

DRAGONS AND NIGHTMARES

ROBERT BLOCH



The weirdest, wildest, most fantastic
book this world famous author
has ever produced. Bloch at his best.

Cast Of Characters

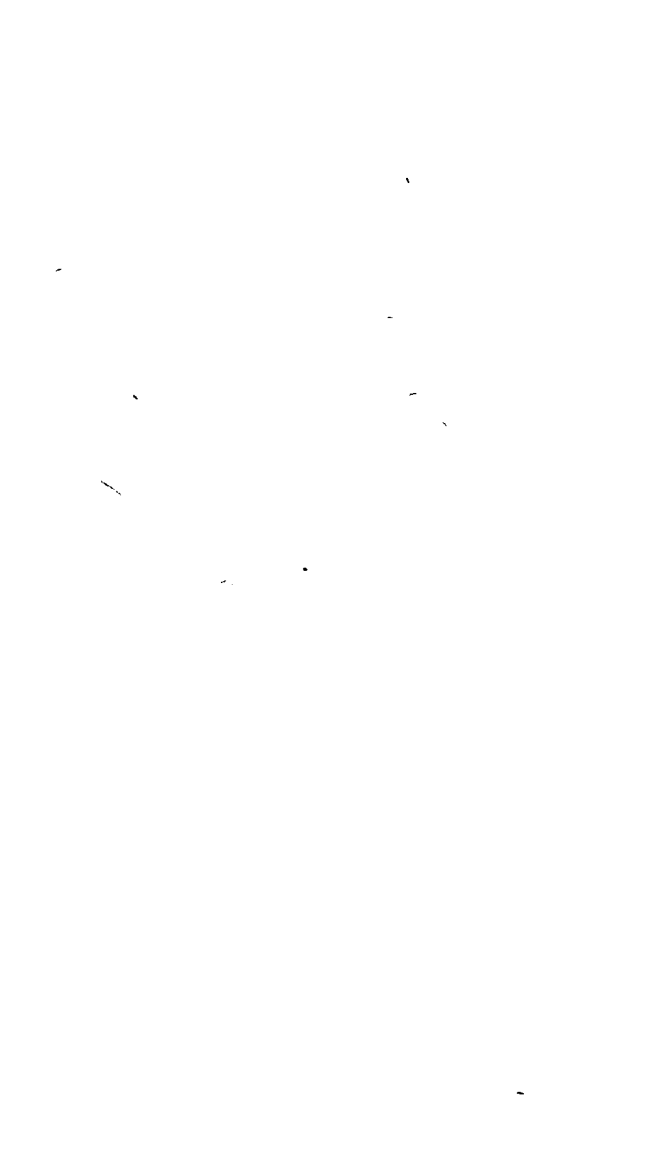
Simpkins, the toothless vampire.

Mr. Margate, who runs a sort of boarding house for ghouls.

Jory, who wears dark glasses so he won't see the full moon.

Captain Hollis, who roams the world looking for fabulous creatures—centaurs and tree nymphs.

The Hero, who applied for a job and was handed a nightmare.



DRAGONS AND NIGHTMARES

Robert Bloch

BELMONT BOOKS • NEW YORK CITY

DRAGONS AND NIGHTMARES
A BELMONT BOOK—November 1969

Published by
Belmont Productions, Inc.
185 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016

Copyright © 1969 by Robert Bloch
All rights reserved.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

***Here is a dedication for
SAM PEEPLES
who has fought the same
dragons and shared the
same nightmares.***



CONTENTS

DRAGONS . . .

A GOOD KNIGHT'S WORK 11

THE EAGER DRAGON 42

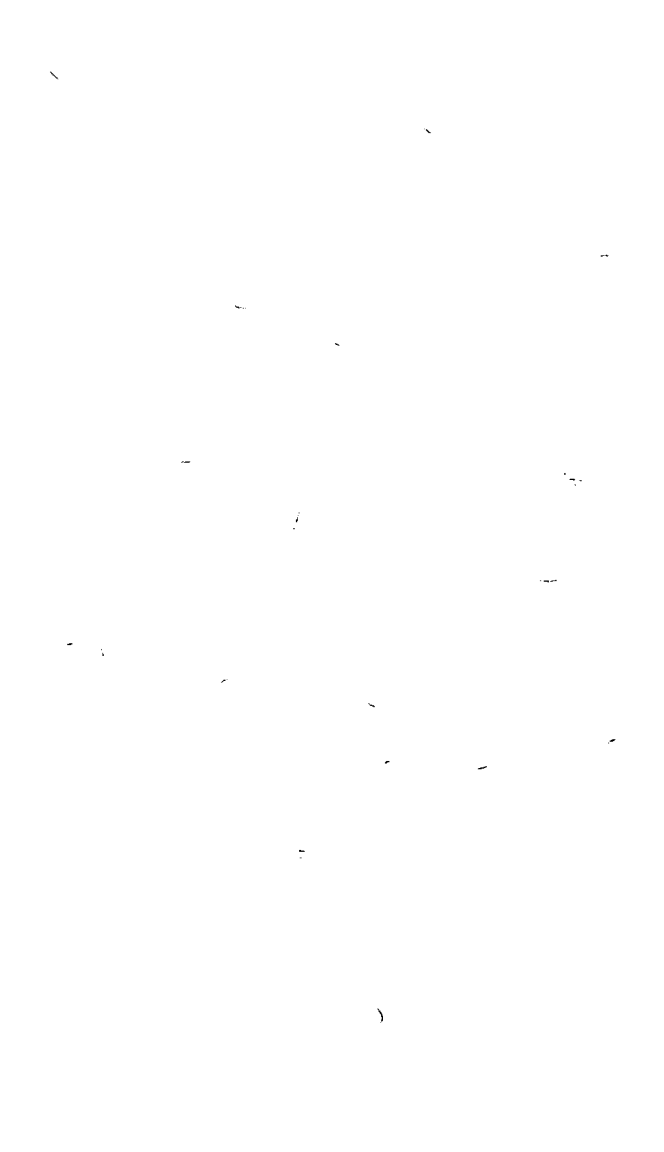
NIGHTMARES . . .

NURSEMAID TO NIGHTMARES 74

***BACKWORD*172**



*A Good
Knight's
Work*



I am stepping on the gas, air is pouring into the truck and curses are pouring out, because I feel like I get up on the wrong side of the gutter this morning.

Back in the old days I am always informing the mob how I am going to get away from it all and buy a little farm in the country and raise chickens. So now I raise chickens and wish I am back in the old days raising hell.

It is one of those things, and today it is maybe two or three of them, in spades. Perhaps you are lucky and do not live in the Corn Belt, so I will mention a few items to show that the guy naming it knows what he's talking about.

This morning I wake up at four a.m. because fifty thousand sparrows are holding a Communist rally under the window. I knock my shins over a wheelbarrow in the back yard because the plumbing is remote. When I get dressed I have to play tag with fifty chickens I am taking to market, and by the time that's over I am covered with more feathers than a senator who gets adopted by Indians in a newsreel.

After which all I do is load the cacklers on the truck, drive fifty miles to town, sell biddies at a loss, and drive back—strictly without breakfast.

Breakfast I must catch down the road at the tavern, where I got to pay ten bucks to Thin Tommy Malloon for protection.

That is my set-up and explains why I am not exactly bubbling over with good spirits. There is nothing to do about it but keep a stiff upper lip—mostly around the bottle I carry with me on the trip back.

Well, I am almost feeling better after a few quick ones, and am just about ready to stop my moans and groans when I spot this sign on the road.

I don't know how it is with you. But this is how it is with me. I do not like signs on the road a bit, and of all the signs I do not like, the *SIAMESE SHAVE* signs I hate in spades.

They stand along the highway in series, and each of them has a line of poetry on it so when you pass them all you read a little poem about *SIAMESE SHAVE*. They are like the Old Lady Goose rhymes they feed the juveniles, and I do not have any love for Ma Goose and her poetry.

Anyhow, when I see this first sign I let out some steam and take another nip. But I cannot resist reading the sign because I always do. It says:

DON'T WEAR A LONG BEARD

And a little further on the second one reads:

LIKE A GOAT

Pretty soon I come to the third one, saying:

JUST TAKE A RAZOR

And all at once I'm happy, hoping maybe somebody made a mistake and the fourth sign will say:

AND CUT YOUR THROAT!

So I can hardly wait to see the last one, and I'm

looking ahead on the road, squinting hard. Then I slam on the brakes.

No, I don't see a sign. There is a *thing* blocking the road, instead. *Two* things.

One of these things is a horse. At least, it looks more like a horse than anything else I can see on four drinks. It is a horse covered with a kind of awning, or tent that hangs down over its legs and out on its neck. In fact, I notice that this horse is wearing a mask over its head with eyeholes, like it belongs to the Ku Klux Klan.

The other *thing* is riding the horse. It is all silver, from head to foot, and there is a long plume growing out of its head. It looks like a man, and it has a long, sharp pole in one hand and the top off a garbage can in the other.

Now when I look at this party I am certain of only one thing. This is not the Lone Ranger.

When I drive a little closer my baby-blue eyes tell me that what I am staring at is a man dressed up in a suit of armor, and that the long, sharp pole is a little thing like a twelve-foot spear with a razor on the end.

Who he is and why he is dressed up this way may be very interesting to certain parties like the State police, but I am very far away from being one. Also I am very far away from Thin, Tommy Malloon who is waiting for my ten bucks protection money.

So when I see Old Ironsides blocking the road, I place my head outside the window and request, "Get the hell out of the way, buddy!" in a loud but polite voice.

Which turns out to be a mistake, in spades and no trump.

The party in the tin tuxedo just looks at the truck coming his way, and cocks his iron head when he sees steam coming from the radiator. The exhaust is begin-

ning to make trombone noises, because I am stepping hard on the gas, and this seems to make up the heavy dresser's mind for him.

"Yoiks!" howls his voice behind his helmet. "A dragon!"

And all at once he levels that lance of his, knocks his tootsies against the horse's ribs, and starts coming head-on for the truck.

"For Pendragon and England!" he bawls, over the clanking. And charges ahead like a baby tank.

That twelve-foot razor of his is pointed straight for my radiator, and I do not wish him to cut my motor, so naturally I swing the old truck out of the way.

This merely blows the radiator cap higher than the national debt, and out shoots enough steam and hot air to supply a dozen congressmen.

The horse rears up, and the tintype lets out a yap, letting his lance loose. Instead of hitting my radiator, it smashes my windshield.

Also my temper. I stop the truck and get out, fast. "Now, listen, buddy," I reason with him.

"Aha!" comes the voice from under the helmet. "A wizard!" He uses a brand of double-talk I do not soon forget. "Halt ye, for it is Pallagyn who speaks."

I am in no mood for orations, so I walk up to him, waving a pipe wrench.

"Bust my windows, eh, buddy? Monkey business on a public highway, is it? I'm going to—Yowl!"

I am a personality that seldom hollers "Yowl!" even at a burlesque show, but when this armor-plated jockey slides off his horse and comes for me, he is juggling a sharp six feet of sword. And six feet of sword sailing for your neck is worth a "Yowl!" any day, I figure.

I also figure I had better duck unless I want a shave and a haircut, and it is lucky for me that

Iron-lung has to move slow when he whams his sword down at me.

I come up under his guard and give him a rap on the old orange with my pipe wrench.

There is no result.

The steel king drops his sword and lets out another roar, and I caress his helmet again with the wrench. Still no result. I get my result on the third try. The wrench breaks.

And then his iron arms grab me, and I am in for it.

The first thing I know, everything is turning black as solitary, and my sparring partner is reaching for a shiv at his belt. I get my foot there, fast.

All I can do is push forward, but it works. About a hundred and fifty pounds of armor loses balance, and there is nothing for the guy inside to do except to go down with it. Which he does, on his back. Then I am on his chest, and I roll up the Venetian blind on the front of his helmet.

"Hold, enough!" comes the double-talk from inside. "Prithee, hold!"

"O.K., buddy. But open up that mail box of yours. I want to see the face of the jerk that tries to get me into a traffic accident with a load of tin."

He pulls up the shutters, and I get a peek at a purple face decorated with red whiskers. There are blue eyes, too, and they look down, ashamed.

"Ye are the first, O Wizard, to gaze upon the vanquished face of Sir Pallagyn of the Black Keep," he mumbles.

I get off his chest like it was the hot seat. Because, although I am very fond of nuts, I like them only in fruit cakes.

"I've got to be going," I mention. "I don't know who you are or why you are running around like this, and

I maybe ought to have you run in, but I got business up the road, see? So long."

I start walking away and turn around. "Besides, my name is not O. Wizard."

"Verily," says the guy who calls himself Sir Pallagyn, getting up slow, with a lot of rattling. "Ye are a wizard, for ye ride a dragon breathing fire and steam.

I am thinking of the fire and steam Thin Tommy Malloon is breathing right now, so I pay little or no attention, but get in the truck. Then this Pallagyn comes running up and yells, "Wait!"

"What for?"

"My steed and arms are yours by right of joust."

Something clicks inside my head, and even if it is an eight ball, I get interested. "Wait a minute," I suggest. "Just who are you and where do you hang out?"

"Why," says he, "as I bespoke, O Wizard—I am Sir Pallagyn of the Black Keep, sent here ensorcelled by Merlin, from Arthur's court at Camelot. And I hang out at the greves in my armor," he adds, tucking in some cloth sticking out of the chinks and joints in his heavy suit.

"Huh?" is about the best I can do.

"And besting me in fair combat, ye gain my steed and weapons, by custom of the joust." He shakes his head, making a noise like a Tommy-gun. "Merlin will be very angry when he hears of this, I wot."

"Merlin?"

"Merlin, the Gray Wizard, who sent me upon the quest," he explains. "He it was who sped me forward in Time, to quest for the Cappadocian Tabouret."

Now I am not altogether a lug—as you can tell by the way I look up some of the spelling on these items—and when something clicks inside my noggin it means I am thinking, but difficult.

I know I am dealing with the worst kind of screwball—the kind that bounces—but still there is some sense in what he is saying. I see this King Arthur and this Merlin in a picture once, and I see also some personalities in armor that are called knights, which means they are King Arthur's trigger men. They hang out around a big table in a stone hideout and are always spoiling for trouble and going off on quests—which means putting the goniff on stuff which doesn't belong to them, or copping dames from other knights.

But I figure all this happens maybe a hundred years ago, or so, over in Europe, before they throw away their armor and change into colored shirts to put the rackets on an organized paying basis.

And this line about going forward in Time to find something is practically impossible, unless you go for Einstein's theory, which I don't, preferring Jane Fonda.

Still, it is you might say unusual, so I answer this squirrel. "What you're trying to tell me is that you come here from King Arthur's court and some magician sends you to find something?"

"Verily, O Wizard. Merlin counseled me that I might not be believed," says Pallagyn, sadlike. He chews on his mustache, without butter. He almost looks like he is promoting a weeper.

"I believe you, buddy," I say, wanting to cheer him up and also get out of here.

"Then take my mount and weapons—it is required by law of the joust," he insists.

Right then I figure I would rather take a drink. I do. It makes me feel better. I get out and walk over to the oat burner. "I don't know what to do with this four-legged glue barrel," I tell him, "or your manicure set, either. But if it makes you happy, I will take them with me."

So I grab the nag and take him around back of the truck, let down the ramp and put him in. When I get back, Sir Pallagyn is piling his steel polo set into the front seat.

"I place these on the dragon for thee," he says.

"This isn't a dragon," I explain. "It's a Ford."

"Ford? Merlin did not speak of that creature." He climbs into the seat after his cutlery, looking afraid the steering wheel will bite him.

"Hey, where you going?"

"With thee, O Wizard. The steed and weapons are thine, but I must follow them, even into captivity. It is the law of the quest."

"You got laws on the brain, that's your trouble. Now listen, I don't like hitchhikers—"

Then I gander at my ticker and see it is almost ten and remember I am to meet Thin Tommy at eight. So I figure, why not? I will give this number a short lift down the pike and dump him where it is quiet and forget him. Maybe I can also find out whether or not there is somebody missing from Baycrest, which is the local laughing academy, and turn him in. Anyway, I have my date to keep, so I start the truck rolling.

This Pallagyn lets out a sort of whistle through his whiskers when I hit it up, so I say, "What's the matter, buddy, are you thirsty?"

"No," he gasps. "But we are flying!"

"Only doing fifty," I tell him. "Look at the speedometer."

"Fifty what? Speedometer?"

My noggin is clicking like a slot machine in a church bazaar. This baby isn't faking! I get another look at his armor and see it is solid stuff—not like fancy-dress costumes, but real heavy, with little designs in gold and silver running through it. And he doesn't know what a car is, or a speedometer!

"You need a drink," I say, taking it for him, and then passing him the bottle.

"Mead?" he says.

"No, Haig & Haig. Try a slug."

He tilts the bottle and takes a terrific triple-tongue. He lets out a roar and turns redder than his whiskers.

"I am bewitched!" he yells. "Ye black wizard!"

"Hold it. You'll cool off in a minute. Besides, I'm not a wizard. I'm a truck farmer, believe it or not, and don't let them kid you down at the Bastille. I'm through with the rackets."

He gets quieter in a minute and begins to ask me questions. Before I know it, I am explaining who I am and what I am doing, and after another drink it doesn't seem so screwy to me any more.

Even when he tells me about this Merlin cat putting a spell on him and sending him through Time to go on a quest, I swallow it like my last shot. I break down and tell him to call me Butch. In a few minutes we're practically cell mates.

"Ye may call me Pallagyn," he says.

"O.K., Pal. How about another slug?"

This time he is more cautious, and it must go down fairly well, because he smacks his lips and doesn't even turn pink.

"Might I inquire as to your destination, O Butch?" he lets out after a minute or so.

"You might," I say. "There it is, straight ahead."

I point out the building we are just coming to. It is a roadhouse and tavern called "The Blunder Inn," and it is in this rat hole that Thin Tommy Malloon hangs his hat and holster. This I explain to Pal.

"It doth not resemble a rat hole," he comments.

"Any place where Thin Tommy gets in must be a rat hole," I tell him, "because Thin Tommy is a rat. He is a wrongo but strongo. Nevertheless, I must now go

in and pay him his ten dollars for protection or he will sprinkle lye on my alfalfa."

"What do you mean?" asks Pallagyn.

"Yes, Pal. I have a little farm, and I must pay Thin Tommy ten a week or else I will have trouble, such as finding ground glass in my hen mash, or a pineapple in my silo."

"Ye pay to keep vandals from despoiling the crops?" asks the knight. "Would it not be expedient to discover the miscreants and punish them?"

"I *know* who would wreck the farm if I didn't pay," I reply. "Thin Tommy."

"Ah, now methinks I comprehend thy plight. Thou art a serf, and this Thin Thomas is thy overlord."

Somehow this remark, and the way Pallagyn says it, seems to show me up for a sucker. And I have just enough drink in me to resent it.

"I am no serf," I shout. "As a matter of fact, I am waiting a long time to fix the clock of this Thin Tommy. So today I pay him no ten dollars, and I am going in to tell him so to what he calls his face."

Pallagyn listens to me kind of close, because he seems pretty ignorant on English and grammar, but he catches on and smiles.

"Spoken like a right true knight," he says. "I shall accompany ye on this mission, for I find in my heart a liking for thy steadfast purpose, and a hatred of Thin Thomas."

"Sit where you are," I says, fast. "I will handle this myself. Because Thin Tommy does not like strangers coming into his joint in the daytime without an invitation, and you are dressed kind of loud and conspicuous. So you stay here," I tell him, "and have a drink."

And I pull up and climb out of the car and march into the tavern fast.

My heart is going fast also, because what I am about to do is enough to make any heart go fast in case Thin Tommy gets an idea to stop it from beating altogether. Which he sometimes does when he is irked, particularly over money.

Even so I walk up to the bar and sure enough, there is Thin Tommy standing there polishing the glasses with boxing gloves on. Only when I look again I realize these are not boxing gloves at all, but merely Thin Tommy's hands.

Thin Tommy is not really thin, you understand, but is called that because he weighs about three hundred fifty pounds—stripped—such as once a month, when he takes a bath.

"So, it's you!" he says, in a voice like a warden.

"Hello, Thin Tommy," I greet him. "How are tricks?"

"I will show you how tricks are if you do not cough up those ten berries fast and furious," grunts Thin Tommy. "All of the others have been here two or three hours ago, and I am waiting to go to the bank."

"Go right ahead," I tell him. "I wouldn't stop you."

Thin Tommy drops the glass he is polishing and leans over the bar. "Hand it over," he says through his teeth. They are big yellow teeth, all put together in not such a pleasant grin.

I grin right back at him because how can he see my knees shaking?

"I have nothing for you, Tommy," I get out. "In fact, that is why I am here, to tell you that from now on I do not require protection any longer."

"Hal" yells Thin Tommy, pounding on the bar and then jumping around it with great speed for a man of his weight. "Bertram!" he calls. "Roscoe!"

Bertram and Roscoe are Tommy's two waiters, but I know Tommy is not calling them in to serve me.

They come running out of the back, and I see they

have experience in such matters before, because Bertram is carrying a blackjack, and Roscoe has a little knife in his hand. The knife worries me most, because I am practically certain that Roscoe is never a Boy Scout.

By the time I see all this, Thin Tommy is almost on top of me, and he lets go with one arm for my jaw. I bend my head down just in time, but Thin Tommy's other hand catches me from the side and slaps me across the room. I fall over a chair, and by this time Bertram and Roscoe are ready to wait on me. In fact, one of them pulls out the chair I fell over, and tries to hit me on the head with it.

I let out a yell and grab up a salt cellar from the table. This I push down Bertram's mouth, and I am just ready to throw a little pepper in Roscoe's eyes when Thin Tommy crashes over, grabs the knife from Roscoe's hand, and backs me into the corner.

All at once I hear a crash outside the door, and somebody hollers, "Yoiks! Pendragon and Pallagyn!"

Into the room gallops Sir Pallagyn. He has got his sword in one hand, and the empty bottle in the other, and he is full to the eyeballs with courage.

He lets the bottle go first and it catches Bertram in the side of the head, just when he is getting the salt cellar out of his mouth. Bertram slides down with a sort of moan, and Roscoe and Tommy turn around.

"It's one of them there rowboats, like in science fiction!" remarks Thin Tommy.

"Yeah," says Roscoe, who is all at once very busy when Pallagyn comes for him with his sword. In fact Roscoe is so busy he falls over the chair and lands on his face, which gets caught in a cuspidor. Pallagyn is ready to whack him one when Thin Tommy drops hold of me and lets out a grunt.

He grabs up the blackjack and the dagger both in

the same hand and lets fly. They bounce off Pallagyn's helmet, of course, so Thin Tommy tries a chair. This doesn't work, either, so he picks up the table.

Pallagyn just turns kind of surprised and starts coming for him. And Thin Tommy backs away.

"No . . . no—" he says. All at once he reaches into his hip pocket and pulls out the old lead poisoner.

"Watch out!" I yell, trying to get to Tommy before he can shoot. "Duck, Pal—duck!"

Pallagyn ducks, but he is still running forward and his armor is so heavy he can't stop if he wants to keep from falling over.

The gun goes off over his head, but then Sir Pallagyn is going on, and he runs right into Thin Tommy, butting his head into his stomach. Thin Tommy just gives one "Ooooooff" and sits down backward, holding his belly where the helmet hits it, and he turns very green indeed.

Pallagyn sticks out his sword, but I say, "Never mind. This ought to teach him a lesson."

Going out, Thin Tommy just manages to whisper to me, "Who's that guy?"

"That," I tell him, "is my new hired man. So if I was you, I wouldn't plant any pineapples on my farm, because he is allergic to fruit."

So we leave and climb back into the truck.

"Thanks, Pal," I say. "You not only throw a scare into that monkey but you also save my life. I am in debt to you, whoever you are, and if Thin Tommy doesn't serve such rotgut, I would take you back in and buy you a drink."

"Verily, 'tis a trifle," says Pallagyn.

"I'll do you the same some day, Pal," I tell him. "You are my buddy."

"Ye could help me now, methinks.

"How?"

"Why, in pursuit of my quest. I was sent here by Merlin to seek the Cappadocian Tabouret."

"I do not know anything about the new night clubs," I tell him. "I am not an uptown boy any longer."

"The Cappadocian Tabouret," says Pallagyn, ignoring me, "is the table on which the Holy Grail will rest, once we find it."

"Holy Grail?"

So Pallagyn begins to tell me a long yarn about how he is living in a castle with this King Arthur and a hundred other triggers who are all knights like he is. As near as I get it, all they do is sit around and drink and fight each other, which makes it look like this King Arthur is not so good in controlling his mob.

The brain in this outfit is this guy Merlin, who is a very prominent old fuddy in the Magician's Union. He is always sending the lads out to rescue some dames that have been snatched, or to knock off the hoods of other mobs, but what he is really interested in is this Holy Grail.

I cannot exactly catch what the Holy Grail is, except it's kind of a loving cup or trophy that has disappeared from some hock shop back there in the Middle Ages. But everybody is hot to find it, including the big boys in the mob like Sir Galahad and Sir Lancelot.

When Pallagyn mentions these two I know I hear of them some place, so naturally I ask questions and find out quite a bit about ancient times and knights and how they live and about the tournaments—which are pretty much the same as the Rose Bowl games, without a take—and many other items which are of great interest to an amateur scholar like myself.

But to slice a long story thin, Merlin cannot put the

finger on this Holy Grail yet, although he is sending out parties every day to go on these quests for it. But he is a smart cookie in many another way, and one of his little tricks is to get himself high and then look into the future. For example, he tells King Arthur that he is going to have trouble some time ahead, and Pallagyn says he may be right, because he personally notices that this Sir Lancelot is making pigeon noises at Arthur's bird. But gossip aside, one of the things Merlin sees in the future is this Cappadocian Tabouret, which is a sacred relic on which the Holy Grail is supposed to sit.

So the old hophead calls in Sir Pallagyn and says he is sending him on a quest for the glory of Britain, to get this table for the Holy Grail and bring it back.

All Merlin can do to help him is to put a spell on him and send him into the future to the time where he sees the Tabouret.

And he tells him a little about these times and this country, sprinkles a little powder on him, and all at once Pallagyn is sitting on his horse in the middle of County Truck AA, where I find him.

"That is not exactly the easiest story in the world to believe," I remark, when Pallagyn finishes.

"Here I am," says the knight, which is about as good an answer as any.

For a minute I think I can understand how he must feel, being shipped off through Time into a new territory, without even a road map to help him. And since he is a good guy and saves my life, I figure the least I can do is try.

"Doesn't this old junkie give you a hint where it might be?" I ask.

"Merlin?" Forsooth, he spoke of seeing it in a House of the Past."

"What kind of house?"

"House of the Past, methinks he named it."

"Never hear of it," I says, "unless he means a funeral parlor. And you don't catch me going into any stiff hotel."

I say this as we are driving into my yard, and I stop the truck.

