, Lady Sutton?"

At the sight of his face she rolled over the divan like a mountain of jelly. Across her helpless body, Finchley smiled to Braugh, his lips unfolding in a cat's grin. Braugh moved his white head in imperceptible answer.

"I said, did you really write this, Chris . . . or have you hired a ghost again?"

Braugh looked angry, then suddenly disappeared behind the curtain.

"Oh my hat!" gurgled Lady Sutton. "This is better than a gallon of champagne. And, speaking of same . . . who's nearest the bubbly? Bob? Pour some more. Bob! Bob Peel!"

The man slumped in the chair alongside the ice buckets never moved. He was lying on the nape of his neck, feet thrust out in a V before him, his dress shirt buckled under his bearded chin. Finchley went across the room and looked down at him.

"Passed out," he said.

"So early? Well, no matter. Fetch me a glass, Dig, there's a good lad."

Finchley filled a prismed champagne glass and brought it to Lady Sutton. From a small, cameo-faced vial she added three drops of laudanum, swirled the sparkling mixture once and then sipped while she read the program.

"A Necromancer . . . that's you, eh, Dig?"

He nodded.

"And what's a Necromancer?"

"A kind of magician, Lady Sutton."

"Magician? Oh, that's good . . . that's very good!" She spilled champagne on her vast, blotchy bosom and dabbed ineffectually with the program.

Finchley lifted a hand to restrain her and said: "You ought to be careful with that program, Lady Sutton. I made only one print and then destroyed the plate. It's unique and liable to be valuable."

"Collector's item, eh? Your work, of course, Dig?"

"Yes."

"Not much of a change from the usual pornography, hey?" She burst into another thunder of laughter that degenerated into a fit of hacking coughs. She dropped the glass altogether. Finchley flushed, then retrieved the glass and returned it to the buffet, stepping carefully over Peel's legs. "And who's this Astaroth?" Lady Sutton went on.

From behind the curtain, Theone Dubedat called: "Me! I! *Ich! Moi!*" her voice was husky. It had a quality of gray smoke.

"Darling, I know it's you, but *what* are you?"

"A devil, I think."

Finchley said: "Astaroth is some sort of legendary arch-demon—a top-ranking devil, so to speak."

"Theone a devil? No doubt of it—" Exhausted with rapture, Lady Sutton lay quiescent and musing on the patterned divan. At last she raised an enormous arm and examined her watch. The flesh hung from her elbows in elephantine creases, and at the gesture it shook and a little shower of torn sequins glittered down from her sleeve.

"You'd best get on with it, Dig. I've got to leave at midnight."

"Leave?"

"You heard me."

Finchley's face contorted. He bent over her, tense with suppressed emotion, his bleak eyes examining her. "What's up? What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Then—"

"A few things have changed, that's all."

"What's changed?"

Her face turned harsh as she returned his stare. The bulging features seemed to stiffen into obsidian. "Too soon to tell you . . . but you'll find out quick enough. Now I don't want any more pestering from you, Dig, m'lad!"

Finchley's scarecrow features regained some measure of control. He started to speak, but before he could utter a word Sidra Peel suddenly popped her head out of the alcove alongside the stage, where the organ had been placed. She called: "Ro-bert!"

In a constricted voice Finchley said: "Bob's passed out again, Sidra."

She emerged from the alcove, walked jerkily across the room and stood looking down in her husband's face. Sidra Peel was short, slender and dark. Her body was like an electric high-tension wire, alive with too much current, yet coruscated, stained and rusted from too much exposure to passion. The deep black sockets of her eyes were frigid coals with gleaming white points. As she gazed at her husband, her long fingers writhed; then, suddenly, her hand lashed out and struck the inert face.

"Swine!" she hissed.

Lady Sutton laughed and coughed all at once. Sidra Peel shot her a venomous glance and stepped toward the divan, the sharp crack of her heel on the walnut sounding like a pistol shot. Finchley gestured a quick warning that stopped

her. She hesitated, then returned to the alcove and said: "The music's ready."

"And so am I," said Lady Sutton. "On with the show and all that, eh?" She spread herself across the divan like a crawling tumor the while Finchley propped scarlet pillows under her head. "It's really nice of you to play this little comedy for me, Dig. Too bad there're only six of us here tonight. Ought to have an audience, eh?"

"You're the only audience we want, Lady Sutton."

"Ah! Keep it all in the family?"

"So to speak."

"The Six—Happy Family of Hatred."

"That's not so, Lady Sutton."

"Don't be an ass, Dig. We're all hateful. We glory in it. I ought to know. I'm the Bookkeeper of Disgust. Some day I'll let you all see the entries. Some day soon."

"What sort of entries?"

"Curious already, eh? Oh, nothing spectacular. Just the way Sidra's been trying to kill her husband—and Bob's been torturing her by holding on. And you making a fortune out of filthy pictures and eating your rotten heart out for that frigid devil, Theone—"

"Please, Lady Sutton!"

"And Theone," she went on with relish, "using that icy body of hers like an executioner's scalpel to torture and . . . and Chris . . . How many of his books d'you think he's stolen from those poor Grub Street devils?"

"I couldn't say."

"I know. All of them. A fortune on other men's brains. Oh, we're a beautifully loathsome lot, Dig. It's the only thing we have to be proud of—the only thing that sets us off from the billion blundering moralistic idiots that have inherited our earth. That's why we've got to stay a happy family of mutual hatred."

"I should call it mutual admiration," Finchley murmured. He bowed courteously and went to the curtains, looking more like a scarecrow than ever in the black dinner clothes. He was extremely tall—three inches over six feet—and extremely thin. The pipestem arms and legs looked like warped dowel sticks, and his horsy flat features seemed to have been painted on a pasty pillow.

Finchley pulled the curtains together behind him. A moment after he disappeared there was a whispered cue and the lights dimmed. In the vast low room there was no sound except Lady Sutton's croupy breathing. Peel, still slumped in

his deep chair, was motionless and invisible except for the limp angle of his legs.

From infinite distances came a slight vibration—almost a shudder. It seemed at first to be a sinister reminder of the hell that was bursting across England, hundreds of feet over their heads. Then the shuddering quickened and by imperceptible stages swelled into the deepest tones of the organ. Above the background of the throbbing diapasons, a weird tremolo of fourths, empty and spine-chilling, cascaded down the keyboard in chromatic steps.

Lady Sutton chuckled faintly. "My word," she said, "that's really horrid, Sidra. Ghastly."

The grim background of music choked her. It filled the shelter with chilling tendrils of sound that were more moan than tone. The curtains slipped apart slowly, revealing Christian Braugh garbed in black, his face a hideous, twisted mass of red and purple-blue that contrasted starkly to the near-albino white hair. Braugh stood at the center of the stage surrounded by spider-legged tables piled high with Necromancer's apparatus. Prominent was Merlin, Lady Sutton's black cat, majestically poised atop an iron-bound volume.

Braugh lifted a piece of black chalk from a table and drew a circle on the floor twelve feet around himself. He inscribed the circumference with cabalistic characters and pentacles. Then he lifted a wafer and exhibited it with a flirt of his wrist.

"This," he declaimed in sepulchral tones, "is a sacred wafer stolen from a church at midnight."

Lady Sutton applauded satirically, but stopped almost at once. The music seemed to upset her. She moved uneasily on the divan and looked about her with little uncertain glances.

Muttering blasphemous imprecations, Braugh raised an iron dagger and plunged it through the center of the wafer. Then he arranged a copper chafing dish over a blue alcohol flame and began to stir in powders and crystals of bright colors. He lifted a crystal vial filled with purple liquid and poured the contents into a porcelain bowl. There was a faint detonation and a thick cloud of vapor lifted to the ceiling.

The organ surged. Braugh muttered incantations under his breath and performed oddly suggestive gestures. The shelter swam with scents and mists, violet clouds and deep fogs. Lady Sutton glanced toward the chair across from her.

"Splendid, Bob," she called. "Wonderful effects—really." She tried to make her voice cheerful, but it came out in a sickly croak. Peel never moved.

With a savage motion, Braugh pulled three black hairs from the cat's tail. Merlin uttered a yowl of rage, and sprang at the same time from the table to the top of an inlaid cabinet in the background. Through the mists and vapors his giant yellow eyes gleamed balefully. The hairs went into the chafing dish and a new aroma filled the room. In quick succession the claws of an owl, the powder of vipers, and a human-shaped mandrake root followed.

"Now!" cried Braugh.

He cast the wafer, transfixed by the dagger, into the porcelain bowl containing the purple fluid, and then poured the whole mixture into the copper chafing dish.

There was a violent explosion.

A jet-black cloud enfolded the stage and swirled out into the shelter. Slowly it cleared away, faintly revealing the tall form of a naked devil; the body exquisitely formed, the head a frightful mask. Braugh had disappeared.

Through the drifting clouds, in the husky tones of Theone Dubedat, the devil spoke: "Greetings, Lady Sutton—"

She stepped forward out of the vapor. In the pulsating light that shot down to the stage her body shone with a shimmering nacreous glow of its own. The toes and fingers were long and graceful. Color slashed across the rounded torso. Yet that whole perfect body was cold and lifeless—as unreal as the grotesque papier-mâché that covered her head.

Theone repeated: "Greetings—"

"Hi, old thing!" Lady Sutton interrupted. "How's everything in hell?"

There was a giggle from the alcove where Sidra Peel was playing softly. Theone posed statuesquely and lifted her head a little higher to speak. "I bring you—"

"Darling!" shrieked Lady Sutton, "why didn't you let me know it was going to be like this. I'd have sold tickets!"

Theone raised a gleaming arm imperiously. Again she began: "I bring you the thanks of the five who—" And then abruptly she stopped.

For the space of five heartbeats there was a gasping pause while the organ murmured and the last of the black smoke filtered away, mushrooming against the ceiling. In the silence Theone's rapid, choked breathing mounted hysterically—then came a ghastly, piercing scream.

The others darted from behind the stage, exclaiming in as-

tonishment—Braugh, Necromancer's costume thrown over his arm, his make-up removed; Finchley like a pair of animated scissors in black habit and cowl, a script in his hand. The organ stuttered, then stopped with a crash, and Sidra Peel burst out of the alcove.

Theone tried to scream again, but her voice caught and broke. In the appalled silence Lady Sutton cried: "What is it? Something wrong?"

Theone uttered a moaning sound and pointed to the center of the stage. "Look— There—" The words came off the top of her throat like the squeal of nails on slate. She cowered back against a table upsetting the apparatus. It clashed and tinkled.

"What is it? For the love of—"

"It worked—" Theone moaned. "The r-ritual—It worked!"

They stared through the gloom, then started. An enormous sable Thing was slowly rising in the center of the Necromancer's circle—a vague, morphous form towering high, emitting a dull, hissing sound like the whisper of a caldron.

"Who is that?" Lady Sutton shouted.

The Thing pushed forward like some sickly extrusion. When it reached the edge of the black circle it halted. The seething sounds swelled ominously.

"It is one of us?" Lady Sutton cried. "Is this a stupid trick? Finchley . . . Braugh—"

They shot her startled glances, bleak with terror.

"Sidra . . . Robert . . . Theone . . . No, you're all here. Then who is that? How did it get in here?"

"It's impossible," Braugh whispered, backing away. His legs knocked against the edge of the divan and he sprawled clumsily.

Lady Sutton beat at him with helpless hands and cried: "Do something! Do something—"

Finchley tried to control his voice. He stuttered: "W-we're safe so long as the circle isn't broken. It can't get out—"

On the stage, Theone was sobbing, making pushing motions with her hands. Suddenly she crumpled to the floor. One outflung arm rubbed away a segment of the black chalk circle. The Thing moved swiftly, stepped through the break in the circle and descended from the platform like a black fluid. Finchley and Sidra Peel reeled back with terrified shrieks. There was a growing thickness pervading the shelter atmosphere. Little gusts of vapor twisted around the head of the Thing as it moved slowly toward the divan.

"You're all joking!" Lady Sutton screamed. "This isn't real. It can't be!" She heaved up from the divan and tottered to her feet. Her face blanched as she counted the tale of her guests again. One—two—and four made six—and the shape made seven. But there should only be six—

She backed away, then began to run. The Thing was following her when she reached the door. Lady Sutton pulled at the door handle, but the iron bolt was locked. Quickly, for all her vast bulk, she ran around the edge of the shelter, smashing over the tables. As the Thing expanded in the darkness and filled the room with its sibilant hissing, she snatched at her purse and tore it open, groping for the key. Her shaking hands scattered the purse's contents over the room.

A deep bellow pierced the blackness. Lady Sutton jerked and stared around desperately, making little animal noises. As the Thing threatened to engulf her in its infinite black depths, a cry tore up through her body and she sank heavily to the floor.

Silence.

Smoke drifted in shaded clouds.

The china clock ticked off a sequence of delicate periods.

"Well—" Finchley said in conversational tones. "That's that."

He went to the inert figure on the floor. He knelt over it for a moment, probing and testing, his face flickering with savage hunger. Then he looked up and grinned. "She's dead, all right. Just the way we figured. Heart failure. She was too fat."

He remained on his knees, drinking in the moment of death. The others clustered around the toadlike body, staring with distended nostrils. The moment hardly lasted, then the languor of infinite boredom again shaded across their features.

The black Thing waved its arms a few times. The costume split at last to reveal a complicated framework and the sweating, bearded face of Robert Peel. He dropped the costume around him, stepped out of it, and went to the figure in the chair.

"The dummy idea was perfect," he said. His bright little eyes glittered momentarily. He looked like a sadistic miniature of Edward VII. "She'd never have believed it if we hadn't arranged for a seventh unknown to enter the scene." He glanced at his wife. "That slap was a stroke of genius, Sidra. Wonderful realism—"

"I meant it."

"I know you did, dearly beloved, but thanks nevertheless."

Theone Dubedat had risen and gotten into a white dressing gown. She stepped down and walked over to the body, removing the hideous devil's mask. It revealed a beautifully chiseled face, frigid and lovely. Her blond hair gleamed in the darkness.

Braugh said: "Your acting was superb, Theone—" He bobbed his white albino head appreciatively.

For a time she didn't answer. She stood staring down at the shapeless mound of flesh, an expression of hopeless longing on her face; but there was nothing more to her gazing than the impersonal curiosity of a bystander watching a window chef. Less.

At last Theone sighed. She said: "So it wasn't worth it, after all."

"What?" Braugh groped for a cigarette.

"The acting—the whole performance. We've been let down again, Chris."

Braugh scratched a match. The orange flame flared, flickering across their disappointed faces. He lit his cigarette, then held the flame high and looked at them. The illumination twisted their features into caricatures, emphasizing their weariness, their infinite boredom. Braugh said: "My-my—"

"It's no use, Chris. This whole murder was a bust. It was about as exciting as a glass of water."

Finchley hunched his shoulders and paced up and back of the shelter like a bundle of stilts. He said: "I got a bit of a kick when I thought she suspected. It didn't last long, though."

"You ought to be grateful for even that."

"I am."

Peel clucked his tongue in exasperation, then knelt like a bearded humpty-dumpty, his bald head gleaming, and raked in the contents of Lady Sutton's scattered purse. The banknotes he folded and put in his pocket. He took the fat dead hand and lifted it slightly toward Theone. "You always admired her sapphire, Theone. Want it?"

"You couldn't get it off, Bob."

"I think I could," he said, pulling strenuously.

"Oh, to hell with the sapphire."

"No—it's coming."

The ring slipped forward, then caught in the folds of flesh at the knuckle. Peel took a fresh grip and tugged and

twisted. There was a sucking, yielding sound and the entire finger tore away from the hand. The dull odor of putrefaction struck their nostrils as they looked on with vague curiosity.

Peel shrugged and dropped the finger. He arose, dusting his hands slightly. "She rots fast," he said. "Peculiar—"

Braugh wrinkled his nose and said: "She was too fat."

Theone turned away in sudden frantic desperation, her hands clasping her elbows. "What are we to do?" she cried. "What? Isn't there a sensation left on earth we haven't tried?"

With a dry whir the china clock began quick chimes. Midnight.

Finchley said: "We might go back to drugs."

"They're as futile as this paltry murder."

"But there are other sensations. New ones."

"Name one!" Theone said in exasperation. "Only one!"

"I could name several—if you'll have a seat and permit me—"

Suddenly Theone interrupted: "That's you speaking, isn't it, Dig?"

In a peculiar voice Finchley answered: "N-no. I thought it was Chris."

Braugh said: "Wasn't me."

"You, Bob?"

"No."

"Th-then—"

The small voice said: "If the ladies and gentlemen would be kind enough to—"

It came from the stage. There was something there—something that spoke in that quite, gentle voice; for Merlin was stalking back and forth, arching his high black back against an invisible leg.

"—to sit down," the voice continued persuasively.

Braugh had the most courage. He moved to the stage with slow, steady steps, the cigarette hanging firmly from his lips. He leaned across the apron and peered. For a while his eyes examined the stage, then he let a spume of smoke jet from his nostrils and called: "There's nothing here."

And at that moment the blue smoke swirled under the lights and swept around a figure of emptiness. It was no more than a glimpse of an outline—of a negative, but it was enough to make Braugh cry out and leap back. The others turned sick, too, and staggered to chairs.

"So sorry," said the quiet voice. "It won't happen again."

Peel gathered himself and said: "Merely for the sake of—"

"Yes?"

He tried to freeze his jerking features. "Merely for the sake of s-scientific curiosity it—"

"Calm yourself, my friend."

"The ritual . . . it did w-work?"

"Of course not. My friends, there is no need to call us with such fantastic ceremony. If you really want us, we come."

"And you?"

"I? Oh . . . I know you have been thinking of me for some time. Tonight you wanted me—really wanted me, and I came."

The last of the cigarette smoke convulsed violently as that terrible figure of emptiness seemed to stoop and at last seat itself casually at the edge of the stage. The cat hesitated and then began rolling its head with little mews of pleasure as something fondled it.

Still striving desperately to control himself, Peel said: "But all those ceremonies and rituals that have been handed down—"

"Merely symbolic, Mr. Peel." Peel started at the sound of his name. "You have read, no doubt, that we do not appear unless a certain ritual is performed, and only if it is letter-perfect. That is not true, of course. We appear if the invitation is sincere—and only then—with or without ceremony."

Sick and verging on hysteria, Sidra whispered: "I'm getting out of here." She tried to rise.

The gentle voice said: "One moment, please—"

"No!"

"I will help you get rid of your husband, Mrs. Peel."

Sidra blinked, then sank back into her chair. Peel clenched his fists and opened his mouth to speak. Before he could begin, the gentle voice continued: "And yet you will not lose your wife, if you really want to keep her, Mr. Peel. I guarantee that."

The cat was suddenly lifted into the air and then settled comfortably in space a few feet from the floor. They could see the thick fur on the back smooth and resmooth from the gentle petting.

At length Braugh asked: "What do you offer us?"

"I offer each of you his own heart's desire."

"And that is?"

"A new sensation—all new sensations—"

"What new sensation?"

"The sensation of reality."

Braugh laughed. "Hardly anyone's heart's desire."

"This will be, for I offer you five different realities—realities which you may fashion, each for himself. I offer you worlds of your own making wherein Mrs. Peel may happily murder her husband in hers—and yet Mr. Peel may keep his wife in his own. To Mr. Braugh I offer the dreamworld of the writer, and to Mr. Finchley the creation of the artist—"

Theone said: "Those are dreams, and dreams are cheap. We all possess them."

"But you all awaken from your dreams and you pay the bitter price of that realization. I offer you an awakening from the present into a future reality which you may shape to your own desires—a reality which will never end."

Peel said: "Five simultaneous realities is a contradiction in terms. It's a paradox—impossible."

"Then I offer you the impossible."

"And the price?"

"I beg pardon?"

"The price," Peel repeated with growing courage. "We're not altogether naïve. We know there's always a price."

There was a long pause, then the voice said reproachfully: "I'm afraid there are many misconceptions and many things you fail to understand. Just now I cannot explain, but believe me when I say there is no price."

"Ridiculous. Nothing is ever given for nothing."

"Very well, Mr. Peel, if we must use the terminology of the market place, let me say that we never appear unless the price for our service is paid in advance. Yours has already been paid."

"Paid?" They shot involuntary glances at the rotting body on the shelter floor.

"In full."

"Then?"

"You're willing, I see. Very well—"

The cat was again lifted high in the air and deposited on the floor with a last gentle pat. The remnants of mist clinging to the shelter ceiling weaved and churned as the invisible donor advanced. Instinctively the five arose and waited, tense and fearful, yet with a mounting sense of fulfillment.

A key darted up from the floor and sailed through midair toward the door. It paused before the lock an instant, then

inserted itself and turned. The heavy wrought-iron bolt lifted and the door swung wide. Beyond should have been the dungeon passage leading to the upper levels of Sutton Castle —a low, narrow corridor, paved with flags and lined with limestone blocks. Now, a few inches beyond the door jamb, there hung a veil of flame.

Pale, incredibly beautiful, it was a tapestry of flickering fire, the warp and weft an intermesh of rainbow colors. Those pastel strands of color locked and interlocked, swam, threaded and spun like so many individual life lines. They were an infinity of beads, emotions, the silken countenance of time, the swirling skin of space— They were all things to all men, and above all else, they were beautiful.

"For you," that quiet voice said, "your old reality ends in this room—"

"As simply as this?"

"Quite."

"But—"

"Here you stand," interrupted the voice, "in the last kernel, the last nucleus so to speak, of what once was real for you. Pass the door—pass through the veil, and you enter the reality I promised."

"What will we find beyond the veil?"

"What each of you desires. Nothing lies beyond that veil now. There is nothing there—nothing but time and space waiting for the molding. There is nothing and the potential of everything."

Peel, in a low voice, said: "One time and one space? Will that be enough for all different realities?"

"All time, all space, my friend," the quiet voice answered. "Pass through and you will find the matrix of dreams."

They had been clustered together, standing close to each other in a kind of strained companionship. Now, in the silence that followed, they separated slightly as though each had marked out for himself a reality all his own—a life entirely divorced from the past and the companions of old times. It was a gesture of utter isolation.

Mutually impulsed, yet independently motivated, they moved toward the glittering veil—

II

I am an artist, Digby Finchley thought, and an artist is a creator. To create is to be godlike, and so shall I be. I shall

be god of my world, and from nothing I shall create all—and my all will be beauty.

He was the first to reach the veil and the first to pass through. Across his face the riot of color flicked like a cool spray. He blinked his eyes momentarily as the brilliant scarlets and purples blinded him. When he opened them again he had left the veil a step behind and stood in the darkness.

But not darkness.

It was the blank jet-black of infinite emptiness. It smote his eyes like a heavy hand and seemed to press the eyeballs back into his skull like leaden weights. He was terrified and jerked his head about, staring into the impenetrable nothingness, mistaking the ephemeral flashes of retinal light for reality.

Nor was he standing.

For he took one hasty stride and it was as though he were suspended out of all contact with mass and matter. His terror was tinged with horror as he became aware that he was utterly alone; that there was nothing to see, nothing to hear, nothing to touch. A bitter loneliness assailed him and in that instant he understood how truthfully the voice in the shelter had spoken, and how terribly real his new reality was.

