

ROBERT BLOCH



the living demons

Sphere Occult



SPHERE

12 stories of the supernatural
spawned in the nightmare imagination of
ROBERT BLOCH
author of **PSYCHO**

'Robert Bloch is a combination of
Lovecraft, Blackwood and Vonnegut.
Sometimes he's better than all of them
put together'

EDITOR'S JOURNAL

THE LIVING DEMONS

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SPHERE

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INTRODUCTION:

THE MONSTER IS LOOSE

It seems there were two Irishmen . . .

Their names were Burke and Hare.

Death was their livelihood—for they provided corpses to the anatomy classes of medical schools. Body-snatching was a lucrative profession, but they added a touch of refinement to the job.

Instead of digging up business in the cemeteries, they found it much simpler to just manufacture their own cadavers. Old-fashioned ghouls, who spent their time moonlighting in the graveyards for poorly preserved specimens, could not hope to compete with Burke and Hare's nice fresh merchandise. They really made a killing out of murder.

Every time I assemble a collection of stories, I think of these two gentlemen. For, in a way, I too am a 'resurrection man'—burrowing amidst the family plots to exhume the body of my work and present it for the reader's dissection in the light of day. Unlike Burke and Hare, I must content myself with older specimens; some of them have been buried in the files of magazines for many years. But I try to exhume only those which still retain a semblance of life, no matter how long they have been interred.

The stories in this collection span a quarter of a century but all of them have a common theme; they deal with monsters. Some of the monsters are human, some are not—but all of them embody, in one way or another, the fears common to us in our dreams.

We call these monsters by many names—ghosts, vampires, extraterrestrials, changelings. But we recognize them for what they are: manifestations of the secret dreads and desires which lurk beneath the surface of consciousness.

Like the monstrous specimens provided by Burke and Hare, these creatures have no power to harm you. On the contrary, they were dug up only for your entertainment.

So turn down the lights, turn the pages, and turn your thoughts to the phantoms and fantasies which await you as the result of my spadework.

Gravely,
—*Robert Bloch*

LIFE IN OUR TIME

WHEN Harry's time capsule arrived, Jill made him put it in the guest house.

All it was, it turned out, was a big long metal box with a cover that could be sealed tight and welded so that the air couldn't get at what was inside. Jill was really quite disappointed with it.

But then she was quite disappointed with Harry, too. Professor Harrison Cramer, B.A., B.S., M.A., Ph.D. Half the alphabet wasted on nothing. At those flaky faculty cocktail parties, people were always telling her, 'It must be wonderful to be married to a brilliant man like your husband.' Brother, if they only knew!

It wasn't just that Harry was fifteen years older than she was. After all look at Rex Harrison and Richard Burton or even Larry Olivier for that matter. But Harry wasn't the movie star type. Not even the mad scientist type, like Vinnie Price in those crazy high-camp pictures. He was nothing.

Of course Jill got the message long before she married him. But he *did* have the big house and all that loot he'd inherited from his mother. She figured on making a few changes, and she actually *did* manage to redo the house so that it looked halfway presentable, with the help of that *fagilleh* interior decorator. But she couldn't redo Harry. Maybe *he* needed a *fagilleh* interior decorator to work on him, too; *she* certainly couldn't change him. And outside of what she managed to squeeze out of him for the redecorating, Jill hadn't been able to get her hands on any of the loot, either. Harry wasn't interested in entertaining or going out or taking cruises, and whenever she mentioned sable jackets he mumbled something under his breath about 'conspicuous consumption', whatever that was. He didn't like art or the theatre, he didn't drink, he didn't even watch TV. And he wore flannel pajamas in bed. *All* the time.

After a couple of months Jill was ready to climb the walls. Then she began thinking about Reno, and that's where Rick

came in. Rick was her attorney. At least, that's the way it started out to be, but he had other ideas. Particularly for those long afternoons when Harry was lecturing at seminars or whatever he did over there at the University. Pretty soon Jill forgot about Reno; Rick was all for one of these quickie deals you get down in Mexico. He was sure he could make it stick and still see to it that she got her fifty-fifty share under the community property laws, without any waiting. It could all be done in twenty-four hours, no hassle; they'd take off together, just like eloping. Bang, you're divorced, bang, you're remarried, and then, bang, bang bang——

So all Jill had to worry about was finding the right time. And even that was no problem, after Harry told her about the capsule.

'I'm to be in charge of the project,' he said. 'Full authority to choose what will be representative of our culture. Quite a responsibility. But I welcome the challenge.'

'So what's a time capsule?' Jill wanted to know.

Harry went into a long routine and she didn't really listen, just enough to get the general idea. The thing was, Harry had to pick out all kinds of junk to be sealed up in this gizmo so that sometime—ten thousand years from now, maybe—somebody would come along and dig it up and open it and be able to tell what kind of a civilization we had. Big deal. But from the way Harry went on, you'd think he'd just won the Grand Prix or something.

'We're going to put the capsule in the foundation of the new Humanities Building,' he told her.

'What are humanities?' Jill asked, but Harry just gave her one of those *Christ-how-can-you-be-so-stupid?* looks that always seemed to start their quarrels, and they would have had a fight then and there, too, only he added something about how the dedication ceremonies for the new building would take place on May 1st, and he'd have to hurry to get everything arranged for the big day. Including writing his dedication address.

May 1st was all Jill needed to hear. That was on a Friday, and if Harry was going to be tied up making a speech at the dedication, it would be an A-OK time to make a little flight across the border. So she managed to call Rick and tell him and he said yeah, sure, perfect.

'It's only ten days from now,' Jill reminded him. 'We've got

a lot to do.'

She didn't know it, but it turned out she wasn't kidding. She had more to do than she thought, because all at once Harry was *interested* in her. *Really* interested.

'You've got to help me,' he said that night at dinner. 'I rely on your taste. Of course I've got some choices of my own in mind, but I want you to suggest items to go into the capsule.'

At first Jill thought he was putting her on, but he really meant it. 'This project is going to be honest. The usual ploy is pure exhibitionism—samples of the "best" of everything, plus descriptive data which is really just a pat on the back for the status quo. Well, I want to include material that's self-explanatory, not self-congratulatory. Not art and facts—just artifacts.'

Harry lost her there, until he said, 'Everything preserved will be a clue to our social attitudes. Not what we pretend to admire, but what the majority actually believes in and enjoys. And that's where you come in, my dear. You're the majority.'

Jill began to dig it, then. 'You mean like TV and records?'

'Exactly. What's that album you like so well? The one with the four hermaphrodites on the liner?'

'Who?'

'Excuse me—it's purportedly a singing group, isn't it?'

'Oh, you're talking about the Poodles!' Jill went and got the album, which was called *The Poodles Bark Again*. The sound really turned her on, but she always thought Harry hated it. And now he was coming on smiles.

'Great,' he said. 'This definitely goes in.'

'But——'

'Don't worry, I'll buy you another.' He took the album and put it on his desk. 'Now, you mentioned something about television. What's your favorite program?'

When she saw he was really serious she began telling him about *Anywhere, U.S.A.* What it was, it was about life in a small town, just an ordinary suburblike, but the people were great. There was this one couple with the two kids, sort of an average family, you might say, only he was kind of playing around with a divorcee who ran a *discothetique* or whatever they call them, and she was getting the hots for a psychiatrist—he wasn't really *her* psychiatrist, he was analyzing one of the kids, the one who had set fire to the high school gymnasium, not the girl—she was afraid she'd been caught because of that

affair she was having with the vice-principal who was really a Commie agent only she didn't know it yet and her real boyfriend, the one who had the brain operation, had a thing about his mother, so—

It go kind of complicated but Harry kept asking her to tell him more and pretty soon he was nodding. 'Wonderful—we'll have to see if we can get kinescopes on a week's episodes.'

'You mean you really want something like that?'

'Of course. Wouldn't you say this show captured the lives of typical American citizens today?'

She had to agree that he was right. Also about some of the things he was going to put into the capsule to show the way people lived nowadays—like tranquilizers and pep pills and income tax forms and a map of the freeway-expressway-turnpike system. He had a lot of numbers, too, for Zip Code and digit-dialing, and Social Security, and the ones the computers punched out on insurance and charge-account and utility bills.

But what he really wanted was ideas for more stuff, and in the next couple of days he kept leaning on her. He got hold of her souvenir from Shady Lawn Cemetery—it was a plastic walnut that opened up, called 'Shady Lawn in a Nutshell'. Inside were twelve little color prints showing all the tourist attractions of the place, and you could mail the whole thing to your friends back home. Harry put this in the time capsule, wrapping it up in something he told her was an actuarial table on the incidence of coronary occlusion among middle-aged, middle-class males. Like heart attacks, that is.

'What's that you're reading?' he asked. And the next thing you know, he had her copy of the latest Steve Slash paperback—the one where Steve is sent on this top secret mission to keep peace in Port Said, and right after he kills these five guys with the portable flamethrower concealed in his judo belt, he's getting ready to play beddy bye with Yasmina, who's really another secret agent with radioactive nipples—

And that's as far as she'd got when he grabbed the book. It was getting so she couldn't keep anything out of his hot little hands.

'What's that you're cooking?' he wanted to know. And there went the TV dinner—frozen *crepes suzettes* and all. To say nothing of the *Plain Jane Instant Borscht*.

'Where's the photo you had of your brother?' It was a real nothing picture of Stud, just him wearing that way out beard

of his and standing by his cycle on the day he passed his initiation into Hell's Angels. But Harry put *that* in, too, Jill didn't think it was very nice, seeing as how he clipped it to another photo of some guys taking the Ku Klux Klan oath.

But right now the main thing was to keep him happy. That's what Rick said when she clued him in on what was going on.

'Cooperate, baby,' he told her. 'It's a real kinky kick, but it keeps him out of our hair. We got plans to make, tickets to buy, packing, and like that there.'

The trouble was, Jill ran out of ideas. She explained this to Rick but he just laughed.

'I'll give you some,' he said. 'And you can feed 'em to him. He's a real s.a., that husband of yours—I know what he wants.'

The funny part of it was that Rick did know. He was really kind of a brain himself, but not in a kooky way like Harry. So she listened to what he suggested and told Harry when she got home.

'How about a sample of the theatre of the Absurd?' she asked. Harry looked at her over the top of his glasses, and for a minute she thought she'd really thrown him, but then he grinned and got excited.

'Perfect!' he said. 'Any suggestions?'

'Well, I was reading a review about this new play, *Little Irma*—it's about this guy who thinks he's having a baby so he goes to an abortionist, only really I guess the abortionist is supposed to be God or somebody, even if he is a Negro, and it all takes places in a pay toilet—'

'Delightful!' Harry was off and running. 'I'll pick up a copy. Anything else?'

Thank God Rick had clued her in. So she said what about a recording of one of these concerts where they used a 'prepared' piano that makes noises like screeching brakes, or sometimes no sound at all. And he liked that. He also liked the idea about a sample of Pop Art—maybe a big blowup of a newspaper *Piles—Don't Be Cut* ad.

The next day she laid it on him about a tape of a 'Happening' which was the real thing, because it took place in some private sanatorium for disturbed patients, and he really got hung up on this idea.

And the next day he asked for a suggestion for a movie, so

she remembered what Rick coached her on about 7½, which was a way out thing by some Yugoslavian director she never heard of, about a man making a movie about a man making a movie, only you never could be quite sure, in the movie, whether the scene was supposed to be a movie of a part of a movie or a movie of a part of what was really happening, if it happened.

He bought this, too.

'You're wonderful,' he said. 'Truthfully, I never expected this of you.'

Jill just gave him the big smile and went on her merry way. It wasn't hard, because he had to go running around town trying to dig up tapes and films and recordings of all the stuff he had on his list. Which was just how Rick had said it would be, leaving everything clear for them to shop and set up their last-minute plans.

'I won't get our tickets until the day before,' Rick told her. 'We don't want to tip anything. The way I figure it, Harry'll be moving the capsule over to where they're holding the ceremonies the next morning, so you'll get a chance to pack while he's out of the way.' Rick was really something else, the way he had it all lined out.

And that's the way it worked. The day before the ceremony, Harry was busy out in the guest house all afternoon long, packing his goodies into the time capsule. Just like a dopey squirrel burying his nuts. Only even dopey squirrels don't put stuff away for somebody to dig up ten thousand years from now.

Harry hadn't even had time to look at her for the past two days, and this didn't bother Jill any. Along about suppertime she went out to call him, but he said he wasn't hungry and besides he had to run over and contact the trucking company to come and haul the capsule over to the foundation site. They'd dug a big hole there for tomorrow morning, and he was going to take the capsule to it and stand guard over it until it was time for the dedication routine.

That was even better news than Jill could hope for, so as soon as Harry left for the trucking company she phoned Rick and gave him the word. He said he'd be right over with the tickets.

So of course Jill had to get dressed. She put on her girdle and the bra with the built-in falsies and her high heels; then she

went in the bathroom and used her depilatory and touched up her hair where the rinse was fading, and put on her eyelashes and brushed her teeth, including all the caps, and tried those new fingernails after she got her makeup on and the perfume. When she looked at the results in the mirror she was really proud; for the first time in months she felt like her real self again. And from now on it would always be this way, with Rick—no more pretending, nothing phony.

There was a good moment with Rick there in the bedroom after he came in, but of course Harry *would* drive up right then—she heard the car out front and broke the clinch just in time, telling Rick to sneak out around the back. Harry'd be busy with the truckers for a couple of minutes at least.

Jill forced herself to wait in the bedroom until she was sure the coast was clear. She kept looking out the window but it was too dark now to see anything. Since there wasn't any noise she figured Harry must have taken the truckers back into the guest house.

And that's where she finally went.

Only the truckers weren't there. Just Harry.

'I told them to wait until first thing in the morning,' he said. 'Changed my mind when I realized how damp it was—no sense spending the night shivering outside in the cold. Besides, I haven't sealed the capsule yet—remembered a couple of things I wanted to add to the collection.'

He took a little bottle out of his pocket and carried it over to the open capsule. 'This goes in too. Carefully labeled, of course, so they can analyze it.'

'The bottle's empty,' Jill said.

Harry shook his head. 'Not at all. It contains smog. That's right—smog, from the freeway. I want posterity to know everything about us, right down to the poisonous atmosphere in which our culture breathed its last.'

He dropped the bottle into the capsule, then picked something else up from the table next to it. Jill noticed he had a soldering outfit there, ready to plug in when he sealed the lid, after he used a pump to suck the air out. He'd explained all this about the capsule being airtight, soundproof, duralumin-sheathed, but that didn't interest her now. She kept looking at what he held in his hand. It was one of those electric knife outfits, with the battery.

'Another artifact,' he said. 'Another symbol of our deca-

dence. An electric knife—just the thing for Mom when she carves the fast frozen, precooked Thanksgiving turkey while she and Dad count all their shiny, synthetic, plastic blessings.' He waved the knife. 'They'll understand,' he told her. 'Those people in the future will understand it all. They'll know what life was like in our times—how we drained Walden Pond and refilled it again with blood, sweat, and tears.'

Jill moved a little closer, staring at the knife. 'The blade's rusty,' she said.

Harry shook his head. 'That's not rust,' he said.

Jill kept her cool. She kept it right up until the moment she looked over the edge of the big, oblong box, looked down into the opening and saw Rick lying there. Rick was all sprawled out, and the red was oozing down over the books and records and pictures and tapes.

'I waited for him when he sneaked out of the house,' Harry said.

'Then you knew—all along——'

'For quite a while,' Harry said. 'Long enough to figure things out and make my plans.'

'What plans?'

Harry just shrugged. And raised the knife.

A moment later the time capsule received the final specimen of life in the twentieth century.

THE INDIAN SPIRIT GUIDE

ORLANDO CROWN was a spook hunter.

If you're a reader of magazines and the Sunday supplements of newspapers, you'll remember his name. Orlando Crown—amateur magician, amateur occultist, and professional ghost buster. The man who made a standing offer of \$25,000 to any medium or mystic producing satisfactory evidence of life beyond the grave. His articles and *exposés* of fraudulent psychic phenomena are famous.

Accordingly, when I determined to do a book on spiritualism, it was only natural that I take a little trip down to San Diego and seek out Orlando Crown.

'Show me a ghost,' I said.

Crown laughed. He threw back his close-cropped grey head and brayed.

'Just like that, eh?' he chuckled. 'The man wants me to show him a ghost. Now take it easy, friend——'

I took it easy. I explained everything; who I was, my purpose in coming to him, and the theme of my projected book. He stopped laughing and began to exhibit interest.

'Naturally, I wanted to get my material firsthand from an expert,' I told him. 'So I came to you.'

'Naturally,' he agreed. 'There is no one else qualified. I assume you'd credit me with the data?'

That was the key, the clue I needed. I'd always wondered why a wealthy man like Orlando Crown bothered with the pursuit of such a peculiar hobby. The answer was—vanity.

'Credit you?' I said. 'Why, if you'll do me the honor of serving as my instructor, I'll dedicate the book to you.'

Crown beamed. He stood up and extended the slim, soft elegance of his hand. 'Come back tomorrow at two,' he murmured. 'I think I'll have something interesting for you.'

Crown's convertible turned south, and the afternoon sun smote my eyes. We bumped along an unpaved street that looked like the butt end of Tobacco Road. Lawns of brown

weeds and sand suffered under the sun, unprotected by the withered palmettos which served as attractions only to the local dogs. Houses sagged behind rusted iron fences. On porches sun-blistered and paint-peeled, unlovely women rocked and fanned futilely. Tow-headed brats peered from behind phlegm-green window shades. Heat waves lent a wavering distortion of the flight of myriad flies, but did nothing to cut the stench of shriveled vegetation, rotting wood, sweat, garbage, and the frying odor of garbage soon-to-be.

'There's the place,' said Orlando Crown, indicating a house. He might have been a psychic sensitive at that; I couldn't have distinguished this particular shack from any of the others. It was a wide two-storey affair which might once have been painted yellow. The shades were drawn, the door was shut, and the only sign of occupancy was a battered blue coaster wagon which lay on its side against the steps. Its name was **SPEEDY**, according to the lettering on its frame, but when I stumbled against it I called it something else under my breath.