"Let's grab a plate of lunch," I suggest. "Maybe we can think of something."

"Lunch?"

"Scoff. Bread."

"Here?"

"Yeah. This is my pad—house."

I salvage Pallagyn out of the car and take him inside. Then, while I fix the food, he sits there in the kitchen and asks me a thousand screwy questions. He is very ignorant about everything.

It turns out that back in his times, there is not enough civilization to put in your ear. He doesn't know what a stove is, or gas, and I can see why they call them the Dark Ages when he tells me he never sees an electric light.

So I tell him everything, about cars and trains and airplanes and tractors and steamships, and then I break down and give him a few tips on how citizens live.

I hand it to him about the mobs and the rackets and the fuzz, and politics and elections. Then I give him a few tips about science—machine guns and armored cars and tear gas and pineapples and fingerprints—all the latest stuff.

It is very hard to explain these matters to such an ignorant guy as this Pallagyn, but he is so grateful that I want to give it to him straight.

I even show him how to eat with a knife and fork, as it turns out at lunch that King Arthur's court doesn't go in for fancy table manners.

But I am not a schoolteacher, and after all, we are not getting any closer to Sir Pallagyn's problem, which is snatching this Tabouret in his quest.

So I begin asking him all over again about what it is and what it looks like and where this fink Merlin said to find it.

And all he manages to come clean with is that it's in the House of the Past, and that Merlin sees it in a jag.

"Big place," he says. "And the Tabouret is guarded by men in blue."

"Police station?" I wonder.

"It is in a transparent coffin," he says.

I never see any of these, though I hear Stinky Raffelano is in one after he catches his slugs last year.

"Ye can see but cannot touch it," he remembers.

All at once I get it.

"It's under glass," I tell him. "In a museum."

"Glass?"

"Never mind what that is," I say. "Sure—guards. House of the Past. It's in a museum in town."

I tell him what a museum is, and then start thinking.

"First thing to do is get a line on where it is. Then we can figure out how to pull the snatch."

"Snatch?"

"Steal it, Pal. Say—do you know what it looks like?"

"Verily. Merlin described it in utmost detail, lest I err and procure a spurious Tabouret."

"Good. Give me a line on it, will you?"

"Why, it is but a wooden tray of rough boards, with four short legs set at the corners. Brown it is in hue, and it spans scarce four hands in height. Plain it is, without decoration or adornment, for it was but

crudely fashioned by the good Cappadocian Fathers."

"So," I say. "I think maybe I have a notion. Wait here," I tell him, "and improve your education."

And I hand him a copy of a girlie magazine. I go down to the cellar, and when I come up after a while, Sir Pallagyn comes clanking up to me, all excited.

"Pray, and who is this fair damsel?" he asks, pointing out a shot of a broad in a bikini. "She has verily the appearance of the Lady of the Lake," he remarks. "Albeit with more . . . more—"

"You said it, Pal," I agree. "Much more, in spades. But here—does this look like the table you're after?"

"Od's blood, it is the very thing! From whence didst thou procure it?"

"Why, it's nothing but a piece of old furniture I find laying down in the basement. A footstool, but I knock the stuffing out of it and scrape off some varnish. Now, all you got to do is get this Merlin to wave his wand and call you back, and you hand him over the goods. He will never catch wise," I say, "and it will save us a lot of trouble."

Pallagyn's puss falls in a little and he starts chewing his red mustache again.

"I fear, Sir Butch, thy ethics are not of the highest. I am a quest, nor could I present a spurious Tabouret in sight of mine own conscience."

So I see I am in for it. Of course it will be easy for me to tell this tin can to go chase his quest, but somehow I feel I owe him a good turn.

"I will work things out in a jiffy, Pal. You just go out and put your nag in the stable, and when you come back, I will have things set."

"On thy honor?" he says, smiling all of a sudden.

"Sure. Shake."

He shakes until his armor rattles.

"Never mind," I say. "Take care of the nag and leave it to me."

He clunks out and I get busy on the phone.

When he comes back I am ready.

"Come on out and hop in the truck," I invite. "We are on our way to pick up that furniture for you."

"Indeed? Then we really quest together, Sir Butch?"

"Don't ask any questions," I remark. "On your way."

I notice he fumbles with that magazine a minute, and when he sees me looking he blushes.

"I wouldst carry the image of this fair lady, as is the custom of the quest," he admits, tucking the picture of the broad in his helmet, so only her legs stick out over his forehead.

"O. K. by me, Pal. But come on, we got a drive ahead of us."

I grab up a pint, the fake Tabouret, and a glass cutter, head for the truck, and we're off.

It is a long drive, and I have plenty of time to explain the lay of the land to Sir Pallagyn. I tell him how I call the museum and find out if they have this table in hock. Then I hang up and call back in a different voice, telling them that I am an express man with a suit of armor on hand for them which I will send over.

"Pretty neat, hey, Pal?" I ask.

"But I do not comprehend. How did you talk to the museum if it is in the city and—"

"I am a wizard myself," I let it go.

"Still, I fail to perceive the plan. What place has armor in a House of the Past?"

"Why, it's a relic. Don't you know nobody wears armor no more? It's all bulletproof vests."

"Still, how doth that contrive for us to—snatch—the Tabouret?"

"Don't you get it? I'll carry you into the museum like an empty suit of armor. Then we will spot this Tabouret. I will set you down in a corner, and when the joint closes up you can snatch it very quick indeed. You can use this glass cutter to get it out, substitute this fake furniture in the case, and nobody will be hep to it the next morning. Simple."

"By're Lady, 'tis a marvel of cunning!"

I admit it sounds groovy myself. But I notice we are now coming into some traffic, so I stop the truck and say, "From now on you are just a suit of armor with nothing inside. You climb into the back of the truck so citizens will not give you the queer eye, and lie quiet. When we get to the museum I will drag you out, and you just hold still. Remember?"

"Verily."

So Pallagyn hops into the back of the truck and lies down and I head into the city. Before I get too far I take myself a couple of quick ones because I am a little nervous, being so long since I pull a job.

I am not exactly floating but my feet do not touch bottom when we get downtown. Which is why I accidentally touch a fender of the car ahead of me when we stop in traffic. In fact I touch it so it drops off.

It is a big black Rolls, and an old Whitey with a mean-looking puss opens the door and leans out and says:

"Here now, you ruffian!"

"Who are you calling a ruffian, you bottle-nosed old baboon?" I answer, hoping to pass it off quiet.

"Aaaaargh!" says Whitey, climbing out of his buggy. "Come along, Jefferson, and help me deal with this hoodlum."

It is funny he should call me such when I feel sure he never sets peepers on me before in his life, but then it is a small world. And the chauffeur that hauls out after him is much too big to be running around in a small world. He is not only big but mean-looking, and he comes marching right at me along with old Whitey.

"Why don't you go away and soak your feet?" I suggest, still wanting to be diplomatic and avoid trouble. But Whitey does not go for my good advice.

"Let me have your license," he growls. "I am going to do something about reckless drivers that smash into cars."

"Yeah," says the big chauffeur, sticking his red face into the window. "Maybe this fellow would slow down a little if he was driving with a couple of black eyes."

"Now wait a minute," I suggest. "I am very sorry if I bump into you and lose my temper, but I am on my way to the museum in a hurry with a rush order. If you look in the back of the truck, you will see a suit of armor I am delivering there."

As it turns out this is not such a hot suggestion at that. Because when I see Whitey and the chauffeur marching at me I have the presence of mind to toss the whiskey bottle in the back of the truck. And now Sir Pallagyn has got a gander at it, so when Whitey hangs his nose over the side, there is Pal, taking a snifter.

When he sees the old guy coming he stops still with his arm in the air, snapping his visor shut with the bottle in his mouth.

"Here, what's this?" snaps Whitey.

"Huh?"

"What's that bottle doing stuck in the visor of this helmet?" And what's making the arm hold on to it?"

"I don't know, mister. That's how I find it when I unpack it this morning."

"Something wrong," insists old Whitey. "They didn't drink whiskey way back then."

"It's pretty old whiskey," I tell him.

"I'll vouch for that," he says, real nasty, "if your breath is any indication. I think you ought to be run in for drunken driving."

"Say," pipes up Jefferson, the big chauffeur. "Maybe this guy doesn't even own the truck like he says. He might have stole this armor."

Whitey smiles like a desk sergeant. "I never thought of that. "Now, sir"—and he wheels on me fast—"if you know so much about this particular bit of armor, perhaps you can tell me the name of its original wearer."

"Why . . . why . . . Sir Pallagyn of the Round Table," I stammer.

"Pallagyn? Pallagyn? Never heard of him," snaps Whitey. "He never sat at the Round Table."

"He is always under it," I say. "Quite a lush."

"Preposterous! This is all a fraud of some sort."

"Look!" Jefferson yells. "The whiskey!"

We all look around, and sure enough the whiskey is disappearing from the bottle because Pallagyn is gargling it down very quiet.

"Fraud!" says Whitey, again, and taps the helmet with his cane.

"Come on, where did you steal this from?" growls Jefferson, grabbing me by the collar. And Whitey keeps hitting the helmet.

"Desist, by blessed St. Georgel" roars Pallagyn, sitting up. "Desist, ere I let air through thy weasand, thou aged conskiter!"

Whitey stands there with the cane in the air and

his mouth is open wide enough to hang a canary in. Pal sees the cane and grabs for his sword.

"A joust, is it?" he yells.

And all around us the citizens are honking their horns and staring out, but when they see Pallagyn standing up and waving his pocketknife they drive away very fast.

"Robot!" mumbles Whitey.

"Rodent, am I?" and Pallagyn begins to slice away at Whitey's breadbasket.

"Hey!" yells the chauffeur, dropping me. "Cut that!" He makes a dive for the knight, but he sees him climbing up into the truck and bops him with the whiskey bottle. The big guy falls down and sits still. Whitey dances around for a minute and then runs for his car.

"I am a trustee of the museum," he bawls. "And whatever that thing is, it isn't going on display. Witchcraft—that's what it is!"

Now this is a fine time for the fuzz to show up, but when he does I quick-motion to Pal to hold still and grab the copper by the collar.

"This guy and his chauffeur back into me," I say. "And if you smell the chauffeur you see he is drunk; as a matter of fact he is out. That old bird is also a lush, but me," and I step on the gas, "I am in a hurry to deliver this armor to a museum, and I do not wish to press charges."

"Hey—" says the beat daddy, but I pull away fast. I am around the corner before he has time to cry "Wolf!" and I take it up several alleys.

Meanwhile I bawl out Pallagyn in all suits.

"From now on," I tell him, "you don't make a move, no matter what happens. Understand?"

"Hic," says Pallagyn.

"The only way I can get you into the museum is for you to be quiet and lay limp," I say.

"Hic."

"Here we are," I tell him, pulling up in back of the big gray building, into the loading zone.

"Hic."

"Shut your trap," I snarl.

Pallagyn pulls down his visor.

"No, wait." He is still hiccuping, so I yank his plume off and stuff it into his mouth.

"Now, be quiet and leave it to me," I say. I get the table under one arm and slip the glass cutter into one pocket. Then I open the back of the truck and slide Pallagyn down the ramp to the ground.

"Ugh! Oooof!" he groans, under his helmet.

"Sh! Here we go!"

It is not so easy to drag Pallagyn along by the arms, but I manage to hoist him up the platform and get him past the door. There is a guard standing there.

"New armor," I tell him. "Where is your hardware department?"

"Funny. Nobody told me to expect a delivery. Oh, well, I'll let you set it up. Dr. Peabody will probably arrange to place it tomorrow."

He looks at me, all red in the puss, trying to drag Pallagyn along.

"Funny it should be so weighty. I thought armor was light."

"This baby is wearing heavy underwear," I tell him. "How about giving me a hand?"

He helps lift Pallagyn and we carry him through a lot of halls into a big room.

There are a lot of suits of armor standing around the walls, and several are hanging on wires from the ceiling, but I see something else and let out a snort.

Sure enough, in the center of the room is a glass

case, and inside it is standing a little table just like the one I have under my arm.

I set the thing down and the guard notices it for the first time.

"What you got here?" he asks.

"The armor is supposed to stand on it," I explain. "It comes with the set."

"Oh. Well, just stand it up against the wall. I got to get back to the door."

And he goes away. I take a quick gander up and down and see the place is empty. It is getting dark and I figure it is closing time already.

"Here we are," I whisper.

"*Hic*," says Pallagyn.

He opens his visor and takes a look at the Tabouret.

"Verily, it is that for which I seek," he whispers. "My thanks, a thousandfold."

"Forget it. Now all you got to do is wait till it gets a little darker, then make the snatch."

I go up to the case and tap it.

"Why," I say, "this is real luck. It opens from the back and you don't even have to use the glass cutter."

But Pallagyn is not paying any attention. He is looking around at the armor on the walls.

"Gawain!" he snorts.

"What?"

"'Tis the veritable armor of Sir Gawain!" he yaps. "One of the Brotherhood of the Round Table."

"You don't say!"

"Aye—and yonder stands the coat of mail of Sir Sagamore! Indeed! I recognize the main of Elderford, he that is cousin to Sir Kay. And Maligaint—"

He is rattling off the names of old friends, clanking around and tapping the tin, but it all looks like a bunch of spare parts in a hot car hide-out to me.

"I am among friends," he chuckles.

"Yeah? Don't be too sure. If these museum babies ever find out what you're up to, it's good-bye quest. Now get to work, quick. I got to be going back." I push him over to the case. "I'll watch the door for you in case anyone is coming," I whisper. "You switch the Tabourets. Snap to it."

So I stand there, and Pallagyn makes for the case, trying not to clank too loud. It is dark and quiet, and creepy.

Pallagyn gets the case open in no time, but he has trouble in hauling out the Tabouret, because it has nails holding it down.

He is grunting and yanking on it and I am shaking because he is maybe going to rouse a guard.

"I cannot say much for this guy Merlin," I comment. "He is supposed to help you knights over the hard spots, but I do not notice he has done you a good turn yet."

"Nay, I have thee to thank for my success," Pallagyn says. "For, lo, my quest is ended!"

And he rips the Tabouret loose and slides the other one in. Then he closes the glass again and marches over across the room.

Only right in the middle of it he lets out a squawk and falls down on the stone floor when his foot slips.

There is a loud crash like all hell is breaking loose. It does.

Guys are yelling down the hall and I hear feet running this way. I get over to Pallagyn and help him up, but just as I am easing him onto his feet a squad of guards charges into the room and the heat is very much on.

"Stop, thief!" yells the guy in the lead, and the whole gang charges down on us. Pallagyn is trying to stand still again and I am yanking open a window,

but when he sees them coming, Pal lets out a whoop and drops the Tabouret, waving his sword around.

"Stand back ere I skewer thy livers!" he howls. Then he turns to me. "Make haste, Sir Butch, and effect thy escape whilst I hold off yon varlets."

"Give me that," I say, grabbing at the sword. "I'll hold them off and you get out of here and gallop back to your Merlin with the Bingo prize.

"There he is, men!" yells a new voice. Coming through the door is none other than Old Whitey in person, and behind him are about eight cops. Then the cops are ahead of him, because they are coming for us, fast. A fat sergeant has his gun extremely out.

"Pendragon and England!" yells Pallagyn, patting the first cop on his bald spot with the flat side of his sword.

"Hell and Damnation!" bawls the sergeant. He lets go of a slug, which bounces off Pallagyn's helmet.

"Superman!" hollers another cop.

"Get him, boys!" screams Whitey.

It is a picnic without ants. I plant one on the sergeant's neck, and Pal wades in with his sword. But the other six push us back into a corner, and the guards come up behind them. As fast as we knock them down, the others close in. They swarm over us like a gang of Airedales on a garbage heap.

"Here we go," I gasp out, punching away.

"Be of good . . . uh . . . heart!" roars Pallagyn. He slices away. All at once he slips and the sword falls. And two coppers jump him before he can get up. The sergeant gets his gun out again and points it at me.

"Now then—" he says. The boys grab us and push us forward.

All at once Pallagyn closes his eyes. "Merlin!" he whispers. "Aid!"

Something very unusual happens here. The first

thing I notice is a lot of clanking and scraping coming from the dark corners of the room.

And then there is more noise, like Pallagyn's armor makes, only louder.

"For Arthur and England!" Pallagyn yells. "Gawain, Sagamore, Eldevord, Maligaint!—"

"Aye, we comel"

Out of the dark crashes a half dozen suits of armor; but there are men in them now. It is the armor from the walls, and I see Pallagyn's gang is here.

"Merlin sends help!" he grunts. And then he grabs his sword and wades in.

The others are whacking up the cops already, and there is a smashing of tinware. Some of the fuzz are running and the guards make for the door. As fast as they get there, the suits of armor hanging on the walls drop down on their necks and throw them.

In a minute it is all through.

Pallagyn stands in the center of the room holding the Tabouret and all the guys in armor huddle around him.

"The quest is over," he says. "Thanks to Merlin, and Sir Butch, here—"

But I am not here any more. I am sneaking out of the window, fast, because I have enough trouble and do not like to get mixed up in hocus-pocus or magician's unions. So I do not stay, but drop over the ledge.

Before I do so I think I see a flash of lightning or something, but cannot be sure. Anyway, I look around once more and see the museum room is empty. There are a lot of cops lying on the floor and a lot of empty suits of armor are standing around, but there is nothing in them. I look for Pallagyn's suit and it is gone. So I blink my eyes and head for the truck, which I drive the hell away from there.

That is how it is, and I do a lot of thinking on my way home. Also the air helps to sober me up and I remember that I am practically drunk all the time since morning.

In fact, I am drunk since before I meet this Palagyn if I ever do meet him and it is not my imagination.

Because when I look back in the museum I do not see him any more and I wonder if it is all something I dream up out of air and alcohol. It bothers me, and I know that whatever happens at the museum will not leak out in print, because cops are touchy about such matters and as far as they know nothing is missing.

Then I figure maybe Thin Tommy Malloon can tell me if I drop in, so on the way home I park the truck at his tavern and step inside.

Nobody is behind the bar but Bertram, and when he sees me he is very polite.

"I would like to speak with Thin Tommy," I say.

Bertram gulps. "He is upstairs lying down," he says. "In fact, he does not feel so well since you bop him in the belly this morning.

"What do you mean *I* bop him?" I ask. "My buddy does that."

"You come in alone," Bertram tells me. He gives me a long look, but there are customers in the joint so I just shrug and walk out.

So the rest of the way home I am up tight, because I figure either Bertram is lying to me or I am nuts. And right now I would just as soon be a little nuts as admit anything so screwy could happen.

Which is how it stands with me. I am sober, and I am done with chasing around for the day. If I lay off drinking shellac, I will not see any more knights in armor with dopey stories about magicians and quests. I will let bygones be bygones and be a good boy.

That suits me, so I back the truck into the garage.
And then I get out and start cursing all over again.

All at once I know for sure whether or not it all happens.

Because standing there in the garage is that dizzy nag with the mask over the head that I have Sir Pallagyn put into the stable.

Do you know anybody who wants to buy a horse, cheap? It's only twelve hundred years old.

The Eager Dragon



I am sitting in Thin Tommy's tavern, and maybe I have a couple too many. This is quite possible, because I hear customers say that even one shot of Thin Tommy's whiskey is too many. But I have ten belts in a row, so I get about as high as the national debt.

Which is how I happen to get talking to these two strangers. They are sitting down at the other end of the bar, minding their own business—which seems to be liquor importing, if the way they spin the bottle is any indication. Each of them manages to import about a fifth of scotch down his throat while I watch. And they do not bother with any waste motions, either, such as pouring their drinks into glasses first.

Now I am not the type of personality that pries into other people's affairs. Particularly in a joint like this, where it is not safe to shake hands with strangers unless you have heavy insurance on your fingers.

So after filling my tank with anti-freeze, I slide off the stool to go home. I do not intend to speak to these clydes, but one of them turns around and lays it on me.

"I beg your pardon," he says, very polite. "But you have your foot caught in a cuspidor."

If there is anything I'm a sucker for, it's politeness. Besides, when I look down I see that I have indeed stuck my left foot into one of Thin Tommy's finger-bowls.

"Thank you for the information," I tell the stranger. "I hardly notice such a thing because I expect to walk a little funny after drinking the stuff they serve here."

"It is vile, isn't it?" says the first stranger. "Won't you have another one with me?"

Well, who can refuse such a courteous invitation? I sit down again and manage to get my Florsheim out of the cigarpond, and the two strangers pour me a shot, and before you can say Jack Robinson I am too stoned to pronounce it.

Right now all I have to do is listen.

Because the first stranger—a tall, skinny guy with glasses—says, "We are a couple of traveling salesmen. We are stranded here miles from the nearest farmer's daughter. Isn't that sad?"

And the second stranger—a fat, older guy with a bald head—says, "We are working our way through second childhood selling magazines to colleges. Our car breaks down tonight and here we sit out in the country where nothing happens since the last time Halley's Comet went through."

Evidently he refers to some traveling burlesque show, but I am just high enough to resent this crack about nothing ever happens.

You see, I like it here in the country, ever since I retire from the rackets and buy me a chicken farm. Besides, things are far from peaceful lately on my cackle ranch. In fact, what happens to me recently is so kinky I never mention it—but now I am too high to keep from leading with my jaw.

"Nothing ever happens here?" I say, to the bald-headed guy. "Listen, I can tell you stories that will make your hair stand on end, if you buy a wig."

"Such as?" pipes the first guy.

"I may look like a farmer but I am not handing you any corn," I say.

"Such as?" insists the first guy.

"You wouldn't believe me."

"You tell me and I'll believe it," the first guy yells. "Tell me just one thing that ever happens to you around here."

"Well, about a week ago I am driving along about a mile down the road and I meet a knight."

"A what?"

"A knight—from King Arthur's court."

"Driving? You've got to be flying," says the bald-headed salesman.

"I tell you you won't believe me."

"Go ahead. This is interesting."

"I meet this knight, from King Arthur's court. Sir Pallagyn, his name is."

"He tells you his name?"

"Why not?"

"Then maybe he also tells you what he's doing and how he got here?"

"Of course. Merlin sent him."

"Merlin?"

"Merlin is the head of the magician's union," I explain. "He can send his boys forward and backward in Time without paying cab fare. He sends Sir Pallagyn here on a big job—to put the snatch on a pedestal for a loving-cup he calls the Holy Grail."

"Aaaargh!" remarks the thin jerk. He is either commenting on my story or strangling on the drink he swallows. So I make with the tongue some more.

"I find out this pedestal is in a museum back in

town, so the knight and I sneak in after dark. We goniff it easy, because Merlin sends some hoods from the Round Table mob to help us."

"Where is this Sir Pallagyn now?" asks the baldy jag. "I would like to meet him."

"I am sorry," I mumble. "But when Pallagyn and his boys get the pedestal they are after, Merlin drags them back through Time again. And that is how it stands."

"It stands kind of wobbly to me," insists the dandruff-victim. "You are wasting your time if you are a chicken farmer. You should be a rodeo star, the way you can throw the bull."

"Listen, my fine featherless friend," I remark, "if you think you can stand there with your bare tongue hanging out and call me a liar, you are not only mistaken but probably dead."

"No offense, buddy," he comes back. "Only you got to admit your story is a little hard to believe."

"I am willing to prove it to you," I say. "It so happens that Sir Pallagyn leaves his glue-barrel in my barn back at the farm. It is a big white nag, all covered with a fancy tin blanket to keep out the flies or something. One look will tell you it isn't any fake and I am not palming off any Derby winner on you."

I am really third-degree burned by all these insinuations, to say nothing of the dirty cracks. That is why I suggest we all three climb into my truck and cut out to the stable for a look at the horse.

"Fine idea," says the thin fink with the glasses. So we all have another drink on that and then we go outside. This time I do not even notice the cuspidor on my foot until we are way up the road—which gives some idea of how soggy I am.

We climb into the truck, I shag on the gas, and pretty soon we pull up at my poultry villa.

Then I help them out of the truck. Archie Biggers—that's the thin one's name—won't get out without another drink. Larry Cotton, the baldy guy, says if he has another drink he can't get out. So I compromise and drink it for him.

After that I lead Archie and Larry right to the barn in back of the house; which is no small job itself, the way they are walking.

"Now you'll see if I'm putting you on," I say, rattling the door.

The door opens without unlocking, which is funny. I light a match. I let out a yell.

"The horse is gone!"

"Huh!" snorts Archie. "I thought so."

"That's a horse on you," says Larry. "Don't bother to lock the barn door when you go out."

"But it's true," I insist. "The horse is right here when I leave tonight. Look—here is the hay I put out for it."

I hold up the second match and show them the hay-pile. Then I let out another yap and drop to my knees.

"What's this?" I holler, pointing to a big round white thing in the hay-pile.

"Why, a horse-egg, of course," sneers Archie.

"It's an egg all right," I agree. "But look at the size of it—why, it's over three feet long!"

And it is, too; a big, round white egg with long yellow splotches on it and a smell that is hardly Grade A.

"Wait a minute," Archie says. He stoops down and picks up a piece of grayish paper lying next to the egg. "Writing on it," he whispers. "In water colors or something. Can't make it out—bad spelling."

"Give it here," I request, grabbing it politely. "I am expert on spelling, particularly such spelling as those

lousy kidnappers use that put the snatch on my horse."

"Put the snatch on?"

"Sure. This is doubtless a ransom note from the mob stealing my nag. There is nothing I hate and detest more than a horse-napper!"

But it turns out I am mistaken.

The writing is some kind of water-color job, and the spelling is atrocious. But I can figure out what the note says:

Sir Butch:

A thousand pardons, but methinks I need the steed. I take it now, lest Pallagyn go unmounted as a churl.

Pallagyn thanks you for your seemly courtesy and bespeaks right highly your prowess as a wizard. It behooves me therefore to tender you this little token of my esteem as a fitting reward for your assistance. It is a seemly gift from one wizard to another, and may serve as a reminder of the gratitude of

Merlin

This is not only lousy spelling but lousy grammar—in fact, it reminds me of the way this Sir Pallagyn talks. Maybe this Merlin is not so much of a brain after all. But what puzzles me is why he sends an egg for a present to a chicken farmer.

"Don't ask me," says Larry. "I don't even know what kind of an egg it is. It certainly isn't a Plymouth Rock. Looks more like a Plymouth Mountain."

"I wonder what's inside," I mumble.

"We can't find out 'till it hatches."

"Well, how we going to hatch it?"

"It's too big for a chicken to sit on."

"Something has to sit on it though," I tell them. "From the looks of it, it should hatch soon."

"From the smell of it, it better hatch soon," says Archie.

"I've got an ideal" yells Larry. "We aren't doing anything tonight. "Let's all sit on it."

"You mean we should hatch this egg?"

"Why not? It's warm here. We have to sleep some place, you know. We might as well curl up in the hay, sleep on the egg, and wait until it breaks open. I want to see what gives here, anyway."