That instant, too, was his salvation. "For," Finchley murmured with a wry smile to the blankness, "it is of the essence of godhood to be alone—to be unique."

Then he was quite calm and hung quiescent in time and space while he mustered his thoughts for the creation.

"First," Finchley said at length, "I must have a heavenly throne that befits a god. Too, I must have a heavenly kingdom and angelic retainers; for no god is altogether complete without an entourage."

He hesitated while his mind rapidly sorted over the various heavenly kingdoms he had known. There was no need, he thought, to be especially original with this sort of thing. Originality would play an important role in the creation of his universe. Just now the only essential thing was to insure himself a reasonable degree of dignity and luxury—and for that the secondhand furnishings of ancient Yahweh would do.

Raising one hand in a self-conscious gesture, he commanded. Instantly the blackness was riven with light, and before him a flight of gold-veined marble steps rose to a glittering throne. The throne was high and cushioned. Arms, legs and back were of glowing silver, and the cushions were

imperial purple. And yet—the whole was incredibly hideous. The legs were too long and thin, the arms were rachety, the back narrow and sickly.

Finchley said: "Ow-w-w-w!" and tried to remodel. Yet no matter how he altered the proportions, the throne remained horrible. And for that matter, the steps, too, were disgusting, for by some freak of creation the gold veins twisted and curved through the marble to form obscene designs too reminiscent of the pictures Finchley had drawn in his past existence.

He gave it up at last, mounted the crooked steps and settled himself uneasily on the throne. It felt as though he was sitting on the lap of a corpse with dead arms poised to infold him in a ghastly embrace. He shuddered slightly and said: "Oh, hell, I was never a furniture designer—"

Finchley glanced around, then raised his hand again. The jet clouds that had crowded around the throne rolled back to reveal high columns of crystal and a soaring roof arched and paved with smooth blocks. The hall stretched back for thousands of yards like some never-ending cathedral, and all that length was filled with rank on rank of his retainers.

Foremost were the angels: slender, winged creatures, white-robed, with blond, shining heads, sapphire-blue eyes, and scarlet, smiling mouths. Behind the angels knelt the order of Cherubin: giant winged bulls with tawny hides and hoofs of beaten metal. Their Assyrian heads were heavily bearded with gleaming jet curls. Third were the Seraphim: ranks of huge six-winged serpents whose jeweled scales glittered with a startling silent flame.

As Finchley sat and stared at them with admiration for his handiwork, they chanted in soft unison: "Glory to god. Glory to the Lord Finchley, the All Highest. . . . Glory to the Lord Finchley—"

He sat and stared and it was as though his eyes were slowly acquiring the distortion of astigmatism, for he realized that this was more a cathedral of evil than of heaven. The columns were carved with revolting grotesques at the capitals and bases, and as the hall stretched into dimness it seemed peopled with cavorting shadows that grimaced and danced.

And in the far reaches of those twisting lengths, covert little scenes were playing that sickened him. Even as they chanted, the angels gazed sidelong with their glistening blue eyes at the Cherubin; and behind a column he saw one

winged creature reach out and seize a lovely blond angel of lust to crush her to him.

In sheer desperation Finchley raised his hand again, and once more the blackness swirled around him—

"So much," he said, "for a Heavenly Kingdom—"

He pondered for another ineffable period as he drifted in emptiness, grappling with the most stupendous artistic problem he had ever attacked.

Up to now, Finchley thought with a shudder for the horror he had recently wrought, I have been merely playing—feeling my strength—warming up, so to speak, the way an artist will toy with pastel and a block of grained paper. Now it's time for me to go to work.

Solemnly, as he thought would befit a god, he conducted a laborious conference with himself in space.

What, he asked himself, has creation been in the past?

One might call it nature.

Very well, we shall call it nature. Now, what are the objections to nature's creation?

Why—nature was never an artist. Nature merely blundered into things in an experimental sort of way. Whatever beauty existed was merely a byproduct. The difference be—

The difference, he interrupted himself, between the old nature and the new God Finchley shall be order. Mine will be an ordered cosmos devoid of waste and devoted to beauty. There will be nothing haphazard. There will be no blundering.

First, the canvas.

"There shall be infinite space!" Finchley cried.

In the nothingness, his voice roared through the bony structure of his skull and echoed in his ears with a flat, sour sound; but on the instant of command, the opaque blackness was filtered into a limpid jet. Finchley could still see nothing, but he felt the change.

He thought: Now, in the old cosmos there were simply stars and nebulae and vast fiery bodies scattered through the realms of the sky. No one knew their purpose—no one knew their origin or destination.

In mine there shall be purpose, for each body shall serve to support a race of creatures whose sole function shall be to serve me—

He cried: "Let there be universes to the number of one hundred, filling space. One thousand galaxies shall make up each universe, and one million suns shall be the sum of each galaxy. Ten planets shall circle each sun, and two moons

each planet. Let all revolve around their creator! Let all this come to pass. Now!"

Finchley screamed in terror as light burst in a soundless cataclysm around him. Stars, close and hot as suns, distant and cold as pinpricks— Separately, by twos and in vast smudgy clouds— Blazing crimson—yellow—deep green and violet— The sum of their brilliance was a welter of light that constricted his heart and filled him with a devouring fear of the latent power within him.

"This," Finchley whimpered, "is enough cosmic creation for the time being—"

He closed his eyes determinedly and exerted his will once more. There was a sensation of solidity under his feet and when he opened his eyes cautiously he was standing on one of his earths with blue sky and a blue-white sun lowering swiftly toward the western horizon.

It was a bare, brown earth—Finchley had seen to that—it was a vast sphere of inchoate matter waiting for his molding, for he had decided that first above all other creation he would form a good green earth for himself—a planet of beauty where Finchley, God of all Creation, would reside in his Eden.

All through that waning afternoon he worked, swiftly and with artistic finesse. A vast ocean, green and with sparkling white foam, swept over half the globe; alternating hundreds of miles of watery space with clusters of warm islands. The single continent he divided in half with a backbone of jagged mountains that stretched from pole to snowy pole.

With infinite care he worked. Using oils, water colors, charcoal and plumbago sketches, he planned and executed his entire world. Mountains, valleys, plains; crags, precipices and mere boulders were all designed into a fluent congruence of beautifully balanced masses.

All his spirit of artistry went into the clever scattering of lakes like so many sparkling jewels; and into the cunning arabesques of winding rivers that traced intricate glistening designs over the face of the planet. He devoted himself to the selection of colors: gray gravels; pink, white and black sands; good earths, brown, umber and sepia; mottled shales, glistening micas and silica stones— And when the sun at last vanished on the first day of his labor, his Eden was a shining jewel of stone, earth and metal, ready for life.

As the sky darkened overhead, a pale, gibbous moon with a face of death was revealed riding in the vault of the sky; and even as Finchley gazed at it uneasily, a second

moon with a blood-red disk lifted its ravaged countenance above the eastern horizon and began a ghastly march across the heavens. Finchley tore his eyes away from them and stared out at the twinkling stars.

There was much satisfaction to be gained from their contemplation. "I know exactly how many there are," he thought complacently. "You multiply one hundred by a thousand by a million and there's your answer— And that happens to be my idea of order!"

He lay back on a patch of warm, soft soil and placed palms under the back of his head, staring up. "And I know exactly what all of them are there for—to support human lives—the countless billions upon billions of lives which I shall design and create solely to serve and worship the Lord Finchley— That's purpose for you!"

And he knew where each of those blue and red and indigo sparks were going, for even in the vasty reaches of space they were thundering a circular course, the pivot of which was that point in the skies he had just left. Some day he would return to that place and there build his heavenly castle. Then he would sit through all eternity watching the wheeling flight of his worlds.

There was a peculiar splotch of red in the zenith of the sky. Finchley watched it absently at first, then with guarded attention as it seemed to burgeon. It spread slowly like an ink stain, and as the curious moments fled by, became tinged with orange and then the purest white. And for the first time Finchley was uncomfortably aware of a sensation of heat.

An hour passed and then two and three. The fist of red-white spread across the sky until it was a fiery nebulous cloud. A thin, tenuous edge approached a star gently, then touched. Instantly there was a blinding blaze of radiance and Finchley was flooded with gleaming, glittering light that illuminated the landscape with the eerie glow of flaring magnesium. The sensation of heat grew in intensity and tiny beads of perspiration prickled across his skin.

With midnight, the incredible inferno filled half the sky, and the gleaming stars, one after another, were bursting into silent explosions. The light was blinding white and the heat suffocating. Finchley tottered to his feet and began to run, searching vainly for shade or water. It was only then that he realized his universe was running amuck.

"No!" he cried desperately. "No!"

Heat bludgeoned him. He fell and rolled across cutting rocks that tore at him and anchored him back down with

his face upthrust. Past his shielding hands, past his tight-shut eyelids, the intolerable light and heat pressed.

"Why should it go wrong?" Finchley screamed. "There was plenty of room for everything! Why should it—"

In heat-borne delirium he felt a thunderous rocking as though his Eden were beginning to split asunder.

He cried: "Stop! Stop! Everything stop!" He beat at his temples with futile fists and at last whispered: "All right . . . if I've made another mistake then— All right—" He waved his hand feebly.

And instantly the skies were black and blank. Only the two scabrous moons rode overhead, beginning the long downward journey to the west. And in the east a faint glow hinted at the rising sun.

"So," Finchley murmured, "one must be more a mathematician and physicist to run a cosmos. Very well, I can learn all that later. I'm an artist and I never pretended to know all that. But . . . I *am* an artist, and there is still my good green earth to people— Tomorrow— We shall see . . . tomorrow—"

And so presently he slept.

The scarlet sun was high when he awoke, and its evil solitary eye filled him with unrest. Glancing at the landscape he had fashioned the day previous, he was even more uncertain; for there was some subtle distortion in everything. Valley floors looked unclean with the pale sheen of lepers scales. The mountain crags formed nebulous shapes suggestive only of terror. Even the lakes contained the hint of horror under their smooth, innocent surfaces.

Not, he noticed, when he stared directly at these creations, but only when his glance was sidelong. Viewed full-eyed and steadfastly, everything seemed to be right. Proportion was good, line was excellent, coloring perfection. And yet— He shrugged and decided he would have to put in some practice at drafting. No doubt there was some subtle error of distortion in his work.

He walked to a tiny stream and from the bank scooped out a mass of moist red clay. He kneaded it smooth, wet it down to a thin mud and strained it. After it had dried under the sun slightly he arranged a heavy block of stone as a pedestal and set to work.

His hands were still practiced and certain. With sure fingers he shaped his concept of a large, furred rabbit. Body, legs and head; exquisitely etched features—it crouched on the stone ready, it seemed, to leap off at a moment's

notice. Finchley smiled affectionately at his work, his confidence at last restored. He tapped it once on the rounded head and said: "Live, my friend—"

There was a second's indecision while life invaded the clay form, then it arched its back with an incredibly clumsy motion and attempted to leap. It moved forward to the edge of the pedestal where it hung crazily for an instant before it dropped heavily to the ground. As it lumbered along on a crazy course, it uttered horrible little grunting sounds and turned once to gaze at Finchley. On that animal face was an evil expression of malevolence.

Finchley's smile froze. He frowned, hesitated, then scooped up another chunk of clay and set it on the stone. For the space of an hour he worked, shaping a graceful Irish setter. At last he tapped this, too, on the narrow skull and said: "Live—"

Instantly the dog collapsed. It mewled helplessly and then struggled to shaking feet like some enormous spider, eyes distended and glassy. It tottered to the edge of the pedestal, leaped off and collided with Finchley's leg. There was a low growl and the beast tore sharp fangs into Finchley's skin. He leaped back with a cry and kicked the animal furiously. Mewling and howling, the setter went gangling across the fields like a crippled monster.

With furious intent, Finchley returned to his work. Shape after shape he modeled and endowed with life; and each: ape, monkey, fox, weasel, rat, lizard and toad—fish; long and short, stout and slender—birds by the score—each was a grotesque monstrosity that swam, shambled or fluttered off like some feverish nightmare. Finchley was horrified and exhausted. He sat himself down on the pedestal and began to sob while his tired fingers still twitched and prodded at a lump of clay.

He thought: "I'm still an artist—What's gone wrong? What turns everything I do into horrible nonsense?"

His fingers turned and twisted, and without his realizing it, a head began to form in the clay.

He thought: "I made a fortune with my art once. Everyone couldn't have been crazy. They bought my work for many reasons—but an important one was that it was beautiful."

He stared at the lump of clay in his hands. It had been partially formed into a woman's head. He examined it closely and for the first time in many hours, he smiled.

"Why, of course!" he exclaimed. "I'm no shaper of animals. Let's see how well I do with a human figure—"

Swiftly, with heavy chunks of clay, he built up the understructure of his figure. Legs, arms, torso and head were formed. He hummed slightly under his breath as he worked, and he thought: She'll be the loveliest Eve ever created—and more—her children shall truly be the children of a god!

With loving hands he turned the full swelling calves and thighs, and cunningly joined slender ankles to graceful feet. The hips were rounded and girdled a flat slightly mounded belly. As he set the strong shoulders, he suddenly stopped and stepped back a pace.

Is it possible? He wondered.

He walked slowly around the half-completed figure.

Yes—

Force of habit, perhaps?

Perhaps that—and maybe the love he had borne for so many empty years.

He returned to the figure and redoubled his efforts. With a sense of growing elation, he completed arms, neck and head. There was a certainty within him that told him it was impossible to fail. He had modeled this figure too often not to know it down to the finest detail. And when he was finished, Theone Dubedat, magnificently sculpted in clay, stood atop the stone pedestal.

Finchley was content. Wearily he sat down with his back to a jagged boulder, produced a cigarette from space and lit it. For perhaps a minute he sat, dragging in the smoke to quiet his jerking nerves. At last with a sense of chaotic anticipation he said: "Woman—"

He choked and stopped. Then he began again.

"Be alive—Theone!"

The second of life came and passed. The nude figure moved slightly, then began to tremble. Magnetically drawn, Finchley arose and stepped toward her, arms outstretched in mute appeal. There was a hoarse gasp of indrawn breath and slowly the great eyes opened and examined him.

The living girl straightened and screamed. Before Finchley could touch her she beat at his face, her long nails ripping his skin. She fell backward off the pedestal, leaped to her feet and began running off across the fields like all the others—running like a crazy, crippled creature while she screamed and howled. The low sun dappled her body and the shadow she cast was monstrous.

Long after she disappeared, Finchley continued to gaze in her direction while within him all that futile, bitter love surged and burned with an acid tide. At length he turned again to the pedestal and with icy impassivity set once more to work. Nor did he stop until the fifth in a succession of lurid creatures ran screaming out into the night— Then and only then did he stop and stand for a long time gazing alternately at his hands and the crazy, careening moons that sailed overhead.

There was a tap on his shoulder and he was not too surprised to see Lady Sutton standing beside him. She still wore the sequined evening gown, and in the lurid moonlight her face was as course and masculine as ever.

Finchley said: "Oh . . . it's you."

"How are you, Dig, m'lad?"

He thought it over, trying to bring some reason to the dumb despair and yet ludicrous insanity that pervaded his cosmos. At last he said: "Not so good, Lady Sutton."

"Trouble?"

"Yes—" He broke off and stared at her. "I say, Lady Sutton, how the devil did you get here?"

She laughed. "I'm dead, Dig. You ought to know."

"Dead? Oh . . . I—" He floundered in a horror of embarrassment.

"No hard feelings, though. I'd have done the same m'self, y'know."

"You would?"

"Anything for a new sensation. That was always our motto, eh?" She nodded complacently and grinned at him. It was that same old grin of pure deviltry.

Finchley said: "What are you doing here? I mean, how did—"

"I said I was dead," Lady Sutton interrupted. "There's lots you don't understand about this business of dying."

"But this is my own personal private reality. I own it."

"And I'm still dead, Dig. I can get into any bloody damned reality I choose. Wait—you'll find out."

He said: "I won't—ever— That is, I can't. Because I won't ever die."

"Oh-ho?"

"No, I won't. I'm a god."

"You are, eh? How d'you like it?"

"I . . . I don't." He faltered for words. "I . . . that is, someone promised me a reality I could shape for myself, but I can't, Lady Sutton, I can't."

"And why not?"

"I don't know. I'm a god, and yet every time I try to shape something beautiful it turns out disgusting and loathsome."

"As how, for instance?"

He showed her the twisted mountains and plains, the evil lakes and rivers, the distorted grunting creatures he had created. All this Lady Sutton examined carefully and with close attention. At last she pursed her lips and thought for a moment; then she gazed keenly at Finchley and said: "Odd that you've never made a mirror, Dig."

"A mirror?" he echoed. "No, I haven't—I never needed one—"

"Go ahead. Make one now."

He gave her a perplexed look, and still staring at her, waved a hand in the air. A square of silvered glass appeared in his hand and he held it toward her.

"No," Lady Sutton said, "it's for you. Look in it."

Wondering, he raised the mirror and gazed in it. He uttered a hoarse cry and peered closer. Leering back at him out of the dim night was the distorted, evil face of a gargoyle. In the small slant-set eyes, the splayed nose, the broken yellow teeth, the twisted ruin of a face he saw everything he had seen in his ugly cosmos.

He saw the distorted cathedral of heaven and all its unholy hierarchy of ribald retainers: the spinning chaos of crashing stars and suns; the lurid landscape of his Eden; each mewling, ghastly creature he had created; every individual horror that his brain had spawned.

Violently he hurled the mirror spinning and turned to confront Lady Sutton.

"What?" he demanded hoarsely, "what is this?"

"Why, you're a god, Dig," Lady Sutton laughed, "and you ought to know that a god can create only in his own image. Yes—the answer's as simple as that. It's a grand joke, ain't it?"

"Joke?" The import of all the eons to come thundered down over his head. An eternity of living with his hideous self, upon himself, inside himself—over and over, re-repeated in every sun and star, every living and dead thing, every creature, every everlasting moment. A monstrous god feeding upon himself and slowly, inexorably going mad.

"Joke!" he screamed.

He flung out his hand and instantly he floated once more, suspended out of all contact with mass and matter. Once

more he was utterly alone, with nothing to see, nothing to hear, nothing to touch. And as he pondered for another ineffable period on the inevitable futility of his next attempt, he heard quite distinctly, the deep bellow of familiar laughter.

Of such was the Kingdom of Finchley's Heaven.

III

"Give me the strength! Oh, give me the strength!"

She went through the veil sharp on Finchley's heels, that short, slender, dark woman; and she found herself in the dungeon passage of Sutton Castle. For a moment she was startled out of her prayer, half disappointed at not finding a land of mists and dreams. Then, with a bitter smile, she recalled the reality she wanted.

Before her stood a suit of armor; a strong, graceful figure of polished metal edged with sweeping flutings. She went to it and stared. Dully from the gleaming steel cuirass, a slightly distorted reflection stared back. It showed the drawn, high-strung face, the coal-black eyes, the coal-black hair dipping down over the brow in a sharp widow's peak. It said: "This is Sidra Peel. This is a woman whose past has been fettered to a dull-witted creature that called itself her husband. She will break that chain this day if only she finds the strength—"

"Break the chain!" she murmured fiercely, "and this day repay him for a life's worth of agony. God—if there be a god in my world—help me balance the account in full! Help me—"

Sidra stared, then froze while her pulse jerked wildly. Someone had come soundlessly down the lonesome passage and stood behind her. She could feel the heat—the aura of a presence—the almost imperceptible pressure of a body against hers. Mistily in the mirror of the armor she made out a face peering over her shoulder.

She spun around, crying: "Ahhhh!"

"So sorry," he said. "Thought you were expecting me."

Her eyes riveted to his face. He was smiling slightly in an affable manner, and yet the streaked blond hair, the hollows and mounds, the pulsing veins and shadows of his features were a lurid landscape of raw emotions.

"Calm yourself," he said while she teetered crazily and fought down the screams that were tearing through her.

"But wh-who—" she broke off and tried to swallow.

"I thought you were expecting me," he repeated.

"I . . . expecting you?"

He nodded and took her hands. Against his, her palms felt chilled and moist. "We had an engagement."

She opened her mouth slightly and shook her head.

"At twelve forty—" He released one of her hands to look at his watch. "And here I am, on the dot."

"No," she said, yanking herself away. "No, this is impossible. We have no engagement. I don't know you."

"You don't recognize me, Sidra? Well—that's odd; but I think you'll recollect who I am before long."

"But who are you?"

"I shan't tell you. You'll have to remember yourself."

A little calmer, she inspected his features closely. Suddenly, with the rush of a waterfall, a blended sensation of attraction and repulsion surged over her. This man alarmed and fascinated her. She was filled with horror at his mere presence, yet intrigued and drawn.

At last she shook her head and said: "I still don't understand. I never called for you, Mr. Whoever-you-are, and we had no engagement."

"You most certainly did."

"I most certainly did not!" she flared, outraged by his insolent assurance. "I wanted my old world. The same old world I'd always known—"

"But with one exception?"

"Y-yes—" Her furious glance faltered and the rage drained out of her. "Yes, with one exception."

"And you prayed for the strength to make that exception?"

She nodded.

He grinned and took her arm. "Well, Sidra, then you did call for me and we did have an engagement. I'm the answer to your prayer."

She suffered herself to be led through the narrow, steep-mounting passages, unable to break free of that magnetic leash. His touch on her arm was a frightening thing. Everything in you cried out against the misery and disgust—and yet another something in you welcomed it eagerly.

As they passed through the cloudy light of infrequent lamps, she watched him covertly. He was tall and magnificently built. Thick cords strained in his muscular neck at the slightest turn of his arrogant head. He was dressed in tweeds that had the texture of sandstone and gave off a pungent, peaty scent. His shirt was open at the collar, and where his chest showed it was thickly matted.

There were no servants about on the street floor of the

castle. The man escorted her quietly through the graceful rooms to the foyer where he removed her coat from the closet and placed it around her shoulders. Suddenly he pressed his hard hands against her arms.

She tore herself away at last, one of the old rages sweeping over her. In the quiet gloom of the foyer she could see that he was still smiling, and it added fuel to her fury.

"Ah," she cried, "what a fool I am . . . to take you so for granted. 'I prayed for you—' you say. 'I know you—' What kind of a booby do you think I am? Keep your hands off me!"

She glared at him, breathing heavily, and he made no answer. His expression remained unchanged. It's like those snakes, she thought, those snakes with the jeweled eyes. They coil in their impassive beauty and you can't escape the deadly fascination. It's like soaring towers that make you want to leap to earth—like keen, glittering razors that invite the tender flesh of your throat. You can't escape!

"Go on!" she screamed in a last desperate effort. "Get out of here! This is my world. It's all mine to do with as I choose. I want no part of your kind of rotten, arrogant swine!"

Swiftly, silently, he gripped her shoulders and brought her close to him. While he kissed her she struggled against the hard talons of his fingers and tried to force her mouth away from his. And yet she knew that if he had released her she could not have torn herself away from that savage kiss.

She was sobbing when he relaxed his grip and let her head drop back. Still in the affable tones of a casual conversation he said: "You want one thing in this world of yours, Sidra, and you must have me to help you."

"In Heaven's name, who are you?"

"I'm that strength you prayed for. Now come along."