I fancied I saw the shades move slightly in a window to the left as we ascended the porch stairs, but I may have been mistaken. Orlando Crown pressed the buzzer and a sour whine echoed from within the house.

A sallow-faced Mexican girl opened the door. She brushed the perspiration from her mustache, wiped her hand on a strand of stringy hair, and said, 'Yes, please?'

'Mrs. Hubbard. We have an appointment.'

'I tell her. Wait here.' Orlando Crown followed her into the hall, and I followed him. The corridor was dark and narrow like a closet. And like a closet it smelled of mothballs and mustiness. There were doors on either side of the hallway, and the girl entered the one at our right.

We settled down in wicker chairs and waited. My chair was next to an end-table piled high with tattered magazines. I picked one up. It was a copy of **FILM FUN** for January.

Orlando Crown smiled at me.

'This looks as if it might be interesting,' he confided, in a whisper. 'There are usually two kinds of operators, you know. The first is the old-fashioned racketeer—the kind that puts up a big phony front, black drapes and brass gongs and music on the organ. The second group goes in for disarming simplicity; the "natural medium" gag. From this buildup I guess Mrs. Hubbard belongs to the second group.'

'How did you happen to select her?' I asked.

'Haven't much choice,' Crown shrugged. 'You see, most of the spook workers in this part of the country know me by sight or reputation. Hate me like poison, of course. But this Mrs. Hubbard is a newcomer.'

He found and lit a cigarette. I sat back and looked at 'gag' pictures of such current comic celebrities as Bud Abbott, Jimmy Finlayson, Andy Clyde, and Leon Errol.

The silence was emphatic. It grew hotter, mustier. The hall became an oversized coffin. Time passed, but what's time when you're inside a casket?

Crown stepped on the butt of his cigarette. I sat there and listened to the worms bore through the woodwork. Then the door opened, we jumped, and the Mexican girl said, 'In here, now.'

Beyond the doorway was an ordinary parlor—'sitting room' in the day when this house was built—filled with the usual scrolled oak furniture upholstered by a contemporary of Queen Anne. The wallpaper was Paris green, obscured in many places by large chromoes of the Saviour in meditation, exaltation and agony.

The center of the room was occupied by a 'dining room suite'; six chairs, and a round table. Mrs. Hubbard sat in one of the chairs, elbows on the table top.

She wasn't exactly Mrs. Hubbard—'Mother Hubbard' would be a more accurate tag. A fat, blowsy, red-faced woman in her mid-forties, with pork bristles on her arms and chin. Coarse brown hair nestled in a bun against the back of her high-necked black dress. There was something tragic about her deep-set eyes—here, if ever I saw one, was a woman who suffered. From a hangover.

'Greetings.'

Her voice was as big as her body. It bounced off the walls and exploded against our eardrums.

'You are prompt, Mr. Kinter.'

I nodded. Orlando had given my name as a coverup, of course.

'And you have brought a guest, I see.'

'Yes. I thought you wouldn't mind. This is——'

'I know.' Mrs. Hubbard smiled slightly. 'Please be seated, and I will endeavor to convince the skeptical Mr. Orlando Crown that I am indeed a psychic sensitive.'

Crown's eyebrows lifted as his posterior lowered into a chair. He started to reply, but the Mexican girl opened the door again and ushered four more people into the room. We turned and stared at the fat little red-faced man with the mustache, the portly matron in the flowered print dress, the pale, bespectacled blonde girl, and the gaunt, grey-haired woman who fiddled with her coral beads.

Mrs. Hubbard, unsmiling, waved them to places at the table. They sat down with the ease and assurance of regular customers who had been there many times before. The Mexican girl brought in an extra chair and disappeared again.

Nobody said a word. Orlando Crown watched Mrs. Hubbard. I watched Orlando Crown. Mrs. Hubbard didn't appear to be watching anybody. The whole affair had much of the quaint charm and jollity of an old-fashioned inquest.

I waited for something to happen. I waited for the closing of the blinds, the whisperings in the darkened room, the rappings and the wailings, the screech of chalk moving across a slate, the phosphorescent phantom issuing from the mouth of a moaning woman.

Instead, the Mexican girl appeared again. She carried a tablet of cheap, blue-ruled paper, a package of envelopes, and a handful of yellow pencils. This assortment made a nice little mess in the center of Mrs. Hubbard's dining-room table.

We watched as the girl rotated chunky thighs toward the door. The red-faced man fingered his mustache, the matron played with her purse, the girl with the glasses coughed, the grey-haired woman used her coral beads for a rosary.

'Will everybody take a pencil, a sheet of paper, and an envelope, please?'

Mrs. Hubbard was ready to go into her routine. We all groped for the props as directed.

'Because our group today is a little larger than usual, and because there is a natural reticence in the presence of strangers, I feel it best to have you put your problems in writing.' Mrs. Hubbard patted her brown pug and smiled.

'I suggest that each of you write down one question, to begin with. If we have time, I shall be glad to work with your further inquiries personally—and privately, if you wish.

'At the moment, the important thing, frankly, is to gain your confidence. Without it, you will have no faith in my power, nor in my ability to help you. Since some of you are

visiting me for the first time today, I'm going to make use of a rather spectacular device to convince you of my extraliminal perception.'

The deep, intelligent voice rolled smoothly, easily, persuasively, from the coarse mouth of that fat, sweating old woman.

'I'm not much of a showman—I cannot offer you a dark room, table tipping, ghostly presences. But if each one will write a question on a piece of paper, fold it up, and personally seal it in an envelope, perhaps I can demonstrate an interesting psychic phenomenon.'

There was a pause, a shared feeling of hesitation. Mrs. Hubbard didn't have to be a mystic to sense it.

'Please. It's very simple. I am going to read your questions back to you as you have written them, without opening the envelopes.'

Mrs. Hubbard smiled. 'There will be no trickery. You can examine the paper, the pencils, the envelopes. You won't find any carbon, or wax, or acid treatments to bring out the writing. There will be no waiting. I'll read your questions back to you and then open your envelopes, one at a time. That should serve as convincing proof of the powers that work through me. Then I'll give you the answers.

'So if you'll write—please do, and make your questions sincere—whatever is closest to your mind and heart——'

The red-faced man scrawled something on his ruled sheet and folded it carefully four times. The matron licked the tip of her pencil and frowned. I shielded my paper and wrote 'Will my new book be written by fall?'

Mrs. Hubbard couldn't possibly have read our writing. She had risen and walked over to a small card table set in the corner of the room. She drew up the extra chair and sat down behind the table, waiting until we folded and sealed and rustled.

'Bring your envelopes over personally, please,' she called. 'I don't want to be accused of switching.'

We filed past the table and sat down again, all of us watching her as she collected the six envelopes, shuffled them carefully, and then placed them on the corner of the table. She spread them out fanwise before her and frowned. Our chairs scraped back as we faced her. She switched on a lamp behind her and produced a wire filing basket.

There was no switching; no sleight-of-hand, no wires or

buzzers, or gimmicks of any kind. We stared at Mrs. Hubbard and she stared down at the envelopes.

Her forehead corrugated. A fat hand reached out at random and lifted an envelope from the center of the fan. She placed it against the corrugations above her eyes. Her eyes closed.

Then she was speaking, and her voice came from far away—far away inside herself, far away inside the envelope.

‘Should I sell my property to the syndicate or hold out for the original figure?’ she whispered.

The red-faced, mustached little man popped up like a Jack-in-the-box. ‘That’s it!’ he shouted. ‘By Golly, that’s my question!’

Orlando Crown never blinked. Everyone else was leaning forward, tense with excitement.

Mrs. Hubbard, eyes still closed, smiled at us. ‘Please, control your enthusiasm. It makes it more difficult to concentrate.’ She opened the envelope now, opened her eyes and glanced carelessly at the sheet, and then placed it in the wicker basket. And all the while she continued to talk.

‘As it comes to me, Mr. Rogers, this property that you speak of consists of a block of eight lots situated just south of San Juan Capistrano, on 101-A, the coast highway. This syndicate of which you speak, the——’

Rogers opened his mouth and she paused. ‘Of course, I will not mention names if you prefer. But it is true, isn’t it, that they plan to build a hotel on this site? And that yesterday they offered you \$58,000 cash for an outright sale, while you are holding out for \$65,000? I thought so. It appears that if you refuse, they will offer you \$60,000 on Thursday. If you still refuse, on Monday they will meet your price.’

Without pausing, the plump hand sought another envelope, pressed it to the red forehead. Eyes closed and mouth opened.

‘Will my new book be written by fall?’

She was reading my question without opening the envelope!

I tried again to pierce Orlando Crown’s bland stare. I tried to figure it out. There must be an angle, there was some kind of fakery somewhere, but it was too much for me. She had read my question without seeing it.

My mouth dropped open as I watched Mrs. Hubbard now carelessly unseal the envelope and withdraw the folded paper. She unraveled it and then—her mouth opened.

Something red fluttered to the table; something bold and

brazen, with a picture of a half-naked girl emblazoned on its crimson background.

It was the cover of the FILM FUN magazine I'd been reading in the hall!

Orlando Crown was on his feet, snatching at the cover. 'My question, I believe,' he said.

Mrs. Hubbard's mouth gulped for words. When they came, they sounded in a sweetly audible cadence.

'Why you dirty stinking lousy skunk!' said Mrs. Hubbard.

She couldn't escape. We crowded around the table and Orlando Crown, inarticulate no longer, held forth.

'You see, it's very simple. The whole trick is old as the hills. While the audience is looking for mirrors, radio-electronic eyes, and all kinds of elaborate devices, the fake mystic merely uses the old "one ahead" system. All she needs for that is a stooge. In this case it was Rogers, here.'

The red-faced man who had popped up like a Jack-in-the-box now looked as though he would collapse like one. But the astute Mr. Crown now held his arm firmly.

'Here's how it works. The stooge writes his question and seals it like all the others, but he marks his envelope—just a nick with a fingernail, here at the flap. The medium looks for it and can recognize at a glance which one belongs to her confederate. Here.'

He held up one of the unopened envelopes.

'This envelope she saves to the last. What she does is call out the stooge's question, which has been agreed upon in advance. He jumps up and makes a big fuss about hearing his question and she opens the envelope she'd held to her forehead. Naturally, it's one of the envelopes containing a legitimate question. She reads it and puts it in the basket. While answering Mr. Roger's question—in convincing detail—she was actually reading Mr. Kinter's question from the envelope she opened. Then with the next envelope she would answer Mr. Kinter and open mine.

'But when she called Mr. Kinter's question, she opened my envelope and that was her mistake.'

'You crummy rat,' muttered Mrs. Hubbard. 'What do you want from me?'

Crown shrugged. 'Nothing at all, really, from you—except your promise to quit working a racket on people who are in

need of genuine assistance from reputable consultants. I don't think you'll be trying these tricks around here very much longer.'

'Why you damned——'

'Careful, now! Watch your language. You aren't very lady-like, Mrs. Hubbard. Of course appearances are so deceptive, you folks must all remember that. For example, Mrs. Hubbard here does not use ladylike language, because she really isn't much of a lady. In fact——'

Orlando Crown's hand descended to pat Mother Hubbard's head. It rose again, clutching a brown-bunned wig. We gaped down on a fat, bald-headed man who gripped the edge of the table with brawny knuckles and cursed in a hoarse voice that drove us all from the room.

Crown turned to the group as we reached the sidewalk and made a courtly bow. 'My friends,' he said. 'I think our little session with the supernatural is over.'

'Well, I never!' 'Of all the things——' They spilled across the street, chattering and goggling. All but the old girl with the coral beads. She edged closer as Crown and I headed for our car.

'Pardon me,' she sniffed. 'I—I just wanted to thank you for what you did in there.'

'No thanks necessary.' Crown smiled and opened the car door.

'Oh, but you helped me a great deal. That horrid woman—person, I mean—had me almost convinced. I'd been coming to her for weeks for advice and she had nearly taken me away from Mrs. Prinn.'

'Mrs. Prinn?'

'Yes. She's a *real* medium. I mean a genuine one, not a fake.'

Crown winked at me, but the look he offered the woman was grave.

'Madame, if you will permit me to say so, all mediums are fakes.'

'Oh no!' The old lady put her hand on her cheek. 'Maybe there are lot of frauds like this one here, but not Mrs. Prinn! She doesn't try to fool you with tricks—she just summons up the spirits of the departed. She has a spirit guide, you know.'

Crown glanced impatiently at his watch. 'Very interesting,' he said. 'But I assure you, as an investigator of long standing,

that I have never encountered a genuine medium, a genuine apparition, or a spirit guide.'

'You ought to meet Little Hatchet,' the woman told him. 'He's an Indian.'

'An Indian spirit guide?' I asked. 'You know, I've always wondered about that. Why do all the mediums seem to work through Indian spirit guides?'

Orlando Crown coughed. 'We must be running along,' he said. Then, to the woman, 'We're going back downtown. If you'd care for a lift——'

'Thank you.' The old lady made a prim little obeisance and opened the rear door of the convertible. 'I think, under the circumstances, an introduction is warranted. I am Mrs. Celia Brewster.'

We gave our names. Crown did the honors as he drove.

'No,' said Mrs. Brewster. 'Not really! I should have recognized you from your pictures in the paper—Orlando Crown! Why, everybody knows about you.'

The Achilles' heel again. Crown positively smirked with pleasure.

'Yes, even Mrs. Prinn has spoken of you to us.'

'Not favorably, I trust.'

'Well——' The old lady had an embarrassed session with her beads. 'Naturally, being a true medium, she rather resents some of the statements you've made about spiritualism.'

'I should imagine so,' I murmured.

'But if you could only see what she does, I'm sure you'd take back all of those remarks about fakery,' Mrs. Brewster continued. She paused. 'Come to think of it, why can't you see what she does? Yes, why don't you visit Mrs. Prinn as my guest?'

'Dear lady——' Crown began.

'It would be such an honor,' the dear lady rattled on. 'Such a distinct honor to have a great investigator present at one of her seances.'

She had found the right note, again. Crown glanced at me. 'Well, I'm not really very interested. But Kinter here is looking for some material and I promised to take him around. What do you say? Would you like to see one of the old-fashioned spook sessions, with table tipping and skeletons and musical trumpets, the works?'

He wanted me to say yes. I said yes.

'Very well. Of course, you mustn't let my name out to Mrs. Prinn. I don't know her and she wouldn't care to meet me.'

'Just as you say, Mr. Crown. It will be a rewarding experience for both of us, I'm sure. I know you'll be convinced, once and for all, of the genuineness of communication from beyond.'

'Or you will be convinced, once and for all, that it's a stupid fake,' Crown retorted. 'Indian spirit guides, eh? Chief Wahoo, is that it?'

'Little Hatchet.' Mrs. Brewster corrected him with a smile. 'He was an Oglalla Sioux, in mundane life. He first manifested himself to Mrs. Prinn in 1934, when she was just a girl. Since that time he has served as her spirit guide, bringing messages from those who have passed over——'

'At so much per message,' Crown interrupted. 'By the way, how much is the old fraud into you for?'

'Why several thou—oh, please, Mr. Crown, I wish you wouldn't talk like that! Can't you at least suspend judgment until you meet Mrs. Prinn?'

'Sorry. By the way, when do you plan this excursion?'

'Why, I have an appointment tomorrow evening, at nine. Would that be convenient?'

'Certainly.' Crown slid the car over to the curb and opened the door. 'We park here, if that's convenient. Suppose I pick you up at eight-thirty, tomorrow evening. Where can I find you?'

Mrs. Brewster gave an address and Crown nodded as she stepped out of the car.

'Goodbye, now,' she said, waving her beads.

'Goodbye,' Crown called. And muttered, under his breath, 'Don't take any wooden Indians.'

Crown was in fine form the following evening. As we drove over to pick up Mrs. Brewster he regaled me at length with accounts of fake apports, telekinesis involving magnets and the use of reaching-rods. Nor did he moderate his remarks when Mrs. Brewster joined us and we headed for the medium's apartments.

'You were asking me about Chief Running Nose——'

'Little Hatchet,' Mrs. Brewster interjected, patiently.

'Whatever you call him, then. Anyway, Kinter here raised the question of why most mediums seem to have Indian spirit

guides.'

'It bothers me,' I said. 'Why pick on the poor Indians all the time?'

Mrs. Brewster sniffed, but subsided as Crown answered with a grin devoid of malice.

'Years and years ago, when spiritualism first flourished commercially on the Continent, mediums hit upon the Noble Red Man as an ideal personification. To begin with, the Europeans were infatuated with the works of Cooper; later generations avidly devoured the lurid thrillers built around the exploits of Buffalo Bill. Indians were exotic to Europeans, just as Hindus would be to us. And weren't all Indians pictured as "guides" in western romances of the day? The reasoning was simple—if Chief Hot Foot could find his way through the trackless wastes of Waukegan, surely he could lead the path through the realms of the spirit world.

'Besides, when the Indian guide spoke through the mouth of a medium, he could converse in gibberish. Nobody understood Indian languages, so the medium could bark out almost anything and sound authentic.

'So you see, it's just an old ghostly custom to use an Indian spirit guide. Nobody seems to wonder why good Indians—dead ones, that is—want to hang around fat old ladies and help them get through to spookville.'

'But Mrs. Prinn's guide isn't an invention,' Mrs. Brewster said, softly. 'Little Hatchet really lived. If you've read anything on Indian ethnology, or the history of the Sioux, you'll find his name. He passed over at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. Custer's Massacre, you know. He can give you details, absolutely authentic proofs that——'

'That your Mrs. Prinn read about in books at the public library,' Orlando Crown finished for her.

'I wish you'd refrain from condemning Mrs. Prinn in advance,' said the old woman, rattling her coral beads in nervous earnestness. 'Because I know you are going to be pleasantly surprised.'

'I think she'll be surprised,' answered Orlando Crown, grimly. 'And I doubt if she'll find it pleasant.'

'I haven't told her your name, but even if she finds out, it won't matter. Mrs. Prinn welcomes tests of her mediumship. If you only knew what she's told me about those who have passed over! And the very first time she knew all about me

without my saying anything; she told me things that I'd never revealed to anyone. Oh, this is going to be a wonderful experience for a skeptic like yourself, Mr. Crown!

'Apparently it begins now,' he observed, as the car entered the driveway of an ornate apartment building. An attendant took the wheel and parked the convertible as we headed for the chromium-splashed foyer and took an elevator to the seventh floor.