So after another drink it doesn't sound so screwy any more. Archie lays down on one side of me and Larry lays down on the other side. All three of us cuddle up to the big egg with its thick shell.

I close my eyes and maybe it's only my head throbbing but I think I hear something pounding away under the egg shell. And maybe it's only the snores of Archie and Larry, but I get the idea I hear noises inside the egg.

What could hatch from an egg over three feet long? Why, it must weigh a couple hundred pounds! More than that who cares?

That is how I feel after the last drink, so I just go off to sleep. But all the time I think I hear the egg making noises, and after while I begin to dream about the kind of things which could lay such eggs. And I do not like to dream about television comics.

It is morning when I wake up. Somebody is shaking me. At first I think it is Archie, but he is asleep. Then I look at Larry and he is sleeping too. But I am being shaken. My head is going up and down. Then I realize. The egg is moving under my head! I jump up fast before I get my neck broken. The egg is cracking in long strips in about a dozen places, and the chunks in between are heaving and falling off. There is no

doubt about it now—I do hear noises from under the shell. There is no doubt about my smelling something either.

The egg is hatching.

By this time, Archie and Larry are awake and on their feet. But I do not watch them. I watch the strips of shell peeling off the egg and watch the green stuff underneath moving up and down.

“What in blazes?” asks Archie, hopping up and down on one foot and pointing.

What he is pointing at is a long green thing waving out of the end of the egg. It looks like a snake without a head.

We do not answer him, Larry and I, because we are looking at the other end of the egg. There is another green thing sticking out of this end, and it is the head. You can’t make any mistake about it, because this head is several feet long and several more feet wide, and it is the kind of head nobody would ever forget, even though they would want to forget it very much indeed.

Larry points at one end and Archie points at the other, and then both of them point at the middle. Because the eggshell cracks, and we see the thing come out.

It is about eight feet long and four feet high, and how it manages to curl up in a three-foot egg I don’t know. But then there are a lot of things I don’t know about it, and I have a hunch I don’t greatly care to find out. What it looks like and what it smells like is enough to hold me for a long, long time.

Like I say, it is eight feet long and about four feet high. Part of the eight feet is a snaky-looking tail. Part is a fat, beer-barrel body all covered with warts and scales like a flophouse bum. But the biggest and worst part is the steam-shovel it uses for a head. This is

round and green, with big bulging eyes, and practically all the rest is mouth and teeth. It wobbles around on four stumpy legs.

I wobble around on two, myself. For some reason I get the impression that this thing is slightly repulsive. In fact, my face gets nearly as green as the one it exhibits.

But all at once Larry is pointing at it and jumping up and down like he just got a double hot-foot.

"I know what it is!" he yells. "It's a dragon!"

"What's a dragon?" I say, glancing down at my trousers.

"That's a dragon. You know, like in the fairy tales. Back in King Arthur's days the woods are full of them—dragons, not fairies. This Merlin must think he is paying you a compliment when he sends you a dragon's egg."

"Sure, that's what it is," says Archie. "Come on down out of there."

He is talking to me. Because when he mentions the word "dragon" I all of a sudden find myself climbing up the side of the barn to the hay-rack. Now I get down real slow, because I am not a personality that likes to hurry—particularly when it comes to meeting such things as dragons or hungry tigers or ex-wives.

"He won't hurt you," Archie argues. "He's just a baby."

"What you want me to do, nurse him?" I inquire. "I am not putting diapers on any walking boa-constrictors. Furthermore—uuuuuuuh!"

Maybe this "Uuuuuuuh!" doesn't make sense, but it sounds very apt when I say it, because right then the dragon walks over to me and begins to rub against my leg.

"It is just like a kitten," Archie tells me. "Quit rattling your knees, or you'll brain it to death."

Sure enough, the dragon begins to purr real soft, like a jet taking off. It looks up at me, and all at once it grins.

"Isn't that sweet?" says Larry. "See how affectionate it is?"

"I know a character back in town who smiles like this," I mention. "He recently takes a fall for bumping off three old ladies with a butcher's cleaver."

"Go ahead, pat it on the head. It's perfectly safe," says Archie.

I feel about as safe as a peace treaty with Mao, but I reach down and run my hand over the dragon's scaly noggin once or twice. Then I smile, more in relief at getting my hand back than at anything else. And it smiles at me again.

For the first time I notice it has blue eyes. They are very pretty eyes—for a dragon. A sort of baby blue. They remind me of a bird I once know, name of Daisy the Fish.

"Love at first sight," Archie sighs.

"All right, now we have our first sight and what do we do with this overgrown chameleon?"

"What do we do about it?" yells Larry. "What do we do about it?" he hollers, running around the hay pile. "Why listen, man—don't you realize what you have here?"

"A hangover."

"Hangover? You've got a million bucks, that's all! A cool million!"

"I don't even see a hot penny," I tell him.

"Listen." Larry stops running and begins to wave his arms. "You are the owner of the only live dragon in captivity—a real, flesh and blood dragon. Don't you realize what a circus would pay for an attraction like this!"

"We're just the salesmen for such a deal," Archie

tells me. "We'll head for town and handle the business end. Straight 25 percent cut. We'll contact circus people and set up a deal. It may take about a week or so, but don't worry. Just take care of baby, here. See that it gets enough to eat. And above all, keep it out of sight, whatever you do. No word of this must leak out to anyone."

"I got to hide out here and play house with this lizard?"

"Think of the money in it," Larry comes back. "You've got a fortune if you do what we tell you."

So he and Archie borrow my truck and split for town. And I am left with a dragon on my hands.

I do not know if you ever have a dragon for a visitor, but it is not such a situation I am set up to handle. I begin to wish right away that Merlin gives a little advice along with his present or at least sends me a book on *THE CARE AND FEEDING OF DRAGONS*.

Because I can tell from first glance that this dragon is hungry. Not five minutes after Larry and Archie cut out, the dragon begins to look at me with those big blue eyes and I know something has to be done. After all, it is only a baby, so to speak, and you have to take care of babies. I never bring up a brat myself, but one thing I do realize is that kids are always hungry. Particularly when they cry. Which is just what this dragon starts to do when it looks at me. Its eyes blink and out comes two tears about the size of footballs. I just stand there and listen to it bawl, soft and low like a sonic boom. I am in a hang-up. I cannot bounce this baby up and down on my lap. I cannot make faces at it, because its own face is more peculiar than anything I can dream up. I cannot give it a rattle, either, except with the old teeth, because I am still a little afraid of the thing. What I need, I

decide, is a drink. So I rush into the house and open the fridge.

All I find is a case of beer, but this is an emergency. So I open a couple bottles and decide to sit down and think. Then I hear a noise from the barn. Grabbing up the case of brew, I rush back out. But it is only the dragon, crying louder. It stands there and blubbers just like a baby sniveling for its bottle. That gives me the old idea. Bottle? I haven't got any dragon milk, but I have got beer. So I open a bottle and pour it down the dragon's throat.

One gulp and the beer disappears. And the dragon smiles! I smile too. Then I hear another gulp. It is swallowing the bottle. But it keeps right on smiling. So I push over the case of beer.

The dragon gets to work, and in about five minutes it swallows eighteen bottles. I go back to the house for another case. Also I call up Thin Tommy's tavern and ask Thin Tommy to send over a couple dozen cases of his vile brew right away.

"Holding a party?" asks Thin Tommy, over the phone.

But I do not answer. I remember that Larry and Archie tell me to keep my mouth shut. This is always a good idea when speaking to Thin Tommy, anyway. If you open your mouth in front of him, he is liable to steal your teeth.

So I just hang up. If I can nurse this dragon on beer it solves a lot of problems, and the way it drinks I do not even have to bother with piling up empty bottles.

Still and all, one other problem does bother me a little. I get to wondering if this thing is house-broken. I am just going to call uptown for a couple of pup tents in case I run out of diapers, when I hear another noise from the barn outside. It is a voice, laughing.

This time I make the trip back in nothing flat. And I am not a moment too soon, either.

Because there is a kid standing at the barn door, looking in. He is a little tow-headed yutz about eight years old, hardly tall enough to reach up and goniff your watch. He is laughing and giggling, and when he sees me, he turns around.

"Look, Mister!" he says. "The dragon has hiccups!"

I look and it is a fact. The dragon has the hiccups. It is standing in the barn and hiccuping like mad. What makes it peculiar is the fact that every time it burps, a little spout of fire comes out of its nose. "Gee, it looks funny!" laughs the kid. I stare at him.

"Aren't you afraid?" I ask.

The kid keeps right on laughing. "What should I be afraid about?" he asks me. "It's only a dragon, isn't it? I read about them in books all the time. Unless, of course, you're a wicked wizard or an ogre. But you don't look like an ogre to me."

"Thanks, buster," I say.

"And my name isn't Buster, it's Edgar," says the kid.

"Edgar what?"

"I'm not about to tell you, because if I do, you'll send me home. And I'm running away from home," the kid gets out.

"What's the matter—the old man put the boots to you?"

"You mean beat me? No, of course not," Edgar says. "Only I want to seek adventure. And I guess this is one, isn't it?"

I don't do any guessing myself. Instead I give this little tow-headed Edgar another look. He is not a yokel type, that I see. But what puzzles me is why the dragon does not bug him.

"You mean to tell me you dig this fire-breathing

monster?" I ask. "Doesn't this thing with hot halitosis make you blow your mind?"

Edgar shakes his noggin. "Of course not. I like animals. Why, back where I live I—" Then he stops and smiles. "But I'm not going to tell."

"Listen, Edgar," I say, kindly, "It will please me extremely if you go back to your old man before I have to do something rash, like kicking your teeth down your throat."

Edgar keeps on smiling. "Don't put me on," he says. "You aren't an ogre."

"I am not the head of an orphan asylum, either," I tell him.

Edgar puckers up his little puss like a sponge and begins to spring a leak from the eyes. "You don't like me—you're sending me away—" he bawls.

"That is the general idea, urchin. Go urch some place else."

"And just when I am starting to have adventures," Edgar snuffles. "Now when I tell people about your real live dragon they won't believe me."

This is something I do not figure. If I send the kid away, it will mean he spills the story about the dragon to somebody he meets. It is, as Mr. Heinz puts it, a very pretty pickle. So I go over to Edgar and pat him on the shoulder. "Do not drizzle so," I console him. "Maybe I change my mind. After all, I need somebody around to take care of the dragon for me while I keep the farm going."

"You really mean I can stay and feed it and everything?" Edgar is so excited he hugs me around the knees, knocking them together severely.

Then Edgar has to go over and hug the dragon. It is a good blueprint for a nightmare to see the kid with his arms around that green head, and the fire

shooting out of the dragon's mouth when he lets go with a hiccup.

"He likes me," squeals Edgar. "See, we get along fine! What's his name?"

"Name?" I reply. "I do not give him a name as yet."

"How do you expect him to come when you call if he hasn't got a name?"

"What makes you think I ever want to call a dragon?" I answer.

But the kid insists. "We can call him Herman," he decides.

"All right, make it Herman," I tell him. "You want I should christen him by breaking a bottle of beer over his head?"

The kid gives me a funny look while he pats Herman on the neck. "I can't figure it out, Mister. You don't act or talk like a magician. But you must be one, or how would you own a dragon?"

"I am just a farmer," I say. "I wish you to forget all this doubletalk about magicians and wizards and what-all." Then I make a dive for the hay.

But I am too late. The urchin gets there first and picks up the note from Merlin, which he reads.

"Boyl!" he remarks. "Oh, boyl! You can't fool me, Mister—this note proves you're a sorcerer."

"Listen, Edgar," I mention, sweetly, holding out my arm. "This fist proves you get a fat lip if you don't cool it about magicians. If you want to stay here with me and take care of Herman, you must keep your cool. I do not wish anyone else to know I possess this dragon."

Edgar smiles. "Maybe you're afraid of an enemy enchanter," he suggests.

"Maybe," I say.

Just then I hear a horn blasting in the yard. I go to the door and take a squint. It is Thin Tommy Mal-

loon, bringing me the beer I order. So I turn around to Edgar and give him the old whisper.

"You are right," I tell him. "I am afraid of an enemy whatever-you-call-it. In fact, he arrives now. So it is up to you to keep yourself and Herman out of sight until he goes away. I do not desire a peep out of you or a burp out of Herman."

At which Herman lets out another burst of anti-aircraft from the tonsils.

"Shove a bottle of beer down his throat," I advise.

But then Thin Tommy honks his horn again, so I go out to the yard. He is sitting in his truck, and when I come up he gives me the old once-over.

"Welcome to Sunnybrook Farm," I say.

Thin Tommy just grunts. It is a normal sound, because he is built like a hog, with a strain of wild boar. They call him Thin Tommy because he weighs in at 300 pounds on the latest police blotter. Besides being a very unpleasant hunk of lard to look at, he is also an unpleasant personality to do business with. He runs his tavern, but also throws the scare into local yokels so they pay him protection money in these parts. In fact, Thin Tommy is what is vulgarly termed a hood. My term for him would be about twenty years.

It is for these reasons that I do not wish him to find out I have a live dragon on the premises, else he is liable to get his two muscles, Bertram and Roscoe, and put the old fingeroo on it.

"Where is the beer?" I ask.

"Right here in the truck," Thin Tommy tells me. "You planning a bash?"

"Not exactly."

"You gonna drink two dozen cases of beer yourself?"

"Well--"

Just then another burp comes from the barn.

"What in purple blazes is that godawful blatting?" inquires Thin Tommy.

I think fast. "I just buy a couple cows," I tell him.

"I never hear a cow make a noise like that," he scowls. "Holsteins?"

"No—Beersteins. A new breed. They give special milk if they get beer to drink."

"What kind of milk does a cow give from drinking beer?"

"Malted milk, stupid!" I tell him. "That is why I order this beer. What is more, I wish you to deliver two dozen cases every day in the future.

"I would like to see such cows," Thin Tommy says, climbing out of the truck.

I back up to the barn door.

"They are too drunk to look at," I excuse.

Out comes another burp, making the door rattle a little. "I still say that does not sound like a cow," Thin Tommy insists.

"Take my word for it," I tell him. "That's no bull."

Then I pull out my wallet to distract him. The sight of money always distracts Thin Tommy, particularly if it is other people's money. It will even distract him through the door of a bank vault.

"Here is your dough," I remind him. "Kindly dump out the beer."

Which he does, and climbs back on the truck.

"So long," I call. "See you tomorrow. I got to go back now—one of the cows has a hangover."

Thin Tommy stares at me again.

"By the way," he purrs. "Speaking of hangovers, what do you feed those two finks you meet in my tavern last night?"

"Who?"

"Those two traveling salesmen with the broken-

down car," he answers. "This morning they come in with awful heads and phone a garage. I hear them muttering under their bad breaths about a dragon they hatch on your farm."

"What?"

"They come on about going up to the old burg and contacting a circus owner or whatever."

"They are extremely stenchy," I shrug. "Are you sure it is not pink elephants they mention?"

"No, it is a dragon. So I merely desire to ask you. Of course," Thin Tommy purrs, "you do not have such a dragon."

"Of course," I say.

"Only some drunken cows," he adds.

It is a bad time to hear another burp, but I do, and so does everyone else within a mile.

Thin Tommy starts his motor and smiles. "One of your cows must be calling you," he winks. "You better put an ice-pack on its forehead. That will make the malted milk colder."

Then he backs his truck out of the yard. I stand there shaking and then lug the beer into the barn. Opening the door I almost trip over Edgar, who is stooping down.

"I know!" he yips. "That's the wicked wizard, isn't it so? Gee, he's a mean-looking ogre."

"I agree," I come back. "But why are you doing a Winchell at the door when you should be taking care of Herman?"

"Oh, Herman's all right," says the kid. "He's eating."

I look. And that's what's happening, baby.

The dragon is swallowing down the milk pails I keep in the corner, also a shovel, a harness, and two pitchforks. While I watch, Herman also swallows an orange crate and the rest of the empty beer bottles.

"He's got a stomach like a furnace," squeals Edgar. "Look at the fire coming out of his mouth now."

It is a three-alarm all right. Smoke and sparks fly out every time he breathes.

But Edgar laughs and pets him, and the dragon stops eating long enough to rub up against his legs. Then he starts to chew the planks in the barn floor.

I grab up the beer bottles in a hurry.

"Quick!" I yell. "Give him these to chew on. He's liable to eat me out of house and home!"

This turns out to be almost a fact in the next couple of days. Because the dragon keeps right on eating, morning, noon, and night. It has a 24-hour-a-day stomach, strictly non-union shop. It eats everything—nails and blankets and boards and tin cans and barbed wire.

And the more it eats the more it grows. By the fourth day it is fifteen feet long and eight feet high. This is not a rib on my part, because I measure it right there in the barn, and I have the yardstick to prove it. That is, I would have the yardstick, only Herman swallows it when I wave it near his head. Then he begins nibbling on the step-ladder, so I get down in a hurry.

Naturally, I have plenty of trouble. To begin with, I have to watch Herman's diet so that he will not actually chew down the barn.

I do not have any figures handy on the hips and bust measurements of a full-grown dragon, but if he grows this much in four or five days, what will he look like in a year? Pretty terrible, I decide.

But I am still waiting to hear from Larry and Archie on their circus caper, so there is nothing to do but hold down the fort—even if I cannot hold down Herman's appetite.

Edgar and I pour beer into him every day and a lot

more at night, so he will go to sleep. It makes him very affectionate, the beer does—which is lucky for us.

In fact it is very quaint the way Herman gives us the old glad eye when we feed him, and rubs up against us. This rubbing-up business has a few flaws in it, though—because now he is always knocking us down by mistake. And we keep our distance from his nose so the flames don't barbecue us.

But Herman digs us, and he lets Edgar pet him and lead him around. In fact, on the fourth day Edgar is out in the barn with him and actually climbs up on his back for a ride.

So the first thing I know, Edgar is riding the dragon around in the back yard.

"Quit playing jockey!" I holler. "Don't you know they can see in from the road?"

"I have to take him out of the barn," Edgar tells me. "He just burns a hole in the roof."

I look, and it is the truth. Herman's breath shoots up in one spot of the barn, and gradually burns quite a hole.

"Take him back in," I order. "I will get some sheet iron and patch it up."

So Edgar rides the dragon into the barn, and not a bit too soon. Because Thin Tommy's truck chugs down the road just then to deliver the daily two dozen cases of beer.

It is very embarrassing, this business of Thin Tommy's visits. So far I manage to keep both the dragon and the kid out of his range of vision, but it cannot go on forever. More and over, Thin Tommy is still suspicious, in spades. He does not understand what I do with all the beer, or what becomes of the empty bottles. So I am hard put to keep him thinking I am raising cows in a cafeteria.

Today he rattles up and unloads without saying anything, which pleases me. I do not spin my chin in his direction, either, but let him haul the beer cases down.

Then, right in the middle, he stops and drops a case. He is staring very hard at something on the ground.

It is a big hole, about fifteen inches across, sunk in the dirt. It has a sort of web pattern to it. All at once I realize what it is. It is one of the footprints left by Herman the dragon when he is out in the yard.

"What gives?" asks Thin Tommy.

"I am just doing a little digging," I tell him.

"Funny-looking hole," he remarks.

"I got a funny-looking shovel."

"You must have," he grunts. Then he looks up. "Unholy smokes!" he gargles. "What's that?"

Flames are coming out of the top of the barn.

"I am roasting marshmallows," I inform him.

Thin Tommy waddles in the direction of the door. "I would like to see that," he says.

I try to bar his way, but who can argue with a human tank like Thin Tommy?

Just as he gets to the door, Edgar walks out.

Thin Tommy stops.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he predicts. "Who's the brat?"

"My nephew—Edgar, this is Thin Tommy."

"The ogre," Edgar says.

"*WHAT?*" Tommy bellows.

I jump in quick. "Edgar is a Boy Scout, and we are just roasting marshmallows in the barn."

Thin Tommy does not listen to this explanation. He does not glance at the flames any more, or at the footprint in the ground. He just stares at Edgar and grunts.

"Your nephew, huh? Never knew you had one." He grunts again. "Name's Edgar, huh?" Another grunt. "Well, I got to be going. So long."

He backs to the truck, climbs in, and roars off.

I scratch my noggin.

"That is funny how he shuts up all of a sudden," I say. "Maybe he recognizes you, Edgar."

"How can he when this is the first time I see him?" answers the kid.

So I let it go at that.

I let a lot of things go these days. To begin with, I do not put the old third-degree on Edgar to find out where he comes from, after that first day. I intend to just as soon as I get rid of the dragon. Meanwhile I let things ride. In fact, I get very mushy over the kid, letting him sack out in my bedroom and even reading him to sleep with stories from *Playboy* magazine. Edgar still insists I am a magician and that I am keeping this dragon under enchantment. So I figure if I do not ask him too many questions he will not ask me any, and we are even.

But the way Thin Tommy looks at him in the yard gets me up tight. "You are sure you do not know this lug?" I ask again.

"Absolutely," he tells me. "Where is the beer? I think Herman wants his bottle again."

So we feed Herman by climbing on the stepladder and I scrounge around to find some old sheet iron to patch the roof with.

While I do it, Edgar keeps up with the dialogue. "When are you going to fight the ogre?"

"Who, Thin Tommy?"

"Yes. You hate him, don't you?"

"Only his intestines," I remark, delicately. "But I do not wish to tangle with that one-man crime wave."

"I know—you're just raising this fire-breathing dragon up and then you'll destroy him, won't you?"

"If I raise this dragon much higher he will destroy me," I mutter. "The beer bills are terrific, he is eating down my barn, and I am going out of my gourd."

"This is a funny adventure," the kid remarks. "A dragon, and wizards, but no princess."

"Princess?"

"Of course. There should be a beautiful princess. You know."

"I am sorry, Edgar, but I do not possess the phone number of any beautiful princess. Besides, if I do, you are still too young to make it with any birds. The princess is out."

Edgar looks sad for a minute. "All right—but it's a cruddy adventure without any princess."

I get the new roofing on and come back to earth. Herman the dragon swishes his tail, knocking down the ladder.

"Quiet, you overgrown iguana," I nag. "Or I will knock your warts off."

This is just a bluff, because now Herman's warts are big as cantaloupes and you cannot knock them off with anything but a blowtorch.

But at this moment he looks pretty tame. I do not figure why, until Edgar notices.

"Look—he's stopping the fire!"

It is a fact. Herman does not breathe fire right now. Perhaps it is the beer, but whatever the case, he is a little woozy.

"He's lying down," says Edgar.

Herman does lie down, with a thump like a ton of coal sliding into a manhole.

"Maybe he's sick." Edgar pets his forehead. "Look how pale he is."

Herman is slightly white around the gills—merely because he cannot get any greener.

"I'll go out and get him some more beer," Edgar says.

I go with him.

When we get to the yard I hear the phone ringing in the house, so I make a dash up the steps. I get on the wire and hear a familiar voice. Two voices, in fact—Larry and Archy.

"Hey, we've got wonderful news!" says Larry. "I'm calling from a drug store in Hoosack. Guess who's with me?"

"Bonnie and Clyde," I suggest.

"No—none other than J. Carver Carson."

"So what?"

"So he's half-owner of the greatest show on earth, that's what! After four days we finally get him to an interview, and he's so anxious to talk business he's coming down with us. I just want to warn you so you'll be sure and have the dragon ready when we arrive."

"He'll be ready," I say.

"Get your pen out—you're going to sign a million-dollar contract! It isn't easy to handle this J. Carver Carson—guess he's having some personal troubles of his own right now—but he's ready to deal. We'll be there tonight."

Larry hangs up, leaving me very happy. I am so happy I do not hear certain noises I should hear, because there is a ringing in my ears—the ringing of a million bucks. But when I get out in the yard again, I am not happy any more. Because in the dirt are fresh tire-marks which I recognize as the marks of Thin Tommy's truck.

I make a dash into the barn. "Edgar!" I yell. There is no answer.

I go out in the yard again and shout. There is no answer here, either. Except the answer in the marks of Thin Tommy's truck.

It is easy to see what is up, all right, and I make a fancy dash back to the house to phone the State Troopers. Only one thing stops me—if I phone them they will come out and find the dragon. Which will be very bad for all concerned, because J. Carver Carson will not like publicity for his new attraction. And besides, the Troopers will ask me many questions about Edgar which I cannot answer on any Quiz show. There is only one question about him I *can* answer. Thin Tommy has him.

So I dash back from the house to the barn.

Herman is still dopey, but he perks up when I kick him in the side of the head. "Come on," I yell. "Edgar's missing!"

Maybe it comes from the kid's ideas about me being a magician and raising a dragon to tangle with Thin Tommy the ogre. Maybe it comes from the feeling I have for Edgar—which makes me want to exterminate Thin Tommy for snatching him. Whatever it is, it's there. And I am there, racing down the highway on Herman's back.

What else can I do? It is the only way out, and if I can put Herman onto Thin Tommy I should have the kid and be back in time to meet J. Carver Carson when the boys arrive with him.

That is the way I figure it, though it is pretty hard to figure anything when you are bumping along on a dragon's back. Particularly since there is no steering wheel on a dragon.

Herman is not sick anymore. He is full of the old Pazazz, and the flames come out of his mouth like he is chewing dynamite.

He seems to understand what we are doing, because

he picks up speed as he goes along, and when I yell, "Come on, step òn it!" in his ear, he nearly jolts me off. I do not know if you ever ride a dragon in your life, but if you do, you know it is very hard without a saddle. So I am more than a little joyful when I see the lights of Thin Tommy's tavern up ahead in the twilight. We round the bend and I grab Herman's ears.

"Whoa!" I yap. He skids into the yard and sits down like a pile-driver. "Wait here until I call," I say, hoping he understands me. Then I march up the steps of the tavern and go inside.

The place is empty. But after I go up to the bar, Bertram and Roscoe come out. These are the two gorillas Thin Tommy has for his waiters. They give me a frigid stare, but I ignore it, being more interested in the way my teeth are chattering.

"Where is Thin Tommy?" I inquire.

"He is out," says Bertram. "You want a short one?"

"I want a short kid. Where is he?"

"We got no kid," says Roscoe. "Get lost."

"Now be reasonable," I suggest. This is a very timely suggestion, because both Bertram and Roscoe suddenly pull out a pair of very black jacks and come around the bar.

I can see they are unsympathetic, and so I back to the door.

Just then I hear a sound from upstairs. It is the kid's voice, and he is not crying for joy.

So I change my mind about going out the door. Instead I do a quick forward run. Bertram comes at me from one side and Roscoe from the other, but I time it right. They miss me when I duck and slam into each other.

Which gives me enough time to gallop up the stairs. I yank open the first door.

Thin Tommy is sitting on the bed, and so is Edgar. When they see me, Thin Tommy gets up and Edgar tries to, but he cannot, because a handcuff attaches his arm to the bedpost.

"I knew you'd come!" says Edgar.