Outside the night was pitch black, and after they had gotten into Sidra's roadster and started for London, the road was impossible to follow. As she edged the car cautiously along, Sidra was able at last to make out the limed white line that bisected the road, and the lighter velvet of the sky against the jet of the horizon. Overhead the Milky Way was a long smudge of powder.

The wind on her face was good to feel. Passionate, reckless and headstrong as ever, she pressed her foot on the accelerator and sent the car roaring down the dangerous dark road, eager for more of the cool breeze against her cheeks and brow. The wind tugged at her hair and sent it streaming back. The wind gusted over the top of the glass shield and

around it like a solid stream of cold water. It whipped up her courage and confidence. Best of all, it recalled her sense of humor.

Without turning, she called: "What's your name?"

And dimly through the chattering breeze came his answer: "Does it matter?"

"It certainly does. Am I supposed to call you: 'Hey!' or 'I say there—' or 'Dear sir—' "

"Very well, Sidra. Call me Ardis."

"Ardis? That's not English, is it?"

"Does it matter?"

"Don't be so mysterious. Of course it matters. I'm trying to place you."

"I see."

"D'you know Lady Sutton?"

Receiving no answer she glanced at him and received a slight chill. He did look mysterious with his head silhouetted against the star-filled sky. He looked out of place in an open roadster.

"D'you know Lady Sutton?" she repeated.

He nodded and she turned her attention back to the road. They had left the open country and were boring through the London suburbs. The little squat houses, all alike, all flat-faced and muddy-colored, whisked past with a muffled *whump-whump-whump,* echoing back the drone of the engine.

Still gay, she asked: "Where are you stopping?"

"In London."

"Where, in London."

"Chelsea Square."

"The Square? That's odd. What number?"

"One hundred and forty-nine."

She burst into laughter. "Your impudence is too wonderful," she gasped, glancing at him again. "That happens to be my address."

He nodded. "I know that, Sidra."

Her laughter froze—not at the words, for she had hardly heard them. Barely suppressing another scream, she turned and stared through the windshield, her hands trembling violently on the wheel. For the man sat there in the midst of that howling turmoil of wind and not a hair of his head was moving.

"Merciful Heaven!" she cried in her heart, "what kind of a mess did I— Who is this monster, this— Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy— Get rid of him! I

don't want him. If I've asked for him, consciously or not, I don't want him now. I want my world changed. Right now! I want him out of it!"

"It's no use, Sidra," he said.

Her lips twitched and still she prayed: "Get him out of here! Change anything—everything, only take him away. Let him vanish. Let the darkness and the void devour him. Let him dwindle, fade—"

"Sidra," he shouted, "stop that!" He poked her violently. "You can't get rid of me that way—it's too late!"

She stopped as a final panic overtook her and congealed her brain.

"Once you've decided on your world," Ardis explained carefully as though to a child, "you're committed to it. There's no changing your mind and making minor alterations. Weren't you told?"

"No," she whispered, "we weren't told."

"Well, now you know."

She was mute, numb and wooden. Not so much wooden as putty. She followed his directions without a word; drove carefully to the little park of trees that was behind her house, and parked there. Very carefully, Ardis explained that they would have to enter the house through the servants' door.

"You don't," he said, "walk openly to murder. Only clever criminals in storybooks do that. We, in real life, find it best to be cautious."

Real life! she thought hysterically as they got out of the car. Reality! That Thing in the shelter—

Aloud, she said: "You sound experienced."

"Through the park," he answered, touching her lightly on the arm. "We shan't be seen."

The path through the trees was narrow and the grass and prickly shrubs on either side were high. Ardis stepped aside and then followed her as she passed the iron gate and entered. He strode a few paces behind her.

"As to experience," he said, "yes—I've had plenty. But then, you ought to know, Sidra."

She didn't know. She didn't answer. Trees, brush and grass were thick around her, and although she had traversed this park a hundred times, they were alien and distorted. They were not alive—no, thank God for that—she was not yet imagining things; but for the first time she realized how skeletal and haunted they looked. Almost as if each had participated in some sordid murder or suicide through the years.

Deeper into the park, a dank mist made her cough, and behind her, Ardis patted her back sympathetically. She quivered like a length of supple steel under his touch, and when she had stopped coughing and the hand still remained on her shoulder, she knew in another burst of terror what he would attempt here in the darkness.

She quickened her stride. The hand left her shoulder and hooked at her arm. She yanked her arm free and ran crazily down the path, stumbling on her stilt heels. There was a muffled exclamation from Ardis and she heard the swift pound of his feet as he pursued her.

The path led down a slight depression and past a marshy little pond. The earth turned moist and sucked at her feet with hollow grunts. In the warmth of the night her skin began to prickle and perspire, but the sound of his panting was close behind her.

Her breath was coming in gasps and when the path veered and began to mount, she felt her lungs would burst. Her legs were aching and it seemed that at the next instant she would flounder to the ground. Dimly through the trees, she made out the iron gate at the other side of the park, and with the little strength left to her she redoubled her efforts to reach it.

But what, she wondered dizzily, what after that? He'll overtake me in the street— Perhaps before the street— I should have turned for the car— I could have driven— I—

He clutched at her shoulder as she passed the gate and she would have surrendered at that moment. Then she heard voices and saw figures on the street across from her. She cried: "Hello, there!" and ran to them, her shoes clattering on the pavement. As she came close, still free for the moment, they turned.

"So sorry," she babbled crazily, "thought I recognized you . . . was walking through the par—"

She stopped short. Staring at her were Finchley, Braugh and Lady Sutton.

"Sidra darling! What the devil are you doing here?" Lady Sutton demanded. She cocked her gross head forward to examine Sidra's face, then nudged at Braugh and Finchley with her elbows. "The girl's been running through the park. Mark my words, Chris, she's touched."

"Looks like she's been chevied," Braugh answered. He stepped to one side and peered past Sidra's shoulder, his white head gleaming in the starlight.

Sidra caught her breath at last and looked about uneasily. Ardis stood alongside her, calm and affable as ever. There

was, she thought helplessly, no use trying to explain. No one would believe her. No one would help.

She said: "Just a bit of exercise. It was such a lovely night."

"Exercise!" Lady Sutton snorted. "Now I know you're cracked!"

Finchley said: "Why'd you pop off like that, Sidra? Bob was furious. We've just been driving him home."

"I—" It was too insane. She'd seen Finchley vanish through the veil of fire less than an hour ago—vanish into the world of his own choosing. Yet here he was, asking questions.

Ardis murmured: "Finchley was in your world, too. He's still here."

"But that's impossible!" Sidra exclaimed. "There can't be two Finchleys."

"Two Finchleys?" Lady Sutton echoed. "Now I know where you've been and gone, my girl! You're drunk. Reeling, stinking drunk. Running through the park! Exercise! Two Finchleys!"

And Lady Sutton? But she was dead. She had to be! They'd murdered her less than—

Again Ardis murmured: "That was another world ago, Sidra. This is your new world, and Lady Sutton belongs in it. Everyong belongs in it—except your husband."

"But . . . even though she's dead?"

Finchley started and asked: "Who's dead?"

"I think," Braugh said, "we'd better get her upstairs and put her to bed."

"No," Sidra said, "no—there's no need—really! I'm quite all right."

"Oh, let her be!" Lady Sutton grunted. She gathered her coat around her tub of a waist and moved off. "You know our motto, m'lads. 'Never Interfere.' See you and Bob at the shelter next week, Sidra. 'Night—"

"Good night."

Finchley and Braugh moved off, too—the three figures merging with the shadows with the delicate shadings of a misty fade-out. And as they vanished, Sidra heard Braugh murmur: "The motto ought to be 'Unashamed'!"

"Nonsense," Finchley answered. "Shame is a sensation we seek like all others, it redu—"

Then they were gone.

And with a return of that horrible chill, Sidra realized that they had not seen Ardis—nor heard him—nor been aware even of his—

"Naturally," Ardis interrupted.

"But how, naturally?"

"You'll understand later. Just now we've a murder before us."

"No!" she cried, hanging back. "No!"

"How's this, Sidra? And after you've looked forward to this moment for so many years. Planned it. Feasted on it—"

"I'm . . . too upset . . . unnerved."

"You'll be calmer. Come along."

Together they walked a few steps down the narrow street, turned up the gravel path and passed the gate that led to the back court. As Ardis reached out for the knob of the servants' door, he hesitated and turned a suffused face to her.

"This," he said, "is your moment, Sidra. It begins now. This is the time when you break that chain and make payment for a life's worth of agony. This is the day when you balance the account. Love is good—hate is better. Forgiveness is a trifling virtue—passion is all-consuming and the end-all of living!"

He pushed open the dooor, grasped her elbow and dragged her after him into the pantry. It was dark and filled with odd corners. They eased through the darkness cautiously, reached the swinging door that led to the kitchen, and pushed past it. Sidra stared and gagged. She uttered a faint moan and sagged against Ardis.

It *had* been a kitchen at one time. Now the stoves and sinks, cupboards and tables, chairs, closets and all loomed high and twisted like the distorted scenery of a nightmare jungle. A dull-blue spark glittered on the floor, and around it cavorted a score of silent shadows.

They were solidified smoke—semiliquid gas. Their translucent depths writhed and interplayed with the nauseating surge of living muck. Like looking through a microscope, Sidra thought in sick horror, at those creatures that foul corpse-blood; that scum a slack-water stream; that fill a swamp with noisome vapors— And most hideous of all, they were all in the wavering gusty image of her husband. Twenty Robert Peels, gesticulating obscenely and singing a whispered chorus:

"Quis multa gracilis te puer in rosa
Perfusus liquidis urget odoribus
Grato, Sidra, sub antro?"

"Ardis! What is this?"

"Don't know yet, Sidra."

"But these shapes!"

"We'll find out."

Twenty leaping vapors crowded around them, still chanting. Sidra and Ardis were driven forward and stood at the brink of that sapphire spark that burned in the air a few inches above the floor. Gaseous fingers pushed and probed at Sidra, pinched and prodded while the blue figures cavorted with hissing laughter, slapping their naked rumps in weird ecstasies.

A slash on Sidra's arm made her start and cry out, and when she looked down, unaccountable beads of blood stood out on the white skin of her wrist. And even as she stared in disembodied enchantment, her wrist was raised to Ardis' lips. Then his wrist was raised to her mouth and she felt the stinging salt of his blood on her lips.

"No!" she screamed. "I don't believe this. You're making me see this—"

She turned and ran from the kitchen toward the serving pantry. Ardis was close behind her. And the blue shapes still hissed a droning chorus:

"Qui nunc te fruitur credulus aurea:
Qui semper vacuam, semper amabilem,
Sperat, nescius aurae
Fallacis—"

When they reached the foot of the winding stairs that led to the upper floors, Sidra clutched at the balustrade for support. With her free hand she dabbed at her mouth to erase the salt taste that made her stomach crawl.

"I think I've an idea what all that was," Ardis said.

She stared at him.

"A sort of betrothal ceremony," he went on casually. "You've read of something like that before, haven't you? Odd, wasn't it— Some powerful influences in this house. Recognize those phantoms?"

She shook her head insanely. What was the use of thinking—talking?

"Didn't, eh? We'll have to see about this. I never cared for unsolicited haunting. We shan't have any more of this tomfoolery in the future—" He mused for a moment, then pointed up the stairs. "Your husband's up there, I think. Let's continue."

They trudged up the sweeping gloomy stairs, and the last vestiges of Sidra's sanity struggled up, step by step, with her.

One— You go up the stairs. Stairs leading up to what? More madness? That damned Thing in the shelter!

Two— This is hell, not reality.

Three— Or nightmare. Yes! Nightmare. Lobster last night. Where were we last night, Bob and I?

Four— Dear Bob. Why did I ever— And this Ardis. I know why he's so familiar. Why he almost speaks my thoughts. He's probably some—

Five— Nice young man who plays tennis in real life. Distorted by a dream. Yes.

Six—

Seven—

"Don't run into it!" Ardis cautioned.

She halted in her tracks, and simply stared. There were no more screams or shudders left in her. She simply stared at the thing that hung with a twisted head from the beam over the stair landing. It was her husband, limp and slack, dangling at the end of a length of laundry rope.

The limp figure swayed ever so slightly, like the gentle swing of a massive pendulum. The mouth was wrinkled into a sardonic grin and the eyes popped from their sockets and glanced down at her with impudent humor. Vaguely, Sidra was aware that ascending steps behind it showed through the twisted form.

"Join hands," the corpse said in sacrosanct tones.

"Bob!"

"Your husband?" Ardis exclaimed.

"Dearly beloved," the corpse began, "we are gathered together in the sight of God and in the face of this company to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony; which is commanded to be honorable among all men and therefore is not by any to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly—" The voice boomed on and on and on.

"Bob!" Sidra croaked.

"Kneel!" the corpse commanded.

Sidra flung her body to one side and ran stumbling up the stairs. She faltered for a gasping instant, then Ardis' strong hands grasped her. Behind them the shadowy corpse intoned: "I pronounce you man and wife—"

Ardis whispered: "We must be quick, now! Very quick!"

But at the head of the stairs Sidra made a last bid for liberty. She abandoned all hope of sanity, of understanding.

All she wanted was freedom—and a place where she could sit in solitude, free of the passions that were hedging her in, gutting her soul. There was no word spoken, no gesture made. She drew herself up and faced Ardis squarely. This was one of the times, she understood, when you fought motionlessly.

For minutes they stood, facing each other in the dark hall. To their right was the descending well of the stairs; to the left, Sidra's bedroom; behind them, the short hallway that led to Peel's study—to the room where he was so unconsciously awaiting slaughter. Their eyes met, clashed and battled silently. And even as Sidra met that deep, gleaming glance, she knew with an agonizing sense of desperation that she would lose.

There was no longer any will, any strength, any courage left in her. Worse, by some spectral osmosis it seemed to have drained out of her into the man that faced her. While she fought she realized that her rebellion was like that of a hand or a finger rebelling against its guiding brain.

Only one sentence she spoke: "For Heaven's sake! *Who are you?*"

And again he answered: "You'll find out—soon. But I think you know already. I think you know!"

Helpless, she turned and entered her bedroom. There was a revolver there and she understood she was to get it. But when she pulled open the drawer and yanked aside the piles of silk clothes to pick it up, the clothes felt thick and moist. As she shuddered, Ardis reached past her and picked up the gun. Clinging to the butt, a finger tight-clenched around the trigger, was a hand, the stump of a wrist clotted and torn.

Ardis clucked his lips impatiently and tried to pry the hand loose. It would not give. He pressed and twisted a finger at a time and still the sickening corpse-hand clenched the gun stubbornly. Sidra sat at the edge of the bed like a child, watching the spectacle with naïve interest, noting the way the broken muscles and tendons on the stump flexed as Ardis tugged.

There was a crimson snake oozing from under the closed bathroom door. It writhed across the hardwood floor, thickening to a small river as it touched her skirt so gently. As Ardis tossed the gun down angrily, he noted the stream. Quickly he stepped to the bathroom and thrust open the door, then slammed it a second later. He jerked his head at Sidra and said: "Come on!"

She nodded mechanically and arose, careless of the sopping skirt that smacked against her calves. At Peel's study

she turned the doorknob carefully until a faint click warned her that the latch was open, then she pushed the door in. The leaf opened to reveal her husband's study in semi-darkness. The desk was before the high window curtains and Peel sat at it, his back to them. He was hunched over a candle or a lamp or some rosy light that enhaloed his body and sent streams of light flickering out. He never moved.

Sidra tiptoed forward, then hesitated. Ardis touched finger to lips and moved like a swift cat to the cold fireplace where he picked up the heavy bronze poker. He brought it to Sidra and held it out urgently. Her hand reached out of its own accord and took the cool metal handle. Her fingers gripped it as though they had been born for murder.

Against all that impelled her to advance and raise the poker over Peel's head, something weak and sick inside her cried out and prayed. Cried, prayed and moaned with the mewlings of a fevered child. Like spilt water, the last few drops of her self-possessions trembled before they disappeared altogether.

Then Ardis touched her. His finger pressed against the small of her back and a charge of bestiality shocked along her spine with cruel, jagged edges. Surging with hatred, rage and livid vindictiveness, she raised the poker high and crashed it down over the still-motionless head of her husband.

The entire room burst into a silent explosion. Lights flared and shadows whirled. Remorselessly, she beat and pounded at the falling body that toppled out of the chair to the floor. She struck again and again, her breath whistling hysterically, until the head was a mashed, bloodied pulp. Only then did she let the poker drop and reel back.

Ardis knelt beside the body and turned it over.

"He's dead all right. This is the moment you prayed for, Sidra. You're free!"

She looked down in horror. Dully, from the crimsoned carpet, a slightly distorted corpse face stared back. It showed the drawn, high-strung features, the coal-black eyes, the coal-black hair dipping over the brow in a sharp widow's peak.

She moaned as understanding touched her.

The face said: "This is Sidra Peel. In this man whom you have slaughtered you have killed yourself—killed the only part of yourself worth saving."

She cried: "Aieeee—" and clasped arms about herself, rocking in agony.

"Look well on me," the face said. "By my death you have broken a chain—only to find another!"

And she knew. She understood. For though she still rocked and moaned in the agony that would be never-ending, she saw Ardis arise and advance on her with arms outstretched. His eyes gleamed and were pools of horror; and his reaching arms were tendrils of her own unslaked passion eager to infold her. And once infolded, she knew there would be no escape—no escape from this sickening marriage to her own lusts that would forever caress her.

So it would be forevermore in Sidra's brave new world.

IV

After the others had passed the veil, Christian Braugh still lingered in the shelter. He lit another cigarette with a simulation of perfect aplomb, blew out the match, then called: "Er . . . Mr. Thing?"

"What is it, Mr. Braugh?"

Braugh could not restrain a slight start at that voice sounding from nowhere. "I—well, the fact is, I stayed for a chat."

"I thought you would, Mr. Braugh."

"You did, eh?"

"Your insatiable hunger for fresh material is no mystery to me."

"Oh!" Braugh looked around nervously. "I see."

"Nor is there any cause for alarm. No one will overhear us. Your masquerade will remain undetected."

"Masquerade!"

"You're not a really bad man, Mr. Braugh. You've never belonged in the Sutton shelter clique."

Braugh laughed sardonically.

"And there's no need to continue your sham before me," the voice continued in the friendliest manner. "I know the story of your many plagiarisms was merely another concoction from the fertile imagination of Christian Braugh."

"You know?"

"Of course. You created that legend to obtain entree to the shelter. For years you've been playing the role of a lying scoundrel, even though your blood ran cold at times."

"And do you know why I did that?"

"Naturally. As a matter of fact, Mr. Braugh, I know almost everything; but I do confess that one thing still confuses me."

"What's that?"

"Why, in that devouring appetite for fresh material, were

you not content to work as other authors do? Why this almost insane desire for unique material—for absolutely untrodden fields? Why were you willing to pay such a bitter and often exorbitant price for a few ounces of novelty?"

"Why—" Braugh sucked in smoke and gushed it out past clenched teeth. "I'll tell you why. It's something that's been torturing me all my life. A man is born with imagination."

"Ah . . . imagination."

"If his imagination is slight, a man will always find the world a source of deep and infinite wonder, a place of many delights. But if his imagination is strong, vivid, restless, he finds the world a sorry place indeed—a drab jade beside the wonders of his own creations!"

"These are wonders past all imagining."

"For whom? Not for me, my invisible friend. Nor for any earth-bound, flesh-bound creature. Man is a pitiful thing. Born with the imagination of gods and forever pasted to a round lump of spittle and clay. I have within me the uniqueness, the ego, the fertile loam of a timeless spirit . . . and all that richness is wrapped in a parcel of quickly rotting skin!"

"Ego—" mused the voice. "That is something which, alas, none of us can understand. Nowhere in all the knowable cosmos is it to be found but on your planet, Mr. Braugh. It is a frightening thing and convinces me at times that yours is the race that will—" The voice broke off abruptly.

"That will—" Braugh prompted.

"Come," said the Thing briskly, "there is less owing you than the others and I shall give you the benefit of my experience. Let me help you select a reality."

Braugh pounced on the word: "Less?"

And again he was brushed aside. "Will you have another reality in your own cosmos? I can offer you vast worlds, tiny worlds; great creatures that shake space and fill the voids with their thunders, little creatures of charm and perfection that barely touch the ear with the sensitive timbre of their tinkling. Will you care for terror? I can give you a reality of shudders. Beauty? I can show you realities of infinite ecstasy. Pain. Torture. Any sensation. Name one, several, all. I will shape you a reality to outdo even the giant intellect that is assuredly yours."

"No—" Braugh answered at length. "The senses are only senses at best—and in time they tire of anything. You cannot satisfy the imagination with whipped cream in new forms and flavors."

"Then I can take you to worlds of extra dimensions that

will stun your imagination. There is a region I know that will entertain you forever with incongruity—where, if you sorrow, you scratch your ear; where, if you love, you eat a potato; where, if you die, you burst out laughing—

"There is a dimension I have seen where one can assuredly perform the impossible—where creatures daily compete in the composition of paradox and where the mere feat of turning oneself mentally inside out is known as *'chrythna,'* which is to say, *'corny'* in the American jargon.

"Do you want to probe the emotions in classical order? I can take you to a dimension of twenty-seven planes where one by one, *seriatim et privatim,* you may exhaust the intricate nuances of the twenty-seven primary emotions —and thence go on to infinite combinations and permutations. Come, which will you take?"

"None," Braugh said impatiently. "It is obvious, my friend, that you do not understand the ego of man. The ego is not a childish thing to be satisfied with toys; and yet it is a childish thing in that it yearns after the unattainable—"

"Yours seems to be a childish thing in that it does not laugh. You have no sense of humor, Mr. Braugh."

"The ego," Braugh continued abstractedly, "desires only what it cannot hope to attain. Once a thing is attainable, it is no longer desired. Can you grant me a reality where I may possess something which I desire because I cannot possibly possess it; and by that same possession not break the qualifications of my desire? Can you do this?"

"I'm afraid," the voice answered hesitantly, "that your imagination reasons too deviously for me."

"Ah," Braugh murmured, half to himself. "I was afraid of that. Why does the universe seem to be run by second-rate individuals not half so clever as myself? Why this mediocrity in the appointed authorities?'

"You seek to attain the unattainable," the voice said in reasonable tones, "and by that act not to attain it. The limitations are within yourself. Would you be changed?"

"No . . . no, not changed." Braugh shook his head. He stood for a moment deep in thought, then sighed and tamped out his cigarette. "There's only one solution for my problem."

"And that is?"

"Erasure. If you cannot satisfy a desire, you must explain it away. If a man cannot find love, he must write a psychological treatise on passion. I shall do much the same thing—"

He shrugged and moved toward the veil. There was a slight

motion behind him and the voice asked: "Where does that ego of yours take you, O man?"

"To the truth of things," Braugh called. "If I cannot slake my yearning, at least I shall find out why I yearn."

"You'll find the truth only in hell, my friend."

"How so?"

"Because truth is always hell."

"Nevertheless I'm going there—to hell or wherever truth is to be found."

"May you find the answers pleasant, O man."

"Thank you."

"And may you learn to laugh."

But Braugh no longer heard, for he had passed the veil.