'What have you got there?' I whispered, indicating the small black satchel Crown carried in one hand.

'You'll see,' Crown answered. 'It's all part of that wonderful experience we're going to have. I don't think Mrs. Prinn will go for it, and I know Little Hatchet will be mad as hell.'

The elevator dumped us in front of a modernistic blonde oak door. Mrs. Brewster rang the bell and got chimes; the expensive, eight-tone kind. The sound alone told me that this seance would be quite a contrast to the sordid session of yesterday.

My assumption was correct. From the moment that the turbanned servant opened the door and bade us enter, we moved in an exotic world.

Only a Beverly Hills fag could have designed that parlor. Everything was black. Black velvet drapes covering the walls, black mohair covering the low, modernistic furniture with the ebony frames. black velour rugs covering the black-tiled floor. There were niches set in the walls at intervals, and they housed statuettes—black, of course—which I recognized as coming straight from primitive mythology or an Oriental art jobber. Dim light illumined the forms of many-armed Kali, grinning Bast, and a goggling Tibetan thunder god. I smelled incense and perfume. I also smelled money, and a rat.

Crown winked at me in the gloom, but Mrs. Brewster was properly impressed. We sat there and fidgeted as the chimes rang again, the Hindu opened the door, and several other seekers after Mystery entered the parlor. They eyed us nervously, but no one spoke.

Kali waved. Bast grinned. The Tibetan figure goggled. And the incense sent sinuous strands of scent through the draped darkness.

Drugs, hypnosis, auto-suggestion? Perhaps all played a part, but after a little while I forgot that this was all a phony stage setting, I forgot that I was sweating under the arms, I forgot that there are no supernatural manifestations. I closed my eyes

and then the music came stealing from far away, the gong sonorously sounded, and I was walking with the rest into another parlor, where the spider waited.

She sat behind the gigantic octagonal table, a wooden web spun to ensnare foolish flies. She sat there, dressed in darkness, and as she bowed her black head I saw a white part that curved like an eternal question-mark.

Her eyes were deep pools, and her voice seemed to issue from them rather than from her mouth. Her hands made strange, Sybilline gestures as she greeted us and urged us to take our places around the table. Eight places, eight people.

I came out of it long enough to look at Crown. Orlando Crown was obviously immune to exotic influences. His little eyes toured the room and blinked acknowledgment of all they saw. He noted the drapes, the candlelight, the deep recess at the far end of the chamber, the thick rug on the floor, the high ceiling with its beams set so as to obscure the faint flickering flame of the candles.

Then he looked at Mrs. Prinn. He inspected her black velvet gown, eyeing the long puffed sleeves. He glanced at her full skirt and at the loose slippers she wore. And then he jostled against me as the others took their places and managed to whisper, 'This is going to be a pushover! Why, she's got the whole joint rigged up, you can see that—just an old-fashioned spook worker with enough props in her clothes to supply a whole tribe of Indians.'

I nodded and then, as Mrs. Prinn glanced at us, sat down next to Crown.

There was a moment of coughing, a moment of rustling, a moment of settling back. Then came a long minute of complete silence. No organ music now, no gong, no chimes. Nothing but the soundless stirring of shadows in a room that was out of this world.

Mrs. Prinn sat there. Her gown was ebony, her flesh carved of marble. We waited for the statue to speak.

'Greetings. There are strangers among us this evening.'

Mrs. Brewster opened her mouth, but a glance from the medium sufficed to still her

'That does not matter. We welcome the presence of new converts. Even the presence of disbelievers does not disconcert us. There is no greater good for the Cause than the conversion of a skeptic to the truth.'

'I see that the gentleman on the end'—she nodded at Orlando Crown—'has taken the liberty of bringing a black bag. From previous experience, I assume that he has some test in mind.' She stared at Crown with a bleak smile.

'Oh, I'm sorry about this, Mrs. Prinn. Perhaps I should have told you. These gentlemen——'

'No need to explain, Mrs. Brewster. The fact that they are your guests is enough for me.' The smile was less bleak. 'If our skeptical friends wish to test this seance in any way, I shall be only too happy to cooperate.'

Crown placed his satchel on the table. Everybody gaped.

'What is it you wish?' purred Mrs. Prinn. 'Do you want to tape the doors, seal them? Sprinkle the floor with powder? String ropes across the room, or nets? Would you like to bind my hands and feet? Consider me a willing martyr at the altar of Science.'

There was a subtle mockery in her tone, and Orlando Crown responded.

'Nothing so elaborate, I assure you. I merely' thought it might be interesting to vary the usual procedure—the joining of hands customary at a seance.'

'What do you propose instead?'

'These.'

Orlando Crown dumped a pile of gleaming silver onto the table top.

'Handcuffs!' breathed Mrs. Brewster. 'Oh, you aren't going to handcuff her, are you?'

'Not only her, but all of us. You see, I brought a dozen pairs; enough and to spare.'

'But——'

'Quite all right,' said Mrs. Prinn. 'We welcome tests. I assume you wish to place them upon our wrists at once. So if there are no objections, I'll ask Chardur to oblige.'

'I'd rather see to it myself,' Crown murmured.

'As you wish.'

Orlando Crown was a fast man with a pair of cuffs. He passed around the table linking wrist to wrist, trying and testing each set of cuffs and locking them into place quite securely. We sat chained to one another with but a single missing link.

'Now call Chardur, if you please.' Crown sat down. 'He can put the bracelets on me and complete the circle.'

Chardur appeared, handcuffing Crown into place between Mrs. Brewster and myself.

'Does Sahib wish to keep the key?' inquired the Hindu.

'Not on your life! Sahib wishes you to put the key in his mouth.'

'In his——?'

'You got me, brother! Put it in my mouth; I want to know where it is when the lights go out.'

Orlando Crown grinned widely, and the key slipped into the grin.

'You may leave and lock the door, Chardur,' called Mrs. Prinn. 'But please extinguish the candles before you go.'

'And after that,' Crown called, 'have the goodness to show yourself in the doorway as you go out. Just for the sake of skeptics.'

The candles went out. So did Chardur. Eight of us sat in darkness around a table, handcuffed together like prisoners in the black hull of a slave ship.

I don't know what it's like inside the hold of a slave ship, but I imagine the air is filled with squeaks and groans, with hoarse breathing and the creaking of wind and sea and the forces outside.

The forces outside——

We weren't in a slave ship, but there *were* forces outside. Creaks. Groans. A chill wind, sighing and swirling. And Mrs. Prinn's voice from far away. A deep voice, in deeper darkness.

'Can you hear me? Can you hear me? I'm calling. . . . calling . . . can you hear?'

Silence.

'I'm trying to make you hear . . . we are waiting . . . I'm trying to lose . . . hard to fight against . . . lose my . . .'

Silence.

'*I come.*'

It wasn't her voice. I've heard imitators, ventriloquists, and drunken sluts in taverns—but no woman can truly mimic the deep bass of a man.

This was a man's voice, guttural and strained through black barriers.

'*Hard to find way. Someone fighting. Someone evil.*'

It spoke like an Indian. It sounded like an Indian. And then—it looked like an Indian!

The whiteness gathered over Mrs. Prinn's head. It wasn't

phosphorescent, or filmy; it gave forth no glow to light up a single inch of surrounding space. It was merely a formless whiteness that assumed form. I saw a man's head and arms emerge as though from a hole in the darkness—a hole that might have been Mrs. Prinn's open mouth.

Indian? I couldn't be sure, even when I saw the single braid on the shaven skull, the single plume surmounting the scarred or painted cheeks.

'Me Little Hatchet.'

I was waiting for that, and I expected it to be corny. But it wasn't. Because I saw the face, emerging from nowhere; heard the voice, emerging from nowhere. Or from somewhere not in this world.

'I come to warn. Evil here. Heap plenty. Enemy.'

The handcuffed wrist attached to my own left hand now moved slowly. Crown was jerking my arm upward.

'I see him. Grey-haired man, make trouble. I know name. Orlando Crown.'

A great sigh went up, and this time I could recognize it as coming from Mrs. Prinn's mouth. The others were breathing hard. I listened, but at the same time I felt Crown's wrist moving mine up, up toward his mouth. Suddenly I understood his plan. He kept the key in his mouth for a purpose. He now intended to unlock his own wrists from the handcuffs and creep over to investigate the Indian spirit guide. A clever man, Orlando Crown.

But apparently Little Hatchet didn't share my sentiments toward him. For the guttural voice droned on.

'He no believe. He no want truth. He want to make trouble, boast and lie. Spirits know. Spirits hate. Spirits send me to warn.'

Fake or not, Mrs. Prinn knew Crown's name, all right. But how could she possibly know that——?

'He take off handcuffs now!'

The guttural voice was a triumphant shout.

'He come to find me. Must not do. Stay back!'

Crown had slipped away from my side at the table. There was a muffled murmur of movement in the darkness. The white blur swirled and swooped.

'Back! No—it is forbidden!'

I heard Crown gasp, knew that he was retreating to his chair again as the white figure of Little Hatchet soared forward,

forcing him. The guttural voice was almost in my ear.

'Spirits command vengeance!'

Those were the last words I heard. But not the last sounds.

I heard a scream, and then something else—a sound I am sure that has not been uttered for over half a century on the face of the earth.

There was another scream, a groan, and then shrieks rose from all around the table. The white blur hovered over Crown; I tried to clutch at it, but felt nothing save the wave of ice that slithered up my arm, down my spine.

The first scream came from Crown, the shrieks came from the rest of the sitters, and now Mrs. Prinn was shouting in a normal voice.

'Lights! Hurry—lights!'

The shocking shape wavered into nothingness. There was a moment of darkness, and then Chardur entered the room and snapped a switch.

I've told it just the way it happened, or just the way I thought it happened there in the darkness with the distraction of phantom shape, phantom voice, and the final moment of madness to blot out all reasonable remembrance.

I've told it just the way I told it to the police, and nothing anyone else can say has added to the story. Mrs. Brewster knows no more, Mrs. Prinn cannot explain.

The police do not wish to believe that the seance was genuine. The police do not wish to believe in the existence of an Indian spirit guide. But there is nothing else to account for what happened—for that final ghastly sound which I identify as a war whoop, and for what we saw when the lights went on...

Yes, the lights were on and I saw Orlando Crown sitting in his chair once more. I stared at his head, which was like a bucket of blood and brains that had overflowed.

Maybe there is an Indian spirit guide and maybe there isn't. But as I stared at the red ruin of Orlando Crown's head, I believed at last.

For Orlando Crown had been scalped.

'LUCY COMES TO STAY'

'You can't go on this way.'

Lucy kept her voice down low, because she knew the nurse had her room just down the hall from mine, and I wasn't supposed to see any visitors.

'But George is doing everything he can—poor dear, I hate to think of what all those doctors and specialists are costing him, and the sanatorium bill, too. And now that nurse, that Miss Higgins, staying here every day.'

'It won't do any good. You know it won't.' Lucy didn't sound like she was arguing with me. She knew. That's because Lucy is smarter than I am. Lucy wouldn't have started the drinking and gotten into such a mess in the first place. So it was about time I listened to what she said.

'Look, Vi,' she murmured. 'I hate to tell you this. You aren't well, you know. But you're going to find out one of these days anyway, and you might as well hear it from me.'

'What is it, Lucy?'

'About George, and the doctors. They don't think you're going to get well.' She paused. 'They don't want you to.'

'Oh, Lucy!'

'Listen to me, you little fool. Why do you suppose they sent you to that sanatorium in the first place? They said it was to take the cure. So you took it. All right, you're cured, then. But you'll notice that you still have the doctor coming every day, and George makes you stay here in your room, and that Miss Higgins who's supposed to be a special nurse—you know what she is, don't you? She's a guard.'

I couldn't say anything. I just sat there and blinked. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't, because deep down inside I knew that Lucy was right.

'Just try to get out of here,' Lucy said. 'You'll see how fast she locks the door on you. All that talk about special diets and rest doesn't fool me. Look at yourself—you're as well as I am! You ought to be getting out, seeing people, visiting your friends.'

'But I have no friends,' I reminded her. 'Not after that party, not after what I did——'

'That's a lie,' Lucy nodded. 'That's what George wants you to think. Why, you have hundreds of friends, Vi. They still love you. They tried to see you at the hospital and George wouldn't let them in. They sent flowers to the sanatorium and George told the nurses to burn them.'

'He did? He told the nurses to burn the flowers?'

'Of course. Look, Vi, it's about time you faced the truth. George wants them to think you're sick. George wants you to think you're sick. Why? Because then he can put you away for good. Not in a private sanatorium, but in the——'

'No!' I began to shake. I couldn't stop shaking. It was ghastly. But it proved something. They told me at the sanatorium, the doctors told me, that if I took the cure I wouldn't get the shakes any more. Or the dreams, or any of the other things. Yet here it was—I was shaking again.

'Shall I tell you some more?' Lucy whispered. 'Shall I tell you what they're putting in your food? Shall I tell you about George and Miss Higgins?'

'But she's older than he is, and besides he'd never——'

Lucy laughed.

'Stop it!' I yelled.

'All right. But don't yell, you little fool. Do you want Miss Higgins to come in?'

'She thinks I'm taking a nap. She gave me a sedative.'

'Lucky I dumped it out!' Lucy frowned. 'Vi, I've got to get you away from here. And there isn't much time.'

She was right. There wasn't much time. Seconds, hours, days, weeks—how long had it been since I'd had a drink?

'We'll sneak off,' Lucy said. 'We could take a room together where they wouldn't find us. I'll nurse you until you're well.'

'But rooms cost money.'

'You have that fifty dollars George gave you for a party dress.'

'Why, Lucy,' I said. 'How did you know that?'

'You told me ages ago, dear. Poor thing, you don't remember things very well, do you? All the more reason for trusting me.'

I nodded. I could trust Lucy. Even though she was responsible, in a way, for me starting to drink. She just had thought it would cheer me up when George brought all his high-class

friends to the house and we went out to impress his clients. Lucy had tried to help. I could trust her. I must trust her—

‘We can leave as soon as Miss Higgins goes tonight,’ Lucy was saying. ‘We’ll wait until George is asleep, eh? Why not get dressed now, and I’ll come back for you.’

I got dressed. It isn’t easy to dress when you have the shakes, but I did it. I even put on some makeup and trimmed my hair a little with the big scissors. Then I looked at myself in the mirror and said out loud, ‘Why, you can’t tell, can you?’

‘Of course not,’ said Lucy. ‘You look radiant: Positively radiant.’

I stood there smiling, and the sun was going down, just shining through the window on the scissors in a way that hurt my eyes, and all at once I was so sleepy.

‘George will be here soon, and Miss Higgins will leave,’ Lucy said. ‘I’d better go now. Why don’t you rest until I come for you?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘You’ll be very careful, won’t you?’

‘Very careful,’ Lucy whispered, as she tiptoed out quietly.

I lay down on the bed and then I was sleeping, really sleeping for the first time in weeks, sleeping so the scissors wouldn’t hurt my eyes, the way George hurt me inside when he wanted to shut me up in the asylum so he and Miss Higgins could make love on my bed and laugh at me the way they all laughed except Lucy and she would take care of me she knew what to do now I could trust her when George came and I must sleep and sleep and nobody can blame you for what you think in your sleep or do in your sleep . . .

It was all right until I had the dreams, and even then I didn’t really worry about them because a dream is only a dream, and when I was drunk I had a lot of dreams.

When I woke up I had the shakes again, but it was Lucy shaking me, standing there in the dark shaking me, I looked around and saw that the door to my room was open, but Lucy didn’t bother to whisper.

She stood there with the scissors in her hand and called to me.

‘Come on, let’s hurry.’

‘What are you doing with the scissors?’ I asked.

‘Cutting the telephone wires, silly! I got into the kitchen after Miss Higgins left and dumped some of that sedative into George’s coffee. Remember, I told you the plan.’

I couldn't remember now, but I knew it was all right. Lucy and I went out through the hall, past George's room, and he never stirred. Then we went downstairs and out the front door and the streetlights hurt my eyes. Lucy made me hurry right along, though.

We took a bus around the corner. This was the difficult part, getting away. Once we were out of the neighborhood there'd be no worry. The wires were cut.

The lady at the rooming house on the South Side didn't know about the wires being cut. She didn't know about me, either, because Lucy got the room.

Lucy marched in bold as brass and laid my fifty dollars down on the desk. The rent was \$12.50 a week in advance, and Lucy didn't even ask to see the room. I guess that's why the landlady wasn't worried about baggage.

We got upstairs and locked the door, and then I had the shakes again.

Lucy said, 'Vi—cut it out?'

'But I can't help it. What'll I do now, Lucy? Oh, what'll I do? Why did I ever——'

'Shut up! Lucy opened my purse and pulled something out. I had been wondering why my purse felt so heavy but I never dreamed about the secret.

She held the secret up. It glittered under the light, like the scissors, only this was a nice glittering. A golden glittering.

'A whole pint!' I gasped. 'Where did you get it?'

'From the cupboard downstairs, naturally. You knew George still keeps the stuff around. I slipped it into your purse, just in case.'

I had the shakes, but I got that bottle open in ten seconds. One of my fingernails broke, and then the stuff was burning and warming and softening——

'Pig!' said Lucy.

'You knew I had to have it,' I whispered. 'That's why you brought it.'

'I don't like to see you drink,' Lucy answered. 'I never drink and I don't like to see you hang one on, either.'

'Please, Lucy. Just this once.'

'Why can't you take a shot and then leave it alone? That's all I ask.'

'Just this once, Lucy, I have to.'

'I won't sit here and watch you make a spectacle of yourself.'

You know what always happens—another mess.’

I took another gulp. The bottle was half-empty.

‘I did all I could for you, Vi. But if you don’t stop now, I’m going.’

That made me pause. ‘You couldn’t do that to me. I need you, Lucy. Until I’m straightened out, anyway.’

Lucy laughed, the way I didn’t like. ‘Straightened out! That’s a hot one! Talking about straightening out with a bottle in your hand. It’s no use, Vi. Here I do everything I can for you, stop at nothing to get you away, and you’re off on another.’

‘Please. You know I can’t help it.’