"Likewise," says Thin Tommy. He waves a newspaper at me. "So this is why you act so mysterious these past days," he grunts. "Because you are holding the brat for ransom. I find it out this morning when I see his puss in the press."

"What do you mean?"

"Take a look," he invites me. "J. Carver Carson's kid—son of the circus owner. Reward, huh? Well, you're out of luck. I just make a call myself, and I find he is on his way up here. So it is lucky you blunder in. Because when he gets here I tell him you are the kidnapper and I rescue Edgar."

This sounds like a very reasonable scheme. What makes it more reasonable is that Thin Tommy suddenly slides the newspaper off his arm and I notice he is holding an equalizer. I notice also that it is pointing at me. I open my mouth but nothing comes out. Instead, it is Edgar who screams.

This turns out to be a very good thing indeed. Because all at once I hear a thundering noise from below and I know Herman the dragon recognizes the kid's voice and is making his move.

"Damn and blast!" yells Thin Tommy, using very bad language for kids to hear. "What the hell is that?" he further inquires, rushing to the door.

"It's the dragon!" squeaks Edgar.

It is the dragon all right. From the sounds I can tell he is smashing the bar, also Bertram and Roscoe. Thin Tommy runs down the stairs very fast.

"Hell's bells!" he growls. "It's a dinosaur!"

Evidently Herman does not like anyone to call him

names, because he lets out a roar like an exploding boiler and there is a terrible crash. Then Thin Tommy begins to shoot.

I head out the door and make the stairs.

Thin Tommy reaches down on the stairway and picks up a keg which he hurls at Herman's head. It smashes on his nose and I see the keg is filled with whiskey.

The result is very unfortunate, because Herman's breath sets the alcohol on fire and a tongue of blue flame leaps up. Besides, Herman is not used to hard liquor, and he lets go with a burp that does Thin Tommy no more good than a bomb explosion.

In fact, this is just what happens.

With one loud blast, the room turns red. The rafters shake, the air turns to smoke, and when it clears away I am staring down into a mass of flames.

Thin Tommy is gone.

I turn around and rush into the bedroom.

"We got to get out of here," I yell. "The joint is on fire."

Then I notice for the first time that Edgar is very unhappy about the whole thing. Because he is still in the handcuff and can't leave the bed.

Right then and there I have to make up my mind about a lot of things. About Edgar, and about the dragon, and about a million bucks.

Which I do.

It is not easy. What comes next is not easy either, and it is a dirty trick on poor old Herman. The explosion is terrific, but it puts the fire out.

And so, half an hour later, I finally get the handcuffs off Edgar and I crawl down the stairs and out of the joint. It is still smoking a little, but the fire is out.

"That's that," I tell him.

And it is, because just then the sirens roar and I see

Larry and Archie and J. Carver Carson arriving with the fuzz.

When it is all over, we go back to the farm.

"I still don't get it," J. Carver tells me. "Edgar here tells me you get rescued by a dragon. And there is no dragon."

"Lucky the cops don't see any," I say.

"But what happens to it?"

"It's simple," I answer. "There is only one way to get Edgar out of there with the place burning down. That is to put the fire out somehow. Which I do."

"I grab a fire extinguisher and toss it down Herman's throat. Naturally, poor Herman explodes. It wrecks the joint, but it stops the fire right away. The only trouble is, it also wrecks Herman. So now there is no longer any dragon left."

"That is a very heroic thing to do," says J. Carver Carson. "And I am grateful to you for it. Naturally, there is a reward."

I shake my head. All of a sudden I feel very sad when I think of poor old Herman. I walk into the barn and the others shuffle along.

"Just think of it," I mutter. "Only this afternoon I have a million-dollar dragon on my hands. Now I have blisters. I can almost see him here now, sitting in the hay and eating a keg of nails or a couple chicken-crate sandwiches. Poor Herman!"

Larry gives me a funny look.

"What do you call the dragon?" he asks.

"Why, Herman."

"I think you make a mistake," he tells me.

"So do I," I say. "The poor thing does not even feel good this afternoon. And then I take him out and extinguish him."

"I mean, you make a mistake when you call the dragon Herman," says Larry.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Take a look," says Larry, pointing at the hay.

Lying there in the haypile is a big round egg, about three feet long.

So that is the way it turns out, after all.

Larry and Archy and Edgar and J. Carver Carson are all lying down in the barn, trying to make the egg hatch.

If it does, I make a million bucks.

If it does not—well, I cook breakfast pretty soon and maybe I'll be eating the biggest omelet in the world.

Night Mares

*Nursemaid To
Night Mares*



The man at the employment agency gave me a long look. "Why do you keep coming back?" he muttered, wearily. "There's nothing for you. I've told you that a dozen times."

I lost my patience.

"What's wrong with me?" I snapped. "I've done everything the books advise. Look at me—my shoes are shined. My trousers are worn but neatly pressed. I haven't got unsightly pores, or dandruff or bad breath. I use a deodorant. My fingernails are clean."

I could see he was impressed. I pursued my advantage.

"I smile pleasantly, don't I? My handclasp is firm isn't it? Look!" As a crowning gesture I produced a handkerchief and waved it under his nose. "See?" I exclaimed, triumphantly. "No tattletale gray."

The agency man shrugged.

"I know all that," he conceded. "You come up to all of the specifications except one, as far as a job is concerned."

"And what's that?" I asked.

"You can't *do* anything."

He had me there.

"Listen, Mister," he said, patiently. "Your card says you're a writer. And we just don't get any calls for writers. Now if you could only do something useful—like plumbing for instance. Or if you were a computer expert. Lots of calls for computer experts."

"But no. You're useless. All you can do is write." A slight sneer crossed his face. "Can't even operate a lathe," he accused.

I bowed my head. It was true. I couldn't operate a lathe.

"But I can type," I suggested, desperately. "You surely must get plenty of calls for a stenographer."

He grunted. "Wouldn't you look cute, now, sitting on a business man's lap?"

"Never thought of that."

He rose from his desk. "So you see how it is. You're just not the type. Haven't got a chance in a factory. My advice to you is to go home and start pounding the typewriter again."

"A very excellent suggestion," I agreed. "But there are one or two slight difficulties. To begin with, as of this morning I no longer have a home. Nor a typewriter. My landlady is in possession of both."

The employment man sighed sympathetically. "Tough. Wonder what I'd do if I were in your shoes."

"Have them re-soled, probably," I told him. "My feet are touching the pavement."

"Must be something," he muttered, scratching his head. "Writer, huh? Inside work. Hey—maybe I've got it!"

He faced me across the desk and his voice dropped.

"Would you mind going to work for a weirdo?" he asked.

"Some kind of a nut?"

"No. Of course not. Why this guy is a millionaire. He's just eccentric."

"You mean that if he were poor he'd be crazy."

"What do you care? A job's a job, and this is a good deal, if you fill the bill. Ever hear of Julius Margate?"

"No."

"Lives uptown. He called in last week—let me see now, if I can find the order." He bustled around opening a card file.

"Here it is. Yes, Julius Margate. He wants a house man. \$800 a month, plus room and board."

"\$800 a month and keep for such a job? He must be out of his skull!"

"Wait. Listen to this. Man selected must be fond of animals, able to climb trees, a good horseman; must have type AB blood and an I.Q. of 140 or higher."

He looked at me.

"Well?"

I smiled. "Happen to know my blood type is AB," I answered. "Got a transfusion once. I've got an I.Q. record lying around that I think I can get my hands on. I haven't climbed a tree for ten years, but I guess I can manage. I used to ride pretty well. I'm not fond of animals—but for \$800 a month and keep I'll sleep with a rhinoceros."

"Maybe you'll have to," commented the employment man. "I'll call up Margate and see what he says. Drop back this afternoon around two."

"Doesn't he want me to go out there for an interview?"

"No. Told you he is eccentric. Insists on phone interviews only. Says when he selects a man he'll send a guide down to take him to his place."

I let it go at that.

Promptly at two I returned. The employment agent was waiting.

"You've got the job," he informed me. "And you start today. Your things will be called for. All ready to go?"

"Suits me."

"Sign here. Usual commission."

I signed.

"What about that guide?" I asked.

"He's waiting for you now in the outer office."

I paused. "I didn't see anyone there," I objected. "That is, nobody but a blind man."

"He's your guide," the employment agent told me. "I warned you Margate was a kook."

We went back to the outer office. The fat blind man with the striped cane rose as we entered.

"Here he is," said the employment man. He introduced me "and this is Captain Hollis."

"Pleased to meet up with you." The captain's voice was a jovial boom. He took my hand, held it. "Sure we'll get along fine. Boss ought to like you. You got long fingers. Like eels. Artistic, ain't you?"

"Writer," I admitted.

He grinned. "Boss likes writers. Thinks they're just too stinking intellecshool. He's pretty intellecshool himself. But let's heave anchor. The car's outside."

We left the building. Captain Hollis led the way, cane and all. He moved with marvelous celerity for a sightless man. He found the elevators and his cane pressed the *down* button with unerring accuracy.

He threaded his way through the outer lobby, using his cane for a needle. And once in the street, he walked directly toward a large Rolls which stood resplendently at the curb.

A uniformed chauffeur opened the door. "This is Dave," the captain told me.

"Pleased to meet you," I said, climbing in.

"He's deaf." The captain thrust his face forward and his lips moved repeating my name and greeting.

Dave smiled. "Glad you're with us. The Boss is gonna like you, I guess. You wear glasses. I'll bet you read a lot."

The Rolls moved out into the traffic as we sat back. I turned to Captain Hollis.

"How about giving me a few tips on my new employer?" I asked. "He seems to be a most remarkable man."

"Who, the Boss? He's really something else. Kindest guy in the world. Big hearted? Why, he loves everybody. He loves people you and I wouldn't put up with in a nightmare."

The captain shivered slightly. It was a startling phenomenon in so large a man.

"Not that I'm saying a word against the house-guests, you understand. They're all nice, decent folks in their way. But what a way!"

He shivered again.

"That's why I'm glad you're taking this job. I've been helping the Boys out around the house. It isn't easy for me, without my lights to guide me, and besides I can't seem to get used to them guests of his. Even if I went and brought a couple of them in the first place. I remember snagging Jory in Hungary. Before the war, that was. Dammit, there was a voyage! But—"

"I don't understand. What about Mr. Margate's guests? Who are they?"

The captain ignored my questions as he leaned forward suddenly to address Dave.

"Wait a minute! I nearly forgot something. Jory wants some flea-powder. Better stop at the pet shop on our way up!"

Dave read his lips and nodded. A moment later the car turned in at the curb.

"You get it," ordered the captain. "Here's the money. A large can of flea powder."

I did. It was my first act in the service of Julius Margate and I was oddly disappointed. After all this build-up I expected something better than buying a can of flea-powder for a guest's poodle.

When I returned to the car, the captain was already issuing a further order to Dave.

"Dammit, I'm losing my memory!" he growled. "We got to stop by the dentist for Mr. Simpkins."

Obediently, the car moved forward. The captain turned to me. "You'll like old Simpkins," he predicted. "He's the best of the gang. Easiest to get along with, I think. Of course Simpkins isn't his real name. Talks with an accent. But the Boss doesn't care about a guy's past if he's working on the level now."

The captain chuckled. "Poor Simpkins kind of overstepped himself, though. That's why the Boss made him go to the dentist today. It puts an end to all chances of accident."

His fingers went to my wrist.

"What time does your watch say?"

"Almost five."

"Is it dark yet?" His sightless eyes blinked.

"Yes."

"Good. Simpkins will be out. He was asleep when I brought him down. Lugged him up myself. He ought to be awake now. And will he be mad when he finds out what the dentist did?"

Again the captain chuckled.

The car moved on once more.

Dave turned his head from the wheel.

"There he is, waiting at the curb," he indicated. "Does he look mad?"

"Boiling."

We pulled up.

I saw a tall, thin, middle-aged man with thinning hair. He *did* look mad—his eyes anyway. The rest of his face was covered by his cupped hands.

"Hello, Mr. Simpkins," boomed the captain. "Climb in. Meet the new house man."

He introduced me.

Tall Mr. Simpkins entered with a grunt. His black coat covered the seat beside me as he extended a bony hand. I grasped it, but not for long. It was icy cold.

"Gratified I'm sure," said Mr. Simpkins, in a burring voice. "You will excuse me. I am very upset."

His hand went back to his jaw as he turned to the captain.

"That was a very bad thing you did to me," he accused. "Taking me to the dentist while I am asleep."

"Boss' orders."

"Ah! I thought so. He is a hard man, Julius Margate. Do you know what he had the dentist do to me?"

"What?"

"He pulled all my teeth! When I woke up a few minutes ago I was lying in the chair and my teeth were all gone. All of them!"

Captain Hollis began to laugh.

"Dammit, that's rich! Beg your pardon, Mr. Simpkins, but that's rich!" The captain turned to me. "Don't you think so?"

"I don't understand," I answered. "What's so funny about pulling out all of a man's teeth when he's asleep?"

It was Simpkins who answered sulkily.

"It isn't funny at all. Losing my teeth is the worst thing in the world that could happen to me. Be-

cause," continued Mr. Simpkins, in a dismal voice, "I happen to be a vampire."

II

Captain Hollis was a very strong man.

I discovered this when I tried to jump out of the car.

Mr. Simpkins was almost as upset as I was.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered. "I won't hurt you. My teeth are all gone, anyway. I couldn't bite you if I wanted to."

His bony hand pressed my shoulder. I winced.

"Honestly," he pleaded. "I never bit anyone even when I had my teeth. Julius—Mr. Margate—always took excellent care of me. Bought me whole blood, the kind they use in transfusions. Liver extract. Anything I wanted. I never went hungry."

"Best-hearted guy in the world," Captain Hollis repeated. "Besides you've got nothing to worry about. You're Type AB, and Mr. Simpkins here is allergic to Type AB blood; ain't you now, Mr. Simpkins?"

"Of course," reassured the vampire. He mumbled badly through his aching jaws.

"If you're a sample of Mr. Margate's house-guests, I'm going to have a pretty tough job," I answered.

"Not at all. Now take me, for example. I'm no bother to anyone. Of course, I don't like to have mirrors in my room, and I can't cross running water. You'd think I'd have trouble bathing, but I use liquid soap and oil."

"I don't want to know a vampire's beauty secrets," I retorted somewhat harshly. Mr. Simpkins looked glum.

"You don't like me," he accused. "Nobody likes me."

"There, there," Captain Hollis consoled him. "Of course he likes you. We all like you. Doesn't he bring you all the way from Transylvania and put you up in his swell mansion? Doesn't he give you everything you want?"

"Everybody hates me," the vampire mumbled. "I'm going out and let the worms eat me."

"Don't talk like that, dammit! You're acting very ungrateful to the Boys. Why when we found you back there in Europe, you was starving to death. Sneaking into henhouses at night and killing chickens, you was. Living from hand to mouth. Thin—you was anemic! And all the time afraid somebody was going to find out where you hid out to sleep in the daytime.

"Now look at you! Got a swell boudoir rigged up down in the cellar. Nobody to bother you. All you got to do is come out at night and talk to the Boss. He's gonna write you up in his book, he says. You'll be famous!"

Mr. Simpkins smiled weakly. "Maybe I am a bit hasty," he conceded. "And I assure you I shall be of little trouble." He turned to me. "I am a noctambulistic soul. I sleep from sunrise to sunset. My wants are simple. I won't bother you."

This was evidently meant to console me. It didn't.

"Listen," I began, addressing the captain. "You might as well tell me everything now. What about these other houseguests? Has Mr. Margate got a couple of zombies boarding with him? Any ghouls to feed?"

"The Boss? Of course not—he wouldn't have anything to do with no such creatures. But wait a minute. You can get the scoop straight from him."

I hadn't realized it, but the car was turning into a

driveway. We rode through an avenue of trees, hinting at spacious grounds beyond. The Rolls pulled up before the steps of a large, rambling stone structure. The interior, brilliantly illuminated, justified the captain's description. It was a mansion all right, and a big one.

We climbed out—Simpkins, the captain, and myself. Dave the chauffeur drove off to the rear.

Simpkins rang the bell. The door opened. No butler stood there. Instead, a pudgy little man in an ornate purple lounging jacket fairly flung himself out onto the terrace. His shock of gray hair bristled with an excitement matched by the gleam in his darting black eyes.

"Here you are! How's your jaw, Simpkins! Ha, ha—explain about that later. Matter of necessity. Want to see you tonight. And you—you must be the new house man."

His hand pumped mine in a friendly, vigorous grip. "My name's Margate. Julius Margate. Sorry, we haven't got a butler. Can't keep them. Devil of a servant problem. Hope you'll be a bit more broad-minded."

He ushered us inside, bustling and talking in a quite breathless manner.

"Got a very good report on you from the agency, young man. Very good. Seem to be just what I need around here. So much to attend to, you know. So much. But come along—I'll show you to your rooms later. Right now, dinner's waiting."

I followed the short man and the captain through the long hall. We entered a spacious dining room. The table was set for three.

"You're eating upstairs, aren't you?" Margate called to Simpkins. The vampire nodded.

"I'll be up to visit later," said the host. "Want to take some notes."

He turned to me.

"Hear you're a writer. Fine! You'll be interested in the book I'm doing. Helpful too, no doubt."

We sat down, following Margate's example.

"Jory's cooking," Margate said. "Had him go out and take Trina her fish. Gerymanx ate earlier. Took his stuff out myself. We'll have to teach our new house man how to feed our guests, eh Captain?"

Margate turned his gray head.

"Jory!" he called. "Oh, Jory—we're ready now!"

Jory brought the platter in from the kitchen. I was introduced quite naturally. I correctly assumed that Jory was a guest, not the cook.

As far as I was concerned, Jory would be neither guest nor cook in any house of mine.

Jory was a big man. Too big. His arms were too long and his legs were too short. He didn't have any neck. His hair was plentiful. It ran over his forehead and bristled on cheek and chin. It sprouted from his wrists.

If he were my guest I'd insist on his using a depilatory. And I'd send him to the dentist too. I didn't like the look of his teeth when he smiled at me.

"You the new house man, huh?" he grunted.

"That's right, Mr. Jory."

"Okay. Where's my flea-powder?"

I'd forgotten about that little item. I took the can from my pocket and handed it to him.

"Thanks," he grunted.

His huge fingers tore open the lid. Raising the can, he doused his head liberally with the powder. With a nonchalant smirk he unbuttoned his shirt and poured flea-powder down his chest.

"Jory—pleasel" objected Margate.

"Huh?"

"The moon will be up in half an hour. I'll powder you then after you change."

Margate turned to me.

"Jory's a werewolf," he explained. I tried to get up. The captain tripped me with his cane.

"He changes every night when the moon is more than half full," Margate continued. "But there's nothing to worry about. I've got his lycanthropy under control. He doesn't get violent unless he sees the moon, and I take care of that. Make him wear dark glasses."

Jory shuffled out of the room. The others began to eat. Somehow I didn't feel very hungry.

"You mustn't mind Jory," Margate told me, noticing my hesitation. "He's crude, I'll admit. Illiterate peasant type. Hungarian backwoods, you know. Hasn't got the breeding of Mr. Simpkins. But, he means well. Faithful as a dog, too."

"That's his only trouble. That canine streak. You know," Margate confided, "I wouldn't want it to get around for the world, but in winter Jory has a very bad habit. He *sheds*! Dreadfully. Usually make him stay in his room. He prefers to sleep in that kennel in back, of course, but I see to it that his hamburger is waiting for him upstairs. Fleas bother him a bit, too. But not too much any more. When the captain captured him he was really—I confess—mangy."

Margate passed me my salad.

"You ever bathe a dog?" he asked. "You can give Jory a bath every so often."

Bathing a werewolf didn't appeal to me. But I was past making objections.

"I'd like to introduce you to some of our other guests later this evening," Margate said. "But I doubt if I'll have time. I must talk to the captain here. Fact

is, Captain, I've got another voyage planned for you."

"Now?" boomed Captain Hollis.

"Yes, for you and Dave both."

"What're we after this trip?"

"Never mind."

Margate glanced at me significantly.

"I'll tell you later. But it's the kind of thing I need you for especially. No one else could do it. And Dave has his part to play as well."

"Don't like it," the captain answered. "Risky business. Where to?"

"Greece again."

"Could be trouble."

"You'll get by if you follow orders. You'll be using my yacht, you know. And the regular crew. They'll handle things. All you must do is follow the map and act when the time comes.

"Something hard to capture?"

"Very hard. Hardest yet. No one but you could do it. There's a bonus in it, of course. Make it worth your while."

The captain grunted. Margate beamed at me.

"Well, young man—suppose you're drawing your own conclusions?"

"More or less," I admitted.

"What do you make of my little household from what you've seen of it?"

"Unusual."

"Diplomatic word. Very. Tactful, aren't you. Why don't you come right out with it and say you think I'm crazy?"

"Because I suspect I might be the crazy one."

"Ha. Good! Very good!" Margate leaned back. He offered me a cigar. I took it as we sipped our coffee.

"Don't alarm yourself," he told me. "It's very simple. I'm a collector, that's all. Just a collector. Hobby of

mine. Many wealthy men collect books. Some collect paintings, or antique furniture. I collect mythological entities."

"So I see."

"Might call me something of a hunter, too. But I'm not interested in big game. Besides, even if I have captured most of my guests, they *are* guests. And are treated as such. I rather flatter myself that I've improved their lot. It's not easy, in times like these, to be a vampire or a werewolf."

I agreed with him on *that*.

"Perhaps you're wondering just what impulse led me to the pursuit of this little hobby?"

"I am."

Margate giggled.

"Oh, it's silly enough, I suppose. At least to people who fancy themselves the practical, hard-headed sort. As a boy, I mooned around a lot over books. Mythology. Bulfinch. You know the stuff. I inherited money. There was no need to work. I inherited a certain amount of intelligence, too. I claim. Enough intelligence to avoid emulating the average career of the wealthy man of leisure. You know the stuff—blondes, polo, blondes, golf, blondes, horses, blondes, tennis. . . ." He giggled again. "But I do like blondes," he added.

"You might say I rebelled against the so-called rational concepts of reality. I began to study the myth-cultures. I convinced myself that certain deviations from the accepted norm existed in Nature. That the legends of supernatural presences and entities might conceivably rest on a basis of truth. That you can't sit back and say, 'There is no such thing as a werewolf,' for example, if you've never looked for one. Besides psychopathology has only recently admitted the psy-

chotic existence of werewolves, if not the physiological possibility.

"I knocked around the globe a bit on my yacht. Picked up Captain Hollis, here. A good man, the captain. Lost his eyes in my service. A maenad scratched them out, off the Dardanelles."

"She was a bitch, that one!" the captain boomed.

"We found a few things together, he and I. Things the hard-headed scientific boys never bothered to look for. They're always willing to go chasing off to nowhere and back to capture a reported new specimen of gorilla, or something, but you never hear of them getting up an expedition to actually track down a sea-serpent, for example. Dullards!"

"At any rate, you'll meet some of my—discoveries later. At the moment, I am engaged on a little writing project of my own. Sort of combination of clinical case-histories and a revision of mythology. That's why my guests are here. I'm extracting their life histories."

Margate smiled amiably.

"I think you'll like it here, once you get accustomed to things," he said. "There's a number of tasks for you to perform, of course. But if you humor my guests a bit you won't have any trouble. They're all goodhearted, if a little unusual."

A crash interrupted his monologue.

"The kitchen!" the captain muttered.

Indeed, the noise of falling crockery and silver resounded from the kitchen doorway.

Margate was on his feet. I followed him.

"Damn that Jory! How often have I told him not to change in the house? He's always doing that, and he always smashes the dishes!"

We stared at the kitchen.

Floundering amidst a welter of broken plates, a large wolf stared up at us with contrite eyes. The

wolf had brown fur—like Jory's hair, only more of it. The wolf was panting a little, and its red tongue lolled.

As we watched, it rose to its paws and uttered a little yelp of embarrassment.

"Oh, Jory, you're so careless!" Margate sighed, shaking his head.

The wolf nuzzled against his leg.

"All right. But try to remember!"

I stared at the red eyes. Jory's eyes.

Now I was able to trace, not without a certain fascinated horror, the human outlines inherent in the wolf body. The bony structure of the ribs. The peculiar adaptation of elbow to joint. The finger-like pattern of the paws. And the human cast of the lupine muzzle.

The werewolf turned and began to scratch patiently at the door.

Margate stared at me.

"Oh dear!" he whispered. "Oh dear!"

"What's the matter?"

He stepped to the wall and took down a harness and muzzle. Stooping, he adjusted them about the wolf's body and throat.

"I'm sorry," he told me. "But I'm afraid you'll have to take Jory outside. I can tell he wants to go."

He placed the end of the leash in my nerveless fingers and pushed me forward into the night. The wolf tugged me into darkness.

"Just once around the block," Margate cautioned.

So I did it. My first duty in the house of my new employer was to walk his pet werewolf around the block.

III

I slept soundly that evening, in spite of it all. I could save my nightmares for when I was awake.

Margate met me at the breakfast table. He was in bubbling spirits—as usual.

“The captain’s left,” he announced. “Got his maps and orders last night. Should be gone about six weeks, I estimate.”

He chuckled to himself.

“If he succeeds this time, my collection will be complete.”

“After something unusual?”

“Unusual is hardly the word! Hope he makes it all right.”

“Isn’t it a risky business for a blind man?”

“Riskier for a man with his eyes,” Margate babbled on. “But finish your breakfast. I’m going to show you around.”

I had hardly downed my coffee when Margate jumped up from the table, bursting with eagerness.

“Come on, come on!”

He led the way into the yard. We walked along a shaded gravel pathway leading to the rear of the house. Margate stooped midway.

“Jory’s tracks,” he muttered. “Didn’t hear him come in last night. Oh, well, he’ll sleep until noon or later. And Simpkins won’t be with us until sundown.”

We proceeded, moving between ordered flower-beds.

“Warm, isn’t it?” Margate commented. He paused in the shadow of a tree.

“It is hot.” I rested my hand against the trunk.

"Get your hands off me!" commanded a voice.

I looked around. There was nothing to see.

"You heard me!" The voice was high, feminine; yet strangely muffled.

I stared again. As I did so, a branch descended and slapped my face.

"Fresh!"

Margate laughed.

"That's Myrtle," he explained. *"In the tree. A hamadryad."*

I wheeled and surveyed the tree. It looked quite ordinary to me.

"Tree nymph," Margate continued. *"Don't mind her. Her bark is worse than her bite."*

"That isn't funny," came the voice from the tree. *"Who's your friend?"*

"That's our new house man."

"Hmmm. Not very polite, I must say."

I thought it best to turn and bow at the branches.

"Sorry if I offended you. As a matter of fact, I was merely admiring your limbs. That's a lovely trunk you have there."

This was the right approach. A peal of girlish laughter was my reward.

"Flatterer!"

"Not at all, I assure you."

"Margate," said Myrtle, softly. *"I hate to say it, but I wish you'd remember to tell Jory to keep away from me when—"*

"Of course, Myrtle. He's just thoughtless, that's all. How are things otherwise?"