And he found himself standing before a high desk—a bench, almost—as high as the top of his head. Around him was nothing else. It looked as though a sulphurous fog had filled the room, concealing everything but this clerkly bench. Braugh tilted his head back and looked up. Staring down at him from the other side was a tiny little face, ancient as sin, whiskered and cockeyed. It was on a shriveled little head that was covered with a high-pointed hat. Like a sorcerer's cap.

Or a dunce cap, Braugh thought.

Dimly, behind the head, he made out towering shelves of books and files labeled: A—AB, AC—AD, and so on. There was also a gleaming black pot of ink and a rack of quill pens. An enormous hourglass completed the picture. Inside the hourglass a spider had spun a web and was crawling shakily across sand-clotted strands.

The little man croaked: "A-mazing! A-stonishing! Incredible!"

Braugh still stared.

The little man hunched forward like Richard Crookback in an amateur play and got his seamed, comical face as close as possible to Braugh's. He reached down a knobby finger and poked Braugh gingerly. Abruptly he tumbled backward and bawled: "THAMM—UZ! DA—GON! RIMM—ON!"

There was a busy bustle and three more little men bounced up behind the desk and gaped at Braugh. The staring went on for minutes.

"All right," Braugh said at last. "That's enough gawping. Say something. Do something!"

"It speaks!" they shouted in unison. "Its alive!" They pressed four noses together and began to gabble swiftly. It

went: "MostastonishingthingDagonthatIeverhespeaksRimmon coulditbehumanheardwhatitsaidBelialyou'dthinktheremustbe someexplanationd'youthinksoThammuzIcan'tsay!"

Then it stopped.

One said: "First thing is to find out how it got here."

"Not at all. Find out what it is."

The third said: "Find out where it's from."

"I don't know about that, Belial. Cart before the horse, you know."

They raved and again turned noses together. The gabble was very loud: "THEIMPORTANTTHING'SWHERENOT ATALLIT'SWHEREFROMYOU'RECRAZYYOU'REBOTH CRAZYLISTENTOMEHOWCANYOUOHALLRIGHTALL RIGHTALLRIGHT!"

Then apparently they came to a decision. The number one sorcerer pointed an accusing finger at Braugh and said: "What are you doing here?"

"The point is," Braugh countered, "where am I?"

The little man turned to brothers Thammuz, Dagon and Rimmon. He smirked and said: "It wants to know where it is."

Dagon said: "Silly animal, ain't he, Belial?"

Rimmon said: "Oh, get on with it, Belial. Can't hold up business all day."

"You!" Belial swiveled on Braugh. "Listen carefully. This is General Administration, Universal Control Center. Belial, Rimmon, Dagon and Thammuz, acting for Satan."

"Tuts," said Braugh, "I came here to see Satan."

"It wants to see Satan!" They were utterly appalled. Then Dagon jabbed the others with his sharp little elbows and placed a finger alongside his nose with a shrewd look.

"Spy!" he said. To elaborate, he jabbed one finger significantly toward the ceiling, then gave a shrewd look.

"Could be . . . could be," Belial said, flipping the pages of a giant ledger. "It certainly don't belong here. No deliveries scheduled today. It's not dead because it don't smell. It's not alive because only the dead ones come here. Question still is: What is it? What do we do with it?"

Thammuz said: "Divination. Only answer."

"Right!"

"Great mind, that Thammuz!"

Belial glared at Braugh and snapped: "Name?"

"Christian Braugh."

"Ha!" cried Dagon. "Onomancy—C, third letter—H,

eighth letter—and so on. Take total sum. Double it and add ten. Divide by two, then subtract original total—"

They added and divided. Quills scratched on parchment and a bumbling, muttering noise droned. At last Belial held up the scrap and scrutinized it carefully. They all scrutinized it. As one man they shrugged and tore the parchment up.

"I can't understand it," Dagon complained. "We always get five for an answer."

"Never mind!" Belial glared at Braugh. "When born?"

"December eighteenth, nineteen thirteen."

"Time?"

"Twelve fifteen, a.m."

"Star Charts!" screamed Thammuz. "We'll try Genethliacs."

They tore at the books behind them and took out huge sheets that unrolled like window shades. This time it took them fifteen minutes to produce a scrap of parchment which they again examined carefully and again tore up.

Rimmon said: "It *is* odd."

Belial said: "It gets odder and odder."

Thammuz said: "We better take it into the laboratory for a check. The old boy will be plenty peeved if we muff this one."

They leaned over the bench and beckoned imperatively. Braugh followed their directions, walked around the side of the bench and found himself before a small door set in the books. The four little sorcerers bounced down from the desk and crowded him through. They just about came up to his waist.

Braugh entered the so-called laboratory. It was a circular room with a low ceiling, tile floors and walls covered with cupboards, shelves, glass gimmicks, alchemists' gadgets, books, bones and bottles. In the center was a large flat rock, the shape of a millstone. There was a slight depression in the center that had a charred look. But there wasn't any chimney over it.

Belial rooted around in a corner and came out with an armful of dry sticks.

"Altar fire," he said and tripped. The sticks went flying. Braugh solemnly bent to pick up the pieces of wood.

"Sortilege!" Rimmon squawked. He yanked a lizard out of a box and began writing on its back with a piece of charcoal, noting the order in which Braugh picked up the scattered bits of wood.

"Which way is east?" Rimmon demanded, crawling after the

lizard. Thammuz pointed directly overhead. Rimmon nodded curt thanks and began to figure rapidly on the lizard's back. Gradually his hand moved slower. By the time Braugh had helpfully placed the bundle of wood on the altar, Rimmon was holding the lizard by the tail, gawping at his notations with a look of sickly wonder. Finally he shoved the lizard under the wood pile. Instantly it caught fire.

Rimmon said: "Salamander. Not bad, eh?" and swaggered off.

Dagon screamed: "Pyromancy!" and ran to the flames. He stuck his nose within an inch of the fire and mumbled rapidly in a long, droning whisper. Belial fidgeted uneasily and muttered to Thammuz: "Last time he tried that he fell asleep."

The droning faded out and Dagon, eyes blissfully closed, fell forward into the crackling flames.

"Did it again!" Belial snapped irritably.

They ran up and dragged Dagon out of the flames. After they had slapped his face awhile, his whiskers stopped burning. Thammuz sniffed the stench of burned hair, then pointed overhead to the drifting smoke.

"Capnomancy!' he said. "It can't fail. We'll find out what this thing is yet!"

All four joined hands and danced around the rising smoke cloud, puffing at it with little pursed lips. Eventually the smoke disappeared. Thammuz gave a sour look and said: "It failed."

There was a dead silence and all glared angrily at Braugh. He endured it about as long as he could, then he said: "What's up, lads? Anything wrong?"

"It wants to know if anything's wrong," Belial sneered.

"Deceitful thing!" said Dagon.

"Not at all," Braugh said. "I'm not hiding anything. Of course I don't believe a particle of what's happening here, but that don't matter."

"Don't matter! What d'you mean, you don't believe?"

"Why," Braugh said, "you can't make me believe that you charlatans have anything to do with truth—much less His Black Majesty, Father Satan."

"Anything to do with— Why, you blasted booby, *we're Satan*—"

A second later they looked scared, lowered their voices and added: "So to speak."

Belial glanced around uneasily and said to unseen ears: "No offense—"

"Merely referring to power of attorney," Dagon trembled.

"I see," Braugh said. "And how, exactly, am I deceiving you?"

"How? We'll tell you how! You've got a devil with you that obstructs official divination. You're a cacodaemon or maybe a barghest or an ouphe or an incubus. But we'll get to the heart of the matter. We'll ferret you out. We'll track you down. We'll make you talk. Bring on the iron!"

Well, Braugh thought, what's all this? Bring on the iron. Sounds like dancing girls.

Dagon trundled out a little wheelbarrow filled with lumps of iron. To Braugh he said: "Take one—any one." Braugh picked up a heavy lump of blue-gray metal and handed it to Dagon, who snatched it from him irritably and plunked it into a small vat. He placed the vat over the fire and got a pair of bellows which he pumped energetically into the flames. The iron heated white-hot. They nipped it out with pincers and waved it over Braugh's head, chanting: "Sideromancy! Sideromancy! Sideromancy!"

After a while, Dagon said: "No soap."

"Let's try Molybdomancy," Belial suggested.

They dropped the iron into a pot of solid lead. It hissed and fumed as though it had been dropped into cold water. Presently the lead melted. Belial tipped the pot over and the silvery liquid streamed slowly across the floor.

"Lead, lead, beautiful lead!" chanted Rimmon. "Tell us the story of this creature. Is it a man? Is it a—"

A crack, loud and sharp as a pistol shot, answered him. One of the floor tiles shattered to pieces, the lead dropped with a gurgle, and the next instant a fountain of water hissed and spurted up through the hole.

Belial said: "We busted the pipes again."

"Pegomancy!" Dagon cried eagerly. He approached the fountain with a reverent look, knelt before it and began to drone. In thirty seconds his eyes closed rapturously and he fell forward into the water. They dragged him back and wrung out his beard.

"Got to get him dry," Thammuz said hastily. "He'll catch his death. Get him over to the fire."

Taking Dagon by each arm, Thammuz and Belial ran him over to the altar fire. They circled the bright blaze once, and as they were about to stop, Dagon choked: "Keep me moving. We'll try Gyromancy. There's got to be some answer to what that thing is!"

They made another circle while Dagon muttered: "Hubble-ka-bubble-ka-hubble-ka-bubble—"

Suddenly Rimmon, who was squatting over the broken tile, paddling ineffectually at the flood, stopped and said: "Oi!"

The others stopped, too, and said: "Oi!"

Braugh turned.

A girl had just entered the door. She was short, red-headed, and delightfully the right side of plump. Her copper hair was done up on top of her head. She was breathing with indignant short breaths that made her look as though she would shake to pieces. She wore an expression of utter exasperation and nothing else.

"So!" she rapped out. "At it again!"

No answer. Much quartet trembling.

"How many times—" she began, then stopped and bit her lip. Abruptly she ran to the wall, seized a prodigious glass retort and hurled it straight and true. When the pieces stopped falling, she said: "How many times have I told you to cut out this nonsense or I'd report you!"

"N-nonsense?" quavered Belial. He tried to stanch his bleeding cuts and attempted an innocent smile. "Why Astarte, wh-what d'you m-mean?"

"You know damned well what I mean! I will not have you smashing my ceiling, dripping things down on my office. First molten lead—then water. Four weeks work ruined. My new Sheraton desk ruined!" She hitched around and exhibited a long red sear that ran straight down from shoulder to hip. "Twelve inches of skin—ruined!"

Belial went: *"Tsk-tsk!"*

Braugh went: "My-my!"

The red-headed Astarte turned on him and lanced him with level green eyes. "Who's this?"

"We don't know," Belial began eagerly in an effort to change the subject. "That's why we were . . . er— Well, it just walked up to my desk, and . . . and that's all."

As Braugh stepped forward he heard Rimmon whisper: "Might try Parthenomancy . . . that is, if Astarte is—"

Then he took the girl's hand and said: "The name is Braugh. Christian Braugh."

Her hand was cool and firm. She said: "The name is Astarte. I, too, am a Christian."

"Satan's crew Christians?"

"Why not?"

There was no answer to that. He said: "Is there some place where we can get away from these Zanies?"

"There's always my office."

"I like offices."

And he also liked Astarte. She ushered him into her place, on the floor below, swept a pile of papers and books off a chair, and casually invited him to sit down. Then she sprawled before the ruin of her desk and after one malevolent glance at the ceiling, listened to his story.

"As I get this," she said, "you're looking for Satan. Evil Lord of the Universe. Well, this is the only hell there is, and ours is the only Satan there is. You're in the right place."

Braugh was perplexed. "Hell?" he inquired. "Fire, brimstone, and so forth?"

"There are the business offices," she explained. "If you're looking for torments—"

"No," Braugh interrupted hastily. "I thank you. No torments."

She smiled at his solemn face and went on: "All this brings us to something rather vital. Just how did you get here? Dead?"

Braugh shook his head.

"Hm-m-m—" She made an interested survey. "You'll bear more looking into. I've never had anything to do with the live ones. You *are* alive, aren't you?"

"Very much so."

"And what business have you with Father Satan?"

"The truth," Braugh said. "I was granted a wish. I wished to discover the truth of all. I was sent here. Why Father Satan, as you call him, should be official purveyor of the truth rather than—" He hesitated, then delicately indicated heaven. "I don't know. But to me the truth is worth any price, so I should like very much to have an interview."

Astarte rapped glittering nails on the desk and smiled broadly. "This," she said, "is going to be delicious!" She arose, flung open the door of her office and pointed down the corridor. "Straight ahead," said Astarte, "then turn to the left. Keep on and you can't miss."

"I'll see you again?" Braugh asked as he set off.

"You'll see me again," Astarte laughed.

This, Braugh thought as he trudged along the corridor, is all too ridiculous. You pass a veil intending to seek the Citadel of the Truth. You are entertained by four ridiculous creatures and by a red-head goddess. You ask to see the Knower of All Things and discover Him to be Satan rather than God. Then off you go down a musty corridor, turn left and then straight ahead.

What of this yearning of mine? What of these truths I seek? Is there no solemnity, no dignity anywhere? Is not Satan a fearful, thunderous deity? Why all this low comedy —this saturnalian air of slapstick that pervades the Underworld Offices of Satan?

He turned the corner to the left and kept on. The short hall ended abruptly in a pair of green baize doors. Almost timidly Braugh pushed them open and to his great relief found himself merely entering an open stone bridge—rather like the Bridge of Sighs, he thought. Around him was nothing but that same sulphurous mist. Behind him was the giant façade of the building he had just left—a wall of brimstone blocks. Before him was a smallish building shaped like a globe.

He stepped quickly across the bridge, for those misty depths on either side of him made him queasy. He paused only a moment before a second pair of baize doors to gather his courage, then tried to smile and pushed them in. You do not, he muttered to himself, come before Satan with a smirk in your heart; but there is an air of general insanity in hell that has touched me.

It was a large office—a kind of file room, and for the second time Braugh was relieved at having put the awesome moment a little further into the future. The office was round as a planetarium and was filled with the largest and most complicated adding machine Braugh had ever seen in his life. The thing was all keyboard. A long platform before the banks of keys buckled and creaked like a painter's scaffolding as a dried-out little clerk wearing glasses the size of binoculars rushed up and back, punching keys with lightning speed.

More as an excuse to put off the meeting than anything else, Braugh watched the little old man scurry before those keys, punching them so rapidly they chattered like a dozen stuttering motors. This little old chap, Braugh thought, has probably put in an eternity figuring out sin totals and death totals and all sorts of statistical totals. He looks like a total himself.

Aloud, Braugh called: "Hello, there!"

Without wavering, the clerk said: "What is it?" His voice was drier than his skin.

Braugh said: "Those figures can wait a moment, can't they?"

"Sorry," said the little old man. He bustled down the scaffolding on a mad run.

"Will you stop a moment!" Braugh shouted.

The clerk paused and turned, removing the enormous binoculars very slowly.

"Now—that's better," Braugh said. "See here, my man, I'd like to get in to see Satan. His Black Majesty, Satan—"

"That's me," said the little man.

Braugh said: "G-Gug—"

For a fleeting instant the dried-out face flickered into a smile. "Yes, that's me, son. I'm Satan."

And, despite all his imagination, Braugh had to believe.

He slumped down on the lowermost tread of the steps that led up to the scaffold. Satan chuckled faintly and touched a clutch on the gigantic adding machine. Instantly there was a click of gears and with the sound of free-wheeling the machine began to cluck softly like a contented hen.

His Diabolic Majesty came creaking down the stairs and seated himself alongside Braugh. He took out an old silk handkerchief and began polishing his glasses. He was just a nice little old man sitting friendly like alongside Braugh. At last he said: "What's on your mind, son?"

"W-well, Satan—" Braugh began.

"You can call me Father, son."

"B-but why should I? I mean—" Braugh broke off in embarrassment.

"Well now, son, I guess you're a little worried about that heaven-and-hell business, eh?"

Braugh nodded.

Satan clicked his tongue and shook his head dubiously. "Don't know what to do about that," he said. "Fact is, son, it's all the same thing. Naturally I let it get around in certain quarters that there's two places. Got to, to keep certain folks on their toes. But the fact is, it's not really so. I'm all there is, son. God or Satan or Siva or Official Co-ordinator or Nature—or whatever you want to call it."

With a sudden rush of good feeling toward this friendly old man, Braugh said: "I call you a fine old man!"

"Well—that's nice of you, son. Glad you feel that way. You understand, of course, that we couldn't let everyone see me that way. Might instill disrespect."

"Y-yes, sir, I see."

"Got to have efficiency." The little old man went: *Tsk!* and shook his head. "Got to frighten folks now and then. Got to have respect, you understand. Can't run things without respect."

"Yes, sir."

"Got to have efficiency. Can't be running things all day

long, all year long, all eternity long, without efficiency. Can't have efficiency without respect."

Again Braugh said: "Yes, sir—" While within him a hideous uncertainty grew. This was a nice old man—but this was also a maudlin old man. His Satanic Majesty was a tired creature much duller and not nearly so clever as Christian Braugh.

"What I always say," the old man went on, rubbing his knee reflectively, "is that love and all that—you can have 'em. They're nice, of course, but I'll take efficiency any time. Yes, indeed . . . any time . . . leastways, for a body in my position. Now then, son, what was on your mind?"

Mediocrity, Braugh thought grimly. He said: "The Truth, Father Satan. I came seeking the truth."

"And what do you want with the truth, Christian?"

"I just want to know it, Father Satan. I came seeking it. Want to know why we are, why we live, why we yearn—I want to know all that."

"Well, now"—the old man chuckled—"that's quite an order, son. Yes, sir, quite an order indeed."

"Can you tell me, Father Satan?"

"A little, son, just a little. What was it you wanted to know mostly?"

"What there is inside of us that makes us seek the unattainable!" Braugh cried with passion. "What are those forces that pull and tug and surge within us? What is this ego of mine that gives me no rest, that seeks no rest, that frets at turbulence and yet seeks nothing but turbulence. What is all this?"

"Why," the old man said, pointing to his adding machine. "It's that gadget over there. It runs everything."

"That!"

"Yes. That."

"It runs everything?"

"Everything that I run—and I run everything there is." The old man chuckled again, then held out the binoculars. "You're an unusual boy, Christian. First person that ever said a kind word for old Father Satan. First person that ever had the decency to pay the old man a visit. I'll return the favor. Here!"

Wondering, Braugh accepted the glasses.

"Put 'em on," said the old man.

And then the wonder began, for as Braugh slipped the glasses over his head he found himself peering with the eyes of the universe at all the universe. And the adding

machine was no longer a machine, but a vastly complex marionetteers crossbar from which an infinity of shimmering silver threads descended.

And with his all-seeing eyes, with the spectacles of Satan, Braugh perceived how each thread attached itself to the nape of the neck of a creature and how each living entity danced the dance of life to the tune of Father Satan's efficient machine.

Wondering, he stumbled up to the scaffold and reached toward the banks of keys. One key he pressed and on a pale planet a creature hungered and killed. A second key and it felt remorse. A third, and it forgot. A fourth, and half a continent away another entity arose five minutes early and so began a chain of events that culminated in discovery and hideous punishment for the murderer.

Slowly Braugh backed away from the adding machine and in a kind of horror s"pped the glasses up to his brow. The machine went on clu ng, and only vaguely did he note that the meticulous chron neter on the wall had ticked away a space of three months' time.

"This," he thought, "is ghastliest of all. We were puppets. We danced the dance of death in life, for we were little better than dead things hung from a string. Up here an old man, not overly intelligent, clicks a few keys, and down there we dance on our strings and take it for a thousand things—for fate, for free will, for Karma, for evolution, for nature, for a thousand false things.

"And none of us knew or knows or will care to know the truth—that there is neither reason, nor beauty, nor sanity to life. That all our mysterious yearning is the push of a decrepit finger on a tab. Oh—it's a bitter thing, this sour discovery. It's a bitter thing always to yearn after truth and find it to be shoddy!"

He glanced down. Old Father Satan was still seated on the steps, but his head slumped a little to one side, his eyes were half closed and he murmured indistinctly about work and rest and not enough of it.

"You're a good boy, Christian," the old man mumbled, "a good boy—"

And revolt stirred in Braugh. "This isn't fair!" he cried. "Father Satan!"

"Yes, my boy?" The old man roused himself slightly.

"This is true? We all dance to your key-tapping?"

"All of you, my boy. All of you."

"And although we think we are free, yet we dance to your tune?"

"You all think yourselves free, Christian, and yet you all dance to Father Satan's playing."

"Then, Father, grant me one thing—one very small thing. There is in a small corner of your mighty kingdom a very tiny planet . . . a very insignificant speck called the Earth—"

"Earth? Earth? Can't say I recollect it off-hand, son, but I could look it up."

"No, don't bother, Father Satan. It's there. Only grant me this favor—break the cords that bind it. Let it go free!"

"Now, son, don't be foolish. I can't do that."

"In all your kingdom," Braugh pleaded, "there are souls too numerous to count. There are suns and planets too vast to measure. Surely this one tiny bit of dust with its paltry few people— You who own so much can surely part with so little!"

"No, my boy, couldn't do it. Sorry—"

"You who alone knows freedom," Braugh cried. "Would you deny it to others?"

But the Co-ordinator of All slumbered.

"This, then, is His Satanic Majesty," Braugh thought. "This likable, simple old man is the one free agent in an entire cosmos. This is the answer to my seeking, and behold, the answer sleeps!"

Braugh grimly slipped the glasses back over his eyes. Let him slumber then, while Braugh, Satan pro tem, takes over. Oh, we shall be repaid for this disappointment. We shall have a giddy time writing novels in flesh and blood! And perhaps, if we can find the cord that leads to my neck and search out the proper key in all these billions, we may do something to free Christian Braugh!

He turned from the keyboard and craned his head over his shoulder, and even as his eyes searched, he stopped short, stunned, transfixed. His eyes ran up, then down, then up again. His hands began to tremble, then his arms, and finally his whole body shuddered uncontrollably. For the first time in his life he began to laugh, and the hysterical peals rang through the vast-domed room.

And Father Satan awoke and cried anxiously: "Christian! What is it? What is this laughter?"

Laughter of frustration? Laughter of relief? Laughter of promise? He could not tell as he shook at the sight of that slender tendril that stretched from the nape of Satan's neck and turned him, too, into a capering puppet. A silver thread

that stretched upward into the infinite heights toward some other vaster machine hidden in the still unknowable reaches of the cosmos—

The blessedly unknowable cosmos.

V

Now in the beginning all was darkness. There was neither land nor sea nor sky nor the circling stars. There was nothing. Then came Yaldabaoth and rent the light from the darkness. And the darkness He gathered up and formed into the night and the skies. And the light He gathered up and formed into the Sun and the stars. Then from the flesh and the blood of His blood did Yaldabaoth form the earth and all things upon it.

But the children of Yaldabaoth were new and green to living and unlearned, and the race did not bear fruit. And as the children of Yaldabaoth diminished in numbers they cried out unto their Lord: "Grant us a sign, Great God, that we may know how to increase and multiply! Grant us a sign, O Lord, that Thy good and mighty race may not perish from Thine earth!"