‘Oh, yes, you can help it, Vi. But you don’t want to. You’ve always had to make a choice, you know. George or the bottle. Me or the bottle. And the bottle always wins. I think deep down inside you hate George. You hate me.’

‘You’re my best friend.’

‘Nuts!’ Lucy talked vulgar sometimes, when she got really mad. And she was mad, now. It made me so nervous I had another drink.

‘Oh, I’m good enough for you when you’re in trouble, or have nobody else around to talk to. I’m good enough to lie for you, pull you out of your messes. But I’ve never been good enough for your friends, for George. And I can’t even win over a bottle of rotgut whiskey. It’s no use, Vi. What I’ve done for you today you’ll never know. And it isn’t enough. Keep your lousy whiskey. I’m going.’

I know I started to cry. I tried to get up, but the room was turning round and round. Then Lucy was walking out the door and I dropped the bottle and the light kept shining the way it did on the scissors and I closed my eyes and dropped after the bottle to the floor. . . .

When I woke up they were all pestering me, the landlady and the doctor and Miss Higgins and the man who said he was a policeman.

I wondered if Lucy had gone to them and betrayed me, but when I asked the doctor said no, they just discovered me through a routine checkup on hotels and rooming houses after they found George’s body in his bed with my scissors in his throat.

All at once I knew what Lucy had done, and why she ran out on me that way. She knew they’d find me and call it

murder.

So I told them about her and how it must have happened. I even figured out how Lucy managed to get my fingerprints on the scissors.

But Miss Higgins said she'd never seen Lucy in my house, and the landlady told a lie and said I had registered for the room alone, and the man from the police just laughed when I kept begging him to find Lucy and make her tell the truth.

Only the doctor seemed to understand, and when we were alone together in the little room he asked me all about her and what she looked like, and I told him.

Then he brought over the mirror and held it up and asked me if I could see her. And sure enough——

She was standing right behind me, laughing. I could see her in the mirror and I told the doctor so, and he said yes, he thought he understood now.

So it was all right after all. Even when I got the shakes just then and dropped the mirror, so that the little jagged pieces hurt my eyes to look at, it was all right.

Lucy was back with me now, and she wouldn't ever go away any more. She'd stay with me forever. I knew that. I knew it, because even though the light hurt my eyes, Lucy began to laugh.

After a minute, I began to laugh, too. And then the two of us were laughing together, we couldn't stop even when the doctor went away. We just stood there against the bars, Lucy and I, laughing like crazy.

THE PLOT IS THE THING

WHEN they broke into the apartment, they found her sitting in front of the television set, watching an old movie.

Peggy couldn't understand why they made such a fuss about that. She liked to watch old movies—the Late Show, the Late, Late Show, even the All Night Show. That was really the best, because they generally ran the horror pictures. Peggy tried to explain this to them, but they kept prowling around the apartment, looking at the dust on the furniture and the dirty sheets on the unmade bed. Somebody said there was green mould on the dishes in the sink; it's true she hadn't bothered to wash them for quite a long time, but then she hadn't eaten for several days, either.

It wasn't as though she didn't have any money; she told them about the bank accounts. But shopping and cooking and housekeeping was just too much trouble, and besides, she really didn't like going outside and seeing all those *people*. So if she preferred watching TV, that was her business, wasn't it?

They just looked at each other and shook their heads and made some phone calls. And then the ambulance came, and they helped her dress. Helped her? They practically *forced* her.

In the end it didn't do any good, and by the time she realized where they were taking her it was too late.

At first they were very nice to her at the hospital, but they kept asking those idiotic questions. When she said she had no relatives or friends they wouldn't believe her, and when they checked and found out it was true it only made things worse. Peggy got angry and said she was going home, and it all ended with a hypo in the arm.

There were lots of hypos after that, and in between times this Dr. Crane kept after her. He was one of the heads of staff and at first Peggy liked him, but not when he began to pry.

She tried to explain to him that she'd always been a loner, even before her parents died. And she told him there was no reason for her to work, with all that money. Somehow, he got

it out of her about how she used to keep going to the movies, at least one every day, only she liked horror pictures and of course there weren't quite that many, so after a while she just watched them on TV. Because it was easier, and you didn't have to go home along dark streets after seeing something frightening. At home she could lock herself in, and as long as she had the television going she didn't feel lonely. Besides, she could watch movies all night, and this helped her insomnia. Sometimes the old pictures were pretty gruesome and this made her nervous, but she felt more nervous when she didn't watch. Because in the movies, no matter how horrible things seemed for the heroine, she was always rescued in the end. And that was better than the way things generally worked out in real life, wasn't it?

Dr. Crane didn't think so. And he wouldn't let her have any television in her room now, either. He kept talking to Peggy about the need to face reality, and the dangers of retreating into a fantasy world and identifying with frightened heroines. The way he made it sound, you'd think she *wanted* to be menaced, *wanted* to be killed, or even raped.

And when he started all that nonsense about a 'nervous disorder' and told her about his plans for treatment, Peggy knew she had to escape. Only she never got a chance. Before she realized it, they had arranged for the lobotomy.

Peggy knew what a lobotomy was, of course. And she was afraid of it, because it meant tampering with the brain. She remembered some mad doctor—Lionel Atwill, or George Zucco?—saying that by tampering with the secrets of the human brain one can change reality. 'There are some things we were not meant to know,' he had whispered. But that, of course, was in a movie. And Dr. Crane wasn't mad. *She* was the mad one. Or was she? He certainly looked insane—she kept trying to break free after they strapped her down and he came after her—she remembered the way everything gleamed. His eyes, and the long needle. The long needle, probing into her brain to change reality—

The funny thing was, when she woke up she felt fine. 'I'm like a different person, Doctor.'

And it was true. No more jitters; she was perfectly calm. And she wanted to eat, and she didn't have insomnia, and she could dress herself and talk to the nurses, even kid around with them. The big thing was that she didn't worry about

watching television any more. She could scarcely remember any of those old movies that had disturbed her. Peggy wasn't a bit disturbed now. And even Dr. Crane knew it.

At the end of the second week he was willing to let her go home. They had a little chat, and he complimented her on how well she was doing, asked her about her plans for the future. When Peggy admitted she hadn't figured anything out yet, Dr. Crane suggested she take a trip. She promised to think it over.

But it wasn't until she got back to the apartment that Peggy made up her mind. The place was a mess. The moment she walked in she knew she couldn't stand it. All that dirt and grime and squalor—it was like a movie set, really, with clothes scattered everywhere and dishes piled in the sink. Peggy decided right then and there she'd take a vacation. Around the world, maybe. Why not? She had the money. And it would be interesting to see all the *real* things she'd seen represented on the screen all these years.

So Peggy dissolved into a travel agency and montaged into shopping and packing and faded out to London.

Strange, she didn't think of it in that way at the time. But looking back, she began to realize that this is the way things seemed to happen. She'd come to a decision, or go somewhere and do something, and all of a sudden she'd find herself in another setting—just like in a movie, where they cut from scene to scene. When she first became aware of it she was a little worried; perhaps she was having blackouts. After all, her brain *had* been tampered with. But there was nothing really alarming about the little mental blanks. In a way they were very convenient, just like in the movies; you don't particularly want to waste time watching the heroine brush her teeth or pack her clothing or put on cosmetics. The plot is the thing. That's what's *real*.

And everything was real, now. No more uncertainty. Peggy could admit to herself that before the operation there had been times when she wasn't quite sure about things; sometimes what she saw on the screen was more convincing than the dull gray fog which seemed to surround her in daily life.

But that was gone, now. Whatever that needle had done, it had managed to pierce the fog. Everything was very clear, very sharp and definite, like good black and white camera work. And she herself felt so much more capable and confident. She was well-dressed, well-groomed, attractive again. The extras

moved along the streets in an orderly fashion and didn't bother her. And the bit players spoke their lines crisply, performed their functions, and got out of the scene. Odd that she should think of them that way—they weren't 'bit players' at all; just travel clerks and waiters and stewards and then, at the hotel, bellboys and maids. They seemed to fade in and out of the picture on cue. All smiles, like in the early part of a good horror movie, where at first everything seems bright and cheerful.

Paris was where things started to go wrong. This guide—a sort of Eduardo Cianelli type, in fact he looked to be an almost dead ringer for Cianelli as he was many years ago—was showing her through the Opera House. He happened to mention something about the catacombs, and that rang a bell.

She thought about Erik. That was his name, Erik—The Phantom of the Opera. *He* had lived in the catacombs underneath the Opera House. Of course, it was only a picture, but she thought perhaps the guide would know about it and she mentioned Erik's name as a sort of joke.

That's when the guide turned pale and began to tremble. And then he ran. Just ran off and left her standing there.

Peggy knew something was wrong, then. The scene just seemed to dissolve—that part didn't worry her, it was just another one of those temporary blackouts she was getting used to—and when Peggy gained awareness, she was in this bookstore asking a clerk about Gaston Leroux.

And this was what frightened her. She remembered distinctly that *The Phantom of the Opera* had been written by Gaston Leroux, but here was this French bookstore clerk telling her there was no such author.

That's what they said when she called the library. No such author—and no such book. Peggy opened her mouth, but the scene was already dissolving...

In Germany she rented a car, and she was enjoying the scenery when she came to this burned mill and the ruins of the castle beyond. She knew where she was, of course, but it couldn't be—not until she got out of the car, moved up to the great door, and in the waning sun of twilight, read the engraved legend of the stone. *Frankenstein*.

There was a faint sound from behind the door, a sound of muffled, dragging footsteps, moving closer. Peggy screamed, and ran...

Now she knew where she was running to. Perhaps she'd find safety behind the Iron Curtain. Instead there was another castle, and she heard the howling of a wolf in the distance, saw the bat swoop from the shadows as she fled.

And in an English library in Prague, Peggy searched the volumes of literary biography. There was no listing for Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, none for Bram Stoker.

Of course not. There wouldn't be, in a *movie* world, because when the characters are real, their 'authors' do not exist.

Peggy remembered the way Larry Talbot had changed before her eyes, metamorphizing into the howling wolf. She remembered the sly purr of the Count's voice, saying, 'I do not drink—wine.' And she shuddered, and longed to be far away from the superstitious peasantry who draped wolfbane outside their windows at night.

She needed the reassurance of sanity in an English-speaking country. She'd go to London, see a doctor immediately.

Then she remembered what was *in* London. Another werewolf. And Mr. Hyde. And the Ripper . . .

Peggy fled through a fadeout, back to Paris. She found the name of a psychiatrist, made her appointment. She was perfectly prepared to face her problem now, perfectly prepared to face reality.

But she was not prepared to face the baldheaded little man with the sinister accent and the bulging eyes. She knew him—Dr. Gogol, in *Mad Love*. She also knew Peter Lorre had passed on, knew *Mad Love* was only a movie, made the year she was born. But that was in another country, and besides, the wench was dead.

The wench was dead, but Peggy was alive. '*I am a stranger and afraid, in a world I never made.*' Or had she made this world? She wasn't sure. All she knew was that she had to escape.

Where? It couldn't be Egypt, because that's where *he* would be—the wrinkled, hideous image of the Mummy superimposed itself momentarily. The Orient? What about Fu Manchu?

Back to America, then? Home is where the heart is—but there'd be a knife waiting for that heart when the shower curtains were ripped aside and the creature of *Psycho* screamed and slashed . . .

Somehow she managed to remember a haven, born in other films. The South Seas—Dorothy Lamour, John Hall, the

friendly natives in the tropical paradise. There *was* escape.

Peggy boarded the ship in Marseilles. It was a tramp steamer but the cast—crew, rather—was reassuringly small. At first she spent most of her time below deck, huddled in her berth. Oddly enough, it was getting to be like it had been *before*. Before the operation, that is, before the needle bit into her brain, twisting it, or distorting the world. *Changing reality*, as Lionel Atwill had put it. She should have listened to them—Atwill, Zucco, Basil Rathbone, Edward Van Sloan, John Carradine. They may have been a little mad, but they were good doctors, dedicated scientists. They mean well. 'There are some things we were not meant to know.'

When they reached the tropics, Peggy felt much better. She regained her appetite, prowled the deck, went into the galley and joked with the Chinese cook. The crew seemed aloof, but they all treated her with the greatest respect. She began to realize she'd done the right thing—this *was* escape. And the warm scent of tropic nights beguiled her. From now on, this would be her life; drifting through nameless, uncharted seas, safe from the role of heroine with all its haunting and horror.

It was hard to believe she'd been so frightened. There were no phantoms, no werewolves in this world. Perhaps she didn't need a doctor. She was facing reality, and it was pleasant enough. There were no movies here, no television; her fears were all part of a long-forgotten nightmare.

One evening, after dinner, Peggy returned to her cabin with something nagging at the back of her brain. The captain had put in one of his infrequent appearances at the table, and he kept looking at her all through the meal. Something about the way he squinted at her was disturbing. Those little pig-eyes of his reminded her of someone. Noah Beery? Stanley Fields?

She kept trying to remember, and at the same time she was dozing off. Dozing off much too quickly. Had her food been drugged?

Peggy tried to sit up. Through the porthole she caught a reeling glimpse of land beyond, but then everything began to whirl and it was too late . . .

When she awoke she was already on the island, and the woolly-headed savages were dragging her through the gate, howling and waving their spears.

They tied her and left her and then Peggy heard the chanting. She looked up and saw the huge shadow. Then she knew

where she was and what *it* was, and she screamed.

Even over her own screams she could hear the natives chanting, just one word, over and over again. It sounded like, 'Kong.'

UNDERGROUND

ALL day long he rested, while the guns thundered in the village below. Then, in the slanting shadows of the late afternoon, the rumbling echoes faded into the distance and he knew it was over. The American advance had crossed the river. They were gone at last, and it was safe once more.

Above the village, in the crumbling ruins of the great chateau atop the wooded hillside, Count Barsac emerged from the crypt.

The Count was tall and thin—cadaverously thin, in a manner most hideously appropriate. His face and hands had a waxen pallor; his hair was dark, but not as dark as his eyes and the hollows beneath them. His cloak was black, and the sole touch of color about his person was the vivid redness of his lips when they curled in a smile.

He was smiling now, in the twilight, for it was time to play the game.

The name of the game was Death, and the Count had played it many times.

He had played it in Paris, on the stage of the grand Guignol; his name had been plain Eric Karon then, but still he'd won a certain renown for his interpretation of bizarre roles. Then the war had come, and with it, his opportunity.

Long before the Germans took Paris, he'd joined their Underground, working long and well. As an actor, he'd been invaluable.

And this, of course, was his ultimate reward. To play the supreme role—not on the stage, but in real life. To play without the artifice of spotlights, in true darkness; this was the actor's dream come true. He had even helped to fashion the plot.

'Simplicity itself,' he told his superiors. 'Chateau Barsac has been deserted since the Revolution. None of the peasants from the village dare to venture near it, even in daylight, because of the legend. It is said, you see, that the last Count Barsac was a vampire.'

And so it was arranged. The shortwave transmitter had been set up in the crypts beneath the chateau, with three skilled operators in attendance, working in shifts. And he, Count Barsac, in charge of the entire operation, as guardian angel. Or guardian demon.

'There is a graveyard on the hillside below,' he informed them. 'A humble resting place for poor and ignorant people. It contains a single imposing crypt—the ancestral tomb of the Barsacs. We shall open that crypt, remove the remains of the last Count, and allow the villagers to discover that the coffin is empty. They will never venture near the spot of the chateau again, because this will prove that the legend is true—Count Barsac is a vampire, and walks once more.'

The question came then. 'What if there are skeptics? What if someone does not believe?'

And he had his answer ready. 'They will believe. For at night, I shall walk. I, Count Barsac.'

After they saw him in the makeup, wearing the cloak, there were no more questions. The role was his.

The role was his, and he'd played it well. The Count nodded to himself as he climbed the stairs and entered the roofless foyer of the chateau, where only a configuration of cobwebs veiled the radiance of the rising moon.

Now, of course, the curtain must come down. If the American advance had swept past the village below, it was time to take one's bow and exit. And that too had been well arranged.

During the German withdrawal, another advantageous use had been made of the tomb in the graveyard. A *cache* of Air Marshall Goering's art treasures now rested safely and undisturbed within the crypt. A lorry had been placed in the chateau. Even now, the three wireless operators would be playing new parts—driving the lorry down the hillside to the tomb, placing the artwork and artifacts in it. By the time he arrived there, everything would be packed. And they would don the stolen American Army uniforms, carry the forged identifications and permits, drive through the lines across the river and rejoin the German forces at a predesignated spot. Nothing had been left to chance. Some day, when he wrote his memoirs—

But there was no time to consider that now. The Count glanced up through the gaping aperture in the ruined roof. The moon was high. Time to leave.

In a way he hated to go. Where others saw only dust and

cobwebs, he could see a stage—the setting of his finest performance. Playing a vampire's role had not addicted him to the taste of blood—but as an actor, he enjoyed the taste of triumph. And he had triumphed here.

'Parting is such a sweet sorrow.' Shakespeare's line. Shakespeare, who had written of ghosts and witches, of bloody apparitions. Because he knew that his audiences, the stupid masses, believed in such things. Just as they still believed, today. A great actor could always make them believe.

The Count moved into the shadowy darkness outside the chateau entrance. He started down the pathway toward the beckoning trees.

It was here, amidst those trees, that he had come upon Raymond, one evening weeks ago. Raymond had been his most appreciative audience; a stern, dignified, white-haired elderly man, mayor of the village of Barsac. But there'd been nothing dignified about the old fool when he'd caught sight of the Count looming up before him out of the night. He'd screamed like a woman and run.

Probably he'd been prowling around, intent on poaching; all that had been forgotten after his encounter in the woods. Raymond was the one to thank for spreading the rumors that the Count was again abroad. He and Clodez, the oafish miller, had then led an armed band to the graveyard and entered the Barsac tomb. What a fright they got when they discovered the Count's coffin open and empty!

The coffin had contained only dust, and it was scattered to the winds now, but they could not know that. Nor could they know about what had happened to Suzanne.

The Count was passing the banks of the small stream now. Here, on another evening, he'd found the girl—Raymond's daughter, as luck would have it—in an embrace with young Antoine LeFevre, her lover. Antoine's shattered leg had invalidated him out of the army, but he ran like a deer when he glimpsed the grinning Count. Suzanne had been left behind and that was unfortunate, because it was necessary to dispose of her. The body had been buried in the woods, beneath great stones, and there was no question of discovery; still, it was a regrettable incident.