"Pretty fair."

"Your new friend here can climb a tree. I might have him shinny up you if you want to be pruned at any time."

I recalled that tree-climbing was one of my requis-

ites listed by the employment man. Type AB blood, fond of animals, a tree-climber—yes, it figured, all right.

"I'd be glad to handle your limbs at any time," I offered.

Myrtle laughed.

"How you talk!" Her branches shook coyly.

Margate moved on down the path. I followed. Myrtle rustled in farewell.

"Lovely girl," my employer remarked. "Often wonder what she looked like. The captain picked her up in the Carpathians. Had to fight off a gang of peasants when he transplanted her." He sighed reminiscently.

We walked down a graveled pathway through the garden which led to the door of a large, low structure. It resembled a stable or barn.

"Want you to meet Gerymanx," Margate explained, as we entered. He hustled in. I had to stoop in order to pass through the doorway.

Gerymanx stood in a large stall. Or rather, a part of Gerymanx. Gerymanx was a horse, and since his back was turned toward me, the part I gazed upon hardly constituted a proper introduction.

"There he is," said Margate. "Nice looking, isn't he?" He thumbed at the portion of Gerymanx which was visible. "Ever see anything like it before?"

"Not since the last Presidential campaign," I told him.

Suddenly, at the rear of the stall, a man raised his head and peered intently at us. He was a stranger, and a rather disreputable one. Tousle-headed and unshaven, he bared prominent yellow teeth in a sly grin.

It rather disappointed me to find Margate employing such a raffish-looking fellow. I told him so, under my breath.

"Not much of a stable-boy," I commented.

"Stable-boy? That's no stable-boy, that's Gerymanx."

"But I thought you told me this—this thing—is Gerymanx," I protested, weakly indicating the protruding brown backside of the horse.

"So it is. But the head is also Gerymanx. Don't you understand, my boy? Gerymanx is a centaur."

I might have known it. But I could hardly control my confusion when the human head wheeled, the horse body pivoted, and Gerymanx trotted out of his stall to welcome us formally.

I am no judge of horseflesh, and certainly no judge of centaurflesh either, but I must admit Gerymanx was impressive. His horse-body glistened beautifully in the sunshine from the stable sky-light. His human torso, rising from the waist, was superbly muscled. I had always imagined centaurs to be somewhat shaggy. Gerymanx wasn't. He trotted forward, and upon our introduction, shook hands. He had to bend his elbows to do it, being considerably taller than myself.

"A pleasure," he boomed. "Mr. Margate here tells me you're a horseman. We must go for a ride together soon."

Margate beamed with pride. "Gerymanx is quite a pacer," he told me. "Four-gaited."

"Glad to get out again," the centaur went on. "No one has been around to exercise me but Dave, and he can't do anything but hang on. Thought I'd like to work out mornings and maybe enter the steeplechase this fall."

"He's very ambitious," Margate added. "Wants to race." He turned to the centaur. "How's the oat situation?"

"Pretty fair. You can tell this gentleman here what

to do for me. I'd like to be curry-combed this week, if you don't mind."

"Your mane wants clipping," Margate observed, critically.

"Guess it does." The centaur smiled shyly. "You know, Margate, I've been thinking of having my tail bobbed."

"Don't do anything hasty now," my host begged.

"But it's all the style. I was looking at the *Breeder's Annual* last night."

"We'll discuss that later," said Mr. Margate, curtly. "Right now we have to be moving on. I'm sure you two will get to be great friends."

He turned to me. "I must give you instructions on Gerymanx shortly. You'll take care of him as well as Myrtle and the rest."

We moved out of the stable as Gerymanx trotted back into his stall.

"Lunch time. Listen—I want you to call up the grocer in town and order a few items for me."

We marched back to the house.

"You understand, I can hardly allow tradespeople to get in here. We'll need a roast for ourselves and some raw hamburger—about two pounds—Vitamin B extract for Mr. Simpkins—better get a bottle of Glover's Mange Cure for Jory—five pounds of halibut steak—and then call the feed store and ask them to send up a bale of hay—a bottle of tabasco sauce—"

I used the hall phone.

"Afraid you're going to be in for a little heavy duty these days," Mr. Margate apologized. "What with the captain and Dave away. Why not run upstairs and take a shower before lunch? It might freshen you up a bit for the afternoon. I want to go over the notes for my book with you, if you don't mind. Run along now—I'll fix us a snack if Jory isn't around."

I ascended the stairs to my own quarters. I had quite a nice bedroom with bath attached. I noted that my things had arrived some time during the morning. Jory must have brought them up.

It was quiet in my room. Quiet, and normal. That's what I needed most. A touch of normalcy, after all this bewilderment.

I walked into the bathroom, reached around the shower curtains and turned on the water. Then I undressed, slowly. I had a cigarette—one of Margate's Turkish. I went back to the bath. I pulled aside the curtain, climbed in the tub.

"Hey!" said a voice.

I looked down.

There was a girl in the bathtub.

IV

She was a very pretty girl. I noticed that at once. She had a long, oval face, high cheekbones, deep blue eyes, and long, curly hair.

I also observed that she would look great in a sweater, though at the moment she wasn't wearing any that I could notice. And I noticed.

"Hey," she repeated, staring up at me.

I just stood there. Because a second glance afforded me certain observations of a disturbing nature. She was a pretty girl with long hair, all right—but her hair was green. A vivid green. Most unusual color.

"What are you trying to do?" persisted the girl.

"I was just going to take a bath," I answered, not too brightly.

"Well don't stand there on one leg like a stork," she replied. "Come on in. The water's fine."

I didn't move, but I was taken aback.

"Who are you?" She stared at me critically. "My but you're skinny, aren't you?"

It was a trifle disturbing. What would you say if you walked into your bathroom and a strange girl in your tub made disparaging remarks about your physique?

I was still pondering the problem when a discreet cough sounded from the doorway.

It was Margate.

He ignored me and strode toward the tub, staring down at the soapy water.

"So here you are, Trina," he accused. "At it again, eh? How did you ever get up here?"

"Jory carried me," answered the girl, defiantly. "I didn't think anyone would notice. Besides, I just wanted to use the bath salts."

"Well, you'll have to get out now. This is our new house man. He wants a bath, I imagine. That is what you want, isn't it?" he added, turning to me for corroboration.

"Yes."

"Oh very well. If you will be a pig, and hog it all for yourself," Trina sulked, "lift me out."

I hesitated.

"Come on."

I stooped and lifted. She was slippery. But that wasn't the reason I almost dropped her.

I was staring at her waist. At the green—oh, it might as well be admitted! Trina was a mermaid.

"Shame on you," Margate scolded. "I thought I told you not to leave your tank," He sighed. "What will our new house man think of us, I wonder? Jory changing in the kitchen and you sneaking into his tub."

"I just wanted bath salts," the mermaid wailed. "And a chance to use this lovely mirror here to comb

my hair." Her eyelids fluttered up at me like waving kelp. "Maybe you'll help me comb my hair?" she suggested.

"Not now!" Margate extended his arms. "Here, give her to me. Go ahead and bathe in peace."

He bore Trina from the room. A most attractive armful too. I bathed meditatively.

At the luncheon table, Margate confided in me.

"It's her French blood," he declared. "Trina's a Bretonne, you know. Found her off the coast of Brittany.

"She's the restless type, though. Wants to sneak out to bathing beaches, I suppose. Crazy about bath salts and perfumes. Guess she's lonesome. Used to a lot of oceanides and nereides around. To say nothing of sailors."

"I like her," I ventured. "I don't blame her for getting bored in a tank. It must be like living the life of a goldfish. Isn't there a swimming pool or something around here?"

"Say, that's an idea! You could dig her one! There in the garden. You know how to handle cement?"

"Guess I could manage."

"Jory will help," Margate promised. "Say, that's fine."

We finished our luncheon in high humor. After a smoke we adjourned to Margate's study.

It was more of a library than a study, and more of a museum than a library. The walls were lined with bookshelves. I scanned the titles with eager curiosity.

"Quite a collection you have here," I commented. "Lots of sorcery."

Margate gave me an earnest glance. "Just for reading purposes," he emphasized. "Never mess with the stuff personally. Too dangerous."

I noted a glass bell jar on the side table. A long,

thin bone rested on a cushion within. Margate marked my interest.

"Supposed to be a unicorn horn," he explained. "But I'm inclined to believe it's a fake. Anybody knows there are no such things as unicorns."

I returned to the large center table and desk. In order to avoid resting my finger on a mummified head, I brought my hand down on a large, dark brown bottle. Margate gasped.

"Careful therel Don't jiggle that bottle! Got a geni in there."

I stepped back.

"Bought it from a sailor in Aden. Set me back a pretty penny. Don't know why I wanted it—I'm afraid to open the thing."

I stared into the brown, cloudy glass. I could see nothing. But when I lifted the bottle it gave forth a rustling sound—a most disconcerting noise to emanate from glass or liquid.

"Let me see, now," Margate began. He stooped over the desk drawers and began to draw forth sheafs of manuscript.

"Here's the case history of Mr. Simpkins," he muttered. "And the notes Jory is giving me. Cave stuff—archeological background from Gerymanx. What's this? Oh, the report of the Demonolatrical Society. Last year's. Out of date."

He lifted his hands, eyebrows waggling in despair.

"You see? Everything's topsy-turvy. Never get anything done this way. Need some system. A little order. Then I can get started again."

But somehow we didn't get at any filing system that afternoon. We sat down and got involved in a little discussion, during which my employer added a few scraps of information to my data on his lifework.

I learned that he had conducted this somewhat

singular menage of his for about five years. Mr. Simpkins was his oldest guest; then Gerymanx, Myrtle, and Jory. Trina was his latest acquisition.

They got along fairly well together, according to Margate. Of course he humored them, kept them happy. And in return, they afforded him diversion enough to recompense him for the sacrifice of a normal social life.

"Never go out," Margate told me. "Couldn't afford to, under the circumstances. Never invite guests, either. But the book is coming along, and it's well worth it. When I am finished I'll take my place alongside of Frazer and Ellis. What Darwin and Huxley did in their fields, I will do in mine.

He seemed a simple soul, did Julius Margate. I felt a growing affection for the man.

"Only one complaint," he confided. "People are always trying to palm off fakes on me. Those things get around, you know. I've had side-show dealers trying to sell me freaks. And some unscrupulous dealers try to peddle monstrosities that never existed. Missing links, and basilisks. I ask you now, is that right?"

He didn't wait for an answer, but rose to his feet with a frown.

"Dear me! Almost supper time. Better dash out to the gate for those groceries. I'll route Jory out. He's in the kennel, most likely.

"On your way back," he called, "I think you'd better take a run down to the cellar. Fix the furnace. It'll be chilly tonight."

I left on my errand. After lugging up the groceries I made for the cellar stairs, descended.

It was dark down there. I struck three matches before I located the furnace in the gloom. I hadn't seen an old-fashioned furnace in years.

I found the coal, filled the hopper. It took some

time. Little red shadows danced on the walls behind me as I got the fire glowing. It was cheerful, warm. I began to whistle.

Then I heard the sound.

The creaking, groaning sound from the corner.

And a rustling. A slow, crawling rustle. A slithering noise.

I lit a match, held it up in none too steady fingers.

Fire swept across a mound of churning earth. A mound in which a box was set—a long, wooden box. A box that opened. Opened in darkness, as two long arms rose silently, swiftly.

Something sat up. Something with a long, white face.

With a sudden start, I recognized Mr. Simpkins.

"You!" I gasped.

"Hello." Simpkins rose. The earth fell from his black coat. He stretched himself and yawned.

"What time is it? Forgot to set the alarm clock again."

I stared down at the coffin from which he had emerged.

The vampire stood beside me. "Pretty bad, isn't it?" he commented.

I shuddered in complete agreement. "Know what I'm going to do, my friend?" he asked.

"N—no."

"I am going to make our host purchase a new coffin for me. It's the least he can do to repay me for that scurvy trick of removing my teeth."

I nodded numbly.

"Since Dave is gone, you shall have to accompany me," he continued. "We can go tonight, I suppose."

"Go—where?"

"Why to the undertaking parlor, of course. Where else would you buy yourself a coffin?"

"I won't do it," I declared.

And that settled that.

After supper Mr. Simpkins and I went out to buy him a new coffin.

Jason Harris operated one of the most thriving mortuary chapels in the city. Mr. Harris himself was always on hand to welcome a fresh customer. That's the only way he liked his customers—fresh.

But he didn't like us.

I could tell that almost as soon as Mr. Simpkins and I entered his display rooms.

It had been a struggle to drag me this far. Both Mr. Simpkins and Mr. Margate had argued with me—pointing out that I was the only one who could drive the vampire down, and that night was the only opportunity Simpkins had of going out to make a personal selection. They clinched the argument by reminding me that I was, after all, an employee. And an employee must follow orders.

Now I wanted to get the whole business over with, quickly and quietly. So when Jason Harris moved forward to greet us, I lost no time.

"My friend and I should like to purchase a coffin," I began.

"Very well." Mr. Harris assumed a mask of sympathy. "Might I inquire as to the nature of the bereavement in the family?"

Mr. Simpkins stepped out. "Never mind that. Just show us around this box factory of yours and we'll make our own selection."

"Of course." Somewhat disconcerted by the callousness of the request, Harris led us over to an imposing bronze casket.

"Here is one of our latest models," he began. "I want you to note the dignity of its outlines, the solidity of its construction, the—"

"What about a mattress?" inquired Mr. Simpkins, eagerly. "Has it got a mattress?"

"A mattress can be secured," Harris assured him. "But I must ask you to observe this special feature—the method whereby the sealed casket is made airtight."

"Airtight? Nothing doing," Simpkins snapped. "How do you expect a man to breathe in an airtight coffin? Why, he'd strangle to death!"

"But the deceased does not breathe—"

"How do you know? You ever been deceased? Come to think of it you do look a little dead on your feet."

Mr. Harris was indeed quite pale.

"I don't seem to understand you gentlemen," he muttered.

"We just want to buy a coffin, that's all. For a body."

"What sort of body?" Mr. Harris persisted.

"Why no body in particular. Just any body."

The mortician looked agitated. "You aren't by any chance planning a murder? You're not mobsters, I hope."

"Of course not." Mr. Simpkins gave out with a laugh that was meant to be reassuring. It wasn't. "Say, I heard a good one about an undertaker who specialized in gangsters' funerals. His motto was 'Don't Put All Your Yeggs in One Casket.' Good eh?"

Mr. Harris didn't think so. He looked distressed. I took advantage of his confusion to pull the vampire over toward a small, modest-appearing gray box.

"What about this?" I suggested.

"Not bad," Simpkins commented. "Always did like a plush lining."

"This is a very select model," Harris assured us. "One of our most popular styles this season."

"Never mind the sales build-up," said Simpkins. "I'll just try it out for myself."

Lifting the lid, he climbed into the coffin and lay down.

"Very comfortable," he grunted. "Lots of leg room."

This statement didn't please the undertaker either. He kept staring at Mr. Simpkins with a rapt expression, and his teeth began to chatter like a bunch of women around a bargain counter.

"This coffin isn't for you!" he exclaimed.

"Of course it is. I always pick out my own coffins when I get the chance."

"Most people don't get a chance," Harris was forced to observe.

"Not me. I'm different. I've picked out five coffins in my time. Outlasted them all." Without waiting to observe the reaction to this last statement, Mr. Simpkins suddenly banged the lid shut. A moment later he pushed it up again.

"Have to oil this lid," he complained. "I might want to get out in a hurry some time. You know how it is."

"No, I don't," the undertaker confessed. "I don't want to know how it is, either. You two get out of here. You're putting me on."

"A fine way for a mortician to talk to a customer," Simpkins brindled. "All right. I don't want your old box anyway. It's lousy. Why I'd be ashamed to be caught dead in one of your coffins."

He rose. "Come on," he told me. "We'll try another joint down the street where the service is better. I probably can make a deal on a trade-in on the old casket, too."

Mr. Harris forced a smile.

"Don't be hasty," he coaxed. "It's just that I didn't seem to understand. But I guess I do now. You want to purchase this coffin to sleep in, is that right?"

"Of course," said Mr. Simpkins, in a disgusted voice. "What would *you* do in a coffin?"

"Very little," the mortician assured him. "But, if I might inquire, why don't you purchase a bed?"

"Beds? Bahl! The dirt gets onto the sheets," Simpkins complained. "And the light comes in, too."

"You sleep during the day?"

"That's right. I want something that's dark. Something to keep out the dirt. To say nothing of the worms."

"You have worms?" asked Mr. Harris in spite of himself.

"I'll say I have worms," answered the vampire.

"Dyspepsia is my trouble," the undertaker confessed.

"Maybe a coffin would help you, too."

"Never thought of it. Quiet in there, isn't it?"

"Very quiet. And think of the plush lining—all that satin and stuff!"

"Interesting idea, if a little morbid."

"Beds are expensive," the vampire continued. "And linen is high, too. I should think, with all these swell boxes lying around, you'd just hop into one for forty winks now and then."

Harris scratched his head.

"I'd have to talk it over with my wife first," he mused.

"Haven't you got any of those double caskets? The big jobs?"

"Yes. It might work out at that."

"Just a thought, friend. By the way—guess we'll take this one."

Harris resumed his professional interest. He quoted a price. I paid him.

"Do you want this delivered?" he asked.

"I'll take it with me," Simpkins responded. He grabbed one end of the casket and I took the other.

Harris followed us to the door. "But this is all so unusual—I'm a little confused. You really want to get into this coffin?"

"Sure as I'm alive," Simpkins answered. Harris sighed deeply.

"Well, it's your own funeral."

"Not bad!" Simpkins chuckled. "And don't forget what I told you. Try a casket yourself for sleeping purposes. I'd love to see you in a coffin."

The undertaker shuddered visibly.

"Oh gentlemen," he called, as we opened the door. "Just one thing more. It's customary to have the name and address when anyone purchases a casket."

Simpkins turned. "You can look me up out at Everest Cemetery," he suggested, maliciously. "I've got a nice grave out there."

Harris trembled.

"Drop in some time," Simpkins added.

As we closed the door, the undertaker turned and ran back into his shop. His shoulders heaved.

"Now see what you did," I accused, as we climbed into the car.

"He probably won't be able to work for a week now."

Mr. Simpkins was contrite.

"I was only trying to be funny," he apologized. "Besides let him close up the funeral parlor if he wants to. Business is probably dead anyway."

I shivered as we drove off. Vampires I could learn to stand—but punsters, never. If Mr. Simpkins didn't behave, he'd find some maggots on his pillow one of these days.

V

The ensuing days were unexpectedly pleasant. Life quickly fell into a routine.

In the morning I usually went out to the stables and brought Gerymanx his oats and hay. Then I turned the hose on Myrtle. Afternoons I spent with Margate, trying to recopy his disordered notes and straighten out his reference sources in some kind of filing system.

At times I took Jory for a walk in the evening. Every Saturday night it was my duty to give him a bath. During the third week I had the rather unpleasant job of shaving him, but on the whole I managed excellently.

At the time of the full moon I called up town and ordered a pair of motorcycle goggles. These fitted over his eyes more comfortably than the usual dark glasses, and he passed through the difficult days with a minimum of howling. Margate's system seemed to keep his lycanthropic instincts well under control.

Within a few weeks I had Mr. Margate's household running smoothly. My work in his study came to an end. He was able to sit down with his book material well organized. I saw little of him, these days—he spent most of his time taking notes. Jory's recital occupied his immediate attention. Jory being rather stupid and illiterate, it was a difficult task to extract coherent information from him. But Margate persevered.

My first feeling of strangeness was almost completely dissipated. One can become adjusted to almost anything through constant familiarity.

I no longer found it shocking when Jory assumed his lupine form before my eyes. The spectacle of Mr. Simpkins snoring in his cellar coffin did not alarm me. Myrtle's muffled voice from the tree-trunk became as natural a manifestation as the rustling from the branches of surrounding elms. Gerymanx was no bother at all. He read his racing form, bragged heroically of his galloping abilities, and had recently become absorbed in a system of physical culture exercises he was taking through the mails.

Perhaps not visiting in town did it. Isolation inured me to the unusual. My duties were light, the food was excellent, and the hours passed swiftly.

Besides, there was Trina.

I got her out of that cellar tank in no time.

During the second week I began to dig the swimming pool. I worked alone, but it was a steady pace that I set for myself. Another week and I had the concrete laid. In the fifth week of my stay the pool was completed.

Trina didn't know, of course. I planned it as a surprise for her, with Margate's connivance.

When I carried her up from the basement she thought I was smuggling her in for a go at the bath salts—a frequent practice of mine which I might as well admit. We had become very friendly, Trina and I. After all, I'm broadminded enough to overlook little details like that emerald hair.

I took her out that afternoon and brought her to the pool.

At first she couldn't speak.

"Ooooooooooh!" she squealed. Tenderly, I lowered her into the water. She splashed gaily. In a moment she swam over and put her arms around my neck.

"It's wonderful!" she whispered, and kissed me. It was the first time but not the last. I found it very

nice. A mermaid's kiss is moist, and a little salty, but very interesting.

I'd built a little rockpile in the center of the pool. She sunned herself like a Lorelei, her livid curls shimmering in the breeze, the radiance of her scales glistening against the water. Her long, delicate fingers, with just the fascinating suggestion of a web at the palm, beckoned to me. I went in the house and borrowed a pair of Margate's swimming trunks to join her.

After that time went very swiftly indeed. I spent hours out there on the rocks with her. We'd swim awhile and sun awhile. She used to sing me some old Breton sea ballads in a piquant Flemish accent. Some of them were slightly bawdy, I suppose. I don't understand French very well.

Trina was happy for the first time in her life since she had been ensnared in Captain Hollis' nets.

"I've been like a fish out of water," she confessed to me "It's like coming home again. Now, if I only had a few sailors—"

I put a stop to that talk in short order. Her weakness for seafaring men was really deplorable. But mermaids are like that, I suppose.

My fondest memories are those of the moonlight bathing parties. She and I in a world of silver water, gliding along under the moon. And afterwards we'd sit on the edge of the pool, roasting hot dogs over a little fire. It was beautiful while it lasted.

Then came the well-remembered day. Along in the seventh week it was.

Margate met me at the breakfast table with a worried frown.

"What's the matter? Still stuck on that Jory memorandum?" I asked. "That part about the relationship

of the moonflower to the anthropomorphic tendencies?"

"No, it's not that," Mr. Margate answered. He ran his hand through his bristling gray crop. "It's Captain Hollis and Dave. They're nearly two weeks late. Haven't heard a word—not a cablegram."

"It's nothing," I consoled him.

"Perhaps. But they're on a risky errand."

It wasn't the first time Margate had told me that. He was constantly hinting but never revealing the nature of this quest.

"I wish you'd tell me," I said. "Maybe I could help."

"There's no way of helping," he answered. "Maybe I'm just a fool for planning this anyway. What good will it be if they are successful? I can't look and I can't listen. Never even see or hear what I get. Have to take my notes second-hand."

I couldn't make sense out of this recital.

"In case they do get back," Margate continued, "I'd better have you clear out the back room in the cellar. The big one. I've ordered sheet metal to cover the door. It's fairly soundproof. Just remove the old furniture and leave the place vacant. We won't need any pen, or any food either, I don't suppose."

He sighed.

"The crew is reliable, though; Hollis has used the men before. They have their orders, but Hollis has to make the actual capture, of course. Dangerous business. Oh well, we'll just have to wait and see. Or rather, wait and not see."

Curiosity gnawed within me. I opened my mouth. But Margate rose and cut me off.

"Say! I just remembered—are you a blacksmith?"

"No. Can't say that I am."

His face fell. "Too bad. Knew I'd forgotten something when I listed your requirements."

"What's the matter?"

"It's Gerymanx. He needs to be shod."

"Oh."

"Didn't he mention that his hooves hurt him?"

"Come to think of it, he said something of the sort to me yesterday. I assumed it was just a minor complaint."

"No, he needs shoes badly. And he'd like a pedicure, I suppose."

Margate sighed. "Tell you what you have to do. Take the small truck into town and see the blacksmith there. I've got the address. Used to ride him down at night myself."

"But you'd better go. I want to stick around here in case Captain Hollis shows up."

"You mean I put the centaur in the back of the truck and haul it to a blacksmith shop?"

"It's all right. I've bribed this fellow heavily. Business being what it is in the smithy line these days, he keeps his mouth shut."

"But what about traveling on the road?"

"Oh, if you use the county trunk you shouldn't have any trouble. Not much traffic."

"All right."

"Better get started." Margate scribbled down an address and gave me some money. I turned.

"Be careful now," he warned me. "And watch Gerymanx. He's a wild one when he gets loose. Got ambitions, he has. And he's too friendly. Keep him out of mischief and when he gets through bring him right back. Whatever you do, don't let him get into Droopy's Tavern next door. He's fond of the grape. We caught him that way, while he was drunk."

I hurried down the path. Trina called out to me from the pool.

"Coming in for a swim, dear?"

"Can't make it. Got to hurry into town." I stopped and gave her a kiss. "See you later."

She flipped her tail at me saucily and turned away. Gerymanx was at the stable door.

"Margate says you're taking me in for the pedicure," he greeted me.

"That's right."

"You want a saddle?"

"No. You're coming in on the truck. And no horseplay, either," I warned.

The centaur's face fell. "That's too bad. I thought we might have a little canter around the park before we went to the smith's."

"Nothing doing. Can't afford to attract any attention."

"Oh, all right," Gerymanx sulked. "Get the truck."

I pulled it out of the garage. It was a small job, but I was grateful for the enclosed sides on the compartment. They completely hid Gerymanx's astonishing body from view. Only his tousled head was visible above the railing.

"Take it easy," he called out.

I took it easy. Very easy. Every time we passed a car on the highway I slowed down and I did my best to avoid jolting my peculiar passenger. It was almost lunchtime when we pulled up at the old brick smithy on the outskirts of town.

I backed the truck up to the door and walked inside.

The blacksmith, who by the most appropriate coincidence was named Smith, came to the door. He was a broad shouldered man with a bald head and a ruddy complexion.

"I've got a job for you," I began hesitantly. "Gentleman in back there wants to be shod."

Smith cocked his head at Gerymanx, then smiled.

"Oh—you're from Mr. Margate. I understand. Bring him inside, there's nobody around."

I led Gerymanx down the loading platform and hurried him into the stables.

"Make it snappy, will you?" I requested, nervously.

"Take about an hour," Smith told me. "Why not go next door and have a bite of lunch?"

It seemed like a sound suggestion. I entered Droopy's Tavern and sat down.

Mr. Droopy—if that was his name—proved to be a short little man with red hair and a permanently bored expression on his unshaven features.

"Whatsa gonna be?" he asked.

I ordered a sandwich and a glass of beer. The sandwich was liberally salted. I had a second glass of beer. It must have been salted too, because my thirst increased. I had a third glass, a fourth.