And Lo, Yaldabaoth withdrew himself from the face of his importunate people and they were sore at heart and sinful, thinking their Lord had forsaken them. And their paths were the paths of evil until a prophet arose whose name was Maart. Then did Maart gather the children of Yaldabaoth around him and spoke to them, saying: "Evil are thy ways, O people of Yaldabaoth, to doubt thy God. For He has given a sign of faith unto you."

Then gave they answer, saying: "Where is this sign?"

And Maart went into the high mountains and with him was a vast concourse of people. Nine days and nine nights did they travel even unto the peak of Mount Sinar. And at the crest of Mount Sinar all were struck with wonder and fell to their knees, crying: "Great is God! Great are His works!"

For Lo, before them blazed a mighty curtain of fire.

Book of Maart; XIII: 29-37.

Pass the veil toward what reality? There's no sense trying to make up my mind. I cannot. God knows, that's been the agony of living for me—trying to make up my mind. How can I when I've felt nothing . . . when nothing's touched me—

ever! Take this or take that. Take coffee or tea. Buy the black gown or the silver. Marry Lord Buckley or live with Freddy Witherton. Let Finchley make love to me or stop posing for him. No—there's no sense even trying.

How it glitters in the doorway. Like silk moiré or rainbow lamé. There goes Sidra. Passed through as though nothing was there. Doesn't seem to hurt. That's good. God knows I could stand anything except being hurt. No one left but Bob and myself—and he doesn't seem to be in any hurry. My turn now, I suppose. But where to?

To nowhere?

Yes—that's it. To nowhere!

In this world I'm leaving there's never been any place for me. There was nothing I could do; nothing I ever wanted to do. The world wanted nothing from me but my beauty. It had no need of me. Nothing but to pose naked while near-sighted little men smudged pictures on canvas.

I want to be useful. I want to belong. Perhaps if I belonged—if living had some purpose for me, this lump of ice in my heart might melt. I could learn to feel things—enjoy things. Even learn to fall in love.

Yes—that's it. To nowhere!

Let the reality that needs me, that wants me, that can use me . . . let that reality have me and call me to itself. For if I must choose, I know I shall choose wrong again. And if I am not wanted . . . anywhere; if I go through to wander forever in blank time and space . . . still am I better off.

Take me, you who want me and need me!

How cool the veil . . . like scented sprays caressing the skin.

And even as the multitude knelt in prayer, Maart cried aloud: "Rise, ye children of Yaldabaoth, and behold!"

Then did all arise and were struck dumb and trembled. For through the curtain of fire stepped a beast that chilled the hearts of all. To the height of eight cubits it stood and its skin was pink and white as nacre. The hair of its head was yellow and its body was long and curving like unto a sickly tree. And all was covered with slack folds of white fur.

Book of Maart; XIII: 38-39

God in Heaven!

Is this the reality that called me? This the reality that needs me?

That scarlet sun . . . so high . . . with its blood-red evil eye. Mountaintops . . . like pain-racked titans. Towering mounds of gray slime— The scabrous sheen of valley floors —The pervading sickroom stench of fetid ruination—

And those monstrous creatures crowding around me— like gorillas made of black, rotting coal. Not animal, not human. As though man had fashioned beasts not too well— or beasts had fashioned men still worse. They have a familiar look to them, these monstrosities. The landscape has a familiar look. Somewhere I have seen all this before. Somehow I have been here before. In dreams of death— Yes—

This is a reality of death and twisted shadows.

Again the multitude cried out: "Glory to Yaldabaoth!" and at the sound of the sacred name, the beast turned toward the curtain of flames whence it had come. And Behold! The curtain was gone.

Book of Maart; XIII: 40.

No retreat?

No way out?

No way back to sanity?

But it was behind me a second ago, the veil! No escape— Listen to the sounds they make. The swilling of swine in muck. This can't be real. No reality was ever so horrible. This is all a ghastly trick. Like the one we played on Lady Sutton. I'm in the shelter now. Bob Peel's given us a new kind of hashish or opium— I'm lying on the couch dreaming and groaning. Presently I'll be awake— Before they come any closer—

I must awaken!

With a loud and piercing cry, the beast of the fire ran through the multitude. Through all the gathered thousands it ran and thundered down the mountainside. And the shrill sound of its cries was as the brazen clangor of beaten shields.

And as it passed under the low boughs of the mountain trees, the children of Yaldabaoth cried out in new alarm; for the beast shed its white furred hide in a manner horrible to behold. And the skin remained clinging to the trees. And the beast ran farther, a hideous pink-and-white thing.

Book of Maart; XIII: 41-43.

Quick! Quick! Run through them before they clutch me. Down the mountainside! If this is a nightmare, running will awaken me. If this is reality— But it can't be. That so cruel a thing should happen to me— Were the gods jealous of my beauty? Jealous of the pride I took in my beauty? No. The gods are never jealous.

My dressing gown!

Gone.

No time to go back for it. Run naked, then— Listen to them howl at me— Raven at me. Down! Down! Quickly and down. This rotten soft offal earth sucks my feet like a leech's mouth. Like the pulsating tendrils of an octopus.

They're following.

Why can't I wake up?

My breath—like knives in my chest that dance quickstep of cutting torture.

Why can't I wake up?

Close! I hear them. Close!

WHY CAN'T I WAKE UP?

And Maart cried aloud: "Take you this beast for an offering to our Lord Yaldabaoth!"

Then did the multitude raise stout courage and gird its loins. With clubs and stones all pursued the beast down the jagged slopes of Mount Sinar, chanting the name of the Lord.

And on a small plateau stout warriors pursued it until a shrewdly thrown stone brought the beast to its knees, still screaming in a manner horrible to hear. Then did the warriors smite it many times with strong clubs until at last the cries ceased and the beast was still. And out of the pink-and-white carcass oozed a fetid red matter that sickened all who beheld it.

But when the beast was brought to the High Temple of Yaldabaoth and placed in a cage before the altar, the cries once more resounded, desecrating the sacred halls. And the High Priests were troubled, saying: "What foul offering is this to place before Yaldabaoth, Lord of Gods?"

Book of Maart; XIII: 44-47.

Pain.

Like burning and scalding.

Can't move.

No dream was ever so long—so real. This, then, is real, all real. And I, too, am real. A stranger in a reality of filth

and horror and torture. My beauty— But why? Why? Why?

My head—still ringing. It feels twisted. It itches inside. I want to scratch it.

This is torture, and somewhere . . . some place— I have heard that word before. Torture. It has a pleasant sound. Torture. The sound of a madrigal; the name of a boat; the title of a prince. Prince Torture.

So light in my head. Great lights and blinding sounds that come and go and have no meaning.

Once upon a time I torture a man—they say.

His name was?

Finchley? Yes. Digby Finchley.

Digby Finchley, they say, loved a pink ice goddess named Theone Dubedat—they say.

The pink ice goddess.

Where is she now?

And while the beast did moan malicious spells upon the altar steps, the Sanhedrin of Priests held council, and to the council came Maart, saying: "O ye priests of Yaldabaoth, raise up your hearts and voices in praise of our Lord. For He was displeased with us and turned His face away. And Lo, a sacrifice has been vouchsafed unto us that we may make our peace with Him."

Then spoke the High Priest, saying: "How now, Maart? Do ye say that this is a sacrifice for our Lord?"

And Maart spoke: "Yea. For it is a beast of fire. It was born of the fire and through fire it shall return whence it came."

And the High Priest said: "Is this offering seemingly in the sight of Yaldabaoth?"

And Maart spoke, saying: "All things are from Yaldabaoth. Therefore are all things good in His sight. Perchance through this strange offering Yaldabaoth will grant us a sign that His people may not vanish from the earth. Let the beast be offered."

Then did the priests agree, for they, too, were sore afraid lest the children of the Lord be no more.

Book of Maart; XIII: 48-54.

See the pretty monkeys dance.
They dance around and around and around.
And they snort.
Almost like speaking.

Almost like— I must stop the singing in my head. The ring-ring-singing. Like the days when Dig was working hard and I would take those difficult poses and hold them for hour after hour with maybe five minutes' time out and I would get dizzy sometimes and reel off the dais and Dig would drop his palette in fright and come running with those big solemn eyes of his ready to cry.

And I knew he loved me and I wanted to love him, but I had no need then. I had no need of anything but finding myself. Now I'm found. This is me. Now I have a need and an ache and a loneliness deep, deep inside for Dig and his love. To see him all eyes and fright at the fainting spells and dancing around me with a cup of tea.

Dancing—dancing—dancing—

And thumping their chests and grunting and thumping.

And when they grunt the spittle drools and gleams on their yellow fangs. And those seven with the rotting shreds of cloth across their chests.

See the pretty monkeys dance.

They dance around and around and around—

So it came to pass that the high holiday of Yaldabaoth was nigh. And on that day did the priests throw wide the portals of the temple and the hosts of the children of Yaldabaoth did enter. Then did the priests remove the beast from the cage and drag it to the altar. Each of four priests held a limb and spread the beast wide across the altar stone, and the beast screamed again with evil, blasphemous sounds.

Then cried Maart: "Rend this thing to pieces that the smell of its evil death may rise to please the nostrils of Yaldabaoth!"

And the four priests, strong and holy, put powerful hands to the limbs of the beast so that its struggles were wondrous to behold; and the light of evil on its hideous hide struck terror into all.

And as Maart lit the altar fires, a great trembling shook the earth.

Book of Maart; XIII: 55-59.

Digby, come to me!

Digby—wherever you are—come to me!

Digby, I need you.
This is Theone.
Theone.
The pink ice goddess.
No longer pink ice, Digby.
Digby, I can't stay sane much longer.
Wheels whirl faster in my head.
Faster and faster.
Digby, come to me.
I need you.
Torture—

Then did the vaults of the temple split asunder with a thunderous roar, and all that were gathered there quailed and their bowels were as water. And all beheld the glittering image of the Lord, Yaldabaoth, descend from pitch-black skies to the temple. Yea, to the very altar itself.

For the space of an eternity did the Lord God Yaldabaoth gaze at the beast of the fire and the beast snarled and writhed, helpless in its evil.

Book of Maart; XIII: 59-60.

It is the final horror—the torture.

This monstrosity that floats down from the heavens.

This hideous apelike, manlike, bestial thing.

It is the final jest that it should float down like the ephemera, like a thing of fluff, a thing of lightness and joy. A monster on wings of light. A monster that stands like a rotting corpse with its twisted legs and twisted arms and the shaggy, loathsome body. A monster with the head of a man that looks torn and broken, smashed and ravaged. With those great saucer eyes—

Eyes? Where have I—

THOSE EYES!

This isn't madness. No. I know those eyes—those great, solemn eyes. I've seen them before. Years ago. Minutes ago. Great, solemn eyes filled with hopeless love and adoration.

No—let me be wrong.

Those big, solemn eyes of his ready to cry.

No, not Digby. It can't be. Please—

That's where I've seen this scene before, seen these crea-

tures and the landscape—Digby's drawings. Those monstrous pictures he drew.

But why does he look like that? Why is he rotten and loathsome like the others—like his pictures?

This is your reality, Digby? Did you call me? Need me? Want me?

Digby!

Why don't you listen to me? Why do you look at me that way, like a mad thing when only a minute ago you walked up and back the length of the shelter and finally darted through the veil toward—

And with a voice like unto shattering mountains, the Lord Yaldabaoth spoke to His people, saying: "Now praise ye the Lord, my children, for one has been sent unto you to be thy queen and consort to thy God."

With one voice the multitude cried out: "Praise the Lord, Yaldabaoth!"

And Maart groveled before the Lord and spoke, saying: "A sign to Thy children, O Lord, that they may increase and multiply!"

Then the Lord God reached out to the beast and touched it, raising it with both hands from the altar fires. And behold! The evil cried out for the last time and fled the body of the beast, leaving only a pleasant song in its place. And the Lord spoke unto Maart, saying: "Lo, I will give you a sign."

Book of Maart; XIII: 60-63.

Let me die.

Let me die.

Let me not see and not hear and not feel the—

The?

Pretty monkeys that dance around and around and around while the great, solemn eyes stare into my soul, and Digby, the darling, touches me with hands so strangely changed.

Changed by the turpentine, perhaps, or the ochre or the bice green or Vandyke brown or burnt umber or sepia or chrome yellow which always seemed to stain his fingers each time he put down the brush.

How good to be loved by Digby. How warm and comforting to be loved and to be needed to want one alone in

all the millions and to find him so strangely walking in a reality like that of when Sutton Castle can't see and I really knew that the cliffs down which I ran so funny so funny so funny so funny so funny so funny—

Then did the children of Yaldabaoth take the sign of the Lord to their hearts, and Lo, thenceforward did they increase and multiply, forever chanting the praise of their Lord and His Consort on high.

Thus ends the Book of Maart.

VI

Exactly at the moment when he entered the veil, Peel paused in astonishment. He had not yet made up his mind. To him, a man of utter objectivity and absolute logic, this was an amazing thing. It was the first time in all his life that he had not made a decision with trigger speed. It was the final proof of how violently the Thing in the shelter had shocked him.

He stood where he was and took stock. He was sheathed in a mist of fire that flamed like an opal and was far thicker than any veil should be. It was not beautiful to Peel, but it was interesting. The color dispersion was wide and embraced hundreds of fine gradations of the visible spectrum. He could identify more than a score by name.

With the little data he had at hand he judged that he was standing somewhere either outside time and space or between dimensions. Evidently the Thing in the shelter had placed all of them en rapport with the matrix of existence so that the mere intent as they entered the veil could govern the direction they would take on emergence. In other words—would direct the time and space into which they would step. The veil was more or less a pivot that could spin them into any desired existence.

Which brought Peel to the matter of his own choice. Carefully he considered, weighed and balanced accounts. So far he was satisfied with the life he led. He had plenty of money, a remunerative profession as consultant engineer, a lovely house, an attractive wife. To give all this up in reliance on the vague promises of an invisible donor would be sheer idiocy. Peel had learned never to make a change without

good and sufficient reason. There was neither good nor sufficient reason now.

"I am not," Peel thought coldly, "adventurous by nature. It is not my business to be so. Romance does not attract me, nor does the unknown. I know that I like to keep what I have. Perhaps I am overly fond of keeping. The acquisitive instinct is strong in me and I am not ashamed to be a possessive man. Acquisitiveness has brought me wealth and success. Now I want to keep what I have. There can be no other decision for me. Let the others have their romance— I keep my world precisely as it is."

He strode forward firmly, a punctilious, bald, bearded martinet, and emerged into the dungeon corridor of Sutton Castle.

A few feet before him, a little scullery maid in blue and gray was scurrying directly toward him, a tray in her hands. There was a bottle of beer and an enormous sandwich on the tray. At the sound of his step she looked up, stopped short, her eyes widening, then dropped the tray with a crash.

"What the devil—" Peel began, confounded at the sight of her.

"M-Mr. P-Peel!" she squawked. She began to scream: "Help! Murder! Help!"

Peel slapped her sharply. "Will you shut up and tell me what in blazes you're doing down here this time of night— carrying on like this?"

The girl squawked and sputtered. Exactly, Peel noted, like a decapitated hen.

Before he could slap her again he felt the hand on his shoulder. He turned sharply and received another shock to find himself staring into the red, beefy face of a policeman. The man was in uniform and there was a rather eager expression on his heavy face. Peel gaped, then subsided. He realized quite suddenly that he was in the vortex of phenomena. No sense struggling until he understood the tides.

"Na then, sir," the policeman said. "No call ter strike the gel, sir."

Peel made no answer. The sharp needles of his mind plucked at the facts. A maid and a policeman. What were they doing down here?

"If I recollect a'right, sir, I heard the gel call yer by name. Would yer give it again, sir?"

"I'm Robert Peel, you blasted idiot. I'm a guest of Lady Sutton's. What is all this?"

"Mr. Peel!" the policeman cried. "What a piece er luck. I got to take yer into custody, Mr. Peel. Yer under arrest."

"Arrest? You're out of your mind, my man!" Peel stepped back and glanced over the policeman's shoulder. The veil was gone and in its place the door to the shelter yawned wide. The entire place was turned upside down. It looked as though it had just been subjected to a spring cleaning. There was no one inside.

"I must warn yer not ta resist, Mr. Peel."

The girl emitted a wail that verged on another scream.

"See here," Peel snapped irritably, "who the deuce are you? What right do you have to break into a private home and prance around making arrests?"

The policeman waved his hand indignantly. "Name of Jenkins, sir. Sutton Township Force. And I ain't prancin', sir."

"Then you're serious?"

The policeman pointed a majestic finger up the corridor. "Come along, sir."

"Answer me, you blithering idiot! Are you serious?"

"*You* oughter, know, sir," replied the policeman with considerable dignity. "Now come along."

Peel gave it up helplessly and went. He had learned long ago that when one is faced with an incomprehensible situation it is folly to take any action until sufficient data comes to hand. He preceded the policeman up the winding stairs and heard the whimpering scullery maid come after them. So far he still only knew two things. One: Something, somewhere, had happened. Two: The police had taken over. All this was upsetting to say the least, but he would keep his head. He prided himself that no situation ever took him at a loss.

When they emerged from the cellars, Peel received his second surprise. It was broad daylight outside—bright daylight. He glanced at his watch. It read exactly twelve forty. He dropped his wrist and blinked. The unexpected sunlight made him a little ill. The policeman touched his arm and directed him toward the library. Peel immediately marched to the high, sliding doors and pulled them open.

The library was high, long and narrow, with a small balcony running around it just under the ceiling. There was a long trestle table filling the length of the room, and at the far end three figures were seated, silhouetted against the light

that streamed through the narrow window. Peel stepped in, vaguely conscious of a second policeman on guard beside the door. His eyes narrowed as he tried to distinguish faces.

While he peered, he listened carefully to the tremendous hubbub of surprise and exclamations that greeted him. He judged that: One: People had been looking for him. Two: He had been missing for some time. Three: No one had ever expected to find him here in Sutton Castle. Four: How did he get back in, anyway? All this from the astonished voices. Then his eyes accommodated to the light.

One of the three was a lanky, angular man with a narrow, graying head and deep-furrowed features. He looked familiar to Peel. The second was short and stout with ridiculously fragile glasses perched on a bulbous nose. The third was a woman, and again Peel was shocked to see that it was his wife. She wore a plaid suit and held a crumpled green felt hat in her lap.

Before he could analyze the data further, the angular man quieted the others and then turned. He said: "Mr. Peel?"

Peel advanced quietly and said: "Yes?"

"I'm Inspector Hoss."

"I thought I recognized you, inspector. We've met before, I believe?"

"We have." Hoss nodded curtly, then indicated the fat man. "This is Dr. Richards."

"How d'you do, doctor—" Peel turned toward Sidra and bowed with a faint air of irony. "Sidra?"

In flat tones she said: "Hello, Robert."

"I'm afraid I'm a little confused by all this," Peel went on amiably. "Things seem to be happening—" This, he knew, was the right talk. Be cautious. Commit yourself to nothing.

"They are," Hoss said grimly.

"Before we go any further, might I inquire the time?"

Hoss was a little taken aback. He said: "It's two o'clock."

"Thank you." Peel held his watch to his ear, then adjusted the hands. "My watch seems to be running, but somewhere it's lost a little time—" While he apparently devoted himself to his wrist watch he examined their expressions minutely. He would have to navigate with exquisite care purely by the light of their countenances until he learned much more.

Then, quite abruptly, Peel forgot his watch and stared at the desk calendar before Hoss. This was like a punch in the

ribs. He swallowed and said: "Is that date quite right, inspector?"

Hoss glanced at the calendar, then back at Peel, his eyes widening. "It is, Mr. Peel. Sunday the twenty-third."

His mind screamed: Three days! Impossible.

Easy— Easy— Peel stiffened and controlled himself. Very well. Somewhere he had lost three days—for he had entered the veil Thursday just past midnight. He felt himself beginning to perspire and reached out blindly for a chair. "You'll have to excuse me," he said faintly, and sat down.

Keep cool, you confounded idiot. There's more at stake than three lost days. He lectured to himself in swift silence to give his nerves time to calm. You know you're a match for anyone. People don't know how to think. A man with a logical mind can cope with anything. Wait for more data.

After a moment of silence, Hoss said: "The fact is, Mr. Peel, we've been looking for you these past three days. You disappeared quite suddenly and we thought we knew why. We're rather surprised to find you in the castle. Rather surprised, indeed—"

"Ah? Why?" Careful now. Be careful!

"I should have thought you'd stay as far away from Sutton Castle as possible."

"Again why?" What's happened? Why the police—the suspicion—the guarded tones? What's Sidra doing here sitting like an avenging fury?

"Because, Mr. Peel, you're charged with the willful and intended murder of Lady Sutton."

Shock! Shock! Shock! They piled on one after the other, and still Peel kept hold of himself. The data was coming in a little too explicitly now. He had hesitated in the veil for a few seconds, and those seconds amounted to three days. Lady Sutton was found dead—evidently. He was charged with murder. Still he needed more facts before he spoke. Now, more than ever, he had to steer carefully.

Peel said: "I don't understand. You had better explain."

"Early Friday morning," Hoss began without preamble, "the death of Lady Sutton was reported. Immediate medical examination proved she died of shock. Witnesses' evidence revealed that you had deliberately frightened her with full knowledge of her weak heart and with the express intent so to kill her. That is murder, Mr. Peel."

"It certainly is," Peel answered coldly, "if you can prove it. May I ask whom your witnesses are?"

"Digby Finchley. Christian Braugh. Theone Dubedat, and—" Hoss broke off, coughed and laid the paper aside.

"And Sidra Peel," Peel finished dryly. Again he met his wife's eye and read the venomous expression clearly. "How very choice!"

But the light broke and he understood at last. They had lost their nerve, those quaking swine, and selected him for the scapegoat. Perhaps because of the golden opportunity of his disappearance. Perhaps—and this was more likely—under the malicious aegis of his wife. This would be Sidra's move to get rid of him, humiliate him, drag him through the courts and up to the executioner's dock. This would be Sidra's perfect revenge.

He got to his feet and before Hoss or Richards could interfere, he grasped Sidra by the arm and dragged her to a corner of the library. Over his shoulder he said: "Don't be alarmed, inspector, I only want a word with my wife."

Hoss coughed and called: "It's all right, officer—" and the menacing blue shadow retreated from Peel's elbow and returned to its post at the door.

Sidra tore her arm free and glared up at Peel, her face suffused with passion; her lips drawn back slightly, showing the sharp white edges of her teeth.

Peel snapped: "You arranged this."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't stall, Sidra. This was your idea."

"It was your murder," she countered.

"Ah?"

"It was. We saw you do it. We tried to stop you, but we couldn't. We've sworn to it—the four of us."

"And it was all your idea?"

Her eyes flashed: "Yes!"

"Hoss will be interested to hear that."

"He won't."

"What if I tell him—"

"He won't believe you. We're four to one."

"I can pick holes in your story."

"Try!"

"You're well prepared, eh?"

"Braugh is a good writer," she said. "You won't find any flaws in our story."

"So you're getting rid of me, eh? I hang for the murder on your trumped-up evidence. You get the house, my fortune and, best of all, you get rid of me."