In the end, however, everything was for the best. Because now silly superstitious Raymond was doubly convinced that

the vampire walked. He had seen the creature himself, seen the empty tomb and the open coffin; his own daughter had disappeared. At his command, none dared venture near the graveyard, the woods, or the chateau beyond.

Poor Raymond! Now he was not even a mayor any more—his village had been destroyed in the bombardment. Just an ignorant, broken old man, mumbling his idiotic nonsense about the living dead.

The Count smiled and walked on, his cloak fluttering in the breeze, casting a batlike shadow on the pathway before him. He could see the graveyard now, the tilted tombstones rising from the earth like leprous fingers rotting in the moonlight. His smile faded; he did not like such thoughts. Perhaps the greatest tribute to his talent as an actor lay in his actual aversion to death, to darkness, and what lurked in the night. He hated the sight of blood, realized that within himself was an almost claustrophobic dread of the confinement of the crypt.

Yes, it had been a great role, but he was thankful it was ending. It would be good to play the man once more, and cast off the creature he had created.

As he approached the crypt he saw the lorry waiting in the shadows. The entrance to the tomb was open, but no sounds issued from it. That meant his colleagues had completed their task of loading. They were ready to go. All that remained now was to change his clothing, remove the makeup, and depart.

The Count moved to the darkened lorry. And then——

Then they were upon him, and he felt the tines of the pitchfork bite into his back, and as the lantern-flash dazzled his eyes he heard the stern command. 'Don't move——'

He didn't move. He could only stare as they surrounded him; Antoine, Clodez, Raymond, and the others, a dozen peasants from the village. A dozen armed peasants, glaring at him in mingled rage and fear, holding him at bay.

But how could they dare——?

The American Corporal stepped forward. That was the answer, of course. The American Corporal and another man in uniform, armed with a sniper's rifle. They were responsible. He didn't even have to see the riddled corpses of his three assistants piled in the back of the lorry to understand what had happened. They'd stumbled on his men while they worked, shot them down, and summoned the villagers.

Now they were jabbering questions at him, in English, of

course. He understood English, but he knew better than to reply. 'Who are you? Were these men working under your orders? Where were you going with this truck——?'

The Count smiled and shook his head. After a while they stopped, as he knew they would.

The Corporal turned to his companion. 'Okay,' he said. 'Let's go.' The other man nodded and climbed into the cab of the lorry as the motor coughed into life. The Corporal moved to join him, then turned to Raymond.

'We're taking this across the river,' he said. 'Hang onto our friend, here—they'll be sending a guard detail for him within an hour.'

Raymond nodded.

Then the lorry drove off into the darkness.

And it *was* dark now; the moon had vanished behind a cloud. The Count's smile vanished, too, as he glanced around him at his captors. A dozen stupid clods, surly and ignorant. But armed. No chance of escaping. And they kept staring at him and mumbling.

'Take him into the tomb.'

It was Raymond who said that, and they obeyed, prodding their captive forward with pitchforks. That was when the Count recognized the first faint ray of hope. For they prodded him most gingerly, no man venturing close, and when he glared at them their eyes dropped. They were putting him in the crypt because they were afraid of him. Now that the Americans were gone, they feared once more: feared his presence and his power. After all, in their eyes he was a vampire—he might turn into a bat and vanish entirely. So they wanted him in the tomb for safekeeping.

The Count shrugged, smiled his sinister smile, and bared his teeth. They shrank back as he entered the doorway. He turned, and on impulse, furred his cape. It was an instinctive final gesture, in keeping with his role—and it provoked the appropriate response. They moaned, and old Raymond crossed himself. It was better, in a way, than any applause.

In the darkness of the crypt, the Count permitted himself to relax a trifle. He was offstage now, and for the last time. A pity he'd not been able to make his exit the way he'd planned, but such were the fortunes of war. Now he'd be taken to the American headquarters and interrogated. Undoubtedly there would be some unpleasant moments, but the worst that could

befall him was a few months in a prison camp. And even the Americans must bow to him in appreciation when they heard the story of his masterful deception.

It was dark in the crypt, and musty. The Count moved about restlessly. His knee grazed the edge of the empty coffin set on a trestle in the tomb. He shuddered involuntarily, loosening his cape at the throat. It would be good to remove it, good to be out of here, good to shed the role of vampire forever. He'd played it well, but now he was anxious to be gone.

There was a mumbling audible from without, mingled with another and less identifiable noise—a scraping sound. The Count moved to the closed door of the crypt, listening intently, but now there was only silence.

What were the fools doing out there? He wished the Americans would hurry back. It was too hot in here. And why the sudden silence?

Perhaps they'd gone.

Yes. That was it. The Americans had told them to wait and guard him, but they were afraid. They really believed he was a vampire, old Raymond had convinced them of that. So they'd run off. They'd run off, and he was free, he could escape now——

So the Count opened the door.

And he saw them then, saw them standing and waiting, old Raymond staring sternly for a moment before he moved forward. He was holding something in his hand, and the Count recognized it, remembering the scraping sound he'd heard.

It was a long wooden stake with a sharp point.

Then he opened his mouth to scream, telling them it was only a trick, he was no vampire, they were a pack of superstitious fools——

But all the while they bore him back into the crypt, lifting him up and thrusting him into the open coffin, holding him there as the grim-faced Raymond raised the pointed stake above his heart.

It was only when the stake came down that he realized there's such a thing as playing a role too well . . .

THE BEASTS OF BARSAC

It was twilight when Doctor Jerome reached the ogre's castle. He moved through the fairy tale land of a child's picture book—a realm of towering mountain crags, steeply slanting roads ascending to forbidden heights, clouds that hovered like bearded wraiths watching his progress from on high.

The castle itself was built of dream stuff. Nightmare qualities predominated in the great grey bulk, rearing its crumbling battlements against a sullen, blood-streaked sky. A chill wind sang its weird welcome as Doctor Jerome advanced toward the castle on the hilltop, and an autumn moon rose above the topmost tower.

As the moon stared down on man and castle alike, a black cloud burst from the ruined battlements and soared squeaking to the sky. Bats, of course. The final touch of fantasy.

Doctor Jerome shrugged and trudged across weed-choked flagstones in the castle courtyard until he reached the great oaken door.

Now to raise the iron knocker ... the door would swing open slowly, on creaking hinges ... the tall, gaunt figure would emerge ... 'Greetings, stranger. I am Count Dracula!'

Doctor Jerome grinned. 'Like hell,' he muttered.

For the whole fantasy collapsed when he thought of Sebastian Barsac. This might be an ogre's castle, but Barsac was no ogre.

Nine years ago, at the Sorbonne, he'd made friends with shy, fat little Barsac. Since then they had taken different paths—but it was impossible for Doctor Jerome to imagine his old companion as the ideal tenant of a haunted castle.

Not that Barsac didn't have some queer ideas. He'd always been a little eccentric, and his theories on biological research were far from orthodox—but Jerome could bank on one thing. Barsac was too fat to be a vampire, and too indolent to become a werewolf.

Still, there was something strange about this invitation, coming after a three years' lapse in correspondence. Merely a

scribbled note, suggesting that Doctor Jerome come down for a month or so to look over experimental data—but that was Barsac's usual way of doing things.

Ordinarily, Doctor Jerome would ignore such a casual offer, but right now it came as a lifesaver. For Doctor Jerome was strapped. He'd been let out of the Foundation, he owed three instalments on his rent, and he had—literally—no place to lay his head. By pawning the remnants of his precious equipment he'd managed to cross the Channel and reach Castle Barsac. A month in a real castle with his old friend—it might lead to *something*.

So Jerome had seized Opportunity before the echo of its knocking had died away. And now he banged the iron knocker, watched the castle door swing open. It *did* squeak, a bit.

Footsteps. A shadow, And then——

'Delighted to see you!' Sebastian Barsac embraced his friend in the French fashion and began to make Gallic noises of enthusiasm.

'Welcome to Castle Barsac,' said the little man. 'You are tired after your long march from the railroad station, no? I will show you to your room—servants I do not retain. And after a shower we shall talk. Yes?'

Up the winding stairs, pursued by a babble of incoherent conversation, Doctor Jerome toiled, bags in hand. He found his oak-paneled chambers, was instructed in the mysteries of the antique mechanical shower arrangement; then was left to bathe and dress.

He had no time to marshal his impressions. It was not until later—after a surprisingly good dinner in a small apartment downstairs—that Jerome was able to sit back and appraise his host.

They retired to a parlor, lit cigars, and sat back before the grateful warmth emanating from the stone fireplace, where a blaze rose to push back the shadows in the room. Doctor Jerome's fatigue had lifted, and he felt stimulated, alert.

As Sebastian Barsac began to discuss his recent work, Jerome took the opportunity to scrutinize his friend.

Little Barsac had aged, definitely. He was fat, but flabby rather than rolypoly. The dark hair had receded on his domed forehead, and his myopic eyes peered from spectacles of increased thickness. Despite verbal enthusiasm, the little lord of

Castle Barsac seemed oddly languid in his physical movements. But from his talk, Doctor Jerome recognized that Barsac's spirit was unchanged.

The words began to form a pattern in Jerome's mind—a pattern holding a meaning he did not understand.

'So you can see what I have been doing these nine years past. All of my life since I left the Sorbonne has been devoted to one end—discovering the linkage between man and animal through the alteration of cell structure in the brain. It is an evolutionary process wherein the cycle occurs in the lifespan of the individual animal. And my key? My key is simple. It lies in the recognition of one fact—that the human soul is divisible.'

'What is all this?' Doctor Jerome interrupted. 'I don't see what you're driving at, Barsac. Where's the connection between biology, alteration of cell structure in the brain, and evolution? And what part does a divisible human soul play in all this?'

'I will be blunt, my friend. I believe that human characteristics can be transferred to animals by means of mechanical hypnosis. I believe that portions of the human soul essence or psyche can be transmitted from man to animal—and that the animal will then begin to ascend the evolutionary scale. In a word, the animal will show *human* characteristics.'

Doctor Jerome scowled.

'In the nine years that you've been dabbling in this unscientific romanticism here in your castle retreat, a new word has come into being to describe your kind, Barsac,' he said. 'The word is "Kinky". And that's what I think of you, and that's what I think of your theory.'

'Theory?' Barsac smiled. 'It is *more* than a theory.'

'It's preposterous!' Jerome interrupted. 'To begin with, your statement about the human soul being divisible. I defy you to *show* me a human soul let alone prove that you can cut it in half.'

'I cannot show you one, I grant,' said Barsac.

'Then what about your mechanical hypnosis? I've never heard it explained.'

'I cannot explain it.'

'And what, in an animal, *are* human characteristics? What is your basis of measurement?'

'I do not know.'

'Then how do you expect me to understand your ideas?'

Sebastian Barsac rose. His face was pale, despite the fire's ruddy glow.

'I cannot show you a human soul,' he murmured, 'but I can show you what happens to animals when they possess part of one.'

'I cannot explain mechanical hypnosis, but I can show you the machine I use to hypnotize myself and the animals in order to transfer a portion of my soul.'

'I cannot measure the human characteristics of the animals undergoing my treatment, but I can show you what they look like and let you judge.'

'Even then you may not *understand* my ideas—but you will see that I am actually carrying them out!'

By this time, Doctor Jerome had also risen to his feet. 'You mean you've been transferring your soul to an animal body?'

Sebastian Barsac shrugged. 'I have been transferring *part* of what I *call* my soul to the bodies of many animals,' he amended.

'But you can't—it's biologically impossible. It defies the laws of reality!'

Behind the bulging spectacles, Barsac's eyes gleamed oddly.

'What is reality and who makes its laws?' he mocked.

'Come, and see for yourself the success of my experiments.'

He led the way across the chamber, down the hall, and up the great circular staircase. They reached the second floor on which Jerome's room lay, but did not pause. Selecting a panel switch from the open box on the wall, Barsac threw it and illumined the upper stairs. They began to climb again.

And all the while Barsac was talking, talking. 'You have seen the gods of ancient Egypt?' he said. 'The anthropomorphic stone figures with the bodies of men and the heads of animals? You have heard the legend of the werewolf, of lycanthropic changes whereby man becomes beast and beast becomes man?'

'Fables, all fables. And yet behind the fables lurked a truth. The truth lurks no longer, for I have found it. The seat of evolution lies in the soul, and in the soul's human instrument of expression, the brain. We have grafted cellular structures of one body onto another—why not graft portions of one soul to another? Hypnosis is the key to transference, as I have said.'

'All this I have learned by much thought, much experimentation. I have worked for nine years, perfecting techniques

and methodology. Many times I failed. To my laboratory I had brought animals, hundreds of animals. Many of them died. I procured others, working endlessly toward one goal. I have paid the price, myself, dying a thousand mental deaths with the failure of each mistaken attempt. Even a physical price I have paid. A monkey—*sale cochon!*—took from me my finger. So.'

Barsac paused and held up his left hand in a dramatic gesture to reveal the stump where his left thumb was missing.

Then he smiled. 'But it is not my wounds of battle I wish to display to you—it is the fruits of victory. Come.'

They had reached the topmost tower at last. Doctor Jerome gazed down the dizzying spiral of the stairs they had ascended, then turned his head forward as Barsac unlocked the paneled door of his laboratory and gestured him inside.

The click of a wall switch heralded the coming of light. Doctor Jerome entered and stood dazzled in the doorway.

Set in the mouldering tower of the old castle was a spacious, white-tiled, completely modern laboratory unit. A great outer room, filled with electrical equipment, was displayed before him. All of the appurtenances necessary to microbiology were ranged on shelves and cabinets.

'Does it please you, Jerome?' asked Barsac. 'It was not easy to assemble this, no. The very tiles were transported up the steep mountain passways to the castle, and the shipping of each bit of equipment was costly. But behold—is it not a perfect spot in which to work?'

Doctor Jerome nodded, absently. His inward thoughts were tinged with definite envy. Barsac here was squandering his genius and his wealth on this crazy dabbling, and he had every scientific luxury at his command, while he, Jerome, a capable scientist with a sound outlook, had nothing; no job, no future, nothing to work with. It wasn't right, it wasn't just. And yet—

'Even an electrical plant,' Barsac was exclaiming. 'We manufacture our own power here, you see. Look around. All is of the finest! Or perhaps you are eager to see what I promised to show you?'

Doctor Jerome nodded again. He couldn't stand the sight of this spotless laboratory because of the jealousy it aroused. He wanted to get it over with, get out of here.

Now Barsac opened the door of a second room, beyond. It

was nearly as large as the first, but the walls were untiled. The original castle stones lent startling contrast to the great gleaming metal cabinet which dominated the center of the chamber.

'This room I had not the heart to change,' Barsac explained. 'It is here, according to family tradition, that my great-great grandfather conducted his experiments in alchemy. He was a sorcerer.'

'So is his great-great grandson,' Doctor Jerome murmured.

'You refer to the machine?' Barsac stepped over and opened the metal door in the side of the cabinet. Within the large exposed area was a chair, fastened with clamps from which led a number of convoluted tubes and metal valves which in turn were fastened to a switchboard bearing an imposing number of dials and levers.

The chair faced a glass prism—a window in the metal that had the general appearance of a gigantic lens. Before this prism was a wheel of radiating wires, so fine as to be almost transparent. Various tubes from the chair led to the tips of the wires at different points of the wheel rim.

'This is not magic but science,' Barsac said. 'You see before you the mechanical hypnotic device I have perfected.'

'The human subject is seated in the chair, so. The attachments are made, the adjustments calculated. The cabinet is closed. The power is turned on—to be automatically generated for a time span set beforehand. The subject gazes into the prism. The wires before the prism revolve and various arcs are actuated across its surface. Mechanical hypnosis results—and then, by means of electrical impulse, something of the life essence, the soul itself, is released. It flows through the glass prism, a vital force, and impinges upon the animal subjects set before the cabinet in the focal range of the glass. The animals receive the essence and—change. The transference is complete. Something of the human goes into the animals. By graduating the focal range I can work with a dozen animals at once. Naturally, each experiment drains my strength and taxes my vitality.'

'It taxes my credulity,' Doctor Jerome interjected.

Barsac shrugged dolefully. 'Very well. I could explain minutely the workings of my machine, but I see you demand visual proof of its work. Come with me.'

The third door was opened and Doctor Jerome stood in the last chamber.

It was hot in here, and a sharp scent smote his nostrils. An animal reek permeated the bare room. Lining the walls were cages—dozens of cages. Some held rats, some white mice, and there was tier upon tier of glass containers housing guinea pigs. Rats squealed, mice squeaked, and guinea pigs chattered.

‘Experimental subjects,’ Barsac commented. ‘Alas, the supply is continuously being exhausted. I work on batches of twenty or more at once. You see, not all animals are—responsive—to the treatment. Out of one batch I could hope for two or three—reactions. That is, until recently. Then I began to find that almost all of my subjects showed changes.’

Barsac moved toward the fourth wall, where no cages loomed. Here were shelves filled with jars. Preserving jars, Doctor Jerome decided.

He moved closer for another look, but Barsac turned. He halted him, left hand on Jerome’s shoulder, so that Doctor Jerome looked down upon the trembling stump where the thumb had been.

‘I shall only permit you to gaze upon the last experiments,’ Barsac whispered. ‘I could show you dogs with human legs, mice with human skulls and no tails, monkeys that are hairless and possessed of human faces. But you would mock at me and say they were freaks, hybrids—or tell me I could produce monstrosities by using infrared or gamma rays.

‘So I shall show you my last experimental results only. The ones that prove not only that human characteristics can be transferred to animals—but that *my* characteristics have been transferred. The transference of my *mental* powers cannot be measured. I shall let you judge the *physical* results only.

‘Perhaps they will not excite you very much, these creatures of mine. They are not as grotesque as the earlier ones, but the reproduction of an *exact* characteristic excites me more than the semianthropomorphic structures in the earlier bodies. It shows me that I am on the right track at last. My next step will produce not creatures that are changed and dead, but creatures changed and living. I——’

‘Show me!’ Doctor Jerome commanded.

‘You will not be impressed,’ Barsac insisted. ‘They are only rats and you may not even notice——’

‘Show me!’