All this time I could hear a merry clanging from the smithy next door. Smith was at work.

The noise ceased abruptly. Smith came in through a side door with a pail.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Pretty hot work," he told me. He turned to the bar.

"Hey, Droopy—fill this up."

Droopy took the pail over to the tap.

Smith went out again. In a few moments the clanging increased. Suddenly it halted once more. Smith re-entered with the empty pail.

"*Very* hot work," he explained. "Droopy—fill this up."

Again he went out. Again the clanging rose. And in a remarkably short time, Smith walked heavily in with his bucket.

"Stremely hot," he mumbled. "Fill 'er up, Droop."

I watched Droopy fill the large pail. I ordered another beer myself. Smith stumbled out. More clanging. Then silence.

Smith wobbled through the door.

"Heat's terrific," he hiccupped. "Gotta fill thish up, Droop, ol' pal."

He went out. I listened intently. The clanging began again. But this time it held a peculiar cadence. A familiar cadence.

"Da- da- da-da dee-da, de-da de-da, de-da da."

Where had I heard *this* before?"

I made for the side door and slipped into the smithy.

Gerymanx squatted on his haunches beside the blacksmith, whose left arm was locked around his neck. Both centaur and smithy held a hammer in their free hands. As I watched, they tapped merrily away on the anvil. Their raucous voices rose in a sour blending of the *Anvil Chorus*. The empty bucket, inverted, was perched on Gerymanx's shaggy head.

"Hello, pall" the centaur greeted me. I glared. "What is the meaning of this—this horseplay?"

Gerymanx wobbled to his feet.

"Wanna 'nother drink of beer!" he insisted. "Feet all shod. Now I wanna celebrate."

"Gerymanx!" I yelled. "Come back here!"

But it was too late. The centaur trotted unsteadily through the side door and into Droopy's Tavern.

He was up at the bar before the red-headed proprietor looked at him. From the waist up, it was a naked man who stared at the bartender and shouted, "Shoot me the soup, Droop!"

"Where's your clothes?" Droopy demanded.

"I'm masquerading," the centaur temporized. I tugged at his elbow.

"Come on, get out of here." I whispered.

"I don't serve no naked persons," Droopy declared. He stepped around the bar, then fell back. His eyes took in the horse body.

"Gawd!" he breathed.

Gerymanx turned what was meant to be a reassuring smile on the bartender.

"Told you I was masquerading, didn't I?" he explained.

"Well, I don't like it." Droopy turned to me. "Get the blazes outta my joint," he demanded. "And take this horse's—whatever it is—with you!"

It was an ill-chosen moment for the entry of another couple. They lurched into the tavern; a tall, flashily-dressed man and an obviously befuddled woman. They stared incredulously at Gerymanx.

"Holy Moses!" muttered the man. "Do you see what I see?"

"Gawd, Harry, it's a mounted policeman." The woman peered tipsily at the centaur.

"What'd he do with his clothes?"

"And where's his legs?" The man quavered. "He's a horsel!"

Gerymanx wheeled, offended. "Who you think you're talking to?" he bridled.

"A talking horse," the woman amended. "Harry, we better lay off the sauce for awhile."

"Lay off me, that's what you should do." Gerymanx tried to prance and stumbled unsteadily. His hooves clattered against a cuspidor.

"I bet his mother was frightened by a merry-go-round," the woman continued.

"Ooooooh—look out!"

For Droopy had rounded the bar, bearing a baseball bat. He bore down on Gerymanx with an oath.

"I'll learn ya to horse around in my dump," he

grated. "What you think this is, a livery stable?" He lifted his bat menacingly.

Gerymanx wheeled. His forefeet rose. Droopy sailed over the bar. With an inhuman neigh, the centaur dashed forward. His charge carried him through the door. I raced after him.

In his drunken fury, the centaur careened into the street. By some unfortunate mischance, a farmer's milk-wagon was standing beside our truck. The mare between the shafts looked up, startled.

At the sight of Gerymanx she neighed coyly. A slow blush spread over her equine cheeks. Gerymanx whinnied. Suddenly the mare's eyes gave a flicker of apprehension as they rested on the centaur's human torso. With a shrill, indignant squeal she dashed forward, carrying the wagon with her. There was a grinding crash as the wagon tipped sideways—right into our truck.

At the same moment Droopy emerged from the tavern. Up the street the milkman dropped his bottle-rack with a clatter and started to run our way.

"Now you've done it," I panted. "Wrecked the truck, too!"

"Get on my back," Gerymanx mumbled. The shock had sobered him. "We'll make a run for it."

I mounted hastily.

"Hang on to my neck."

I hung.

"Here we go."

We went.

The centaur's hooves struck sparks from the brick as he raced down the street. I clung to him for dear life.

"Wheel!" he yelled. "This is more like it!"

A glance showed me that our pursuers were gathered in a knot around the milk wagon and truck.

"What a mess," I groaned. "How'll we ever get back?"

"I'll carry you."

"On top of the load you're carrying already?"

Gerymanx laughed.

"I feel great," he snorted over his shoulder. "Great. Let's go annoy some street cleaners."

"We're going home. Right now."

"Oh, don't be a wet blanket! I want to have fun. Let's go down to Saratoga. Maybe you could enter me in a race."

I allowed this revolting suggestion to go unanswered.

"Take me home," I commanded.

Gerymanx's pace slackened.

"All right," he grumbled. "All right."

"Stick to the side road now," I cautioned.

He did. It was a slow trip. We hid out behind billboards whenever I spotted a car ahead or behind us. It was almost twilight when we cantered through the gate and up the drive.

VI

"Come right in!" Margate urged, standing on the steps. He waved his arms expansively.

"Me too?" Gerymanx asked.

"Of course. Wouldn't be a party without you."

"But I'll track up the carpet—"

"Track away! We're going to celebrate tonight."

"What is all this?" I inquired.

Margate's flushed little face held a slightly tipsy grin.

"Great news! Captain Hollis is back, and the trip's a success."

"Fine. Where is he?"

"He called from the yacht-basin. He's hired a truck and ought to be up in a few hours."

"I'm anxious to see what he's got."

"You wouldn't be if you knew what it was." Margate snickered. "But come on, let's go inside and have a drink. I'm in the mood."

Gerymanx clattered after Margate and I followed.

The house was brilliantly illuminated. Margate was following its example. I found all the guests in the parlor. Trina sat in a wash tub. Mr. Simpkins was up and about. Jory, in his more or less human form, was busily mixing drinks.

"Success!" Margate proposed, passing glasses to the centaur and myself.

"How about some supper?" I suggested.

"Help yourself." Margate indicated a row of bottles.

I shrugged. He was too far gone to argue with. I sat down next to Trina and tried to get into the spirit of things.

I didn't succeed. Perhaps they were all too far ahead of me. Perhaps it was instinctive premonition. Maybe it was just the rotten sandwich I'd had at the tavern. Whatever it was, I was the skeleton at the feast. I couldn't get with it at all.

When Gerymanx began riding Mr. Simpkins around on his back I regarded it as so much horseplay. Trina, noticing my dour face, turned away and began to flutter her eyelashes at Margate.

Jory, who had been taking a drink for himself every time he mixed for anyone else, soon lost all control. He changed right in front of us, and began running around on his paws. Everyone seemed to get their kicks out of the spectacle, but it gave me the chills.

Margate was maudlinly solicitous. "Whassa matter?" he demanded. "Come on, have a drink."

"No thanks."

"All right. Spoil the party. Go ahead."

I forced a smile. "I'm pretty tired. Think I'll hit the hay."

"Whassat? Aren't you gonna wait up to see the nice new specimen Captain Hollis' gonna bring to the party? No welcoming committee?"

"I guess not."

"All right, then." Margate shrugged, and nearly fell over. "Get me a bucket full of whiskey," he called. Gerymanx trotted over.

"Bucket of whiskey? What for?"

"Myrtle isn't here. Gonna take it out and splash it all over her roots."

That was enough for me. I went upstairs to my room and climbed in bed.

Downstairs I could hear the murmers from the parlor. The party was getting rough. I didn't like it. For the first time I was really ready to consider my situation. After all, this sort of thing couldn't go on forever. Trina was a nice girl, but you couldn't walk up the aisle with a topless mermaid. Mr. Simpkins was very nice, for a vampire, and Jory was an amiable enough werewolf. But we'd never be close friends. And being a jockey to a centaur isn't exactly a recommendation to future employers. A man is known by the company he keeps. If this kept up, people would soon be pointing their finger at me for an incubus, or something.

I'd better have a talk with Margate soon, I decided. Yes, Margate would have to let me go. I was a little worried about him, anyway. It was hard to say what new monstrosity Hollis was bringing—but it would complicate matters. All this secrecy, and the

special room in the cellar, now; this meant something pretty outlandish.

And there was Margate, whooping it up downstairs. Happy as a kid with a new toy. And just as irresponsible. Irresponsible! That was it. That's what was the matter with the whole crew. They needed a nursemaid. Being fantasies, they weren't able to face realities.

Oh, well. In the morning, now—

I fell asleep.

I had the damndest dream. It seemed to me that something sneaked into my room. It had Trina's hair and Jory's face, and it lumbered along on four hooves like Gerymanx. Somehow I got the idea that it had Mr. Simpkins' missing teeth and it wanted to bite me. All the while it came closer it was laughing like Margate himself. I tried to move, but couldn't. It squatted right on top of me and grabbed at my throat. Its mouth opened.

I woke up.

Strong hands were closing around my neck.

"What the—"

The hands relaxed.

"Wake up!" boomed a voice. It was Captain Hollis.

"How'd you get here?"

"I made it." The blind man was panting. "I had to get you. Come on."

I sat up. "What's the matter?" I yawned. "When did you get in?"

"About half an hour ago. Around midnight. But never mind. You've got to help me get them out! You've got to."

"Where's Dave?"

"Dave's—gone."

"What do you mean?"

"When we captured it. He got bit. Buried him at

sea." The captain's hurried tones reached me as he jostled me toward the door.

"Tell me what happened," I muttered, as we went down the hall. "Where is everybody?"

"They're in the cellar. With it."

"With what?"

"Don't ask questions. That's what finished them. They were sitting around drunk when I got in. I carried it into the cellar in a packing crate. But I passed Myrtle, and she's gone too."

"I don't understand."

We moved across the deserted parlor. I snapped on the lights as we went. Hollis came after me, cane tapping.

"Don't try to understand," he whispered. "I couldn't stop them. They had to take a peek. Margate forgot everything. Said he wasn't afraid, dammit, and it was his after all. The whole crew made for the cellar."

"Come on." I went on through the kitchen. "They're all down there?"

"Yes."

"But what happened to them? What's the matter? What must I do?"

"Try and get them out. Think of a way."

"What's that?"

I flattened myself against the wall of the dark staircase.

A figure padded through the level below.

"Where?"

"Listen—footsteps."

"Jory. I know those paws."

It was Jory. The wolf was slinking down the cellar corridor.

"Jory—wait!" I called. He didn't look around.

We followed.

The wolf made straight for the door at the end of

the hall. The metal-covered door. It stood ajar. His muzzle forced it wider. The gray body moved in.

"Stop—" Hollis began.

I heard a howl. Just one howl. A howl that rose, and then froze in midair on its highest quaver. After that, silence.

"It got him," Hollis whispered.

I moved forward.

Hollis clutched my arm. "Wait. Don't go in there."

"But you say they're all in there. You want me to get them out with you."

"I know. But you mustn't go in now. Not like that."

I faced the doorway. "Quit talking riddles. I'm going in."

Hollis held me.

I began to stare at the slight opening where the door hung ajar. It was dark beyond, but not entirely. A sort of subdued light filtered through. A light that didn't dissipate the darkness, but seemed to be a part of it. A stronger part.

It was violet, but sharper than a distinct color. Radiant. Like the reflection of a million Christmas tree ornaments. Gaudy. Alluring.

Then I felt it. The urge to enter. I wanted to see that light. It was like the ray emanating from a great jewel.

I brushed the captain's hand away.

"Let me go." I muttered.

Wriggling from his grasp, I darted forward. I opened the door.

With a grunt, Hollis lunged. His fist caught me in the eye. I reeled back. His other fist lashed out. I stumbled, my hands covering my face.

"What in blazes—"

I reeled, steadied myself, took my hands away. Darkness.

"Hollis, you fool—you've blackened my eyes for me!"

"I know. Now go in!"

I groped my way through the door. He followed.

We stood in darkness. Two blind men, in a room filled with a violet light.

"Where are we?"

I groped along the wall. The room was silent. Too silent. "Jory! Trina! Where are you?" I whispered. "Margate!" No answer. I stumbled forward, hands outstretched.

I touched something. Something cold. My hands flew back. But there was no sound, no movement. I stretched my fingers forward once more. Again they rested on a cold surface. A hard surface.

I ran them along, tracing an all too familiar outline. Hair. A face. Trina's hair and face. But hard and cold. Cold as—marble.

"She's stonel"

"Of course. They're all stone. All of them."

I moved on. Another figure. I almost collided with it. It was a standing man. Bristly hair.

"Margate!"

Hollis sighed behind me.

"That's why we both had to come in, dammit. To lift them out. They're too heavy."

"But Hollis—what is it? What did this?"

"The thing," the captain answered.

My fingers fumbled toward a third figure.

"What thing?" I asked.

This surface was cold too, but it wasn't motionless. My hands moved over a long neck; and then up into an icy tangle. Hair.

But the hair moved, too. It was thick, horribly thick. In solid coils. Coils that suddenly came to life, writhing forth with a rustling.

Then I heard the hissing, felt the hair coiling around my wrist, jerked my hand away in frantic haste.

"Serpents!" I muttered.

"Get back!" Hollis yelled. "It's the thing—that damned Gorgon—the Medusa!"

As the hissing rose to a shrill crescendo I turned and ran blindly out of the cellar room.

VII

That's the way it was.

It must have been over an hour before Hollis argued me into going back with him to get them out. I consented finally, and we went to work.

They weighed at least three hundred pounds apiece. Gerymanx we had to slide across the floor—too heavy to lift. It was all we could do to keep him from chipping.

Two blind men, carrying statues. We made it, though. Until at last there was only the hissing thing.

We locked the door on it. I couldn't walk, of course. I wanted to burn the place, but it would cause trouble later on.

Hollis and I had a long talk. He wouldn't tell me much more about his voyage. Or about the charts and directions Margate gave him. I know he found it somewhere close to Crete, and that's all. He had to go into the cave alone—being blind, it couldn't harm him. It was after he had it out that Dave reached into the sack, and one of the snakes bit him.

I shuddered over my own narrow escape when I heard that.

"Poor Dave," Hollis grunted. "Mebbe it was just as

well. Boss had a later job for him. Going after one of these sirens—that's what you call them. Because he was deaf and couldn't hear it."

He wouldn't tell me any more.

So there we were.

"We'll have to get some sleep," Hollis told me. "Then we can figure something out."

But in the morning there was nothing figured out. I could see a little, though my eyes were puffy and swollen. I got a nasty shock when I looked at the statues we dragged out.

Usually I admire life-like work, but these things were too damned life-like to suit me. Or to suit themselves, I suppose. Trina was lovely, though. It broke my heart to look her. And Gerymanx looked quite imposing. Margate had one hand stuck out straight, as though to steady himself. Jory and Mr. Simpkins were both caught in mid-howl. Their mouths were still open.

"Now what do we do?" Hollis groaned. "We can't go away and leave that Medusa thing down there alive."

"Why leave it alive?" I asked. "We can kill it."

He laughed sarcastically.

"That's what you think," he told me. "It won't die."

"But Perseus killed one."

"Who?"

"A Greek warrior. He had some kind of sword—"

"Bull. It's still alive, ain't it? This Percy-what's-his-name must have been putting somebody on."

"Never thought of that."

"Well, think of it, then. I know it won't die. Because I tried it myself."

"You did?"

"Sure. After it got Dave. I pumped six shots into the thing."

"You didn't!"

"You bet I did, dammit. And on the voyage back—two of the boys blundered onto it down in the cabin. Snoopers. It got them both. After that the rest of us went to work. The cook took a knife to it, from the rear. No result. Except that it turned around. I cooked for the rest of the trip."

"It won't die, huh?"

"That's right."

This was a prettier problem than I'd expected. I looked at the stone faces around me. No solution there. But there must be a solution. I couldn't run off and leave that thing down in the cellar. Somebody would investigate sooner or later. And then—more statues.

"I'm going down there again."

"Oh, no you don't. You can see now."

I'd forgotten *that* little detail. I *could* see. I stared at my puffy eyes in the mirror.

Then I got it.

"Wait for me. I've found the way out."

"Not me. I'm heading for the yacht, and I'm not coming back."

"But Captain—"

He tapped off. I was left alone.

I acted fast. I found what I was looking for and went downstairs.

It was hard work unlocking the cellar door. It was harder work to nerve myself up to going in. The violet light shed its evil radiance through the chink of the keyhole.

But there was no choice. I opened the door and walked in.

The Medusa was against the wall in the center of the room. Alone, in Gorgonic glory. I heard the rustling whisper of the coiled tresses.

It didn't stop me.

I walked forward, holding the object I'd brought right squarely in front of my face. It was a shield.

"Hey!" I called.

The Gorgon wouldn't understand English. But this didn't matter. Just so long as I attracted its attention.

"Hey—look!"

I was almost on top of it. But it looked. It must have looked.

Because I heard the damndest hissing shriek that ever issued from the lips of nightmare. Whether it was the Gorgon or the serpents in its hair I don't know.

The wail rose up as the Gorgon stared, and then there was silence.

After that, I stuck out my hand. I felt the cold face. The cold *stony* face.

It had worked.

I dropped the object I was holding. It shattered there on the floor. But I didn't need it any more. Nor Perseus' sword.

I'd killed the Gorgon in the only possible way. I turned it to stone by showing it its own face in the mirror. So—

There it was. I had two choices now. I could go back to the employment agency and try to get another job. Something quiet and peaceful, like assembly work in a boiler plant.

Or I could stay here and take care of my statues. I smashed the Medusa without looking at it. Used a crowbar. The others I left upstairs.

Margate had no relatives, so I might as well make myself at home. Trina would look good decorating the pool. Gerymanx would do for the foot of the staircase. I could make a gallery with Margate and Simpkins and Jory.

I sighed. They were turned to stone. And there

was nothing I could do about it now. I decided to get stoned myself.

VIII

Margate had a stock of fine liquor in his cellar, right next to the coffin that once housed Mr. Simpkins, the vampire. I used it.

Who can blame me? I was so lonely! Lonely for a sight of my unusual friends. I used to brush the statues every day with loving care. Particularly the statue of Trina. Ah, there was a girl! I sighed when I thought of her, and the wonderful times we'd spent together. She and I would sit in the magic moonlight and I would toss her a fish. The sight of her piquant face as she twisted her neck and caught the fish in her mouth—it haunted me with wistful poignancy.

A man can stand only so much of such moon-drenched memories. I had to do something.

Of course, I could have left the mansion. But if I went away, who would brush the dust from the faces of my stone friends? Into what unsympathetic hands would I entrust the statues? I couldn't bear the thought.

So I stayed. Stayed and studied. Studied sorcery in the great black library of Julius Margate. Studied sorcery in the shadowed silence of dust-shrouded shelves.

I pored intently through endless pages, peered at passages in musty, iron-girded tomes, perused with a perilous purpose.

For I was seeking a spell—an evocation—a rune or incantation—a rite or ritual—whereby I could sum-

mon my friends to animate life again. I sought to shatter that shroud of stone that swathed their souls.

Somewhere I must stumble across a solution, a means to kindle living flesh from marble. A mystic Pygmalion, I sought the formula to evoke a half-dozen Galateas. --

There must be a way.

I read, and I shuddered. Here and there were hints. Only a linguist could hope to translate Greek, Latin, medieval French, and German, Sanskrit, Arabic and Hebrew.

Once translated, only a devotee of mantic arts would risk his soul to perform the dark offices necessary to conjure up Those who might grant the baleful boon of forbidden life.

But I searched. Day after day, night after night. When the autumnal skies were black as my despair, I read on. When the ravening winds howled as mournfully as the sighs that rose in my throat, I pondered over the yellowed, crumbling pages.

The wings of ancient evil brushed my face and left deep lines etched about my eyes, but I read on. I sat till dawn, forever seeking a solution for my dark desires.

Seated one night in the study, I heard a knock on the great outer door.

I rose, startled. Wryly, I thought of Poe's *Raven*. But dismissing the absurd fancy with a grin, I shook off my bemusement and stalked down the hall.

As I went striding along, blood flowed back into my cramped limbs. I began to feel a little foolish about the whole thing.

I was going to see another human face finally, and I was self-conscious about the way I'd been spending my time.

More than that, I experienced a curious elation. I

didn't know who in the world would be knocking on Julius Margate's door around midnight, but anyone would prove a welcome visitor to me. I thirsted for companionship.

Just the mere act of answering the door brought my spirits up with a bound.

I unchained the door, fumbled with the lock, threw the door open wide.

There was a sudden swoop.

A broomstick hit me in the face.

Riding the broomstick was a witch.

IX

I lay flat on my back and stared up as the witch swooped into the hallway.

"Whoa, there," she muttered, and the broomstick clattered to a halt on the floor. The witch climbed off slowly. A dog and a cat jumped down from the shaft of the broomstick behind her. The witch dumped a large satchel on the floor.

All the while, I stared, recognizing her for what she was. The broomstick proved it—and so did the beaked nose, the wrinkled face, the gray hair that wasn't heveled.

My first impulse was to stay right where I was, on the floor. It seemed somehow safer there. But the witch gave me a withering glance.

"Up with you," she snapped. "Is that any way to greet a guest?"

She placed her broomstick neatly in the corner.

I rose and faced her, mumbling my name. I didn't have the courage to hold out my hand in greeting.

She took no notice of the omission. A smile revealed her toothless gums.

"I am Miss Terioso," announced the witch. "An old friend of Julius Margate's."

"Is that so?" I answered, with my usual gift of repartee.

"Used to see him around at covens," the witch explained.

"Covens?"

"Witch Sabbats," Miss Terioso enlightened me.

"But I didn't know he went in for such things."

"Oh, it was just a hobby with him. He dabbled in everything, did Julius Margate. A bit of a dabbler and a bit of a babbler.

"Aren't you going to ask me in?" she demanded. "Where's your courtesy, young sir?"

I indicated the parlor with a weak gesture. Miss Terioso's bent figure crept across the hall. She turned an evil profile toward me, and I'll swear she looked like something only a mother would love. A mother vulture, that is.

"By the way," she screeched, "Better get some milk for my pets here. My familiars, dear little lambs."

I stared at the snarling, mangy dog and the hissing, scrawny black cat. They padded towards me stealthily.

Hastily, I backed into the hall and ran to the kitchen. Returning with a saucer of milk, I found the witch and her two familiars in the parlor under the lamp-light.

"That's a courteous young man," approved the witch. "Let them sup on milk. Of course it's not as good as the real red stuff, but it's better than nothing. Eh?"

I nodded, but the last half of the nod was a shiver.

"Look at the darlings," commanded the witch. "My two sweet lovelies!"

"What are their names?" I asked, just as if I wanted to know.

"I call the cat Fido, and the dog is named Puss," she told me.

"Very nice," I answered.

The witch sat down and raised her legs. With a shock I noticed that she was wearing tights under her black skirt.

"Those tights—" I began.

She giggled softly, like a wounded tigress.

"What's wrong with them?" she demanded. "Nothing immodest about tights, young sir! Mod is the better word. Besides, I have to wear them. I'm certainly not going to ruin a good pair of silk stockings riding a broomstick."

This sounded logical.

"As it is, I'm worried about a straw shortage for my broom," Miss Terioso complained. She opened her big satchel and took out a woolen knitting bag and two knitting needles.

"Do you knit?" I asked.

She giggled again. "Not exactly."

Reaching into the knitting bag, she extracted a tiny wax mannikin and began to stick her knitting needles into its body.

"Just a poppet," she explained. "Do you mind if I work while we talk?"

"Not at all, I gulped.

She put the poppet away and reached into the big satchel again. When her hand emerged again it was clutching something.

It was a human arm.

She reached in again and drew out a leg. A shapely leg, but a severed limb, for all that.

"Murderess!" I chokes.

Miss Terioso smiled. "Flatterer!" she cooed. "I

haven't really murdered anyone in years! No, young sir. These are not human limbs. They are the limbs of a window dummy. Here."

She began to bring out more appendages from her satchel. Another arm, another leg. A torso. And finally, a lovely head with a red wig.

Expertly, she fitted the various parts together. Soon a complete window dummy stood before us. A very pretty redheaded window dummy—distinctly female.

"Just a notion of mine," Miss Terioso explained. "I began to think that my poppets were too small to really get delicate work into them with the needles. So I bought this window dummy. It's still a wax figure, but a life-size one."

"Clever, eh?" she asked.

"Clever is no word for it," I said. And it wasn't.

Suddenly Miss Terioso shrugged.

"But let us get down to business, then," she declared. "I am here for a definite reason. I want Julius Margate."

"You can't see him." I spoke too rapidly to be cautious about it. "You can't see him. He's turned to stone."

The witch grinned.

"I know. I know all about it. He's stone and the rest of his freaks are statues, too. And I want him."

"You want his statue?"

"Yes."

Was I crazy, or did Miss Terioso blush slightly?

"I—I used to have a hang-up on the old fool," she explained. "I'd like to have him around for sentimental reasons."

Somehow this didn't sound convincing. She looked about as sentimental as a barracuda.

There was more here than met the eye, I decided. So I also decided on a little strategy.

"By the way, Miss Terioso," I began. "Before we get down to details—would you care for a little refreshment?"

The witch simpered. "Don't mind if I do, young sir. Have you a bit of human—" She checked herself hastily. "No, I don't suppose you would," she sighed.

"Be right back," I promised.

And I was. I went down to the cellar, rummaged around, and emerged with a fifth of Irish whiskey and two glasses. Bearing the refreshments back to the parlor, I poured out two neat shots.

Miss Terioso drained her glass.

I refilled it.

Miss Terioso drank the second as a chaser, so I refilled it again.

"Very pleasant," she told me. "I enjoy something mild for a change."

"One of Margate's prize bottles," I remarked.

"Speaking of bottles," she interrupted, "I meant to tell you this before. I not only want to buy Margate and the other statues, but that geni in the bottle as well. He *has* a geni in a bottle, hasn't he?"

I admitted it. "But what I want to know," I said, filling her glass for the fifth time, "is what you want with those statues."

She drank.

I refilled her glass.

"I told you," she repeated. "I am sentimental about the old son of a poltergeist. I'd like to have him around to look at. Eh?"

The liquor was working. The witch was getting slightly tipsy. I refilled her glass once more and proceeded artfully.

"Come now," I coaxed. "We're friends, aren't we? You can tell me the truth. What do you *really* want with those statues?"