She smiled like a cat. "You catch on fast, Robert."

"And this is the reality you asked for? This is what you planned when you went through the veil?"

"What veil?"

"You know what I mean."

"You're mad." She was confused.

"You're lying."

She smashed her knuckles into his face.

"Never mind," Peel said quite loudly, a plan taking shape in his mind, "never mind, Sidra. But if you think you're going to turn me into a scapegoat you're quite mistaken. Yes —quite mistaken."

"Here," Hoss called sharply, "What's all this?"

"He wanted me to bribe the witnesses," Sidra said in a clear voice, walking back to her seat. "I was to offer them ten thousand pounds each."

The doctor grunted: "Cad!"

Hoss said: "Now see here, Peel, we've been—"

"Please, inspector," Peel interrupted. He sauntered up to the desk, his mind clicking rapidly. The best defense was a startling offensive. The best time to begin was now. "My wife has just told you a fantastic lie."

"Ha?"

"More than that, inspector, your other witnesses have lied, too. I wish to charge Braugh, Finchley, Miss Dubedat and my wife with the willful murder of Lady Sutton!"

Hoss gasped and started forward, slapping the papers off the table. As the doctor bent to pick them up, Hoss stuttered: "M-my d-dear Peel! Really . . . you know!"

"Don't believe him!" Sidra screamed. "He's lying. He's trying to lie out of it!"

He let her scream, grateful for more time to whip his story into shape. It must be convincing—flawless. The truth was impossible. And who would believe the truth, anyway? What was truth for him was plainly unknown to the others.

"The murder of Lady Sutton," Peel went on smoothly, "was planned and executed by those four persons. I was the only member of the party to demur. You will grant me, inspector, that it sounds far more logical for four persons to

commit a murder against the will of one, than one against four. Four could stop one. One could not possibly stand in the way of four."

Hoss nodded, fascinated by Peel's cold logic.

"Moreover, it is far easier for four persons to trump up a false account and swear to it, than for one to outweigh the evidence of four."

Again Hoss nodded.

Sidra beat at Hoss' shoulder and cried shrilly: "He's lying, inspector. If he's telling the truth ask him why he ran away! Ask him where he's been these last three days! Ask him—"

"Unfortunately there's little love lost between my wife and myself," Peel commented dryly. "Her evidence is entirely wishful thinking."

Hoss freed himself and said: "Please . . . Mrs. Peel. I beg you—"

With a graceful gesture, Peel ran sensitive fingers across his crisp beard and mustache. "My story is this," he continued, "the four whom I accuse desired to murder Lady Sutton. Motive? A craving for the ultimate in emotional sensation. They were utterly depraved and degenerate. The only reason I was a part of their devilish clique was to protect my wife as much as possible. On Thursday night I learned of their plans for the first time. I refused to permit them to continue and threatened to reveal all to Lady Sutton. Evidently they were prepared for this. My wine was drugged and I was rendered unconscious. I have a faint recollection of being lifted and carried somewhere by the two men and—that's all I know of the murder."

"My word!" Hoss gasped. The doctor leaned over to him and whispered. Hoss nodded and murmured: "Yes, yes—the tests can come later." He turned to Peel and said: "Please, go on."

So far, Peel thought, so good. Add a little truth to a lie and it makes the whole seem truthful. Now for the rest, he would have to add just enough color to gloss over the rough edges.

"I came to in pitch darkness. I was lying on a stone floor. I heard no sounds, nothing but the ticking of my watch. These dungeon walls are fifteen and twenty feet thick in places so I could not possibly hear anything. When I got to my feet I found I was in a small cavity about ten feet square.

"I realized that I was in some secret cell that was as yet unknown to any but the members of the clique. After an hour's

shouting vainly for help and pounding on the wall, an accidental blow of my fist must have touched the proper spring or lever. One section, vastly thick, swung open quite abruptly and I found myself in the passage were I was picked up—"

"He's lying!" Sidra screamed again.

While Hoss calmed her, Peel coolly considered his position. His story was excellent so far. The evidence at hand was sufficiently strong. Sutton Castle was known for its secret passages. His clothes were still rumpled from the framework he had worn to frighten Lady Sutton. There was no known saliva or blood test to show that he had been drugged seventy-two hours previous. His beard and mustache would eliminate the shaving line of attack. So far his logic was excellent.

"That," Peel said quietly, "is my story."

"We note that you plead not guilty, Mr. Peel," Hoss said, "and we note your story and accusation. I confess that your three-day disappearance seemed to incriminate you, but now—" He shrugged. "All we need do is locate this mysterious cell in which you were confined."

Peel was even prepared for this. He said: "You may, and then again you may not. I'm an engineer, you know. I warn you that the only way we may be able to locate the cell is by blasting through the stone, which may only serve to wipe out all traces."

"We'll take that chance."

"That chance may not have to be taken," the little round doctor said.

Hoss turned slowly and gave the doctor a curious glance. Sidra exclaimed. Peel shot a sharp look toward the man. Experience warned him that fat men were always dangerous.

"It was a perfect story, Mr. Peel," the fat doctor said pleasantly, "quite a perfect story. Most entertaining. But really, my dear sir, for an engineer you slipped up quite badly."

"I beg your pardon?" Peel said stiffly, every nerve on guard.

"When you awoke in your cell," the doctor went on with a childish smile, "you mentioned that you were in complete darkness and silence. The walls were so thick all you heard was the ticking of your watch. Very colorful. But, alas, proof of a lie. You awoke seventy hours later— *No watch will run seventy hours without rewinding!*"

He was right. Peel realized that at once. He had made a

mistake, and there was no going back for alterations. The entire story depended on the wholeness of the fabric. Tear away one threat and the whole thing would ravel. The fat doctor was right—and he was trapped.

One glance at Sidra's malevolent, triumphant face was enough for him. He decided that now was the time for action, and very quick action indeed. He arose from his chair, laughing in obvious defeat. Hoss was gaping again; the doctor chuckling like a pleased puzzle-solver; Sidra gloating. Peel sprinted to the window like a shot, crossed arms before his face, and smashed through the glass pane.

The shattering of the glass and the excited shouts behind him were only vague sounds. Peel limbered his legs as the soft earth came up at him and landed with a jarring shock. It was a fifteen-foot drop, but he took it well. He was on his feet in a trice and running toward the rear of the castle where the cars were parked. Five seconds later he was vaulting into Sidra's roadster. Ten seconds later he was speeding past the high iron gates to the highway outside.

Even in this crisis, Peel thought swiftly and with precision. He had driven out of the grounds too quickly for anyone to note which direction he would take. He turned toward London and sent the car roaring down the road until he came to an abrupt curve. Here he stopped and snatched a hammer from the tool kit.

He smashed every window in the car and the windshield, too. The broken glass he spread evenly across the road. It might not cause a puncture, and then again it might. The loss of time was worth the gamble. He leaped back into the car and started off again toward London. A man could lose himself in a metropolis.

But he was not a man to flee blindly, nor was there panic in his heart. Even as his eyes mechanically followed the road, his mind was sorting through facts, accurately and methodically, and inevitably drawing closer to a stern conclusion. He knew that he could never prove his innocence. The three-day hiatus was the bar to that. He knew he would be pursued as Lady Sutton's murderer.

In war time it would be impossible to get out of the country. It would even be impossible to hide very long. What remained then was an outlaw living in miserable hiding for a few brief months only to be taken and brought to trial. Peel had no intention of giving his wife the satisfaction of watching him dragged through a murder trial.

Still cool, still in full possession of himself, Peel planned as he drove. The audacious thing would be to go straight to his home. They would never think of looking for him there—for a while. At home he would have time enough to do what had to be done. He set his mouth in a thin, straight line.

Rapidly he drove deep into London toward Chelsea Square, a frigid, bearded, bald man at the wheel of the car looking like some icy buccaneer from the past.

He approached the square from the rear, watching for the police. There were none about and the house looked quite calm and inauspicious. But, as he drove into the square and saw the front façade of his home, he was grimly amused to see that an entire wing had been demolished in a bombardment. Evidently the catastrophe had taken place some days previous, for all the rubble was neatly piled and the broken side of the building was fenced off.

So much the better, Peel decided. No doubt the house would be empty. He parked the car, unnoticed by the few people in the street, leaped out and walked briskly to the front door. Now that he had made his decision and formed his plans he was absolutely impassive.

There was no one inside. Peel went to the library, took pen and ink and seated himself at the desk. Carefully, with lawyerlike acumen, he made out a new will cutting his wife off beyond legal impeachment. While the ink was drying, he went to the front door and waited until a couple of laborers trudged by with shovels on their shoulders.

"You there!" Peel called.

They turned weary faces toward him. "Yes, sir?"

"Want to earn a fiver?"

Their faces glowed.

"Step in a moment."

With many apologies for their muddied boots, they edged into the library, glancing around curiously. Peel sat them down and read the will to them. They listened with open mouths, then witnessed his signature. Laboriously, with much protrusion of tongues, they signed their names and received the bank note. Peel ushered them out and locked the door.

He paused grimly and took a breath. So much for Sidra. It was the old possessive instinct, he knew, that forced him to act this way. He wanted to keep his fortune, even after death. He wanted to keep his honor and dignity, even after death.

He had made sure of the first. He would have to perform the second—quickly!

He thought for another moment, then nodded his head decisively and marched back to the kitchen. From the linen closet he took down an armful of sheets and towels and with them padded the windows and edges of the doors. As an afterthought, he took a large square of cardboard and on it, with shoe-blacking, printed: DANGER! GAS! He placed it outside the kitchen door.

When the room was sealed tight, Peel went to the stove, opened the oven door and turned the gas cock over. The gas hissed out of the jets, rank and yet cooling. Peel knelt and thrust his head into the oven, breathing with deep, even breaths. It would not, he knew, take very long. It would not be painful.

For the first time in hours, some of the tension left him, and he relaxed almost gratefully, calmly awaiting his death. Although he had lived a hard, geometrically patterned life; and traveled a rigidly realistic road—now his mind reached back toward more tender moments. He regretted nothing; he apologized for nothing; he was ashamed of nothing—and yet he thought of the days when he first met Sidra with a sense of sorrow.

> What slender youth, bedewed with liquid odors,
> Courts thee on roses in some pleasant cave,
> Sidra—

He almost smiled. Those were the lines he wrote to her when, in the romantic beginning, he worshiped her as a goddess of youth, of beauty and goodness. Those had been great days—the days when he had finished at Manchester College and had come to London to build a reputation, a fortune, a life. A thin-haired boy with precise habits and precise thoughts. Dreamily he sauntered through the backwash of memory as though he were recalling an entertaining play.

He came to with a start and realized that he had been kneeling before the oven for twenty minutes. There was something very much awry. He had not forgotten his chemistry and he knew that twenty minutes of illuminating gas should have been sufficient to make him lose consciousness. Perplexed, he got to his feet, rubbing his stiff knees. There was no time for analysis now. The pursuit would be on his neck at any moment.

Neck! That was an idea. Almost as painless as gas. Much quicker!

Peel shut off the oven, took a length of laundry rope from a cupboard and left the kitchen, picking up the sign en route. As he tore up the cardboard, his alert little eyes pried through the house, looking for the proper spot. Yes, there. In the stairwell. He could throw the rope over that beam and stand on the balcony above the stairs. When he leaped, he would have a ten-foot drop to the landing.

He ran up the stairs to the balcony, straddled the railing and carefully threw the rope over the beam. He caught the flying end as it whipped around the beam and swung toward him. He tied it into a loose knot and ran it up the length of the rope until it snuggled tight. After he had yanked twice to tighten the knot, he put his full weight on the rope and swung himself clear of the balcony. The rope supported his weight admirably. There was no chance of its snapping.

When he had climbed back to the railing, he shaped a hangman's noose and slipped it over his head, tightening the knot under his right ear. There was enough slack to give him a six-foot drop. He weighed one hundred fifty pounds. It was just about right to snap his neck clean and painlessly at the end of the drop. Peel poised, took a deep breath, and leaped—

His only thought as he fell was a chaotic attempt to figure how much time he had left to live. Thirty-two feet per second square divided by six gave him almost a fifth of a second. Then there was a blinding jerk that racked his entire body, a dull *crack* that sounded large and blunt in his ears, and a sensation of intolerable pain in his neck.

And for the first time, Pell's iron control was broken.

It took him fully five seconds to realize that he was still alive. He hung by his neck in a kind of horror and slowly understood that he was not dead. The horror crawled over his skin like a wave of chill ants, and for a long time he hung and shuddered, refusing to believe that the impossible had happened. He shuddered while his arms flailed helplessly and the chill reached his mind numbing it with terrible trepidation.

At last he reached into his pocket and withdrew a penknife. He opened it with difficulty, for his body was slowly turning palsied and unmanageable. After much sawing he

at last severed the rope and dropped the last few feet to the landing. While he still crouched, he reached up fingers and felt his neck. It was broken. His head was tilted at an angle that made everything seem topsy-turvy. He could feel the jagged edges of the broken cervical vertibrae. He shuddered again.

As Peel dragged himself up the stairs, he realized that something too ghastly to understand was taking place. There was no attempting a cool appraisal of this; there was no data to be taken, no logic to apply. He reached the top of the stairs and lurched through the bedroom to the bath. In the mirror he examined his twisted neck.

With fumbling hands he groped in the medicine cabinet until he grasped his razor. He closed the cabinet door, then opened the blade, faintly admiring the six inches of gleaming steel. There was promise in the hair-fine, hollow-ground edge. He gripped the handle firmly, tilted his chin back as far as the twisted neck would allow, and with a firm, steady stroke sliced the steel across his throat.

Instantly he was deluged with a great gout of blood, and, as he drew breath, his windpipe was choked. He doubled over, coughing, and his throat was lathered with red foam. Still coughing and gasping, with the wind whistling madly through the ragged slit in his neck, Peel slowly crumpled to the tile floor and lay there while the blood gushed with every heartbeat and soaked him through. Yet as he lay there, gasping with little hacking, foaming coughs, he did not lose consciousness.

For the first time in all his life, Peel was afraid—desperately afraid. The agony of his twisted neck was nothing to the agony in his mind. He floundered on the bathroom floor and realized vaguely that life was clinging to him with all the possessiveness with which he had clung to life and the things he owned.

He crawled upright at last, not daring to look at his wax-white, bloodless face in the mirror, nor at the yawning red slash in his throat. The blood—what remained of it—had clotted slightly. He still could breathe normally at times. Gasping and almost completely paralyzed, Peel stumbled back into the bedroom and searched through Sidra's dresser until he found her revolver.

It took all his presence of mind to steady the muzzle at his chest and still his shaking hands. Deliberately, he pumped

three shots into his heart. And when the echo of the reports died away and the sharp powder tang lifted, he was still alive, with a great ghastly hole torn in him.

It's the body, he thought crazily. Life clings to the body. So long as there's a body—the merest shell to contain a spark—then life will remain. It possesses me, this life, but there's yet a solution. I'm still enough of an engineer to work out a solution.

That solution, he knew, would have to be absolute disintegration. Let him shatter this body of his to particles—to bits—to a thousand pieces—and there would no longer be the cup of flesh to contain that persistent life. For that he needed explosives, and there was nothing in the house. Nor could he drag himself to his laboratory.

He lurched into his study and removed a deck of washable plastic playing cards from his drawer. For long minutes he cut them to pieces with his desk scissors, until he had a bowlful of minute pieces. He carried them to the bathroom and with the little strength that was left in his shattered body he removed a section of brass pipe from the tap inlet and carried it to his study.

There was a small spirit lamp on his desk, used to keep pots of coffee hot. Peel lit the lamp, placed a dry pot over it on the gimbals and dropped a lead paper weight in. After hours, it seemed, the lead melted. He used half the molten metal to plug one end of the pipe tight.

It took all his remaining energy to return to the bathroom for the forgotten bits of playing cards, but he knew it would be the last trip he would have to make. He rammed the frayed shreds of nitrocellulose into the brass pipe, using a heavy pencil as a ramrod. When the pipe was packed solid, he put in the heads of three matches and sealed the open end with the remaining lead and then placed the end of the pipe directly in the spirit flame.

With a sigh, he drew his desk chair close and hunched before the heating bomb. Nitrocellulose—a powerful-enough explosive when ignited under pressure. It was only a question of time, he knew, before the pipe would burst into violent explosion and scatter him around the room—scatter him in blessed death.

The agony in his chest and neck made him rock gently and sway from side to side. He began to whimper like a child as each individual nerve took up the screaming chorus of pain.

The red froth at his throat burst forth anew, while the blood on his clothes caked and hardened.

Slowly the bomb heated.

Slowly the minutes passed.

Slowly the agony increased.

Peel rocked and whimpered, and when he reached out a palsied hand to push the bomb a little closer into the flame, his fingers could not feel the heat. He could see the red-caked flesh scorch and blister but he felt nothing. All the pain writhed inside him—none outside.

It made noises in his ears, that pain, but even above the blunt sounds he heard the dull tread of footsteps far out in the house. They were coming toward him, slowly and almost with the inexorable tread of fate. Panic struck him at the thought of the police and Sidra's triumph. He tried to coax the spirit flame higher.

The steps passed through the downstairs hall and then began to mount the steps of the stairway. Each steady thud sounded louder and more terrifying. Peel hunched lower and in the dim recesses of his mind began to pray. The steps reached the top of the stairs, turned and advanced on his study. There was a faint whisper as the study door was thrust open. Running hot and cold with pain and fear, Peel refused to turn.

So abruptly that it jarred him, a voice said: "Now then, Bob, what's all this?"

He neither turned nor answered.

"Bob!" the voice called hoarsely, "don't be a fool!"

Vaguely he understood that he had heard that voice somewhere.

Steps sounded again, then a figure stood at his elbow. With bloodless eyes he flicked a frightened glance up. It was Lady Sutton. She still wore the sequined evening gown.

"My hat!" she gasped, her tiny eyes goggling in their casement of flesh, "you've gone and messed yourself up, haven't you!"

"Go away—" His words were cracked and whistling as half his breath hissed through the slit in his throat. "I will not be haunted."

"Haunted?" Lady Sutton laughed shrilly. "That's a good one, that is."

"Go away," Peel muttered. "You're dead."

"What've you got there?" Lady Sutton inquired in brassy

tone. She hesitated for a moment. "Oh, I see; a bomb. Going to blow yourself to bits, eh, Bob?"

His lips formed soundless words. Still he hunched over the heating bomb.

"Here," Lady Sutton said. "Let me—" She reached forward to knock the brass tube off the gimbals. With a convulsive effort Peel struggled to his feet and grasped her arm with clawing hands. She was solid for a ghost. Nevertheless he flung her back.

"Let be!" he wheezed.

"Now stop this, Bob!" Lady Sutton ordered. "I never intended this much misery for you."

Without bothering to puzzle at her words, he struck at her feebly as she tried to get past him to the bomb. She was far too strong for him. He turned quickly and flung himself forward toward the spirit lamp, arms outstretched to infold it and protect it from interference.

Lady Sutton cried: "Bob! You damned fool!"

There was a blinding explosion. It smashed into Peel's face with a flaring white light and a burst of shattering sound. The entire study rocked and a portion of the wall fell away. A heavy shower of books rained down from the jolted shelves. Smoke and dust filled space with a dense cloud.

As the cloud cleared, Lady Sutton still stood alongside the place where the desk had been. For the first time in many years—in many eternities, perhaps, her face wore an expression of sadness. For a long time she stood in silence. At last she shrugged and began to speak.

"Don't you realize, Bob," she said in a low voice, "that you can't kill yourself? The dead only die once, my boy, and you're dead already. You've all been dead for days. How is it that none of you could realize that? Perhaps it was that ego that Braugh spoke of— Perhaps— But you were all dead before you reached the shelter that night. You should have known when you saw your bombed house. That was a heavy raid last Thursday—very heavy."

Slowly she raised her hands and began to unpeel the gown that covered her. In the dead, unnatural silence, the little sequins rustled and tinkled. They glittered as the gown dropped from her body to reveal—nothing. Mere empty space.

"I enjoyed that little murder," she said. "It was amusing

—quite amusing to see the dead attempt to kill. That's why I let you go on with it. It was amusing—"

She removed her shoes and stockings. She was now nothing more than arms, shoulders and a gross head in space. Nothing more. The face was still heavy and still wore the slightly sorrowful expression.

"But it was ridiculous trying to murder me," she went on, "seeing who I was. It was even a little ridiculous producing that play. Because, Bob, Astaroth does happen to be a lady—so to speak—and I happen to be Astaroth."

With a sudden motion, the head and arms jerked into the air and then dropped to the floor alongside the heaped-up dress. They clattered dully like waxen figures, and yet the voice continued from the smoke-filled space. Where the dusty mist swirled, it revealed a figure of emptiness—a mere outline in space—a bubble—and yet a figure horrible to behold.

"Yes," the voice went on, softening slightly to a quiet tone, "I am Astaroth, Bob—Astaroth, as old as the ages—as old and bored as eternity itself." It took on a pleading note. "That's why I had to play my little joke on you back in the shelter. I had to turn the tables and have a bit of a laugh. Satan knows, you cry out for a bit of novelty and entertainment after an eternity of arranging hells for the damned! And Satan knows, there's no hell like the hell of boredom—"

The passionate, pleading voice broke off.

And a thousand scattered bloody fragments of Robert Peel heard and understood. A thousand particles, each containing a tortured spark of life, heard the voice of Astaroth and understood.

"Of life I know nothing," Astaroth cried out, "but death I do know—death and justice. I know that each living creature creates its own hell forevermore. What you are now, you have wrought with your own hands. Hear ye all, before I depart—if any of ye can deny this—if any one of you would argue this—if any one of you would cavil at the Justice of Astaroth—let him speak! Speak now!"

Through all the far reaches the voice echoed, and there was no answer.

A thousand pain-thorned particles of Robert Peel heard and made no answer.

Theone Dubedat heard and made no answer.

A questing doubt-crazed Christian Braugh heard and made no answer.

A rotting, self-devouring Digby Finchley heard and made no answer.

All the damned of all eternity in an infinity of self-made hells heard and understood and made no answer.

For the Justice of Astaroth is unanswerable.

THE CREST OF THE WAVE

* *Jane Rice*

Jane Rice (remember "The Idol of the Flies"?—yes, *that* Jane Rice) was an *Unknown* regular for most of the magazine's life. Most of her stories had a haunting quality—after years and years, you would find yourself remembering a scene, a moment, a flash of character. And they all, or mostly, dealt with a highly personal involvement with the supernatural—not much jauntiness, but the very feel of *normal* life in wonderful or terrible touch with the unreal . . . or what had been unreal to the people involved until . . .


EDD
CAM
TIGA

BIG MIKE SETTLED BACK AGAINST THE DOVE-GRAY VELOUR upholstering with a well-fed grunt. His little eyes imbedded in rolls of fat gazed serenely out at the shifting scenery of Lindell Boulevard sliding past the car windows, three-inch and bulletproof.