‘Then, look.’

Barsac stepped aside and Doctor Jerome gazed down at the

jars. The bodies of twenty rats floated in the preserving fluid. Jerome stared. They were rats and only rats—their dead grey bodies were unchanged. Barsac was mad, quite mad.

And then Doctor Jerome saw it. He stared at one rat and saw the left forepaw that was not a forepaw—but a tiny hand!

He stared at the other rats in the other jars and saw that each left forepaw was alike. Each forepaw was like a human hand—*like the left hand of Sebastian Barsac on which the thumb was missing!*

Something was climbing the ivy outside the castle walls. Something was peering through the castle window—peering with little red-rimmed eyes that held a light of gleeful and atrocious floating. Something chuckled as it scrambled through the open window and dropped to the floor of the castle bedroom on tiny paws; paws that scraped and padded as they advanced towards the great bed.

Suddenly Jerome felt it crawling up the counterpane. He writhed and twisted, striking out with his hands to dislodge it; but the creature crawled upward, and now he could hear it chuckling in a voice that was a shrill mockery of human laughter.

Then its head rose on a level with Jerome's eyes, and he saw it—saw the furry figure, the monkeylike body and the mannikin-head of a witch's familiar—saw and recognized the hideous little monster for what it was . . . an animal, but with Barsac's face!

He screamed, then, and knew without any further indication that the creature was not alone.

The room was full of them. They were crawling out of the shadows in the corners, they were creeping along the paneling of the walls; they crowded through the door and slithered through rat holes in the worm-riddled flooring.

They were all about him now, chattering and squealing as they climbed toward him.

Then through the door came the man-sized figures; the man-sized figures with the shaggy bodies and flaming eyes and the acrid scent of the werewolf seeping forth from between their carrion fangs. And beneath their shaggy bodies was the flesh and form of Barsac, and within their flaming eyes was the laughing gaze of Barsac, and Jerome recognized them for what they were and screamed again.

But screaming did not stop them. Nothing stopped them as the mannikin-horde and the wolf-horde flowed in a furry flood toward his writhing body on the bed. He felt the touch of their horrid paws everywhere, tensed himself for the moment when he would feel their claws, their jaws——

A shriek wrenched from his throat as Jerome sat bolt upright in the bed.

Moonlight streamed tranquilly through the castle window, and its bright pattern was etched upon a bare floor and unshadowed walls.

The creatures were gone. They had never existed, save in his own disordered dreams.

Doctor Jerome sighed and dropped back as the hot perspiration trickled down into his eyes. He drifted off to sleep again.

It seemed to him as though the oaken door opened as he slept, and Barsac crept into the room. The little fat man was smiling a secret smile as he advanced on the bed. In his arms he held a rabbit—a white rabbit. He stroked the furry head until the ears lay flat and the pink-rimmed eyes were open and alert. Then Barsac's eyes opened and he gazed on Jerome and he fixed Jerome's gaze with unshakable intensity. Barsac's bulging eyes held a command and a ghastly promise, and Jerome could not turn away. Barsac's very being seemed concentrated in his eyes, and as he stared, Jerome felt his own being rise to meet that ghastly gaze.

He felt himself flowing out ... out ... and somehow he knew that he was no longer staring at Barsac but at the white rabbit. The white rabbit was absorbing his personality through the hypnotic stare.

Jerome felt weak, giddy. His head reeled, and through a blurred mist he saw the figure of the white rabbit. The white rabbit was *growing*. The furry body was larger. It slipped out of Barsac's hands and crouched on the floor, looming upwards as it swelled and grew.

Its long white ears were melting into a skull that in itself was changing. The pink muzzle blended back into the face. The rabbit's eyes were moving farther apart and a mouth sprang into prominence above a suddenly protruding chin.

There was something terribly familiar about the rabbit's face. Jerome strove to cleanse his mind of loathing and concentrate upon recognition. He had seen that face before and he knew

that he *must* remember whose it was.

Then, in a wave of supreme terror, he recognized the face upon the rabbit.

It was his *own*——

Doctor Jerome didn't tell Barsac about his dreams. But Barsac must have noted his pallor and the dark pouches under his eyes, and drawn his own conclusions.

'I fear my accommodations are not of the best,' he said, over the breakfast table. 'It is my hope that you will soon become accustomed to the simple life. After we begin working together, things will probably adjust themselves, no?'

'No,' said Doctor Jerome. 'And what makes you think I'm going to work with you?'

'But of course you are going to work with me, my friend,' Barsac declared. 'It was for this reason I asked you to come here. I appreciate your brilliance, my friend, and I need your talents badly here.'

'I have waited for you before resuming my experiments so that we could complete the final steps together. I realize that you were shocked by what I showed you last night, but I trust your reason has prevailed over your emotions.'

'Together we can carry this experiment to its ultimate conclusion. Up to now I have produced monstrosities—and then managed to reproduce my own physical characteristics in a group of animals. I can go further than that, I think. I have evolved a refinement of my technique. Using other animals than rats, I hope to make the changes and keep them alive.'

'Then I can determine whether I have transmitted a portion of my *mind* as well as a force that changes the bodies to resemble me. You perceive the significance?'

Doctor Jerome did not look as though he perceived anything except a most unpleasant prospect. He shook his head slowly.

'I—I can't,' he murmured.

'Wait, you misunderstand! I shall not ask you to submit to hypnosis if you do not wish to. I shall take that risk myself. All I desire is that you remain here and help to supervise the work, take notes, and act as a scientific witness to corroborate my findings.'

'It's no use, Barsac.' Doctor Jerome did not attempt to disguise the disgust that worked in his features. 'I can't stand it—I won't set foot in that laboratory again.'

Barsac clucked sympathetically. 'You will get over your aversion,' he predicted. 'And, I hope, soon. For I shall now proceed with the last experiment. If it succeeds—and I know it will—you must be convinced. And if you are convinced, you can carry on alone.'

'Carry on? Alone?'

Barsac lowered his head. The little fat man addressed the wall rather than his breakfast companion.

'Yes. I am not long for this earth, my friend. The doctors, they tell me of my heart. The strain of long experimentation has taken its toll. And this last one may well prove to be the end of further work, if not the end of my life itself. No, Jerome, a man cannot give of his soul and retain life for long.'

Doctor Jerome stared at Barsac's earnest face. Barsac avoided his gaze and continued.

'That is why I invited you and asked you to consider working with me. When I die, I wish that you will carry on my work. For the sake of our friendship, and because of my respect for your abilities and brilliance. Have no fear, whether you choose to enter the laboratory or not. I have compiled all of the notes and data necessary for you to take over.

'And one thing more.' Barsac's voice was quite faint. 'I have made the other arrangements. I have seen my advocate and prepared my will. You will be left everything when I die; my entire estate goes to you to continue in this work.'

Jerome rose. 'It's no use,' he said. 'I won't go into that laboratory with you.'

'Very well. I understand. But this I ask of you—please stay here with me during the next two days. I shall proceed at once with the operations I have in mind. I hope to be able to give you complete proof of success—living animals that will not only bear a physical resemblance to me, but inherit my mental processes as well.'

Doctor Jerome shuddered slightly.

'Please,' said Barsac. 'Do not leave me during these next two days. I shall stay in the laboratory and work if you will prepare the meals. You understand, I cannot keep servants here. They are ignorant, superstitious fools—easily frightened. And I must have someone here to rely on. You will stay?'

Jerome was silent for a long moment. Then he nodded. 'Yes,' he whispered. 'I will stay.'

Barsac clasped his hand. Doctor Jerome felt the cold, flabby fingers and drew back involuntarily. To him, the light of gratitude in Barsac's bulging eyes was too reminiscent of the look he had glimpsed there in his dreams.

'I shall not wait,' Barsac promised. 'I go now to prepare. I will be in the laboratory—you need only to bring meals to the outer door. Within forty-eight hours I hope to announce success. Meanwhile, you are at liberty to amuse yourself as you will.'

He turned. 'I will leave you now. My gratitude, Jerome.'

Barsac left the room.

Doctor Jerome smiled grimly as he gazed up at the forbidding stone ceiling.

'Amuse myself as I will,' he muttered.

He finished his cigar, then rose and walked aimlessly down the hall. His footsteps rang eerily through the empty corridors. At a turn in the hall Jerome saw the figure standing against the wall in the shadows and started back.

Then he recognized the outlines of a suit of armor. Of course—Castle Barsac would have suits of armor. And all the trimmings, too. Perhaps he could amuse himself for a few hours, exploring the castle.

Doctor Jerome set about his explorations with scientific precision. He covered the ground floor thoroughly, entering a score of dusty chambers and apartments—being careful in each instance to turn on the lights before venturing into a strange room.

He found much to interest and delight him. Massive Regency furniture, elaborate tapestries, a full gallery of oils. The family portraits of the Barsac line gazed down austere from a long chamber at the rear of the castle, and Jerome speculated as to the identity of that great-great grandfather with the sorcerous proclivities.

Everything hinted of great age and great wealth. If the castle were haunted, it was haunted by the past alone. Again Jerome was reminded of the storybook atmosphere. All that was needed was a family vault in the cellar.

A vault? Why not?

Jerome explored. He discovered the stairs that descended to the lower levels and here he found the catacombs.

Catacombs they were in truth. On marble slabs lay the stone sarcophagi of the Barsacs. Row on row they rested in eternal

slumber here below. Now only Sebastian Barsac remained, the last of his line, and soon he too would join these ranks of the dead.

The last of the Barsacs, and he was mad. Mad and soon to die.

How soon?

There in the dank and silent catacombs, the thought came to Jerome.

He could die quite soon.

Why not? Let him die soon, and quietly.

Then there would no longer be a Castle Barsac. Jerome would have the castle, have the laboratory, have the money. And why not? Barsac was mad. And he was all alone. The doctors had said he would die, and it need hardly be called murder. Perhaps a strong shock would do it.

Yes, a shock. Barsac would weaken himself in these crazy experiments. And then it would be so easy to precipitate a stroke, a seizure. He could be frightened.

The will was made, and all that remained was the deed. Mad Barsac would lie here on the last empty slab, and it would be ended.

Doctor Jerome ascended the stairs slowly. He went out and walked through the hills, returning only at dusk. He had wrestled with temptation and put it aside. There was no thought of putting poison in the food he took upstairs at dinner. He left the tray outside the laboratory door and knocked. He descended quickly before Barsac opened the door, and ate a solitary supper in the great castle kitchen below.

He was resigned to waiting, now. After all, in a few weeks Barsac might die a natural death. Meanwhile, let his work go on. Perhaps he might succeed.

Jerome listened to the reverberation from the laboratory above his head. A steady humming sounded, accompanied by a rhythmic pulsing. Barsac must be in his cabinet now, working the focal prism and hypnotizing himself and his animals. Doctor Jerome wondered what sort of animals he was using in these 'improved' experiments.

On second thought he didn't care to know. The vibrations were beginning to affect his nerves. He decided to turn in early. One more day and it would be over. If he could get a good night's sleep now, his morbid fancies would vanish.

Accordingly, Jerome ascended to bed, switching off the

lights as he proceeded down the hall. He undressed, donned pajamas, plunged the castle bedroom into darkness, and sought sleep.

Sleep came.

And then Barsac came. He wheeled in the cabinet, the great metal cabinet, and once again his bright eyes caught and captured Jerome's astonished stare. Jerome's will slipped away and he entered the cabinet. He was clamped into the seat as a prisoner is clamped in the electric chair. Like a prisoner, Jerome knew he was facing the execution of a death sentence. Yet his will was a prisoner—and now, as Barsac turned the dials, his soul was imprisoned, too.

Jerome stared through the great glass prism that loomed before his eyes. He could not look away, for the gigantic lens was in itself a hypnotic agent, pulling at his retina, impelling him to gaze ahead into the hugely magnified world of the focal field. He waited for the animals to appear in the field—but there were no animals.

There was only Barsac. For suddenly a great face loomed through the glass—a monstrous face with the bulging eyes of Barsac, and the great domed forehead.

Barsac was smiling and his yellow teeth were exposed, but Jerome could only see the eyes. The eyes that glared and pulled at his own eyes, at his brain behind them. Pulled his being into the glass, for as the humming rose insanely about him, Doctor Jerome felt himself plunging forward. His body was clamped to the seat, but his soul roared through the weird prism and lost itself in Barsac's mad eyes——

Doctor Jerome awoke. It was daylight at last, but he did not sit up to greet its coming. He felt weak, drained.

Drained.

A dreadful suspicion was forming in Jerome's mind. He knew that he had dreamed—but he did not know what he hadn't dreamed. Could it be that there was a distorted truth in his symbolic nightmare?

Was Barsac lying to him? Perhaps his machine *could* drain some of the vital essence from a man's soul. Perhaps Barsac wanted him to assist in the experiments so that a part of his soul would be removed—not to be incorporated into animals, but into Barsac! Hypnotic, scientific vampirism!

Had Barsac been in this room last night while he slept and dreamed? Had Barsac hypnotized him in his sleep, seeking to

snare his soul?

Something had happened. Jerome felt weak.

And then he was strong—strong with sudden purpose. The thoughts of yesterday came back, but they came now as a resolution.

He would kill Barsac, today.

He would kill him before he died himself. He would kill Barsac because he was a madman, because his experiments were blasphemous, because he deserved to die.

Doctor Jerome would kill Barsac for the sake of science.

That was it. For the sake of science.

Doctor Jerome rose, dressed, prepared breakfast, took Barsac's tray upstairs, returned to the castle chambers below, and began to plan anew.

Madman or genius, Barsac would die. He had to die. Suppose he were *really* doing what he claimed? Suppose he actually managed to create animals with human physical attributes and with human minds? Minds like Barsac's mind.

Wouldn't that be the ultimate horror? And shouldn't that horror be avoided, stamped out?

Of course. He, Jerome, would save humanity from this monstrous affront to the laws of life. He would do the deed as he had planned, by shock. Tonight.

Yes, tonight. He'd short the electrical current in the castle, go up to the laboratory in the dark and shock Barsac to death. Never lay a hand on him. A simple plan, and it would succeed. It must succeed.

Jerome knew it must succeed by late afternoon—for when the vibrations sounded from above he realized he couldn't wait much longer. He couldn't stand the sound or the visions it conjured up. Barsac, draining his soul into the bodies of a horde of animals—it was impossible to bear the thought.

What were the animals? Not rats, he had said. Jerome remembered the rats. Barsac had refused to show him the other monstrosities. He only showed the rats with the deformed paws. The paws with the missing finger or missing claw.

Jerome prepared dinner and laughed. His apprehensions faded away with the memory of his dream.

The paws. Of course! How foolish he was, letting Barsac's crazy talk and the morbid atmosphere of the castle affect him. Because of that and a few bad dreams he'd tricked himself into

swallowing the grotesque claims of an obvious lunatic.

There *was* a machine—but any lunatic, given the funds and a scientific training, can build an imposing machine. That didn't prove that it actually worked as Barsac claimed it did.

There had been no other monstrosities for Jerome to see—for they didn't exist. Barsac's talk about previous experiments was merely talk.

There were the rats, but what of it? Barsac had been cunning. He had taken twenty rats, killed them, and removed their individual claws on the left forepaws.

That was all there was to it.

Barsac was crazy, and there was nothing to fear.

Doctor Jerome laughed again. That made it easier. He would kill the madman and take over. No more nightmares, no more fears.

His laughter blended with the thunder.

A storm was breaking. It shattered in fury over the castle, and the rumbling swallowed the noise of the vibrations from the laboratory upstairs.

Jerome peered out of the window as jagged lightning slithered between the mountain crags.

The thunder grew louder.

Doctor Jerome turned back to get Barsac's tray ready. Then he paused.

'Why bother?' he whispered. Yes, why bother? Why wait any longer? He'd go upstairs now, shut off all the lights, knock on the laboratory door, Barsac would appear, expecting his dinner tray. Instead, he'd dine on death.

Yes. He'd do it now, while the resolution held.

As the thunder mounted, Doctor Jerome walked up the stairs on his grim errand.

Lightning flickered as he reached the second landing. Jerome moved toward the switch panel on the wall. There came the blinding bolt, and as thunder followed, the lights went out.

The storm had struck. It was an omen. Jerome exulted.

Now he moved up the spiral staircase leading to the laboratory landing at the top of the great castle tower. He groped his way slowly, in utter darkness, tensing himself for the moment when he would reach the oaken door and knock.

Then he listened, above the howling of the storm, for the vibrations from behind the door.

They had ceased, abruptly, when the lightning struck.

Jerome reached the top of the stairway. He edged toward the door. He was ready, now——

The door opened, swiftly.

Doctor Jerome heard Barsac's labored breathing.

'Jerome!' called Barsac. The voice was faint, but filled with overtones of triumph. 'Jerome—where are you? I've succeeded, Jerome, I've succeeded beyond my wildest dreams!'

Jerome was very glad Barsac had called out. It enabled him to locate Barsac's body in the darkness.

Now he glided forward and brought his cold hands up to Barsac's neck. Sudden shock, a fright——

But Barsac did not scream with fear. He screamed with anger.

'Jerome, it's you!' he shouted.

So he knew. Knew Jerome meant to kill him. Therefore he must die. Jerome's hands, which had risen merely to frighten, now remained to strangle.

He tightened his grip about Barsac's throat. Barsac tried to claw him off, but he could not see, and his gestures were pitifully weak.

Now Barsac did not cry out. He merely gurgled as Doctor Jerome pressed his windpipe and then dragged him back along the corridor. He dragged him swiftly, purposefully, and with his own feet he felt for the edge of the great staircase.

Then he thrust Barsac forward. There was a single shriek as Sebastian Barsac reeled in the darkness, and then only a dreadful series of rubbery thumps as he plunged down the black well of the spiral staircase.

Doctor Jerome stood there as the thunder came again. When its muttering reverberation died away, the thumping had ended.

Barsac was at the bottom of the stairs.

Cautiously, Doctor Jerome descended the staircase. His feet groped for the next stair, and groped for the feel of Barsac's body. But it was not until he reached the bottom that his shoes met the resistant flesh of Barsac.

Jerome knelt and passed his hands over that flesh, finding it quite cold. As cold as death.

So it was done. Barsac was dead. Long live the new ruler of Castle Barsac!