"Ha! cackled Miss Terioso. "He's so artful, this kind young sir. Methinks he wants me to betray the fact that I intend to re-animate those statues myself and bring them back to life. But he'll never squeeze a word about it from me, he won't! Eh?"

I smiled and pressed my fingers together judiciously before my face.

"Suppose someone wanted to bring the statues back to life," I said, just as if I'd never heard her maunderings. "Would it be possible through sorcery?"

"Anything is possible through sorcery, my pet," said the witch. "If one is willing to pay the price."

She cackled, grabbed the bottle, and clawed it to her scrawny bosom.

"Now the price for a fine young man like you would be high," she mumbled. "But an old hand like myself—blast you, there are ways and means of paying very little. Of striking bargains, as it were. I should conjure a demon . . . a friendly one, of course . . . and I should not sell my soul. I could not, for I sold it long ago. Long, long ago."

The witch began to sing *Long, Long Ago* in a voice like a tugboat's whistle. I coughed discreetly.

"Eh? It's the problem of animating those statues, isn't it, dear sir?" Miss Terioso smiled. "I have a sort of a due bill on Hell, so to speak. There are certain powers and perquisites coming to me. I should just summon my demon, ask the boon, and the statues would be warm flesh and blood in the twinkling of an owl's eye!"

She drank again—

"But how do you summon a demon?" I demanded.

"You hold a Black Mass," she answered. "Everybody knows that."

Suddenly a look of crafty reticence spread over her wrinkled countenance. "But I'm talking too much. I

see that now. I'll not tell you how to hold a Mass to Satan, never fear. I'd be such a schnook to tell you, eh?"

Suddenly I saw a way of bringing back my friends.

"You and your talk about Black Masses and witchcraft." I rose and smiled. "You and your ridiculous little wax figures. And this foolish looking window dummy herel" I tapped the red-headed dummy with an accusing finger.

"You aren't a witch," I told her. "Just a broken-down dressmaker, I'm thinking! All this is a put-on."

"I'm not a witch, eh? I, the most famous sorceress in three continents and four dimensions?"

Miss Terioso gulped the last drink in the bottle and lurched to her feet. She stared at me with bloodshot eyes.

"You can't hold a Black Mass," I snickered.

"Oh, can't I?" snarled the witch. "I'll show you! I'll not only hold a Black Mass—I'll blessed well hold one in Technicolor if you like!"

X

Miss Terioso swayed out into the wide hallway. I followed at her rundown heels, gasping in mingled apprehension and excitement.

Then we stood in the huge room that held the statuary. I lit a lamp and revealed the stony images of my friends. There was pot-bellied little Julius Margate, his face a marble mask of bewilderment. Gaunt Mr. Simpkins hovered, his false teeth forever frozen in an embarrassed grin. Jory held a petrified paw in the air. Gerymanx was a noble Grecian centaur and looked somehow natural in stone. And Trina made a

beautiful mermaid. She had a gorgeous shape—plenty of these and those, and fins, too.

I sighed.

The witch wheezed alcoholically in my face.

"Think I can't do it?" she muttered.

"A Black Mass? It's ridiculous," I told her. "I understand you must draw a pentagon in blue chalk, and use holy wafers and sacramental wine. And you intone the Lord's Prayer backwards in Latin, and use the body of a naked woman for an altar."

"Right," said the witch.

"Well, you haven't got the ingredients, so that's that!" I jeered.

Miss Terioso tittered drunkenly.

"I'll fix that," she promised. "You've got some chalk, haven't you, dear boy? Margate must have some around for his own spells."

I rummaged through the library and returned with a stub of blue phosphorescent chalk.

I found Miss Terioso on her way back from the kitchen, laden with packages.

"Here's the chalk."

She set to work on hands and knees, drawing a glowing blue line. Panting, she arose.

"That's no pentagon," I exclaimed. "There's only four sides to it."

"Ran out of chalk," mumbled the witch. "It doesn't matter, really."

She faced me and began to chew on something.

"Holy wafer?" I asked.

"No," said Miss Terioso. "Haven't got any. This is a graham cracker. Same thing, almost."

She drank something out of a cup.

"Sacramental wine?"

"Coca-cola," the witch explained. "They will probably never know the difference."

Suddenly she ran tipsily out of the room and returned with the window dummy, which she placed across two chairs.

"We have no naked woman for an altar, so the dummy will have to do," said Miss Terioso. "Here goes for the invocation."

As the phosphorescent chalk glowed in the darkness, the witch crouched over the window dummy, mumbling sonorously.

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "That doesn't sound like the Lord's Prayer backwards in Latin."

"Don't remember the Latin," sighed the witch. "I'm using pig-Latin."

She continued. After a moment she began to make passes with her clawlike hands. Her voice deepened, then rose shrilly. I recognized rumbling syllables and shrieking vocables.

The cadence was rhythmic. In my fancy the blue lines on the floor began to dance in pulsation with her pronouncements.

It wasn't fancy. The lines moved. The room swayed. Her voice shrieked.

Miss Terioso turned green in the face. Her drunken mumblings slurred oddly. She began to sway.

The sight was very impressive. She looked just as though she had been given a Mickey.

With a supernatural belch, Miss Terioso slid to the floor in a dead faint.

"Out like a light," I sighed. "Oh, well I might have known the old bat couldn't do it."

"Do what?"

"Why, that she couldn't—*hey!*" I wheeled suddenly as I realized that a strange voice had addressed me.

Staring across the blue line I saw the strange owner of the strange voice.

This time I almost slid to the floor.

But not quite. I gazed at the presence on the other side of the pseudo-pentagon.

Was it a demon?

If demons have red, scaly bodies like gigantic lizards, and semi-anthropomorphic limbs, slick hairless skulls, and faces like grinning death—then it was a demon, all right.

Or a demon, all wrong.

Because despite this terrifying aspect, there was something horribly bedraggled about this apparition.

His eyes were bloodshot. His cheeks were scratched. His arms hung limply, and his chest rose and fell in despairing gasps. I noticed that his tail was dragging.

"Go ahead," said the deep voice, in accents that congealed my vertebrae. "Go ahead, make sport of me! You accursed human midgel! You ensorcelled scum, you foul thaumaturgical imposter! You're not fit to be impaled on a spit for a weenie roast in Hell!"

"What do you mean?" I gulped.

"What do I mean? the internal impudence of the nigromantic nincompoop! I mean you bungled the whole ceremony! You used the wrong materials, you gave the wrong accent to the invocations, you even left out part of the Gloric Chant!"

"But—"

"And what does that mean? I'll tell you what," snarled the demon, and his eyes flashed at 400 degrees Fahrenheit. "It means I was dragged bodily through five-dimensional space. It means I was twisted through the veritable warpings in the spatio-temporal continuum! I was bruised and battered and banged and buffeted, and nearly annihilated before I got here! My mundane simulacrum was almost impossible to assume.

"And why? Because an amateur sorcerer like yourself didn't know how to call me. Why you don't know

enough to raise the dead! Why don't you read the rule books?"

"Wait a minute," I temporized. "I didn't call you. She did—Miss Terioso, the witch. She was drunk and forgot a lot of things."

"Drunk eh?" said the demon, with a self-righteous smirk. "Serves her right. Never touch the stuff myself. Wine is a mocker."

I nodded.

The demon did an alarming thing. He thrust his head out on his rubbery neck. It stretched a good foot.

As he darted his skull forward and back restlessly, I diffidently jumped a yard to one side.

"Well, now that I'm here, what are you going to do about it?" demanded the demon. "Have I wriggled through the dimensions all for nothing? I want something to eat, something to kill, or something to bargain over."

"I'll bargain with you," I said boldly.

"You?" The demon sniffed. "You aren't a sorcerer. What can you offer me? Your soul?"

"I don't think so," I hesitated.

"Current rate of exchange is very favorable," said the demon, suddenly all coaxing smiles. "I pay top dollar."

"Not interested," I insisted.

"Then I might as well go," the demon sighed.

Inspiration smote me.

"Wait a minute," I snapped. "I'll give you a wonderful trade. How would you like to own a geni?"

"A geni? You have a geni?" The glare on the demon's face registered red incredulity. "I doubt that very much."

"I have a geni in a bottle," I told him. "Wait right here and I'll be back in a flash with the flask."

He waited, and I was.

Barely a minute passed before I returned bearing the curious old bottle from Margate's library. Within it gurgled the geni, like a shrunken mermaid.

The demon goggled.

"You *have* got one at that," he admitted. His eyes narrowed to cunning slits.

"What are you asking for it?" he purred.

"A boon."

"Be specific."

"I want these statues reanimated," I said, waving my arm to embrace the stone images around me. "I want their souls, or life-force to return to flesh instead of stone."

"That's very difficult," said the demon, thoughtfully. "Couldn't you settle for something easier? How about a swinger? Lots of you magicians seem to go for deals involving swingers. A nice blond *succubus*, now, with big—"

"Never mind," I insisted. "I want those statues alive."

"I don't know," the demon shrugged.

"Think of the geni," I said, shaking the bottle. "One of your own kind. A helpless prisoner in a bottle. How would you like to be shut up in a bottle, like—like an olive?"

The demon winced. I knew I had him.

"I am too soft-hearted," he rumbled. "But I'll do it. Or try to do it. A most unusual request, and there's so much to arrange."

"Get to work," I said. "I'll toss you the bottle in a moment."

"Hold on," advised the demon. "This is liable to be a bit messy."

It was.

I didn't mind the way the air changed colors as the

demon crouched in the center of the room, croaking gutturally as he squatted like a malignant frog.

I didn't mind the great quaking wind that rose to howl through my hair.

I didn't mind the smoke and the flame.

But when the chandelier crashed from the ceiling and hit me on the head, I minded very much indeed.

The world went black and I went to sleep beside Miss Terioso on the floor.

There was a confused impression of a gigantic hand grasping the geni-bottle, a muffled illusion of smoke and shouting, and then I went out, like the proverbial light.

The next thing I knew I was awake, spitting out a mouthful of broken glass.

"What a hangover!" I whispered.

"Oh, yeah?" said a strange voice.

XI

I sat up. Miss Terioso and the shattered chandelier still lay on the floor. But the demon had vanished from the chalk formation, and the bottle with the geni was nowhere to be seen.

I groped for the light, seeking the source of the voice.

Radiance flooded the room and I stared at the statues.

Statues no longer!

They *were* alive. I saw familiar flesh once more. The grotesque bodies of men and the wolf and the centaur and mermaid were moving.

I ran over to Trina. The beautiful mermaid with

the lovely green hair staired up at me with a radiant smile.

"Trina, darling!" I whispered, taking her in my arms.

"Get away from me or I'll kick your teeth down your throat with my hoofs!" boomed a gruff voice.

"But you have no hoofs, dear," I laughed. "You're a mermaid. You have a—"

"Don't you call me 'dear', you oaf! I'm a centaur!" growled the voice.

I stepped back in dismay.

That voice—I recognized it—was the voice of Gerymanx the centaur! But it came from Trina's body!

I rushed over to Gerymanx.

"Hello, my friend," came the calm words.

"Who—who are you?" I whispered.

The centaur smiled. "I'm Margate, of course. Who else would I be?"

I gulped. "You're sure?"

"Of course."

"Come here." I grabbed the centaur's arm and led the figure over to a full-length mirror.

"Take a look," I suggested.

He looked at the horse body projecting behind him. When he saw what he was dragging around in the rear, the man almost collapsed.

"But I'm Margate!" he wailed. "What am I doing in Gerymanx's body?"

"What is Gerymanx doing in Trina's body? I asked.

"Who is in my body?" Margate suddenly yelled. He ran over to confront his body and reached out a cautious hand to grasp the chest.

"What are you reaching for, dearie?" lisped a high voice. "Be careful how you handle my trunk."

"Myrtle!" whispered Margate. "Myrtle, the hamadryad."

"Of course. Recognize my limbs?"

"What is all this?" demanded the rasping voice that had roused me from unconsciousness. I turned to face tall Mr. Simpkins.

"Why am I not a wolf?" demanded the voice. "Who stole my form? Why am I a wolf in Mr. Simpkins' clothing?"

It was Jory the werewolf, in the vampire's body. As I expected, the vampire was now wearing the wolf-form instead.

"Is this a way for a self-respecting vampire to be?" groaned the wolf. "Going around on all fours like an animal?"

"Something terrible has happened," I gasped. "You're alive, but your souls got into the wrong bodies. The demon made a mistake. You've switched."

Then I remembered. Gerymanx was in Trina's body. But where was Trina?

I stared out the open window. Then I saw it—the tree, the tree of Myrtle the hamadryad. Trina had to be in the tree! It must have been transformed through the open window like the rest of the statuary.

Running across the room, I bounded out on the lawn and threw my arms around the treetrunk.

"Trina," I whispered. "Trina, darling!" There was no answer.

"Trina, speak to me!"

Not a leaf rustled.

I stumbled back into the room. "Trina," I groaned.

"Here I am, darling!"

The familiar voice fired my blood.

I turned my head.

Coming toward me was—the red-headed window dummy!

She fell into my embrace, the lovely waxen figure, and we kissed.

I shuddered. She was alive—but still wax.

Now I understood. In the mixup, the window dummy, having no soul, probably entered Myrtle's tree. Trina entered the body of the window dummy. So there we stood.

A vampire in a werewolf's body, a werewolf in a vampire's. A man in a centaur's form, and a centaur in a mermaid. A mermaid in a window dummy, and a tree nymph in the shape of a man.

And I myself, in one hell of a mess.

Miss Terioso couldn't have picked a worse time to regain consciousness. Which is probably why she picked this one.

The witch rose from the floor and her bleary gaze swept the room more thoroughly than her broom could have done the job. In a moment comprehension came to her.

"So you made your own bargain with the demon," she scolded me. "Gave him the geni, I warrant? A clever young sir, aren't you. I've got a mind to—"

Then she saw the face of Julius Margate.

Instantly a change swept over Miss Terioso. I remember she had admitted having a thing with Mr. Margate—and her actions now confirmed the fact.

She simpered coyly, straightened her stringy hair, and assumed a smile such as one sees on the face of a particularly hungry crocodile.

"Why Julius my dear!" she gushed, advancing on Mr. Margate with a sickening leer. "I'm so glad to see you."

"Keep your hands off me, you old cow!" shrilled a high voice.

Miss Terioso halted and stared at the man.

"Don't look at me that way, you Walpurgistic wench!" said the voice from Margate's body.

Miss Terioso, not realizing that Margate's body was now inhabited by Myrtle the hamadryad, was confused.

"Here I am," called another voice. "It's me, Julius Margate over here."

The witch turned to face the centaur. Her face was shock-proof, but her lips twitched.

"Don't you recognize me?" asked Julius Margate, waving his tail, coyly.

Miss Terioso gaped at the centaur.

"Who is making sport of me?" she snapped. "What sort of jest are you playing?"

"Nobody's making fun of you," insisted Margate. "Come on over and get friendly. I'll give you a ride around the block if you like."

The witch froze. "I don't want a ride around the block," she announced. "I'm getting out of here."

She swooped across the hall and returned with the cat and dog under her arm. She set her satchel and broomstick down.

"I'm leaving, baggage and broomstick," sniffed Miss Terioso. "Oh, yes. I must take my window dummy, too."

"Not me," said Trina.

The witch goggled at the red-headed wax dummy.

"Did you speak?" she demanded.

"Of course. What's the matter with your ears, outside of their looks?" Trina replied.

"Something is very much wrong here," the witch declared.

"I've been trying to tell you," I said. I explained briefly.

Miss Terioso nodded.

"Nevertheless, the window dummy is mine. It's my poppet, and I shall pop off with it."

"Go fly your broomstick," shrilled Trina the mermaid. "And don't call me a dummy, you Halloween hag!"

"She's right," said Margate, from the centaur's body. "You have no claim on a soul. You'd better go now."

"You dare to order me out of your house?" screamed the witch.

"I dare to throw you out," said Margate.

Miss Terioso made for the door, hastily. She mounted her broomstick and turned.

"Very well," she sniffed. "Good riddance to all of you. And as for you, Julius Margate, you're just a—oh, go look in a rear-view mirror and see what you are!"

The door banged shut behind her.

There was an ominous silence. I felt the danger of that silence. I knew my peculiar friends. They were bad enough to handle in their own weird bodies. But now that those bodies were all mixed up, I'd better do something in a hurry!

"You must be hungry after such an ordeal," I said. "Let's all go out to the kitchen and I'll whip up a snack to eat." We did.

They ate ravenously. The sight of a mermaid eating oats and a centaur smoking a cigar rather spoiled my own appetite. And the clumsiness of all of them in their new forms did something to general table manners. But hunger ruled for a while.

Then they finished, and gloom reined.

"This is a fine mess," sighed Gerymanx. "What do we do now? Usually after a meal I go out for a brisk trot around the stable and grounds. But now I'm a mermaid, I can't even canter."

"I'd like to go out and have the birds perch on my limbs," said Myrtle. "But I can't, in this man's body. It's so difficult. I doubt if I can even get a robin to build a nest in my hair."

"Don't you dare put bird-nests in my hair," yelled Margate, from the Centaur's body.

"Your hair?"

"That body you're wearing still belongs to me," Margate insisted. "I expect you to take good care of it."

"What about me?" asked Jory, disconsolately. "I like to howl in the sunrise every morning. But in a vampire's body I'll have to sleep all day in a musty old coffin."

"That's nothing," responded the vampire. "Just look at me in this wolf's form! I'm afraid I'm going to shed all over the place. And I can't seem to get the knack of changing back into a man! You'll have to give me some lessons soon, Jory."

"Your troubles are mild," insisted Julius Margate. "How can I go out in polite society in a centaur's body? It's enough to give anybody a fright."

Trina pouted at me from the window dummy's body.

"Can I take a swim in the pool?" she whispered.

"No. Your wax will spoil," I told her sadly.

"We've got to settle this problem somehow," said Julius Margate. "Wonder if we could call up that demon again and make him put us in the right bodies?"

"Not without selling somebody's soul," I told my employer. "I've made the only trade I could, and from now on, souls are the articles of exchange. And I won't sell my soul, I'll tell you that!"

Margate shook his head.

"We'll have to figure it out," he declared. "It can't

go on like this forever. It isn't natural for a werewolf to be a vampire, and a centaur to be a mermaid."

"It isn't natural for a mermaid to be a window dummy either," said my red-headed companion. "I'm dying to be tearing a herring."

Her words smote my heart.

"I'll think of something," I promised. "Tomorrow night, when Mr. Jory wakes up at sundown in Mr. Simpkins' body, we can get together again and figure something out. Right now we all need sleep after this excitement."

So, yawning at dawning, we went to bed.

XII

"We've got to do something, right now!" insisted Julius Margate, over the supper table.

The heads of his bedraggled companions nodded in eager assent.

"I'm sick of sleeping in a coffin," said Jory, the werewolf. "I want to go back to my dog kennel." He shot a malicious glance at Mr. Simpkins in his wolf's body.

Simpkins wagged his tail. "What about me?" he complained. "I turned into a man in the daylight but when the sun set tonight I became a wolf again. And I don't like it. I think I'm getting the mange."

Gerymanx the centaur, in his mermaid form, propped both elbows on the table and sighed. "Being a mermaid is no fun either," he declared. "I can't go near that swimming pool unless I get a pair of water-wings."

"Imagine a mermaid who doesn't know how to swim!"

He started to expand on the theme, then turned in shocked surprise to survey the body of Julius Mar-

gate. Julius Margate's human body rose and began to divest itself of clothing.

"What goes on here?" I asked, in a startled voice.

"Oh," said Myrtle the hamadryad, from within Margate's body. "I'm just pruning off these clothes, that's all. I can't stand the pressure on my limbs."

"Please, for the sake of decency," I protested, "wait a while. I'll find a way to restore you all to your proper shapes."

"Hurry, darling." It was the voice of Trina in my ear. The wax dummy leaned close. "I do so want to kiss you," said the girl, wistfully. "But every time I try it, my head falls off."

"Yes, hurry up," yelled Julius Margate, from the body of Gerymanx the centaur. "I'm afraid to visit the barber shop to get my tail clipped."

"Too bad," I sympathized.

"And that's not all," sighed Margate. "I wish you'd go and steal the witch's broom and use it to sweep out the stable."

"There's an ideal" cried Trina.

"What?"

"Why don't you go and visit the witch tomorrow? Persuade *her* to hold another Black Mass."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, she has some kind of a due-bill on hell, hasn't she? She can get the demon to switch us back into our regular bodies. Then we can be self-respecting mermaids and vampires and werewolves again."

"Brilliant!" said Margate.

"But the witch is angry," I objected.

"Then you must soften her up," Margate told me. "Make out with her, or something."

"Make out with a witch?"

"It's the only way out," Margate snapped. "You'll have to do it. You can't let us down this way."

Trina nibbled my ear with waxen lips. "Just remember," she whispered. "Play up to her, but no funny stuff. I get jealous so easily. Why it makes my wax melt to think of you in her arms."

"It makes my blood freeze to think of that," I replied.

"Even if you have ice-cubes in your veins, you must go through with it," implored Julius Margate. "Tomorrow you go to the witch."

And so it was decided.

Next afternoon, after getting directions from Julius Margate, I left the mansion on the hill and set out along a winding path through the woods to the house of Miss Terioso.

Carrying a basket on my arm, I approached the cottage feeling like Little Red Riding Hood on her way to Grandma's house.

Miss Terioso's cottage looked something like Grandma's house at that—except for the red and green smoke that poured from the crumbling stone chimney as I walked up the path.

The smoke assumed ghastly, billowing shapes, and I averted my eyes. I preferred to read the signs on the cottage lawn:

Miss Terioso

Black, White and All Colors of Magic

Love Philtres. Acid. Fortunes Told.

Psychiatry

Unfamiliar Spirits Keep Out

I knocked on the door, letting my trembling wrist provide the leverage.

Miss Terioso stuck her head out. "We gave at the office," she said. "Oh, it's you, young sir. Step in, won't you?"

I would, and did.

There was a bearskin rug in the hallway. As I put my foot on it, it grunted horribly, and the gigantic head rose with gnashing teeth.

"Down, Brunt!" commanded the witch. The rug subsided, and regarded me through malevolent glass eyes.

I stood in the witch's cottage glancing around at the ancient furniture—prewar vintage, and typical of a spinster's home.

Miss Terioso resumed her seat by the fire and took up her knitting. She was silent, absorbed.

I looked at the placards on the walls. There was a Charter Membership in Coven Local Number 9, a neatly embroidered motto, decorated with mandrake roots, reading

A Fiend in Need Is a Fiend Indeed

Then I broke the silence.

"What are you knitting?" I inquired.

"A shroud," said Miss Terioso, brightly.

I coughed. "I've brought you a present."

Her eyes brightened. I handed her the basket. She opened the cover.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Just a little wax fruit."

"Wax fruit?"

"To melt down into poppets," I explained.

Miss Terioso favored me with a warm smile.

"Groovy," she gushed.

I came on strong. "I was so delighted to see you the other evening," I said, sitting down, "I admired you greatly."

"You *did*?"

"Yes. I said to myself, 'now there's a girl with real high spirits about her,' that's what I said."

"Flatterer! I usually consort with low spirits," Miss Terioso gurgled.

"I was wondering if you'd care to have a date with me tonight," I ventured. "How about splitting out?"

"Why, there's no Sabbath tonight."

"I wasn't thinking of a Sabbath," I answered. "Just a little happening."

She blushed. "Very well. But first I must go to the beauty parlor. I'll drop you off at home on the way and come by afterwards when we go out."

Miss Terioso rose and bustled over to her broomstick.

I gulped.

"We're not going to ride that thing, are we?" I asked.

"Why, of course," she declared.

Trembling, I mounted the broomstick behind her. She opened the cottage door, muttered a few words under her breath, and we were off in the twilight.

XIII

I don't know whether you've ever ridden a broomstick, but it's not an experience one is likely to forget. I don't care to think about that soaring sweep through dusk-driven skies. All I can say is that for my money, the broomstick will never replace the jet.

When I was finally dropped off—literally—at my

destination—Miss Terioso waved farewell and called that she would come back from the beauty parlor and pick me up again.

For several minutes I wondered if she would have to pick me up, actually, before I'd be able to stir. But after a time I groaned, stood up and hobbled into the house.

The gang bombarded me with questions.

"Did you see her?"

"What did she say?"

"Did you make a date?"

I answered definitely. "I'm taking Miss Terioso out on the town this evening," I announced. "Margate, I'm borrowing one of your tuxedos. And about \$80 in cash."

Trina walked up to me, her wax arms swinging in agitation.

"I'm jealous," she confessed. "Take me with you as a chaperone."

"Impossible," I sighed.

"Then I'll go alone, with Myrtle in Margate's body," she declared. "I don't trust you with that baleful bag."

"I'll hitch up the station-wagon," Margate chimed in. "Then I'll harness myself to it and pull the rest of you into town."

I protested. "Do you want to spoil everything? You'll make a terrible scene in human society! Leave everything to me," I argued.

"But—"

There was a bump from upstairs.

Miss Terioso had made a three-point landing on the roof.

"Get out of sight," I commanded. "I'll skip upstairs and change and crawl out the skylight to join her."

Now all of you stay here and behave. I'll have you back in your bodies before morning.

They scattered, and I scampered.

Five minutes later I joined Miss Terioso on the roof.

I stared at the vision in the starlight.

For Miss Terioso was changed. The magic of the beauty parlor had wrought a startling transformation.

This was no old crone who awaited me, but a radiantly lovely woman—a vivid brunette with lips red as love's own fire. Her eyes sparkled and she smiled with pleasure as she noted my reaction.

"You dig me, eh?" she said. Her voice was low, husky.

I said nothing, but mounted the broomstick and put my arms around her. Her nearness was intoxicating.

We sailed up toward the stars. Her hair streamed in the wind, mingling with the moonlight.

I enjoyed the ride.

All incongruity was forgotten. By the time we landed on a fire-escape and clambered down to reach a night club entrance, we were copacetic.

We swept into the lobby of the club and Miss Terioso checked her broomstick in the cloakroom.

A waiter led us across the dance floor to a table, "Champagne," I ordered.

I didn't need it. I was intoxicated by her presence. But revolving drunkenly in the back of my brain was the consciousness of my purpose.

Soon I would artfully wheedle and cajole her into changing my friends back. But the evening was young now, and I could enjoy myself first. Enjoy her company. Gaze into those burning black eyes. Hold her flowery-fragrant fingers.

We lifted our glasses.

"Here's to you," murmured Miss Terioso.

"Here's to—us," I corrected.

We drank.

After that I tried to sit in her lap.

Now thinking back, I know what must have happened. Miss Terioso was an old hand at the game.

She'd probably anticipated this, the old she-wolf, and slipped a philtre into my drink.

The effects were startling.

All at once I knew that I was madly in love with Miss Terioso. The thought of my friends, the thought of Trina—all was forgotten.