Women in furs, their tiny hats and sheer hose belying the scurrying wind that nipped at their silken ankles, and shook cascades of rusty leaves from the threadbare trees to send them whirling in the gutters; the stuccoed Coronado; tall, thin apartment buildings with blank inscrutable fronts; a house, incongruously out of place, draped with dried brown ivy; the Park Plaza with its circular drive of crushed stone and swank iron grillwork; an old crone huddled in her shapeless coat and exhibiting shoelaces, and toothless gums, to passersby; the Chase, its clipped shrubbery curtsying to the wind, its doorman spanking his white gloved hands for

warmth. And beyond, Forest Park—the baseball diamonds deserted and forlorn, the trees trying desperately to make their tattered garments cover their twisted limbs; a trickle of people, bent against the wind, coming up the walk from the Monkey House; a small boy jumping up and down on the pedal of a drinking fountain, its bowl stained and discolored and choked with trash.

The car turned left. Neon signs began to make their slow appearance: Italian Spaghetti; Clark Gable in "Boom Town"; Beer To Take Out; Hamburgers 10c; "Gone with the Wind" at Popular Prices; Thrifty Dry Cleaning, Pants Pressed While You Wait; Closing Out, Everything Must Go, Prices Slashed; Edward G. Robinson in "Brother Orchid" All Seats 15c; Poske's Barbecue; a policeman on the corner teetering back and forth on his heels; Ladies' Entrance; We Buy Old Gold and Silver; a walnut-faced man in a dirty newspaper apron yelling, "Read all about it; big jewel robbery; read all ABOUT it, read ALL ABOU—" His voice was lost in the derisive toot the chauffeur gave the horn as Big Mike swept by.

Big Mike picked up the speaking tube.

"Mebbe we shoulda bought a paper, hey, Joe?" and he laughed a thick, gurgling laugh of padded contentment.

The chauffeur only smiled. It was a mirthless smile, barely curved, and did not come anywhere near the outer corners of his lips. He didn't answer. Which was as it should be, for Big Mike had let the speaking tube slip from his pudgy fingers and had given himself up to meditation.

It had been a haul, all right. Fifty thousand bucks, easy. Of course, the boys had to get their cut but he could tone that down some. He knew how to soap the boys. And then that crook Zacchus wouldn't handle anything hot for less than a third. He ought to have his can spiked. He was *going* to handle it, though, and the way the D. A. was putting on the screws most of the mobs let out a squawk fit to bust your eardrums, if you brought in anything that didn't have six months' age on it. Oh well, say twenty thousand take after the payoff. Twenty G's complete. Not bad. Not bad at all.

Big Mike laughed again. Silently. His stomach shaking like pastry dough. Nobody could say he hadn't made good. Seven years ago slicing up codfish in the Market, resting his hands on the porcelain counter and saying. "What's yours?" to a lot of beefy-faced housewives who watched the scales like a brood of hawks. Well, that was seven years ago. A lotta water'd gone over the dam since then. Seven years. He'd done O. K. Plenty O. K. *Big* Mike insteada just Mike. The

Kingpin some of them called him. That was him, all right. The Kingpin.

Big Mike heaved himself up by the window strap and unanchored his watch from its hiding place among the folds of his blue-serge paunch. He picked up the tube.

"Slow down, Joe. Ain't no rush."

He settled back once more against the velvety cushions. Never wait for a doll. That was his policy. Keep *them* waiting. Made 'em feel like they was lucky he come at all. Of course, Flo wasn't no ordinary doll. She had class. Well, wait'll she laid her blinkers on what he'd save out for her. Them sparklers was class, too, all right.

The short, stubby fingers caressed a jewel box beside him on the seat.

Twenty thousand clear. He might even take Flo down to one of them resorts. One of them smart jobs with mineral springs and all the fixings. Nothing was too good for Flo. Funny, her calling him up and asking him to pick her up way out here. She'd never done that before. It'd been his place, or her place, or Garselli's downtown. But that was Flo for you. Just when you thought you had her tagged and figured, she'd do something and you was right back where you started. She was a pistol, all right. Yes, sir, mebbe one of them ritzy joints with a swimming pool right inside the building. That'd suit Flo to a T.

The car swerved over to the crub and purred to a smooth stop so the rear door was exactly even with the yawning cave of a faded green canopy flaunting on its canvassed sides the legend, "Floor Show Every Hour."

A girl in a squirrel-skin coat, with a jeweled butterfly caught in her platinum-blond hair, was standing just inside the gloomy shelter. She was nervous. You could tell by the way she kept touching a sausagelike ringlet that drooped becomingly low over one mascaraed eye. As the car drew up she seemed to grow tense, as if every nerve had gone taut as piano wire. But that was only for a moment—a split second. An instant later her powdered face was wreathed in smiles and, letting her coat hang loosely so that the decided V of her neckline showed like a demarcation on an alabaster column, she stepped swiftly to the door of the car.

Big Mike hoisted himself up and pressed down the safety catch. The door swung open.

"Keep yuh waiting?" he asked.

The girl flashed two rouged dimples at him. "Don't you always," she said archly and kissed him. Big Mike's face

was momentarily buried in a full shirred collar of squirrel skin faintly redolent of perfume. And that was where Big Mike made his first and only mistake. And his final one.

Two men, slim-hipped, pinch-waisted, with dark slouch hats, swung from the shadowed twilight of the canopy and when Big Mike looked up he looked right down the barrels of two .38s. His hand darted underneath his coat but he was too late.

Flo, the rouge standing out in symmetrically round spots on her chalky cheeks, backed away—Big Mike's gun concealed in the voluminous squirrel-skin sleeves. Her blue eyes were locked with the blazing slits that were Big Mike's and a muscle at the corner of her mouth twitched, as if it held a hidden spring. She whirled suddenly and ran back under the canopy and up the steps. The blare of a band playing "My Gal Sal," sounded brassily as she opened the door and was cut off with its closing.

The silver and maroon custom-built Cadillac swept away from the curb and out into the stream of traffic headed north.

All in all the entire performance had taken one and three-quarter minutes.

"What's the gag, boys?" Big Mike asked softly.

"It's no gag," the slimmest of the men answered. Straight-browed, clear, round eyes, a sensitive flaring nose, he just escaped being handsome. It was hard to say why. Was it the very clearness of those eyes, as if they had been chosen carefully from a vast selection in an optician's drawer? Or was it the immobility of those chiseled features, or the lines of the jaw—too soft, perhaps?

"You wouldn't kid me, would you, Toki?"

"No, I wouldn't kid you," Toki said.

There was a long silence broken only by the traffic noises and the distant melancholy "aug—aug—aug" of a paddle-wheeler loaded with crated poultry and machinery and bolts of bright calico, going down the Mississippi bound for Natchez and Shreveport and New Orleans.

Big Mike picked up the speaking tube.

"You in on this, Joe?"

Joe looked in the rear-view mirror and away again. Muffled and toneless his voice came through the tube.

"Whadda *you* think, Fatso?"

Fatso! He, Big Mike, being called Fatso! His neck above his collar turned an angry mottled shade of red. These—these pipsqueaks with their patent-leather hair and their

pasty pusses *daring* to—why he'd *made* them. What'd they been before he took over. Poolroom Johnnies, penny matchers, hanging out on corners and cadging drinks in saloons, and rolling drunks in areaways. And Flo. She'd been a hostess at Saebeck's guzzling ginger ale for Scotch and getting a cut on the bill. Flo! That she would do this to him, to Big Mike. Smiling that smile and taking him for what he was worth. And him not knowing it. That was what rankled. Him being played for a dumb gimp and not conning to it. And all the while Toki biding his time and waiting for a chance to step in. Waiting for a haul like this. Waiting until the stuff was planted with Zacchus and the all-clear signal had gone through. Flo and Toki. Toki and Flo.

"You won't get away with it, Toki."

"No?"

"No."

"Where you're going it'll be too hot to worry about it. If I were you, I'd concentrate on saying prayers—if you know any."

"It may be hot," Big Mike said slowly, "but it won't be too hot for me to make a return trip to see you. That goes for Flo, too. Tell her for me I'll be seeing her. Soon."

"Stow it."

"I'll square this if it's the last thing I do."

"The last thing you'll do will be to kiss the Buckley Bridge good-by."

"So that's it."

"That's it. Now cut the gab. You talk too much."

There was this to be said for Big Mike, he took it without belly-aching. He didn't bat an eyelash. They trussed him up with baling wire and weighted him. Weighted him good. So he'd stay down. When they carried him over to the railing he even derived a sort of grim pleasure out of the fact that it took the three of them to do it and that they breathed heavily, in great, gulping lungfuls.

Funny, he thought looking up, he'd never noticed before how many stars there were. Kind of pretty. And the sky all pinky in one spot where the downtown lights hit it.

The three men gave a heave and he was clear. He would've screamed then but he couldn't, because there was adhesive tape over his mouth.

There was a splash and a white spray of water and finally only ever-widening ripples mirroring the wavy reflection of the green channel marker.

"Aug—aug—aug" went the paddle-wheeler bound for Natchez and Shreveport and New Orleans.

The silver and maroon Cadillac nosed up to the green canopy. Toki got out and said, "Make it one o'clock, Joe," slammed the door and watched the red taillight until it disappeared. He lighted a cigarette, flipped the match into the street, inhaled deeply, let the smoke dribble from his nostrils and, chuckling, he went inside. He spun his hat through the air to the check girl and walked down the red-carpeted hall to stand for a moment looking at the jammed dance floor, pocket size, and the perspiring Negro band, and the cavorting patrons, before he descended the steps on cushiony tiptoe and threaded his way through the maze of tables and jabbering humanity to Flo.

"Hi ya, gorgeous," he said laying a proprietary hand on her shoulder.

She jumped. "Cripes," she said, "you scared the gizzard out of me."

"What you so jittery about?" Toki sat down and signaled to a waiter in a limp Tuxedo. "A bottle of champagne," he said. "Best you got in the house."

The waiter grinned affably. "Sure thing, Toki."

Toki's hand shot out and stopped him as he prepared to move off. "From now on it's Cruseppi, see. *Mister* Cruseppi. Got it!"

The grin vanished from the waiter's face as if it had been wiped with a damp sponge.

"Yes, sir," he said hurriedly and, giving a jerky little bow, he hastened away calling, "A bottle of Mums for Mr. Cruseppi." He knew his psychology.

Flo relaxed. "Then you did it. No hitch."

"Listen, baby, when I do something, I *do* it."

"You're sure he's dead?"

"Sure, I'm sure. Say what's eating you anyway?"

"Nothing. Only sitting here waiting like this gave me the wimmies. I kept thinking suppose . . . suppose he *didn't* die. Supposing he got away somehow. The way he looked at me. It was like . . . it was like . . . it was awful . . . like he'd have— Oh, Toki . . . it was awful."

"The guy's dead, I tell you. In three days those Mississippi river cats'll have picked him clean."

"What if he come up?"

"He won't."

"Did anybody see you?"

"Do I look like a goop?"

"Did he say anything? About me, I mean?"

"He said to tell you he'd be seeing you, soon."

Flo shivered. "The way he looked at me," she said.

"Oh, come off it. From now on, baby, you ain't got a thing on your mind but me. Look, I got something for you." He edged a jeweler's box under the table. "Open it under your napkin."

Flo lifted the hinged velvet cover and gave a delightful squeal.

"Ooooooooh, Toki!"

"Like it, eh? We'll get you a new outfit to match and do one of them soup-and-fish joints. Whadda you say? How about the Windermere, Satiddy. They're opening up a new night club on the top floor. The Crazy House. I seen the announcement in the papers. We'll put on the dog. This place stinks. Ain't got no atmosphere. Hey! Waiter! Where's that there champagne. We ain't going to sit around here all our lives."

"Yes, Mr. Cruseppi. Right away, Mr. Cruseppi. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr. Cruseppi."

"Oh, Toki, you're wonderful."

Toki leaned back and permitted himself to expand.

"I'm riding the crest of the wave, baby. Yes siree, the crest of the wave."

It was quiet down in the shanty boat. Axel Kohler puffed at his pipe and squinted at the oil lantern slung from the cross beam.

"River mighty fidgety," he said.

His wife wiped her hands on her apron and listened. "It's the wind. Been chopping at the river all day."

Axel Kohler puffed on in silence. After a while, he said:

"I can feel her swelling. Uneasylike. Like maybe she had got something in her craw that wasn't settling any too well."

His wife put her hands on her ample hips and surveyed him exasperatedly. "If you're thinking of getting out of mending those fishing nets, you've got another think coming." She waddled over and tapped the homemade barometer. "It's steady. This time of year there's always wind."

Her husband arose and, shielding his eyes with his cupped hands, peered out the dingy window.

"Crested waves," he said, "she's a-trying mighty hard to spit it up." He turned back into the room. "Something's heavy on her stomach. She's riled, underneath."

"You talk about that river like it was human," the woman

snapped. "Get started on those nets, Axel Kohler, afore I get my dander up."

It was dusk. The hurried bustle of early Saturday night was accentuated by a cold drizzle of rain. The streets were capped with umbrellas. Men walked with their heads down, coat collars up, and here and there a woman scurried for shelter with a newspaper held over her hat. Clerks, salesgirls, bookkeepers, bundle-laden shoppers streamed out of the stores and office buildings, hung by straps in the crowded streetcars, jammed shoulder against shoulder in the busses, overflowed the corners and the yellow concrete safety islands. Lights were going out one by one in the high, soot-stained, rainstreaked towers of business, whose empty corridors were beginning to echo with the shuffling footsteps of bent-backed cleaning women and the slosh of sudsy mops and the scrape of buckets along the tiled floors. And lights were going on in kitchens, in homes, in apartments, in the murky back rooms of taverns, shining out all over the city in tiered squares, chasing endlessly around and around the glittering names on theater marquees, polishing the white raincoats of traffic cops and the drenched boulevards which danced with a thousand smeary, upside-down reflections.

A swell night for a job, Toki thought, going up the steps of the brownstone front; its iron balustrade glistening and wet. A helluva swell night. All of the coppers warming themselves in lunch wagons or parking their number twelves in doorways outta the rain. Oh well, what the hell. He was in the bucks or would be soon as Zacchus coughed up. He didn't have to worry none for a while. Tonight was his and Flo's night. They were going to eat lobster tails and drink some of that there sparkling Burgundy and have some of them little glasses of stuff—cordial was it?—after they'd finished putting on the feed bag. None of this apple pie alamode. Roquefort cheese with crackers and a cordial, please. That was it. That was the way the highbrows did it. Offhandlike. Didn't even have to pop a gander at the menu.

He opened the door with his latch-key and went upstairs. Place smelled like cabbage. He'd have to look around for something more elite. Apartment hotel, maybe. A quiet one. Genteel. But classy. With a fire escape handy.

He unlocked the door of his room and switched on the light. A faded Brussels carpet, nondescript wallpaper showing pale oblongs and ovals attesting to the pictorial habits of former tenants, a dirty sock hanging limply from the open

drawer of a cheap, veneered dresser, a white iron monstrosity of a bed, its thin mattress veiled by a sleazy pink rayon counterpane with a cigarette burn in the center of it, a table boasting a soiled, crocheted doily and a vase of flyblown artificial roses, and a brown paper package.

Toki stopped. His eyes narrowed. His nostrils dilated like a hound dog casting for a scent. That package. He hadn't ordered no package. He approached it warily. There wasn't no name on it. No writing. What th— Maybe Flo'd sent him something. Maybe the boys had bought him a fountain-pen set with engraving on it like they'd done for Big Mike. There wasn't no tick coming out of it, so it wasn't no pineapple, anyway.

He gave it an experimental push. It was heavy. Probably a gift from the boys. Bronze, maybe. He took out his knife, slit the package open and spread the flaps. In the bottom of the box, half covered with a layer of silt and mud, was a roll of baling wire, a jumble of sash weights and a water-soaked strip of adhesive plaster.

Involuntarily Toki took a step backward, his breath hissing out from between his clenched teeth. For a full moment he stood there, his eyes glued to the parcel, the color slowly draining out of his face. Then inch by inch he backed across the room, felt for the China knob with his hand, wrenched open the door and was out in the hall—his heart hammering against his ribs.

He went downstairs and knocked on Mrs. Weatherbee's door. Hard.

Mrs. Weatherbee, a worn, straw-flower of a woman with her hair strained tightly back from a worried forehead, eased her door open a crack and peeped out nearsightedly, clutching with one scrawny hand a shoddy Japanese kimono.

"Yes? Oh. Mr. Cruseppi! I was just laying down. I declare this weather gets in my bones something terrible, though I'm not one to complain if I do say so mysel—"

"I got a package and I—"

"Oh dear, I hope I didn't break anything. It was so heavy. I could've died when I dropped it, and it made the most awful racket. Fit to wake the dead. I thought I—"

"Who brought it?"

"A man. I was out in the dining room setting the plates and the doorbell rang. And I answered it. Raining cats and dogs it was. And there was this man holding the package and he—"

"What'd he look like?"

"He was big, and kind of solid fat, and he had little squinched-up eyes. I remember his eyes because they didn't move. They stared right straight ahead all the time he was talking. Set, they was." Mrs. Weatherbee drew her dressing gown closer around her neck. "And wet. He was wet as water. Looked like he was soaked through. I'll bet you could've wrung out every last stitch he had on." Mrs. Weatherbee paused in her recital. "He . . . he . . . he looked—drowned," she said.

"What'd he say?"

"He said to put the package in your room and to tell you not to forget he'd be seeing you soon. Why? Is something the matter, Mr. Cruseppi? If I broke anything I'll be glad to—"

"No," Toki said in a staccato voice. "You didn't break nothing. It was some . . . some tools I ordered—some woodworking tools."

Mrs. Weatherbee sighed gratefully. "Oh. Well, I'm glad I didn't break anything." She peered at Toki. "Why you look like you've caught a chill, Mr. Cruseppi. I declare you're real blue. Come in and I'll fix you up a nice cup of hot tea. I declare this weather gets right into the marrow. Makes you feel the nearness of the grave, that's what it does. Come in and—"

"No thanks," Toki said, "I've got a date." He forced his lips into a stiff semblance of a smile and left Mrs. Weatherbee shaking her head and "declaring" to herself.

Toki went down the hall, put a nickel in the coin box of the telephone and dialed a number. He stood with his back against the wall and his body rigid, only his eyes were alive, darting up and down the hall and investigating the deeper shadows.

"Hello. That you, Joe? Toki speaking. Any of the boys been looking for me? Ain't, eh. Well, look, don't pick me up tonight. No. No, I got some things to do. If I want you, I'll give you a buzz. That's right. Yeah, I got a date with Flo. The Crazy House. Yeah. What's that? Yeah, I'm kinda hoarse. Got a cold. O. K., Joe."

He replaced the receiver, sent a probing glance along the hallway, and started back upstairs. He looked over his shoulder twice before he reached the top and he pushed open his door with his foot and stood outside flattened against the jamb, listening, before he went in.

When he opened his door again he was wearing a Tuxedo under his belted overcoat and was carrying a satchel. A heavy one. There was a nick on his chin as if he had

shaved not only hastily but unsteadily. He stood for a moment on the threshold and then went back into his room and took an empty box off the table and stuffed it under the bed. He switched off the light, looked quickly up and down the hall, went down the stairs and let himself out into the night.

It had stopped raining but the sidewalks were still wet and puddles had collected where the paving had settled. An occasional car droned by, its tires making a *chzzzzzing* sound on the slick streets.

Toki walked to the corner, turned, went half a block and entered an alley. He lifted the lid off a garbage can, snapped the catch on the satchel and up-ended it. There was a series of dull thuds. Swiftly he replaced the lid, closed the satchel and retraced his steps. At the corner he hailed a roving cab. "The Windermere," he said as he climbed in.

The thing to do was to keep your eyes and ears peeled and your yap shut. Toki patted a bulge in his coat pocket. And your safety catch off. It *might* be the boys' idea of a joke. Rig some one of 'em out like Big Mike and send him over to see if he crawfished. What was it Mrs. Weatherbee had said? He looked—drowned. The old bat couldn't see worth a hoot without her specs. Like as not it was one of the boys. You'd think they'd have stuck around to watch though, wouldn't you? There wasn't no point in giving the box to Mrs. Weatherbee. Besides it was too damn risky. She mighta took it on herself to open it. Where'd they get them sash weights, anyhow? He'd 'a' swore the ones they used on Big Mike was the last of the lot. What was it she'd said he said—tell him not to forget I'll be seeing him soon.

Toki straightened his lips into a knife-edged line. When you was dead, you was dead. That's all there was to it. There wasn't no way of getting around it. He'd had a aunt when he was a kid who used to claim she saw spooks. Used to carry on regular conversations with 'em like they was setting right there in plain sight. And she'd been clapped in the nut hatch. Well, they wasn't going to clap *him* in no nut hatch. Big Mike was dead. He'd been dead for going on to three days and rubbing elbows with river cat you was deader'n a doornail.

Mrs. Weatherbee had dished him up a lot of mush once about some guy in the Bible who'd been dead for three days and had gotten back. Resurrected was the word. Supposing there *was* something in this resurrection business. Aw nuts, this wasn't no Bible. This was St. Louis. It was probably one of the boys. Probably Joe. Or Nickels. Well, let 'im try it

again. He'd pin his nose up for him. They wasn't going to make no booby outta him.

The taxi crawled up in front of the cream-brick façade of the hotel and a doorman resplendent in plum livery and gold epaulets opened the door with a practiced twist of his wrist. Toki got out and put the satchel on the sidewalk. He paid the fare and waved away the nickel change with a lordly gesture.

The doorman picked up the satchel.

"I'll carry it," Toki said quickly.

"Be glad to help you, sir."

"I'll carry it. It ain't heavy."

"Yes, sir." The doorman gave him an odd look.

Toki took the bag and nearly dropped it. For one spinning minute he thought he was going to be sick and his knees felt as if they were filled with milk. He gaped foolishly at the satchel, his mouth tightened into a hideous cartoon of a smile and, moving as if his feet were leaden, he maneuvered the steps and disappeared through the revolving doors.

"What they won't do to save a dime," the doorman observed to the cab driver. "It ain't heavy," he mimicked. "Not much, it ain't!" He spat on the pavement and rubbed it in with his foot. "Felt like it was loaded with brickbats."

"Takes all kinds to make a world," the cabby said philosophically. He yawned, pocketed his nickel, switched on the ceiling light and picked up a dog-eared copy of a magazine from the seat beside him.

"Like ghost stories?" he asked. "There's a dandy in this issue. About a bloke haunting another bloke because this here second bloke, which was his partner, double-crossed him. Boy, he's got this here second bloke sweating buckets."

"Not me," the doorman said. "Ghosts is the bunk. Give me something real, something that actually happens, something I can get my teeth into. Westerns, now that's my ticket. *They're* stories."

Toki didn't go through the lobby. He went downstairs to the lower level, paused at a door lettered neatly "Men," and stalked inside. He took the last stall in the row and waited until a florid-jowled man finished wiping his hands on a paper towel and left. Then he put the satchel on the floor and opened it.

In the bottom was a roll of baling wire, some sash weights, and a strip of water-soaked adhesive.

He mopped his clammy forehead with his handkerchief.

The door whished open and someone came in whistling merrily, blundered into the last stall, said, "Oh, sorry," and retreated. Toki waited until he had gone. Then he locked the bag, went cautiously out into the gleaming expanse of white tile and mirrors and wedged the satchel behind a low-slung sofa. He went over to a washbasin and rinsed his face.