Doctor Jerome straightened up with a grin. It was easy, after all. 'Gentlemen, it was an unavoidable accident. Sebastian

Barsac was at work in his laboratory when the lights went out. He came out into the hall, evidently with the purpose of descending the stairs. In the dark he must have made a mis-step and fallen down the staircase.'

He whispered the words aloud, just the way he meant to repeat them at the inquest. He heard their echoes rustle and die away.

And then he heard the *other* rustling.

It came from far overhead, from a room at the top of the stairs. A room at the top of the stairs—a rustling from the laboratory!

Jerome bounded up the stairs.

The animals were loose. He'd better lock the laboratory door, at once.

He heard the shrill squeaking as he made the second landing and turned to climb the last flight to the tower level.

Then he paused. For there was a drumming from the floor above—a padding and a scraping as small bodies moved down the hall. They had already left the laboratory.

For the first time he detected the ominous note in the squeaking sounds. Shrill little cries of anger resounded from the head of the stairs. They were angry, as Barsac had been angry when he had died. Barsac, who had come out, crowing in triumph that his experiments were successful beyond his wildest dreams.

His experiments were successful!

'I will transfer the physical attributes of myself, and also the mental attributes.'

Jerome knew the meaning of fear, then.

The creatures of Barsac's experiments were loose. The creatures whose bodies he had changed. Whose minds were a part of Barsac's mind.

They knew and they were loose. Loose and coming after him to seek revenge!

Jerome heard them creeping down the stairway. They were after him. They knew he was there—they could see in the dark! He turned in blind panic down the hallway. He'd hide in his room. That was it, his room. He stumbled through the pitchblack corridor, and heard them at his heels.

The beasts were swift. He reached the door, groped for his key. He fumbled in his pockets, cursing. The key wasn't on his ring. And the door was locked.

Perhaps he'd dropped it now, dropped it on the floor. He stooped to feel around.

And his hand encountered the warmth of flesh. Flesh that was furry, but not furry enough. Flesh that wriggled through his fingers.

The creatures had come!

Fangs nipped at his thumb. He stood up, hastily, and kicked out at the furry beast. But another body brushed his other ankle, and then they were all around him. Their squealing rose. One of the tiny monstrosities was crawling up his leg, and he felt the touch of minute fingers clinging to his body.

Jerome screamed, and knew Barsac had spoken the truth. The monsters he had created with his mind were going to kill him in revenge for Barsac's death. And there was no escape.

Their squealing filled the corridor and their bodies blocked it completely. They swarmed around Doctor Jerome like ravening rats, but they were not rats. Jerome knew that if he should see them he would go mad. And if he did not see them they would crawl up his body and sink their horrible little mouths in his throat, stroke his face with their ghastly fingers.

Jerome wheeled and charged down the corridor again. The nightmare ranks broke for a moment and he sped down the black corridor of the haunted castle with the beasts of Barsac at his heels. He was playing tag with death in a nighted lair, and death ran behind him on purposeful paws. Death squealed and chattered, and Jerome fled. He had to get out before they reached him, touched him, took him. He had to.

Gasping in agony he reached the corridor's end, knowing that the horde was keeping pace. He turned again, ran forward. He never gave a thought to the stairs.

And then, as the squealing rose and echoed in his ears, Doctor Jerome tumbled down the castle staircase and landed with a sickening little crunch that he never heard. His head lolled grotesquely on the broken stem of a neck. He lay next to the body of Sebastian Barsac, and like Barsac, he was quite dead.

It was casual irony that chose this moment for the castle lights to flicker on again.

They revealed nothing but the two bodies lying at the foot of the stairs. Mad Barsac lay dead, and so did mad Jerome.

On the landing above, the twenty escaped guinea pigs blinked down with stupid, uncomprehending eyes.

PHILTRE TIP

MARK THORNWALD had an obsession.

Now there is nothing wrong with having an obsession in our society, provided one chooses it wisely. The man who is obsessed with the desire to make money often becomes wealthy. Those who dedicate an entire existence to the pursuit of fame frequently are rewarded, and can deduct the clipping bureau's fee from their income tax. Men who devote a lifetime to excel in athletic pursuits often wind up with a sizable collection of trophies, plus an occasional hernia.

But Mark Thornwald chose the wrong obsession.

Her name was Adrienne.

It is easy to deal with this particular obsession in terms of labels—*mother-fixation*, *chemical attraction*, *love object*, and the like.

Unfortunately, Thornwald wasn't satisfied with labeling his obsession. He had other plans for Adrienne. With the sorry result that he wasn't satisfied, period.

The first time he attempted to put his plans into action, Adrienne laughed at him. The second time, she slapped his face. The third time she threatened to call her husband and have Thornwald thrown out of the house.

Thornwald elected to leave quickly, hugging his obsession to his breast, nursing it on the juices of hatred and frustration. As a result, it grew enormously.

Since Adrienne's husband, Charles, happened to be an associate professor of medieval history and since Thornwald was one of the regents of the university, it was no great trick to see that his contract was not renewed. After assuring himself that attrition had set in, Thornwald again approached Adrienne and made what he considered a handsome offer.

Adrienne thought both the offer and Thornwald quite ugly, and told him so. Again he retired in defeat, comforted only by the knowledge that she would never stoop to telling her husband.

Thornwald took stock of the situation. Of course, being ob-

sessed, he did not consider matters realistically. When one is obsessed with avarice, one does not reflect upon the widows and orphans who may purchase the phony uranium stock; the seeker of fame at any price is quite willing to propel his pelvis in public or even run for Congress if needs be. And the man whose obsession takes a delectable, feminine form is equally lacking in ethics and scruples. To him, love laughs at locksmiths and goes into positive hysteria over the spectacle of a faithful wife.

'The end justifies the means,' Thornwald told himself, and when he spoke of 'the end' in connection with Adrienne it is to be feared he had a very tangible image in mind.

But there were no means available until Adrienne's husband provided them.

They came to Thornwald in the shape of a bulky manuscript, delivered by Charles himself.

'*Aphrodisia*,' Thornwald murmured. '*A Study of Erotic Stimuli Through the Ages*.'

'Don't let the title deceive you,' Charles told him. 'It's a scholarly work. I've been doing research on it now for almost a year—ever since I lost my position at the university. See what you think. Maybe it could stand a chance with Harker House.'

'Ah yes, Harker House.' Thornwald happened to be on the board of editors of the publishing firm.

'Read it as a professional,' Charles urged. 'Not as a friend.'

This wasn't difficult for Thornwald, since by no stretch of the imagination did he consider himself to be Charles' friend. Rival, or deadly enemy—that was much more to Thornwald's taste, and the nourishment of his obsession.

Still, after Charles went away, he *did* read it professionally. And found the answer.

'Why did you cross out this formula for a love philtre?', he asked Charles, upon a subsequent visit. Thornwald indicated the page. 'Here—the one from Ludvig Prinn's *Grimoire*, in the English edition.' He read the ingredients listed and the description of their effects.

'The meereſt droppe, if placed in a posset of wine or sack, will transforme ye beloved into a veritable bitches in heate.'

Charles smiled and shrugged. 'You've just answered your own question,' he said. 'Most of the spells and incantations I've set down are mere *curiosa*. I doubt if there's any amorous incitement in owl dung, and calling a tomato a love apple is

just sympathetic magic. But a few items come from sources I respect. Ludvig Prinn, for example, was a considerable sorcerer in his day.'

Thornwald elevated his eyebrows. 'In other words, you decided to omit this particular formula because you're afraid it might work?'

Charles nodded. 'Look at the ingredients,' he said. 'Some of them I never heard of, and heaven only knows what their reaction might be in combination. The ones I do know—yohimbine and cantharadin, for example—are in themselves powerful aphrodisiacs. Added to this other stuff, the result could be trouble.'

'Just what I was thinking,' Thornwald said. And made a mental note, which he at once underlined in big black encephalographs.

'Interesting material,' he told Charles. 'Let me pop this in to the editorial staff and we'll see what we can do.'

He took the manuscript away and, three weeks later, called Charles. 'It's practically set,' he said. 'You've an afterdinner appointment with the board tonight. Get into town and come back with a contract.'

That part was easy. The difficult matter had been to track down all of the obscure ingredients for the love philtre. Some of them were only approximated in the pharmacopia and others had to be illegally obtained, but Thornwald's obsession brooked no obstacles. And now he was ready.

As soon as he made certain that Charles had indeed departed for the city he made his final preparations. Promptly at eight he knocked on the door of Charles' flat and Adrienne admitted him.

'Charles isn't here,' she said.

'I know, but he'll be back before midnight. And then we'll celebrate his new book contract.' Thornwald waved the two bottles. 'Champagne, my dear, and already iced. One bottle for when Charles returns. One to share between us while we're waiting.'

Adrienne eyed the bottles dubiously, but before she could object, Thornwald took over. 'Glasses,' he demanded. 'And a corkscrew, if you please.'

'But——'

'It's to be a surprise,' Thornwald assured her. And he meant it.

Adrienne, he knew, could never resist surprises. And this particular one she could resist least of all. He didn't tell her about the third bottle—the tiny one—which he carried concealed in his pocket. He waited until she brought in the glasses and the corkscrew and an ice bucket.

'I'll open the bottle,' he said. 'Man's work.' He winked at her. 'Meanwhile, why don't you slip into that party dress of yours, so that we can give Charles a proper welcome?'

Adrienne nodded and left the room. It was then that Thornwald opened the champagne, poured it, and added just the merest drop of the love philtre to the contents of her glass.

He finished just in time, dropping the little vial back into his pocket just as Adrienne blossomed into the room. His hand trembled, not with apprehension but with anticipation.

Obsession or no, Adrienne was a beautiful woman in her own right; slim, shapely, and quite probably a natural redhead. Thornwald determined to satisfy himself on this latter point the moment Adrienne downed her drink.

She swept over to him, proffering his glass and raising her own as he turned away until he could control his shaking fingers. Now was the time for self-control. In a moment, he felt certain, it could be abandoned.

Thornwald raised his champagne glass.

'To tonight,' he said. And sipped tentatively.

Adrienne nodded, bent her shapely wrist, brought the edge of the glass to her lips, and hesitated.

'Now that we seem to be friends again,' she murmured, 'suppose we seal our relationship in a friendly gesture?'

'Such as?'

'Let us take each other's glasses.'

Thornwald gulped. 'Oh no!' he exclaimed. 'Believe it or not, I have a cold.'

'Very well.' Again, Adrienne paused.

'Drink up, my dear,' Thornwald urged. 'Here's to surprises.'

'Surprises,' Adrienne echoed. And drank.

Thornwald tossed off the champagne. His hands were trembling again. How long would he have to wait?

Not very long, apparently. For it seemed but a moment before the change came.

Adrienne moved quite close and her voice, like her smile, was soft and caressing.

'I don't know what you put in my drink,' she murmured.

'But you *did* put something in. That's why you wouldn't switch glasses with me, isn't it?'

Thornwald noted the warmth in her voice and felt it was now safe to nod.

'Good,' Adrienne said. 'I thought as much. Which is why I switched glasses before I made the suggestion—when I handed you your drink.'

Thornwald blinked. And then the philtre took effect and he knew it worked, knew that if the merest drop would transform a woman into a bitch in heat, it was equally potent when administered to a male.

All he could do was tremble and watch the room swirl and listen to Adrienne's laughter. If only she could understand his motivations, if only she realized he'd acted out of genuine affection! Thornwald knew he had to tell her, so he took a deep breath and opened his mouth.

'I love you,' he barked.

THE UNSPEAKABLE BETROTHAL

'Not far thence is the secret garden in which grow like strange flowers the kinds of sleep, so different one from the other . . . the sleep induced by datura, by the multiple extracts of ether, the sleep of belladonna, of opium, of valerian; flowers whose petals remain shut until the day when the predestined visitor shall come and, touching them, bid them open, and for long hours inhale the aroma of their peculiar dreams into a marvelling and bewildered being.'

Proust: *Remembrance of Things Past*

AVIS knew she wasn't really as sick as Doctor Clegg had said. She was merely bored with living. The death impulse perhaps; then again, it might have been nothing more than her distaste for clever young men who persisted in addressing her as '*O rara Avis.*'

She felt better now, though. The fever had settled until it was no more than one of the white blankets which covered her—something she could toss aside with a gesture, if it weren't so pleasant just to burrow into it, to snuggle deeply within its confining warmth.

Avis smiled as she realized the truth; monotony was the one thing that didn't bore her. The sterility of excitement was the really jading routine, after all. This quiet, uneventful feeling of restfulness seemed rich and fertile by comparison. Rich and fertile—creative—womb.

The words linked. Back to the womb. Dark room, warm bed, lying doubled up in the restful, nourishing lethargy of fever . . .

It wasn't the womb, exactly; she hadn't gone back that far, she knew. But it did remind her of the days when she was a little girl. Just a little girl with big round eyes, mirroring the curiosity that lay behind them. Just a little girl, living all alone in a huge old house, like a fairy princess in an enchanted castle.

Of course her aunt and uncle had lived there too, and it wasn't a really truly castle, and nobody else knew that she was

a princess. Except Marvin Mason, that is.

Marvin had lived next door and sometimes he'd come over and play with her. They would come up to her room and look out of the high window—the little round window that bordered on the sky.

Marvin knew that she was a sure enough princess, and he knew that her room was an ivory tower. The window was an enchanted window, and when they stood on a chair and peeked out they could see the world behind the sky.

Sometimes she wasn't quite sure if Marvin Mason honest and truly saw the world beyond the window; maybe he just said he did because he was fond of her.

But he listened very quietly while she told him stories about that world. Sometimes she told him stories she had read in books, and other times she made them up out of her very own head. It was only later that the dreams came, and she told him *those* stories, too.

That is, she always started to, but somehow the words would go wrong. She didn't always know the words for what she saw in those dreams. They were very special dreams; they came only on those nights when Aunt May left the window open, and there was no moon. She would lie in the bed, all curled up in a little ball, and wait for the wind to come through the high, round window. It came quietly, and she would feel it on her forehead and neck, like fingers stroking. Cool, soft fingers, stroking her face; soothing fingers that made her uncurl and stretch out so that the shadows could cover her body.

Even then she slept in the big bed, and the shadows would pour down from the window in a path. She wasn't asleep when the shadows came, so she knew they were real. They came on the breeze, from the window, and covered her up. Maybe it was the shadows that were cool and not the wind; maybe the shadows stroked her hair until she fell asleep.

But she would sleep then, and the dreams always came. They followed the same path as the wind and the shadows; they poured down from the sky, through the window. There were voices she heard but could not understand; colors she saw but could not name; shapes she glimpsed but which never seemed to resemble any figures she found in picture books.

Sometimes the same voices and colors and shapes came again and again, until she learned to recognize them, in a way. There was the deep, buzzing voice that seemed to come from

right inside her own head, although she knew it really issued from the black, shiny pyramid thing that had the arms with eyes in it. It didn't look slimy or nasty, and there was nothing to be afraid of—Avis could never understand why Marvin Mason made her shut up when she started telling about those dreams.

But he was only a little boy, and he got scared and ran home to his Mommy. Avis didn't have any Mommy, only Aunt May; but she would never tell Aunt May such things. Besides, why should she? The dreams didn't frighten her, and they were so very real and interesting. Sometimes, on grey, rainy days when there was nothing to do but play with dolls or cut out pictures to paste in her album, she wished that night would hurry up and come then she could dream and make everything real again.

She got so she liked to stay in bed, and would pretend to have a cold so she didn't have to go to school. Avis would look up at the window and wait for the dreams to come—but they never came in the daytime; only at night.

Often she wondered what it was like *up there*.

The dreams must come from the sky; she knew that. The voices and shapes *lived* way up, somewhere beyond the window. Aunt May said that dreams came from tummy aches, but she knew that wasn't so.

Aunt May was always worried about tummy aches, and she scolded Avis for not going outside to play; she said she was getting pale and puny.

But Avis felt fine, and she had her secret to think of. Now she scarcely ever saw Marvin Mason any more, and she didn't bother to read. It wasn't much fun to pretend she was a princess, either. Because the dreams were ever so much more real, and she could talk to the voices and ask them to take her with them when they went away.

She got so she could almost understand what they were saying. The shiny thing that just hung through the window now—the one that looked like it had so much more to it she couldn't see—it made music inside her head that she recognized. Not a real tune; more like words in a rhyme. In her dreams she asked it to take her away. She would crawl up on its back and let it fly with her up over the stars. That was funny, asking it to fly; but she knew that the part beyond the window had wings. Wings as big as the world.

She begged and pleaded, but the voices made her understand that they couldn't take little girls back with them. That is, not entirely. Because it was too cold and too far, and something would change her.

She said she didn't care how she changed; she wanted to go. She would let them do anything they wanted if only they would take her; it would be nice to be able to talk to them all the time and feel that cool softness; to dream forever.

One night they came to her and there were more things than she had ever seen before. They hung through the window and in the air all over the room—they were so funny, some of them; you could see through them and sometimes one was partly inside another. She knew she giggled in her sleep, but she couldn't help it. Then she was quiet and listening to them.

They told her it was all right. They would carry her away. Only she mustn't tell anyone and she mustn't be frightened; they would come for her soon. They couldn't take her as she was, and she must be willing to change.

Avis said yes, and they all hummed a sort of music together, and went away.

The next morning Avis was really and truly sick and didn't want to get up. She could hardly breathe, she was so warm—and when Aunt May brought in a tray she wouldn't eat a bite.

That night she didn't dream. Her head ached, and she tossed all night long. But there was a moon out, so the dreams couldn't get through anyway. She knew they would come back when the moon was gone again, so she waited. Besides, she hurt so that she really didn't care. She had to feel better before she was ready to go anywhere.

The next day Doctor Clegg came to see her. Doctor Clegg was a good friend of Aunt May's and he was always visiting her because he was her guardian.

Doctor Clegg held her hand and asked her what seemed to be the matter with his young lady today?

Avis was too smart to say anything, and besides there was a shiny thing in her mouth. Doctor Clegg took it out and looked at it and shook his head. After a while he went away and then Aunt May and Uncle Roscoe came in. They made her swallow some medicine that tasted just awful.