She gave me a demure glance and I held her hand and stared into her inscrutable eyes and I leaned forward over the table, and then I got hit in the head with a human leg.

That's one way to sober up.

I turned quickly and stared.

Lying on the floor was the limb. With a shock, I recognized it. Trina's leg, from the window dummy!

Employing my knowledge of ballistics I wheeled around and stared at a table across the way.

Sure enough, Trina had made good her threat. She sat at a table across the way.

I collected my scattered wits hastily. Then, bending down, I collected the inert leg, rose politely, mumbled an excuse to Miss Terioso, and stalked over to the table, carrying the wax leg.

"Pardon me, madam, but I think you've lost something," I said, for the benefit of eavesdroppers. Trina accepted the leg, bent down, fastened it on again, and winked.

"What the hell's the big idea?" I whispered furiously. "I thought I told you to stay home."

"We're going to keep an eye on you," Trina answered. "After getting an eyeful of that chick, I don't trust you any further than I can throw my limbs."

"We're all here," added Myrtle, from Margate's body.

"No!"

But as I glanced around, I saw Mr. Simpkins and Jory at another table, in each other's bodies. Jory's body had resumed human shape.

"Margate and Gerymanx are outside, in the centaur's and mermaid's bodies," Myrtle added. "They came in the wagon."

"I hope to heaven they stay there," I sighed. "What if the customers saw them?"

It was a hideous thought. As things were, the situation was bad enough. No sooner had I uttered the words than I caught a snatch of conversation between Myrtle and a stranger at the adjoining table.

Myrtle, in Margate's body, had probably been drinking. The stranger certainly had. His little bloodshot eyes revolved woozily as he mumbled.

"Pardon me, sir," he hiccuped. "But that lady at th' table wish' you—she has got a wooden leg, huh?"

"Sure," answered Myrtle, gaily.

"Mos' unusual," said the lush.

"What's unusual about that?" demanded Myrtle, suddenly argumentative. "Why shouldn't she have a wooden leg? Me, I'm *all* wood!"

Under the influence of liquor, Myrtle forgot she was in Margate, and thought of herself as still being a hamadryad in a tree. But the drunken stranger didn't know this. He peered incredulously.

"You're all wood?" he echoed.

"Of course," said Myrtle. "Do you want to examine my trunk?"

"You're crazy!" sneered the drunk, wobbling to his feet.

"I am not," said Myrtle. "I can prove that I'm a tree. Why, I even have termites!"

"I wouldn't brag about it, sir."

"Say, who are you calling sir?" shrilled Myrtle. "I'll have you know I'm a lady! A hamadryad."

The drunk stared at Julius Margate's body.

"I wouldn't admit such a thing," he declared passionately.

"What's wrong with that?" Myrtle flung back. "Some of my best friends are hamadryads! And if you don't stop annoying me—I'll have my girl friend throw her head at you!"

The drunk drew back in panic.

Mr. Simpkins, in Jory's body, stalked over to the scene and quickly led Myrtle away in time to prevent mayhem.

Jory, in Mr. Simpkins' body, quietly left the room.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Miss Terioso advancing on me. I kicked Trina's waxen shin.

"Keep quiet from now on," I ordered. "Nearly had a riot as it is. Now I'll steer Miss Terioso away from here before she recognizes you."

I turned, bowed to the advancing witch.

"Let's dance," I suggested.

I danced with the witch on the nightclub floor while my window dummy sweetheart regarded me with a smouldering light in her lovely glass eyes.

XIV

Fortunately, I was dancing and didn't see the scene in the outer bar. But I heard about it later—plenty.

Mr. Simpkins, in Jory's body, had retired to the bar for a quiet and meditative drink.

"What'll it be?" asked the bartender.

"Got any bl—give me Scotch," said Mr. Simpkins, quickly erasing his original thought.

The Scotch arrived. Simpkins paid for it with a \$20 bill.

The sight of the greenback fluttering in the breeze acted as an unwitting signal to a tall blonde draped over the end of the bar. She uncoiled herself and advanced sinuously on Mr. Simpkins.

"You look sad, Mister," she observed. "Are you lonesome?"

This remarkable technique overpowered Mr. Simpkins quite completely. He was pretty unworldly, being a supernatural entity.

"*I am* sad," he sighed.

"Tell Olga what the matter is," coaxed the blonde, summoning the bartender and ordering a Silver Fizz. "Why are you sad?"

"Well," breathed Mr. Simpkins, "I used to be a vampire, but I'm not any more."

Olga blinked. This stranger was pretty smashed.

"You know how it is," he mournfully observed. "I'm hungry for blood. Now all I get is dog biscuits."

"Say," said Olga, perturbed, "what's with you? That's a funny line for a guy to hand out to a girl. You look like a wolf to me."

This was definitely the wrong thing to say.

"I am a wolf," muttered Mr. Simpkins.

"What do you mean, you're a wolf?" laughed Olga, back on familiar territory again. "You've got to show me, brother!"

Mr. Simpkins, naïve soul, sighed.

"Right here?" he said.

"Sure. Why not?"

"All right," said Mr. Simpkins. "I'll show you."

He descended from his bar stool and crouched on the floor. He threw his head back and began to whim-

per. Suddenly his body seemed to quiver. A plastic horripilation coursed through his frame. His forehead melted to a slant. His nose lengthened. His arms and legs furred.

Mr. Simpkins turned into a werewolf on the bar-room floor.

Olga saw and was convinced. She was so convinced she began to scream.

About that time, Miss Terioso and I were dancing near the doorway. Miss Terioso heard the scream and turned her head.

She looked out.

Her gaze was not attracted by Mr. Simpkins, but by Jory. He stood at the checking counter, and he was grabbing Miss Terioso's broom.

"Come on," gasped my dancing-partner, running off the floor.

"Where are you going with my broomstick?" she yelled at the fleeing Jory.

"I'm borrowing it to use outside," he called. "Don't forget Margate is in the centaur's body out there."

"Come back here," yelled the witch, leaping after him.

Hell broke loose with a vengeance.

Miss Terioso clawed at Jory. She beat the poor man over the head with her broomstick, uttering shrill imprecations.

A flying form launched past me as I wavered in the doorway.

It was Trina, in the window dummy's body. She hurled herself on Miss Terioso, valiantly coming to Jory's aid.

Miss Terioso turned.

Before I could intervene, she grappled with the red-headed dummy. Before the eyes of the shrieking

spectators, she tore the window dummy apart, literally limb from limb.

A torso, a head, and pairs of arms and legs fell to the floor.

Behind me came another scream. I turned in time to see Myrtle, in Margate's body, exchanging wild blows with the drunk from the next table.

"Good God, what next?" I gasped.

I started toward the howling wolf on the floor. Then something thundered past me from the outer door.

Margate, in the body of the centaur, charged into the night-club lobby. Squirming in his arms was the mermaid—Gerymanx. Stamping his hoofs, the terrible apparition bearing its hideous burden, roared down the bar.

"What is all this?" boomed Margate, flicking his tail and neighing wildly.

Arms encircled me. I turned to face Miss Terioso, brandishing her broomstick.

"Let's get out of here, eh?" she panted. "Get on the broomstick before it's too late."

I mounted in a daze.

The howling wolf, and prancing centaur, the fighting man, and the dismembered body of the window dummy blocked our path. We sailed over them all.

Sailed over them—and into the hands of the fuzz.

XV

Judge Numbottom heard the story. First he heard it from the drunk who insulted Myrtle. Then he

heard it from Olga, the call girl. After that he got a few stumbling sentences out of me.

Finally he listened to Patrolman Lossowitz as he explained the whole thing, from ghastly beginning to untimely end.

"So she says she's a tree, Your Honor," mumbled Lossowitz, unemotionally. "Meanwhile out in the bar this guy is telling Olga he used to be a vampire but now he's a werewolf. And he turns into a wolf.

"Meanwhile the witch tears this other woman to bits, and then the centaur and the mermaid run in, and the witch tries to beat it on a broomstick with this guy here."

Lossowitz pointed to me.

Judge Numbottom pointed to Lossowitz. The veins bulged on his bald forehead.

"Stop that kind of talk," he gasped, weakly. "After all, this is a night court, not a bedtime story session. I'm a grown man, Lossowitz, am I not?"

"Yes, Your Honor," said Lossowitz meekly.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, you're not," Lossowitz declared, uncertainly.

"Shut up! You can't think straight or talk straight! Admit you were drinking in this night club!"

"No, Your Honor. Not a drop."

"You don't drink drops, I realize that. Probably a bottle," decided the terrible old man. "But drunk or sober, you couldn't see such things. Bring in the prisoners, Lossowitz, and let me question them myself."

Obediently, Patrolman Lossowitz marched out and returned with Myrtle, Trina, Margate, Gerymanx, Jory, and Mr. Simpkins in tow. Miss Terioso marched before them, indignantly waving her broomstick.

Judge Numbottom took one look at the man, the centaur, the window dummy, and the mermaid, and

the second man, and the wolf. Then he hid his face in his hands.

"No, no!" he murmured. "Cover them up, Los-sowitz! Get blankets and at least cover some of them up. That horse thing and that human fish, anyway!"

It was a matter of minutes before Judge Numbottom raised his haggard face. He winced as he stared at the motly assemblage. Finally his eyes lighted on Miss Terioso as the most attractive and normal-looking prisoner.

"Will you please step forward and answer a few questions," he said, controlling his voice.

Miss Terioso advanced.

"Your name?"

"Miss Terioso."

"Your—your occupation?"

"Oh," she replied lightly. "I'm a witch."

Judge Numbottom began to turn purple. "I beg your pardon," he rasped. "I must have misunderstood you."

"I'm just a witch, Your Honor," she said. "I ride broomsticks."

"Go on," sighed the Judge. "You nauseate me strangely."

"Well, it all started when these people turned into statues," said Miss Terioso.

"Statues?"

"Yes. Marble. Stone, you know. They're all statues, really."

"Looks like a statue-story offense," put in Los-sowitz, unhelpfully.

"I don't understand," sighed the Judge.

"This man can confirm my story," said Miss Terioso, pointing her broomstick at me.

"That's right," I answered. "These people were once statues, in my charge. But as you can see, they've

undergone a change, Your Honor. That's simple enough. I haven't got all my marble statues any more."

"You haven't got all your marbles any more, you mean!" snarled Judge Numbottom. "Step down, you two."

Margate, in Gerymanx's body, sidled forward.

"Let me help you," he suggested: "I owned these people before they were statues."

Judge Numbottom looked at the horse's body protruding from under the blanket. He favored Margate with a long, painful scrutiny.

"Who and what are you?" he whispered.

"I'm a centaur."

Lossowitz interfered again. "The guy is lying, Your Honor!" he bawled, excitedly. "He ain't no centaur. I seen lots of centaurs when I was in Washington!"

"Shut up!" thundered the Judge. "Let me speak to the others."

He addressed the mermaid in the centaur's arms.

"What about you, young lady?" he asked, forcing a smile. "What is the reason for your—ah—piscatorial disguise?"

"Who are you calling a lady?" snarled the voice of Gerymanx from the mermaid's body. "And what kind of dirty remark are you making about me being piscatorial?"

Judge Numbottom sighed and shook his head.

"Can't any of you talk sense?" he begged.

"Let me help you," said Jory, from Mr. Simpkins' body. "It's very simple. You see, I used to be in that body over there."

He pointed at the wolf form now worn by Mr. Simpkins.

"You were in the body of that animal?" Judge Numbottom's eyes started from their sockets.

"Why not?" piped the wolf.

"A talking wolf?" moaned the Judge.

"Well, if it disturbs you so much—" sniffed the wolf. He bent forward and began to go through contortions. It was a fascinating if repulsive spectacle. Slowly, the wolf turned into a man.

"You see?" he asked.

"I don't want to see!" groaned Judge Numbottom.

"Then look at her!" suggested Lossowitz, pointing at Trina in the body of the redheaded window dummy.

The window dummy was redheaded no longer. With a clatter, the dummy's head dropped to the floor.

"So sorry," said Trina. "Looking at a sight like that wolf is enough to make anyone lose their head."

She stooped and picked up her head slowly.

Judge Numbottom's eyes were almost resting on his cheekbones.

"It's sorcery," he sobbed. "Sheer black sorcery! And how can I press a sorcery charge at election time?"

I stepped up.

"Listen, Your Honor," I whispered. "I think I have a way to straighten this matter out. Never mind getting the story straight. I know a way to restore these people to their rightful forms. Then we can forget the whole thing.

"How?" gasped the Judge.

Briefly, I told him about Miss Terioso holding a due bill on hell. She could evoke a demon and order him to restore my friends to their rightful shapes.

"Incredible," objected the Judge.

"No more incredible than what you've seen here," I reminded him.

"Why doesn't she do it, then?" he asked.

"She's stubborn. I suggest that you force her to do it."

"How?"

"Issue a court order commanding her to evoke the demon and make the change."

The Judge sat up. His eyes flashed fire. "I'll damned well issue the order," he snapped. "If not, I'll have the lot of you jailed for the rest of your unnatural lives."

"Have you got your due-bill on hell ready?" I whispered nervously, crouching next to Miss Terioso in the darkened courtroom.

"It's right here in my satchel," replied the witch. During the past hour her glamor had fallen away, and she was once again the familiar crone-like figure, as she puttered around making passes in the air.

Judge Numbottom ejected the drunk, the call girl, and Patrolman Lossowitz from the chamber, leaving us in privacy.

A baliff had been dispatched to secure the ingredients Miss Terioso required for the ceremony of the ritual, and now she went through the parody of the Black Mass and the moment for evoking the demon neared.

My fine finned and furry friends moved restlessly to and fro as her voice rose in awesome crescendo.

The climax came.

Amidst a shaking of walls and a rumbling of far-off vortices between the stars, the red demon slithered into tri-dimensional being in the center of Judge Numbottom's court.

A gasp rose from the assemblage.

"To think of me, acting as an accessory in this," hissed Judge Numbottom morosely. "Oh Lord—what's that?"

He saw the demon. So did my friends.

The demon stretched a rubbery red neck and blinked with nyctaloptic eyes.

"It's you again," he growled, squatting near me.

I shrugged. "Not at all. This lady called you."

I indicated Miss Terioso, who nodded. The witch swept commandingly before the creature of darkness.

In low tones she conversed with the entity.

"You want me to switch them?" the demon asked.

"Yes."

"And you have a paper entitling you to—ah—services?"

"Here it is."

Miss Terioso fluttered a piece of paper.

"Very well," sighed the demon. "Let's get on with it."

He paused. "I shall have to freeze them into marble again before I unscramble their psyches," he said.

"Very well."

"Don't worry," I told Trina, moving close to her. "It will just be a minute."

That is all it took, and I was glad.

For my very spine shook at the violence of the psychic force that concentrated itself in the room.

Gazing through the phosphorescence of the chalk lines, I saw a horribly unnatural transformation. Men, mermaid, centaur, and wolf, turned to gleaming white stone. They froze in marble attitudes on the floor.

"So," breathed the demon. He was sweating horribly, as sparks rising from his body attested.

"Now for the second step," he muttered. "But give me the due bill first."

His voice addressed the witch, but his eyes couldn't reach her.

It was I who finally located Miss Terioso in the

darkness. She stood by the window, the open window, and she was already bestriding the broomstick.

"She's not going through with the deal!" I yelled. "She's double-crossing us and cutting out!"

It was true.

The demon realized it instantly.

"Come back!" he shouted.

"Farewell!" called the witch. She rose in midair.

The demon, like a gigantic rubber ball, bounded after her.

He soared, with dynamic propulsion, through the window.

I rushed over to the ledge and peered outside.

Hovering in midair, witch and demon clawed wildly in a writhing tangle of arms and legs. She was trying to hold on to the piece of paper. He enfolded her in his red arms, hissing.

The broomstick wobbled.

Suddenly came a cataclysmic crash of thunder, a burst of eyeball-searing luminescence, and then *nothing!*

Witch and demon were gone.

"Trina," I whispered.

A lifeless window dummy stared at me with glassy eyes.

Judge Numbottom switched on the lights.

He rubbed his eyes.

"It is the order of this court," he whispered, "that these statues be confiscated. Immediately. And taken out of sight. Not a word of this must get out. You understand?"

I nodded.

"Julius Margate's house will be put up for sale under court order," he added.

"The window dummy?" I whispered.

"Will await claim by rightful owners," he told me.

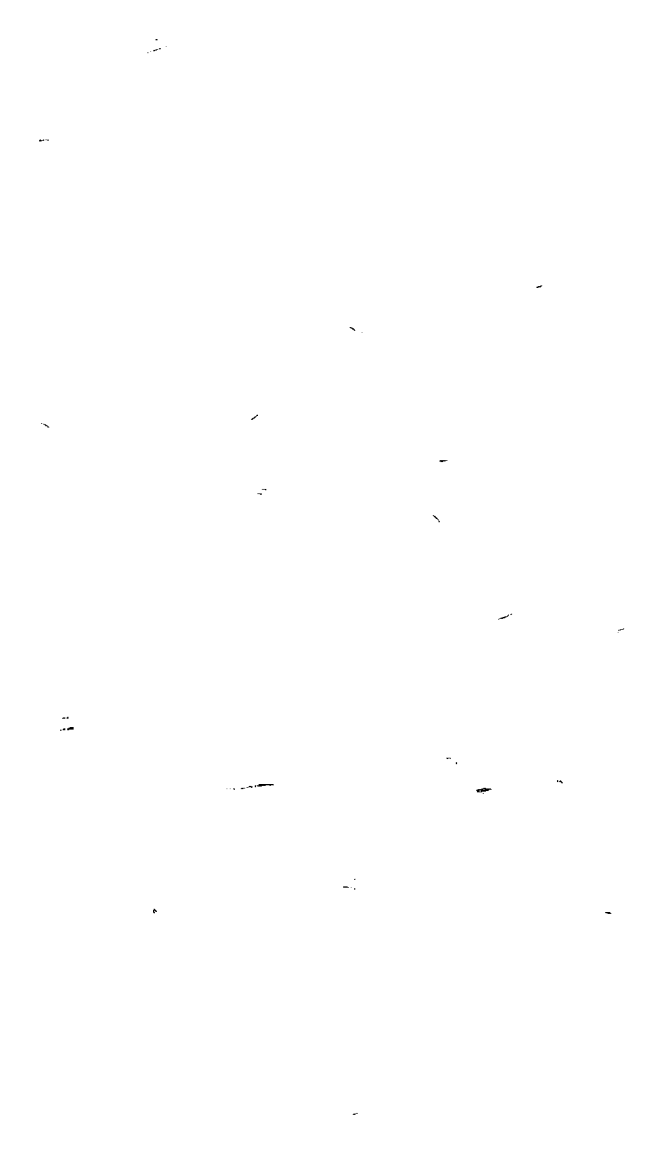
And so it ended. I left Margate, his friends, and his house. And now I try to forget,

Of course, I still see the window dummy every day.

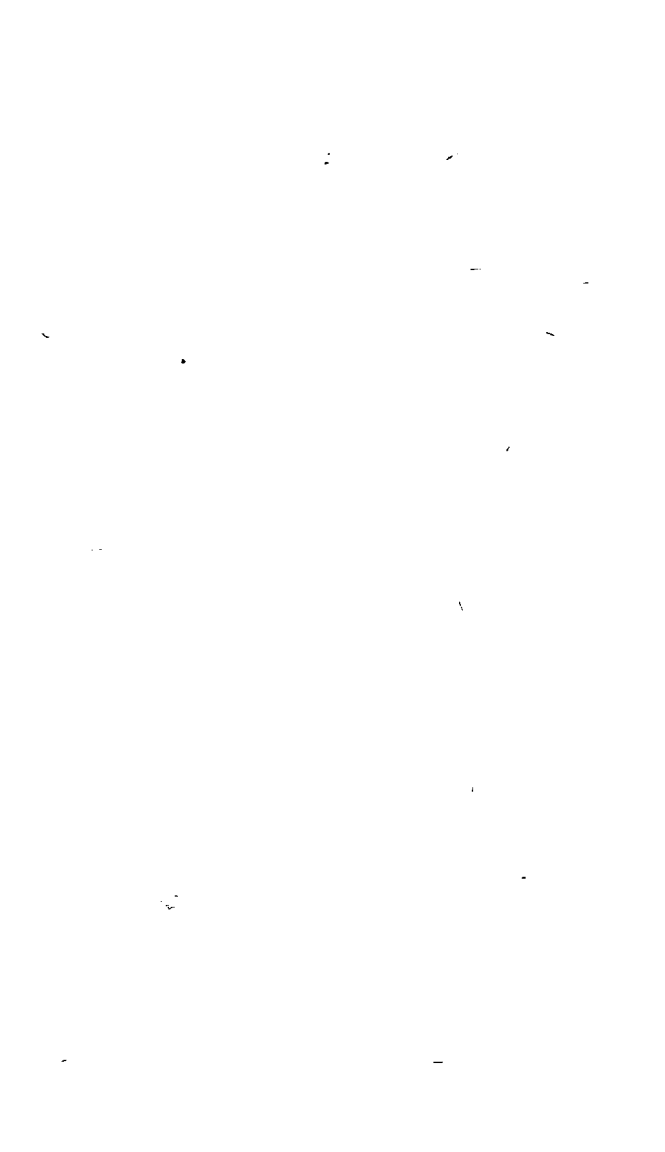
That's all I have left, you know. All I have to prove that it really happened.

So I see the window dummy every day. And you can come and see her yourself if you like.

She's the third one from the left—in Macy's window.



Back Word



A funny thing happened to me on the way to the publication of this book.

I got older.

Which is why I'm writing a Backword instead of a Foreword. In order to discuss the contents of this volume I must shift into reverse and steer an erratic course down memory lane. Or a memory course down erratic lane. (I took a very good memory course some years ago which I'd be glad to recommend to you, but I've forgotten its name).

I speak of the contents of this volume, but I'm not unmindful of its discontents. All of these stories were a product of those discontents. At the time they were written, I was acutely dissatisfied with my pseudo-pedantic style and sombre subject-matter. I wanted to break away from a preoccupation with ghosts and ghouls, phantoms and funerals, coffins and cemetaries. So I went from the grave to the humorous.

Humor is a product of its times, and the times were innocent. We had no real problems to confront in those days—merely a heritage of a stock market

crash, ten years of the Great Depression, and a minor disturbance called World War II which currently afforded a modicum of irritation. The great problems, the great issues—things like love-ins, psychedelic art, happenings, the music of Sonny and Cher—had not yet arisen. We were almost totally lacking in insight and perspective. In our touching naivete, we looked upon Bonnie and Clyde as no better than criminals. All our pornography was soft-core, and our idea of Black Comedy was limited to Amos 'n Andy on the radio.

So it was that when I elected to try my hand at humor I was forced to make do with the then-current examples which satisfied the mores and the morons of the day. And the two most successful literary practitioners of the antic art at this time were Damon Runyon and Thorne Smith.

Damon Runyon's justly-famed style lent itself admirably to would-be advocates of the sincerest form of flattery. Runyon wrote sentimental fables about soft-boiled yeggs with hardshell exteriors, couched in a vernacular which might best be described as anti-Proustian, in that it rigidly avoided the past tense. It occurred to me that it might be amusing to combine his style with inappropriate subject-matter by placing a typical Runyon narrator-character in an atypical situation. My first effort, A Good Knight's Work, appeared in Unknown Worlds. Its reception encouraged a sequel, The Eager Dragon—its title ringing a change on the then-current Disney film, The Reluctant Dragon. Unfortunately, by the time I got around to writing the second story, the magazine was ready to abandon publication due to wartime paper shortages, so the sequel appeared in Weird Tales. By then I was already extending the style and scope of this approach into a series of twenty-three Lefty Feep

yarns which infested the pages of yet another magazine, *Fantastic Adventures*, over the ensuing years. My debt to Mr. Runyon is considerable and I acknowledge it gratefully.

Thorne Smith remains, to my mind, a classic comedic commentator on the contemporary scene. His appraisal of civilization and its discontents during the Twenties and early Thirties makes for easier reading today than the *Main Street* and *Babbitt* of Sinclair Lewis, and I'm not at all certain that Smith was not superior in his insight and the disarming deftness of his light approach. Thorne Smith employed fantasy for his purpose, and my pastiches were as obviously derivative as they were openly tributes to the Master. *Weird Tales* printed the first two under their original titles; *Nursemaid to Nightmares* and *Black Barter*. These stories later saw reprint in another publication, *Imaginative Tales*, combined under the title *Mr. Margate's Mermaid*. And during the Forties and early Fifties I saw fit on several occasions to further institute Smithsonian sagas. But I never came within hailing distance of the originator, a gentle and gifted man.

Although many writers take great pains to disavow the fact, I believe most beginners are "influenced by" (i.e., imitate) the work of established authors they admire. I began by writing in the style of H. P. Lovecraft, then—as noted here—followed Runyon and Smith in an effort to break away from the pattern. In due time I did evolve an approach of my own. Ironically enough, I've now come full-circle: since the publication of *Psycho*, some writers have seen fit to imitate me! Which should be poetic—or prosy—justice enough for messrs. Runyon and Smith.

Runyon's Broadway and Smith's suburbia have van-

ished—if indeed they ever existed save in the imaginative evocations of their creators. And the now humor of Guys and Dolls or Night Life of the Gods has acquired nostalgic connotations which may soon evolve into quaintness. Topical references to Prohibition, bootleggers, gun-molls and Mah Jong players are as dated as the slang-phrases in which they are described. In an effort to avoid the jarring effect of the more obvious anachronisms, I've made an attempt to delete these elements from my own stories and to substitute today's idiom wherever possible. (And how dated that will be in just a few short years I shall leave it to today's generation of readers to discover).

I'm not about to promise that my updating efforts have been successful. The spirit and flavor—if any—of these tales still reflect their own times and evolve from their own frame of reference. But as I've endeavored to point out, the contemporary is temporary, and he who laughs last may do so merely because he didn't happen to be around the first time the gag was pulled. This doesn't necessarily mean he's getting the short end of the schtick.

Once upon a time I had fun writing these way-out fantasies, when way-out was in. In or out, wherever it's at, I hope you have fun reading them now.

Robert Bloch
Los Angeles, California
February, 1968

more psychos from the author of psycho

Robert Bloch, world famous author of **Psycho** and **The Scarf**, scriptwriter for everything from Alfred Hitchcock to **Star Trek**, has produced the most unusual book of his long and distinguished career. **Dragons and Nightmares** is different in style and treatment than anything Robert Bloch has ever written. Here, a sardonic sense of the absurd has been added to the author's unique kind of fantasy. In this book you will meet such rare beings as Sir Pallagyn of the Black Keep, Herman the Eager Dragon, Simpkins the Toothless Vampire, Jory the Werewolf, who wears dark glasses to counteract the influence of the full moon, millionaire Julius Margate, who collects "mythological entities"—tree nymphs and centaurs. There has never been a book like this: there may never be another. Bloch at his best.