A youth in his early twenties came in and surveyed him with tipsy glee.

"You looksh like youshh dwon-dwron-drownded," he hiccuped. "Dwronded in the bottom of the shea."

But Toki had gone. Hurriedly.

The youth's eyes blurred and with intense concentration he re-focused them and stared in bewildered puzzlement around the empty room.

"Sh'funny," he said musingly, "I would've shworn there wash a man in here." He held up two fingers and wiggled them before his nose. "Twoo. A grea' big man. An' a eenshy-weenshy middle-shized man. Dwroned man . . . men." A look of vague queasiness overspread his countenance. He put his hand over his mouth and staggered into the last stall.

Toki hoped Flo had arrived. He needed company. Needed it bad. And he wanted a jolt. A good three fingers. Neat. Clear his head. It felt like it was full of flies. Or angleworms. Like his head was a jar and his brains was squirming around the sides trying to get out. Like they was alive and making snail tracks inside his skull. He'd better get hold of himself. As long as he didn't shoot off his yap he'd be hunky dory. Nobody'd know. No matter *what*, they wasn't going to clap him in no nut hatch. They wasn't going to lace him up the back in one of them sleeveless nightgowns and give him the bye bye. They wasn't going to do it! There was Flo. Now, easy does it. Sweet-talk her. Act natural. Give her the old sauce and sit tight. Don't keep gawping over your shoulder. And get a table against the wall. Yeah, smack against the wall.

"Hi ya, gorgeous. Keep yuh waiting?"

Flo coquettishly lowered one blue shadowed eyelid. "Don't you always," she said, dimpling.

They gravitated toward the elevator and were shot upward by a uniformed attendant who intoned with nasal boredom, "The Crazy House, floor show in twenty minutes, dinner from three-fifty, check room on your right, watch your steppleasethiscarmakesnostopsgoingdown."

Toki checked their wraps, unobtrusively transferring the .38 from his overcoat to a cleverly designed inner pocket of his Tuxedo, while Flo with the aid of a vanity case applied

another layer of powder on her pert nose. She linked arms with Toki and they went down the thickly carpeted steps into The Crazy House.

It was that literally. Except for a lurid, surrealist mural over the bar, which was doing a tremendous business at the far end of the room, the walls were solid sheets of mirrors, the kind that are so popular with amusement park concessions, and whose sole purpose is to distort one's image as grotesquely as possible. Add to this a red-velvet ceiling draped like a circus tent, a close-packed thicket of zebra-skinned chairs and tables, a maze of white shoulders and brocade and satin and taffeta and firestruck jewelry, punctuated by the black coats of men, and hazed over with a flickering sheen of candle shine, and all this bounding and rebounding in caricatured deformity from the mirrored walls—and you can well imagine the effect was indeed all that the decorator had striven for. Yea, and full measure, and pressed down, and running over.

Flo squeezed Toki's arm delightedly. "It's the berries," she said.

The maître d'hôtel advanced with remote hauteur. He bowed from the waist.

"You have a reservation?" The manager had sent him up from below to add tone to the proceedings and he was—as a result—in none too good a humor.

"No," Toki said. "But I want a table against the wall."

The maître d'hôtel shrugged expressively. "I am sorry but I am afraid there is nothing available." He brushed an imaginary fleck from an impeccable coat sleeve and waited.

Toki extracted a bill from his wallet and folded it carefully so that the denomination was uppermost. The maître d'hôtel assumed a thoughtful expression.

"But, perhaps," he said, "someone has turned in a reservation."

The bill changed hands.

"Right this way, m'sieu," said the maître d'hôtel. The only difference between this man and his lowly brethren at Saebeck's, and Kitsy Dikes, and Roy's Casino was that the maître d'hôtel capitalized on his psychology.

Toki ordered a Martini for Flo and a double brandy for himself. "And don't die," he told the waiter. The waiter didn't. He knew a sure thing when he saw one. This gink was good for about three double ones and the lobster-tail dinner with an imported wine, and an excellent chance to pad the bill on the side.

As a matter of fact he was good for four. They warmed his stomach and relieved the constricted feeling across his chest. They acted as a soporific and lulled his subconscious into a sense of security.

When he'd dumped out them sash weights there was probably some stuck in the bottom, or something. Musta been. After all he hadn't *seen* nothing had he? It was like circumstantial evidence, more or less. Hearsay mostly. And any goof knew you could beat the rap every time on circumstantial evidence. He was Toki Cruseppi, wasn't he? The boss. Sure he was. He didn't have to take shenanigans from anybody. Dead or alive.

He even danced with Flo. And enjoyed it. And he ordered the lobster-tail dinner with the imported wine. And ate it. And he was entertained by the floor show, although in his own opinion they wore too many clothes. And he actually remembered to order Roquefort cheese and crackers *and* a cordial without having to refer to the menu.

Flo was having the time of her life. When balloons had appeared she had popped the nearest ones with her cigarette. Her blond hair was spangled with multi-colored confetti and the bracelets on her bare arms tinkled together and sparkled red and green and violet when she threw serpentine at the other tables. She wished the other tables would throw some back at her. And she had a hat of cone-shaped crepe paper with rosettes pasted on it. Toki had one, too.

She twisted her neck so she could see their irregular reflections in the mirrors. She giggled. They looked like dwarfs. Little bitty. The hats hardly showed. She punched Toki.

"Look at us," she said, "we're all scrooched up."

Toki obediently swiveled his head toward the wall. And the fatuous smirk vanished from his face. Not all at once, but gradually, as if it had melted by degrees, or had slipped, or been jarred, from its moorings.

Drifting toward him *through* the mirror was the figure of a man, his lips parted in a frightful, gloating grin. He moved slowly with a curious buoyant lift and his scant hair stood about his head and was wafted gently back and forth as if it were washed by invisible ripples of water. His features had the swollen stretched appearance of the drowned and the pallor of his skin was accentuated by a mottled bluish tinge. There was a fragment of muddy weed like a makeshift patch plastered over one of the small piglike eyes. The figure came on, deliberately, and, when it was separated from Toki by only a thin layer of glass, it began to raise its dripping hands,

the pudgy fingers curved to fit smoothly around Toki's throat.

There was a crash, the brittle sound of splintering crystal, and Toki, pale as death, faced the amazed Flo across the overturned table. A bevy of waiters materialized, apparently from thin air.

"I'm sick," Toki said harshly. "I'll be back in a minute," and he fled, heedless of the sea of questioning upturned faces, of the dancers, of the tables, of anything at all except the wild desire to get away—as far away as he could—from where he was.

He jabbed the elevator button savagely. Again and again.

He had to get that bag outta the men's room, too. It had his initials on it and, if it was turned in, and the house dick saw them weights, and got to inquiring around, and if the bee was put on him— He felt like he was hollow inside and somebody had poured fizz water in the hole. Big Mike! It couldn't have been Big Mike. Big Mike was dead. Cold as a cucumber. But it *was* Big Mike. And he'd looked at him outta them marble eyes just like he'd looked at Coky Gallagher when Coky had held out on some of the numbers. And two days later Coky had been found doubled up in a trunk in the check room at Union Station.

It couldn't have been Big Mike. But it was. It *was*. Where was that elevator? He pressed his thumb on the buzzer and held it there.

The metal door clanged open to emit a stream of chattering people. Toki was the only one going down.

The elevator plummeted to the lower level and Toki lurched out and in the direction of the washroom. The attendant sniffed. Keep his finger on the buzzer would he. He knew how to take care of those babies. Let 'er ride, straight down the shaft, and bring 'er up short. Look at 'im wibble. *Phftt*, stick your finger on the buzzer again sometime, buddy.

The men's room was vacant. Toki let the door swing to behind him and leaned against it breathing deeply, drops of perspiration beaded his brow, and his tongue was heavy and thick and glued to the roof of his mouth. Over and over the words chased through his mind in an endless circle of monotony— "Big Mike—he had to get outta here—get that bag—and get out. Big Mike—it *was* Big Mike—get the bag —and get out—"

The light glared from the white walls and ricocheted from the tiled floor. Wadded paper towels spewed from the wire baskets and one of the basins was filled with stagnant water.

The room was odoriferous with tobacco, and disinfectant, and liquid soap, and of stale, exhausted air.

Toki swayed over to the sofa and dragged it out from the wall. He grasped the handle of the satchel and tugged it free.

There was a click and the lights went out.

Toki froze. His eyes strove frantically to pierce the darkness which was illumined only by the dull, red glow of a bulb showing faintly through from the other side of the frosted transom. His ears sang with the desperate yammering of his heart.

"Who's there," he called softly.

There was no answer.

The satchel slid from his cold hands. He drew his revolver from his pocket and, pressing close to the wall, began to work his way toward the door. There was no sound except that of his own labored breathing. He was halfway around before he saw the form standing by the door waiting for him.

The gun fell with a *clang* from Toki's nerveless fingers and Toki, his arms outthrust before him as if to ward off the thing confronting him, began to back away, his throat working convulsively, his voice a shrill, babbling squeal of horror.

The figure came on. Relentlessly. And Toki's very brain reeled with the damp river smell that seemed to permeate the atmosphere. His hip struck a washbasin, he stumbled, and would have fallen if he had not been gripped firmly by two icy hands that slowly, inexorably forced his head down, down, down into the soap-scummed water of the bowl.

He kicked out frantically and his arms flailed in a vain endeavor to grapple with his unseen adversary. But his struggles were impotent on the shadowy mist that surrounded him —a mist as intangible as river fog.

There was a succession of gurgles, the water spilled over the sides of the basin and splashed on the floor. Toki's limbs twitched once, twice, and went lax. And there was silence, except for the *dlop—dlop—dlop* of dripping water.

"Hey, where's the light!" The florid-jowled man was just a bit tight. "By Harry, it's an outrage." He felt for the switch and snicked it on. "Damned outrage that's wha—" His voice tore raggedly and his complexion changed quickly from apoplectic to tubercular. He blinked at the sprawled form with its head in the basin.

"Good heavens!" he said and wheeled on his heel. His voice could be heard diminishing down the corridor. "Help!

Murder! Police!" He was not the type of clientele cherished by innkeepers who want to keep their hotels out of the newspapers.

Flo powdered her nose and rerouged her lips for the tenth time. Her rhinestone slippers beat an impatient tattoo under the table. She consulted the diminutive watch on her wrist and her eyes were angry blue slashes.

Well! This was the first time in her young life she'd been ditched. Ditched. Plain, common, ordinary ditched. And that waiter hanging around the table emptying ash trays, and putting water in the glasses, and rearranging the salt cellars. Thought he was going to get hauled for the bill, did he. She'd show him.

She summoned him imperiously.

The only one who was going to get hauled was Toki Cruseppi. And sure as her name was Flo Davis he was going to get hauled, and what I mean *hauled*. She'd make him wish he'd never known anybody named Flo Davis, she'd fix him so he— She halted her thoughts to smile sweetly at the hovering waiter.

"I'm afraid my escort has been taken ill," she said demurely. "May I have the check?"

It came to forty-one fifty. Cripes, they really laid it on.

Flo put a fifty-dollar bill on the silver salver and said graciously. "You keep the change." That'd show him she wasn't no two-timer.

The waiter became suffused with cheer. Could he get modom's coat, could he call the starter and see that modom's car was waiting, could he—

"Thank you, no," Flo said. Modom's car in a pig's eye. Modom's jitney cab and it'd better not cost more'n three ninety or there was going to be a sore taxi driver. Just wait'll she got her hands on Toki Cruseppi. Ditched. And raked for fifty bucks to boot. Just wait.

She gathered up her long kid gloves and evening bag, arose and swept across the floor and up the steps, trying to act as if she were only on her way to the powder room.

She collected her coat from the check girl and went down in the elevator. Maybe Toki *was* sick like he'd said. So what? If he had any manners, he'd have sent a bellhop or somebody to tell her, and to see that she was put in a cab, *and* to pay the bill. As far as she was concerned he could go take a fast running jump in the reservoir.

Little clusters of people stood about in the lobby talking

excitedly and the manager, looking very harassed, was trying his best to break up the groups and keep them moving.

There was an ambulance drawn up outside. The doorman whistled a cab for her.

"What's the matter," she asked him.

"Nothing," he said. "I guess it's some lamebrain's idea of a lark." He'd had his instructions direct from the manager, himself.

Flo climbed in and gave her address. The driver folded down the corner of a page of a dog-eared copy of a magazine, shoved in the gears, and they moved out into the night.

The meter read three dollars and ten cents when the cab drew up in front of the remodeled flat. Thirty cents tip. That left fifty cents. Just enough to buy a few lilies. And Toki'd be ripe for them when she got through with him.

She ran lightly up the steps and into the building.

A girl with her hair in tin curlers and a pink bath towel over her arm trailed her froufrou housecoat down the hall of the second floor.

"Hi," she said. "Have a good time?"

"Swell," Flo answered.

"My, you're sure all diked out." The girl sighed enviously. "I don't know what you've got I haven't got but whatever it is, it's potent. Go out with one guy and have another guy send you flowers."

"It's my feminine appea— Flowers?"

"Gardenias. I nearly snuffed a hole in the box. You get gardenias and I'm lucky if my boy friend buys me a bunch of cloth daisies for my last year's coat."

"When did they come?"

"About half-hour after you left. I put them out on my window sill so they'd keep. Just a sec and I'll get them." The girl gave her a knowing look and she went off down the hall saying, "Anytime you want to give me lessons, dearie, holler."

Half an hour after she'd left. Toki hadn't sent them, then. Who had? Could it be that man in the Buick coupé who'd given her a ride home that day she'd gone to the matinee at the Bijoux, or the trombone player at Saebeck's. He'd had a crush on her for ages—scared of Big Mike, though. Big Mike. He used to say, "Phfah! Gardenias! Smell like funerals." Flo felt a little chain of goose pimples quiver along her spine. She wondered if she'd ever forget the way Big Mike had looked at her. It was enough to give you the bejums. She pulled herself together at the *slap, slap* of returning bed-

room slippers. Well, whoever'd sent 'em would have put a card in the box.

She accepted the white pasteboard carton with careless nonchalance.

"Sure," she said, "anytime. Five bucks a lesson. Give me a knock when you're through with the tub, will you?"

"Oke doke, I'll leave the water running."

Flo let herself into her suite. She called it a suite to distinguish it from the other apartments whose boudoirs pulled down from a closet in the living room. She always made it a point to add, "Suite 2," when she gave her address to department stores for a delivery.

She turned on the lamps, threw her coat across the flowered-brocatelle arm of a chair and went into her bedroom. Flo really prided herself on her bedroom. It had been lifted bodily out of the Louis Quinze section of Stix, Baer & Fuller and was, as Flo said, a dilly. To be sure the brocade drapes were streaked from the radiator, and the vanity had a whitish irregular splotch on its inlaid top where she had spilled nail-polish remover, but it still looked like the kind of bedroom that might have belonged to Madame DuBarry. Flo was a bit hazy as to Madame DuBarry's identity—anyway a king had been ga-ga about her, and that was enough recommendation for Flo.

She usually walked languidly around her bedroom when she came in, dropping frilly heaps of clothing here and there. It gave her a sense of luxury, even if she would have to pick them up herself in the morning.

But tonight she didn't bother. Her resentment at Toki momentarily shelved, she snapped on the rose silk bed lamp and proceeded without further delay to open the florist's box. She lifted the gardenias out and hunted for the card. There was none. She shook the paper and ransacked the carton and even poked among the silver stems and creamy petals of the corsage. There simply wasn't a card. Anywhere.

That was damned queer. If you sent somebody flowers, you wanted to get the credit for it, didn't you? Unless it *was* the man in the Buick coupé. Maybe he was married or something. You'd think he'd have written a line on it though, wouldn't you? Like, "here's to the Bijoux," or, "To an enjoyable ride," or something like that. You couldn't tell about married men, though. They were cagy. They might want to eat cake but, by gosh, most of them were darn careful they were going to keep what cake they had at home, too. Well, whoever it was would turn up. They always did.

She'd wear her black crêpe tomorrow. They'd look well on black, and the fox furs, and that off-the-face turban with the veil.

She slipped out of her gown and into a full-skirted moire negligee. And she'd wear the diamond bracelet Toki had given her, *over* her gloves like in the ads.

She took a jar of theatrical cold cream and a container of tissues off the shelf of the closet and walked across to her dressing table to light the tall, thin, lace-shaded lamps on either side of the scrolled mirror. And she'd wear her new doeskin pumps and her— She gave a stifled gasp and the jar of cream fell from her grasp, bounced off the grained wood and rolled bumpily around on the rug.

On the mirror was written in bold, blood-red letters, "It's your funeral." A lipstick, its scarlet tongue blunted, lay on the table top.

Flo looked wildly around the room and back at the scrawled words. The cloying scent of gardenias arose chokingly in her nostrils. Her head swam and she gripped the edge of the table to retain her balance.

Who? Her door was locked. Nobody had a key, except Toki. Toki had one. Big Mike had one. But he was dead. Toki. Toki *must* have done it. Why? Why would he do a thing like that? Had he ditched her to come down here and write that on her mirror? That wasn't like Toki. But he *must* have. Why? Why? *What* was her funeral? Was this his way of telling her she was washed up? That there was somebody else? It looked—it looked nasty hanging there in midair like that. Damn those gardenias. They *did* smell like funerals. They did! If Big Mike wasn't dead—but he was dead—his eyes that night she'd—she'd stood there under the canopy—but he was dead. He was. He *had* to be.

There was a rap on the hall door. With an immense effort Flo said, "What is it?" Her voice quavered and broke.

"Your bath's running."

"Thanks."

"What's the matter? You sound kind of shaky."

"Nothing. Nothing at all. See you in the morning."

"Oke doke. 'Night."

"G'night."

Flo took a handful of tissues and wiped the mirror frenziedly. The words smudged and ran together. Another handful, another and another and, finally, there was no trace except for faint pinkish film. She sat down on the French

blue bench and stilled the trembling of her lips with a cold forefinger.

There was no sense in getting excited. It was some of Toki's doings and that's all there was to it. He just had a perverted sense of humor. She'd make him wish it was *his* funeral. She'd knock his props for him! Lord, those gardenias. They made her sick to her stomach.

She put them outside on the window sill.

And nuts with a bath. She wasn't dirty. And, besides, the masseuse at the Adelphia Turkish Baths said that too many of them weren't good for your skin. Dried it out. She'd turn the water off and nuts with it. What she needed was sleep. She wanted to be in fine fettle tomorrow when she saw Toki. She'd funeral him!

She wrapped her negligee around her and went out and down the hall into the bathroom.

The place was black as pitch. Gladys must have turned on the taps full tilt. Couldn't hear yourself think. Smelled like the pipes could stand some cleaning. A muddy, river smell. Dank. Where was the light chain?

She felt in one of her quilted pockets, found a paper packet of matches and struck one.

The door closed behind her. Softly, Easily.

She whirled. The match burned her fingers. She dropped it and tore off another. It broke in the middle.

"Gladys?"

There was no answer.

"Who is it?" she said hoarsely, tearing at the matches. But there was no reply—only the rush of water into the tub.

A third match flamed and this time Flo didn't know when it burned her fingers. She was conscious of nothing but the blotched, bloated features of the man moving toward her with dripping outstretched arms. She couldn't even shriek. She tried. But her voice was locked fast in her throat. The match burned down to the end, flared, and went out.

Tink—tink—tink—

Mrs. O'Donnell broke off in the middle of a snore, turned over in her mammoth bed and began on a different note.

Tink—tink—tink—

She wrinkled her nose sleepily and hitched up her covers.

Tink—tink—tink—

Mrs. O'Donnell sat up and listened.

Tink—tink—tink—tinktink—tink—

She switched on the light. A dark, wet stain was spreading

over Mrs. O'Donnell's ceiling and a miniature pond was collecting, drop by drop, on Mrs. O'Donnell's pillow.

Her lips blew out in an exclamatory poof, and she got out of bed with an alacrity astonishing for one of her ponderous bulk, to shrug into a shabby bathrobe and stuff her archless feet into broken-down Daniel Greens.

These boarders! Forget to turn the lights out, forget to close the windows so that most of the time she was heating up all outdoors, and the bathtub! This would make the third time in six months. Did they care how much a plasterer charged. Did they care if the ceilings fell down? Did they care about anything but their own sweet selves? Not them! She'd bet dimes to dill pickles it was that Flo Davis again. The worst of the lot. Shiftless, no 'count. What did Flo Davis care if the ceiling fell down and killed innocent people, not to speak of the mess after the plasterer got through, and the *prices* he charged!

Mumbling and muttering, Mrs. O'Donnell climbed the stairs and padded down the hall to the bathroom. Water was seeping along the baseboards and the runner was a soggy mush.

Mrs. O'Donnell bunched her nightgown and bathrobe around her knees, opened the bathroom door, felt blindly for the light chain, and gave it a violent yank.

The bunched clothing unbunched and fell to her ankles where it sloshed loosely in the running water. Mrs. O'Donnell put a hand on the wash bowl to steady herself, and without taking her gaze from the bathtub, she began to scream methodically, evenly, and with monotonous persistence.

The morning sun tried its best to pierce the gray sky and did succeed in striking a brassy response from the portals of the Windermere before it retired for the day behind its conglomerate layer of sulphurous clouds, gasoline fumes and coal smoke.

The cabby looked up from his paper and frowned. One dumb day, if you asked him. Dead as ditch water. Quiet as an old maid's parlor. The funnies weren't even any good. Same brand of news, too.

Fire on Tenth Street. The regular run of accidents. The Windermere had managed to keep their little accident out of the papers, he'd noticed. Some pull. Shucks, he couldn't blame them, though. It wasn't their fault a bloke with a skizzler full had to pass out face down in a washbasin.

And, let's see, a streetcar smash-up, and a beer truck, and the usual school bus and train, and a hit-and-run in a silver

and maroon Cadillac. Two people killed outright. Joe Somebody and Nickels Somebody-else. The guy driving had escaped. Well, he wouldn't *stay* escaped with that car and that description. Big and fat with small eyes, height five-ten, weight two-fifty, wearing a blue serge suit believed to be wet.

And a dame had jumped out of a window, or been pushed, during a party and another dame had slipped in a bathtub and knocked herself out long enough to get drowned. He'd had a fare last night at that second address. Or near it. Some looker. Acted like she knew her way around town. He'd bet *she* didn't fall in no bathtub. Not that babe. Not unless there was a bunch of pearls or a stack of dollar bills in the bottom of it. He wondered if it was true that there were more deaths caused in bathtubs than automobiles. He grinned. He'd have to tell *that* to the old lady next Saturday.

The jewel robbery had been solved. A fence named Zacchus—criminently the *names* some of these birds sported—had been caught with the goods. Only one piece missing, a bracelet.

And the ads. Pages of 'em. Sears were having a sale. The old lady was griping for a new ice box. Maybe, he'd get her one. Christmas was coming.

And one of those shantyboat dodos—Krohler was it?—Kohler—had caught a stiff in his fishing net. Haw, bet *that* played hob with your breakfast, brother.

And the weather. Clear tomorrow, not much change in temperature. River 40.8, 40.8, 40.8, calm.

The cabby put the paper alongside him on the seat, pulled his hat down over his eyes, scrounged on the back of his neck, sighed gustily, and slept.

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