By this time it was getting dark and there was a storm coming outside. Avis wasn't able to talk much, and when they shut the round window she couldn't ask them to please leave it

open tonight because there was no moon and they were coming for her.

But everything kept going round and round, and when Aunt May walked past the bed she seemed to flatten out like a shadow, or one of the things, only she made a loud noise which was really the thunder outside and now she was sleeping really and truly even though she heard the thunder but the thunder wasn't real nothing was real except the things, that was it nothing was real any more but the things.

And they came through the window; it wasn't closed after all because she opened it and she was crawling out high up there where she had never crawled before but it was easy without a body and soon she would have a new body they wanted the old one because they carried it but she didn't care because she didn't need it and now they would carry her *ulnagr Yuggoth Farnomi ilyaa* . . .

That was when Aunt May and Uncle Roscoe found her and pulled her down from the window. They said later she had screamed at the top of her voice, or else she would have gone over without anyone noticing.

After that Doctor Clegg took her away to the hospital where there were no high windows and they came in to see her all night long. The dreams stopped.

When at last she was well enough to go back home, she found that the window was gone, too.

Aunt May and Uncle Roscoe had boarded it up, because she was a somnambulist. She didn't know what a somnambulist was, but guessed it had something to do with her being sick and the dreams not coming any more.

For the dreams stopped, then. There was no way of making them come back, and she really didn't want them any more. It was fun to play outside with Marvin Mason now, and she went back to school when the new semester began.

Now, without the window to look at, she just slept at night. Aunt May and Uncle Roscoe were glad, and Doctor Clegg said she was turning out to be a mighty fine little specimen.

Avis could remember it all now as though it were yesterday or today. Or tomorrow.

How she grew up. How Marvin Mason fell in love with her. How she went to college and they became engaged. How she felt the night Aunt May and Uncle Roscoe were killed in the crash at Leedsville. That was a bad time.

An even worse time was when Marvin had gone away. He was in service now, overseas. She had stayed on all alone in the house, for it was her house now.

Reba came in days to do the housework, and Doctor Clegg dropped around, even after she turned twenty-one and officially inherited her estate.

He didn't seem to approve of her present mode of living. He asked her several times why she didn't shut up the house and move into a small apartment downtown. He was concerned because she showed no desire to keep up the friendships she had made in college; Avis was curiously reminded of the solicitude he had exhibited during her childhood.

But Avis was no longer a child. She proved that by removing what had always seemed to her a symbol of adult domination; she had the high round window in her room unboarded once more.

It was a silly gesture. She knew it at the time, but somehow it held a curious significance for her. For one thing it re-established a linkage with her childhood, and more and more childhood came to epitomize happiness for her.

With Marvin Mason gone, and Aunt May and Uncle Roscoe dead, there was little enough to fill the present. Avis would sit up in her bedroom and pore over the scrapbooks she had so assiduously pasted up as a girl. She had kept her dolls and the old fairy-tale books; she spent drowsy afternoons examining them.

It was almost possible to lose one's time sense in such pastimes. Her surroundings were unchanged. Of course. Avis was larger now and the bed wasn't quite as massive nor the window as high.

But both were there, waiting for the little girl that she became when, at nightfall, she curled up into a ball and snuggled under the sheets—snuggled and stared up at the high, round window that bordered the sky.

Avis wanted to dream again.

At first, she *couldn't*.

After all, she was a grown woman; engaged to be married; she wasn't a character out of *Peter Ibbetson*. And those dreams of her childhood had been silly.

But they were *nice*. Yes, even when she had been ill and nearly fallen out of the window that time, it had been pleasant to dream. Of course those voices and shapes were nothing but

Freudian fantasies—everyone knew that.

Or did they?

Suppose it were all real? Suppose dreams are not just subconscious manifestations; caused by indigestion and gas pressure?

What if dreams are really a product of electronic impulse—or planetary radiations—attuned to the wave length of the sleeping mind? Thought is an electrical impulse. Life itself is an electrical impulse. Perhaps a dreamer is like a spiritualist medium; placed in a receptive state during sleep. Instead of ghosts, the creatures of another world or another dimension can come through, if the sleeper is granted the rare gift of acting as a *filter*. What if the dreams feed on the dreamer for substance, just as spirits attain ectoplasmic being by draining the medium of energy?

Avis thought and thought about it, and when she had evolved this theory, everything seemed to fit. Not that she would ever tell anyone about her attitude. Doctor Clegg would only laugh at her, or still worse, shake his head. Marvin Mason didn't approve either. Nobody wanted her to dream. They still treated her like a little girl.

Very well, she would be a little girl; a little girl who could do as she pleased, now. She would dream.

It was shortly after reaching this decision that the dreams began again; almost as though they had been waiting until she would fully accept them in terms of their own reality.

Yes, they came back, slowly, a bit at a time. Avis found that it helped to concentrate on the past during the day; to strive to remember her childhood. To this end she spent more and more time in her room, leaving Reba to tend to housework downstairs. As for fresh air, she always could look out of her window. It was high and small, but she would climb on a stool and gaze up at the sky through the round aperture; watching the clouds that veiled the blue beyond, and waiting for night to come.

Then she would sleep in the big bed and wait for the wind. The wind soothed and the darkness slithered, and soon she could hear the buzzing, blurring voices. At first only the voices came back, and they were faint and far away. Gradually, they increased in intensity and once more she was able to discriminate to recognize individual intonations.

Timidly, hesitantly, the figures re-emerged. Each night they

grew stronger. Avis Long (little girl with big round eyes in big bed below round window) welcomed their presence.

She wasn't alone any more. No need to see her friends, or talk to that silly old Doctor Clegg. No need to waste much time gossiping with Reba, or fussing over meals. No need to dress or venture out. There was the window by day and the dreams by night.

Then all at once she was curiously weak, and this illness came. But it was all false, somehow; this physical change.

Her mind was untouched. She knew that. No matter how often Doctor Clegg pursed his lips and hinted about calling in a 'specialist', she wasn't afraid. Of course Avis knew he really wanted her to see a psychiatrist. The doddering fool was filled with glib patter about 'retreat from reality' and 'escape mechanisms'.

But he didn't understand about the dreams. She wouldn't tell him, either. He'd never know the richness, the fullness, the sense of completion that came from experiencing contact with other worlds.

Avis knew *that* now. The voices and shapes that came in the window were from other worlds. As a naive child she had invited them by her very unsophistication. Now, striving consciously to return to the childlike attitude, she again admitted them.

They were from other worlds; worlds of wonder and splendor. Now they could meet only on the plane of dreams, but someday; someday soon, she would bridge the gap.

They whispered about her body. Something about the trip, making the 'change'. It couldn't be explained in *their* words. But she trusted them, and after all, a physical change was of slight importance contrasted with the opportunity.

Soon she would be well again, strong again. Strong enough to say 'yes'. And then they would come for her when the moon was right. Until then, she could strengthen the determination, and the dream.

Avis Long lay in the great bed and basked in the blackness; the blackness that poured palpably through the open window. The shapes filtered down, wriggling through the warps, feeding upon the night; growing, pulsing, encompassing all.

They reassured her about the body but she didn't care and she told them she didn't care because the body was unimportant and yes, she would gladly consider it an exchange if

only she could go and she knew she belonged.

Not beyond the rim of the stars but between it and among substance dwells that which is blackness in blackness for Yugo-
goth is only a symbol, no that is wrong there are no symbols
for all is reality and only perception is limited *ch'yar ul'nyar*
shaggornyth . . .

*It is hard for us to make you understand but I do understand
you can not fight it I will not fight it they will try to stop you
nothing shall stop me for I belong yes you belong will it be
soon yes it will be soon very soon yes very soon . . .*

Marvin Mason was unprepared for this sort of reception. Of course, Avis hadn't written, and she wasn't at the station to meet him—but the possibility of her being seriously ill had never occurred to him.

He had come out to the house at once, and it was a shock when Doctor Clegg met him at the door.

The old man's face was grim, and the tenor of his opening remarks still grimmer.

They faced each other in the library downstairs; Mason self-consciously diffident in khaki, the older man a bit too professionally brusque.

'Just what is it, Doctor?' Mason asked.

'I don't know. Slight, recurrent fever. Listlessness. I've checked everything. No TB, no trace of lowgrade infection. Her trouble isn't—organic.'

'You mean something's wrong with her mind?'

Doctor Clegg slumped into an armchair and lowered his head.

'Mason, I could say many things to you; about the psychosomatic theory of medicine, about the benefits of psychiatry, about—but never mind. It would be sheer hypocrisy.'

'I've talked to Avis; rather, I've tried to talk to her. She won't say much, but what she does say disturbs me. Her actions disturb me even more.'

'You can guess what I'm driving at, I think, when I tell you that she is leading the life of an eight-year-old girl. The life she *did* lead at that age.'

Mason scowled. 'Don't tell me she sits in her room again and looks out of that window?'

Dr. Clegg nodded.

'But I thought it was boarded up long ago, because she's a somnambulist and——'

'She had it unboarded, several months ago. And she is not, never was, a somnambulist.'

'What do you mean?'

'Avis Long never walked in her sleep. I remember the night she was found on that window's edge; not ledge, for there is no ledge. She was perched on the edge of the open window, already halfway out; a little tyke hanging through a high window.

'But there was no chair beneath her, no ladder. No way for her to climb up. She was simply *there*.'

Dr. Clegg looked away before continuing.

'Don't ask me what it means. I can't explain, and I wouldn't want to. I'd have to talk about the things she talks about—the dreams, and the presences that come to her; the presences that want her to go *away*.

'Mason, it's up to you. I can't honestly move to have her committed on the basis of material evidence. Confinement means nothing to *them*; you can't build a wall to keep out dreams.

'But you can love her. You can save her. You can make her well, make her take an interest in reality. Oh, I know it sounds mawkish and stupid, just as the other sounds wild and fantastic.

'Yet, it's true. It's happening right now, to her. She's asleep up in her room at this very moment. She's hearing the voices—I know that much. Let her hear your voice.'

Mason walked out of the room and started up the stairs.

'But what do you mean, you can't marry me?'

Mason stared at the huddled figure in the swirl of bed-clothes. He tried to avoid the direct stare of Avis Long's curiously childlike eyes; just as he avoided gazing up at the black, ominous aperture of the round window.

'I can't, that's all,' Avis answered. Even her voice seemed to hold a childlike quality. The high, piercing tones might well have emanated from the throat of a little girl; a tired little girl, half-asleep and a bit petulant about being abruptly awakened.

'But our plans—your letters——'

'I'm sorry, dear. I can't talk about it. You know I haven't been well. Doctor Clegg is downstairs, he must have told you.'

'But you're getting better,' Mason pleaded. 'You'll be up and around again in a few days.'

Avis shook her head. A smile—the secret smile of a naughty

child—clung to the corners of her mouth.

'You can't understand, Marvin. You never *could* understand. That's because you belong here.' A gesture indicated the room. 'I belong somewhere else.' Her finger stabbed, unconsciously, toward the window.

Marvin looked at the window now. He couldn't help it. The round black hole that led to nothingness. Or—something. The sky outside was dark, moonless. A cold wind curled about the bed.

'Let me close the window for you, dear,' he said striving to keep his voice even and gentle.

'No.'

'But you're ill—you'll catch cold.'

'That isn't why you want to close it.' Even in accusation, the voice was curiously piping. Avis sat bolt upright and confronted him.

'You're jealous, Marvin. Jealous of me. Jealous of *them*. You would never let me dream. You would never let me go. And I want to go. They're coming for me.

'I know why Doctor Clegg sent you up here. He wants you to persuade me to go away. He'd like to shut me up, just as he wants to shut the window. He wants to keep me here because he's afraid. You're all afraid of what lies—out there.

'Well, it's no use. You can't stop me. You can't stop *them*!'

'Take it easy, darling——'

'Never mind. Do you think I care what they do to me, if only I can go? I'm not afraid. I know I can't go as I am now. I know they must alter me.

'There are certain parts they want for reasons of their own. You'd be frightened if I told you. But I'm not afraid. You say I'm sick and insane, don't deny it. Yet I'm healthy enough, sane enough to face them and their world. It's you who are too morbid to endure it all.'

Avis Long was wailing now; a thin, high-pitched wail of a little girl in a tantrum.

'You and I are leaving this house tomorrow,' Mason said. 'We're going away. We'll be married and live happily ever after—in good old storybook style. The trouble with you, young lady, is that you've never had to grow up. All this nonsense about goblins and other worlds——'

Avis screamed.

Mason ignored her.

'Right now I'm going to shut that window,' he declared. Avis continued to scream. The shrill ululation echoed on a sustained note as Mason reached up and closed the round pane of glass over the black aperture. The wind resisted his efforts, but he shut the window and secured the latch.

Then her fingers were digging into his throat from the rear, and her scream was pouring down his ear.

'I'll kill you!' she wailed. It was the wail of an enraged child.

But there was nothing of the child, or the invalid, in the strength behind her clawing fingers. He fought her off, panting.

Then, suddenly Doctor Clegg was in the room. A hypodermic needle flashed and gleamed in an arc of plunging silver.

They carried her back to the bed, tucked her in. The blankets nestled about the weary face of a child in sleep.

The window was closed tightly now.

Everything was in order as the two men turned out the light and tiptoed from the room.

Neither of them said a word until they stood downstairs once again.

Facing the fireplace, Mason sighed.

'Somehow I'll get her out of here tomorrow,' he promised. 'Perhaps it was too abrupt—my coming back tonight and waking her. I wasn't very tactful.

'But something about her; something about that room, frightened me.'

Doctor Clegg lit his pipe. 'I know,' he said. 'That's why I couldn't pretend to you that I completely understand. There's more to it than mere hallucination.'

'I'm going to sit up here tonight,' Mason continued. 'Just in case something might happen.'

'She'll sleep,' Doctor Clegg assured him. 'No need to worry.'

'I'll feel better if I stay. I'm beginning to get a theory about all this talk—other worlds, and changes in her body before a trip. It ties in with the window, somehow. And it sounds like a fantasy on suicide.'

'The death impulse? Perhaps. I should have thought of that possibility. Dreams foreshadowing death—on second thought, Mason, I may stay with you. We can make ourselves comfortable here before the fire, I suppose.'

Silence settled.

It must have been well after midnight before either of them

moved from their place before the fire.

Then a sharp splinter of sound crashed from above. Before the tinkling echo died away, both men were on their feet and moving toward the stairway.

There was no further noise from above, and neither of them exchanged a single word. Only the thud of their running footsteps on the stairs broke the silence. And as they paused outside Avis Long's room, the silence seemed to deepen in intensity. It was a silence palpable, complete, accomplished.

Doctor Clegg's hand darted to the doorknob, wrenched it ineffectually.

'Locked!' he muttered. 'She must have gotten up and locked it.'

Mason scowled.

'The window—do you think she could have——?'

Doctor Clegg refused to meet his glance. Instead he turned and put his massive shoulder to the door panel. A bulge of muscle ridged his neck.

Then the panel splintered and gave way. Mason reached around and opened the door from inside.

They entered the darkened room, Dr. Clegg in the lead, fumbling for the light switch. The harsh, electric glare flooded the scene.

It was a tribute to the power of suggestion that both men glanced, not at the patient in the bed, but at the round window high up on the wall.

Cold night air stretched through a jagged aperture, where the glass had been shattered, as though by the blow of a gigantic fist.

Fragments of glass littered the floor beneath, but there was no trace of any missile. And obviously, the glass had been broken from the outer side of the pane.

'The wind,' Mason murmured, weakly, but he could not look at Dr. Clegg as he spoke. For there was no wind, only the cold, soft breeze that billowed ever so gently from the nighted sky above. Only the cold, soft breeze, rustling the curtains and prompting a saraband of shadows on the wall; shadows that danced in silence over the great bed in the corner.

The breeze and the silence and the shadows enveloped them as they stared now at the bed.

Avis Long's head was turned toward them on the pillow.

They could see her face quite plainly, and Doctor Clegg realized on the basis of experience what Mason knew instinctively—Avis Long's eyes were closed in death.

But that is not what made Mason gasp and shudder—nor did the sight of death alone cause Doctor Clegg to scream aloud.

There was nothing whatsoever to frighten the beholder of the placid countenance turned toward them in death. They did not scream at the sight of Avis Long's face.

Lying on the pillow of the huge bed, Avis Long's face bore a look of perfect peace.

But Avis Long's body was . . . gone.

BLACK BARGAIN

It was getting late when I switched off the neon and got busy behind the fountain with my silver polish. The fruit syrup came off easily, but the chocolate stuck and the hot fudge was greasy. I wish to God they wouldn't order hot fudge.

I began to get irritated as I scrubbed away. Five hours on my feet, every night, and what did I have to show for it? Varicose veins. Varicose veins, and the memory of a thousand foolish faces. The veins were easier to bear than the memories. They were so depressing, those customers of mine. I knew them all by heart.

In early evening all I got was 'cokes'. I could spot the 'cokes' a mile away. Giggling high-school girls, with long shocks of uncombed brown hair, with their shapeless tan fingertip coats and the repulsively thick legs bulging over boots. They were all 'cokes'. For forty-five minutes they'd monopolize a booth, messing up the tile table top with cigarette ashes, crushed napkins daubed in lipstick and little puddles of spilled water. Whenever a high-school girl came in, I automatically reached for the cola pump.

A little later in the evening I got the 'gimme two packs' crowd. Sports shirts hanging limply over hairy arms meant the filtertips. Blue work shirts with rolled sleeves disclosing tattooing meant the unfiltered cigarettes.

Once in awhile I got a fat boy. He was always a 'cigar'. If he wore glasses he was a two-for-thirty-fiver. If not, I merely had to indicate the box on the counter. Ten cents straight. Mild Havana—all long filler.

Oh, it was monotonous. The 'notions' family, who invariably departed with aspirin, Ex-Lax, candy bars, and a pint of ice cream. The 'public library' crowd—tall, skinny youths bending the pages of magazines on the rack and never buying. The 'soda waters' with their trousers wrinkled by the sofa of a one-room apartment, the 'curlers', always looking furtively toward the baby buggy outside. And around ten, the 'pineapple sundaes'—fat women Bingo players. Followed by the 'chocolate

sodas' when the show let out. More booth parties, giggling girls and red-necked young men in sloppy mod outfits.

In and out, all day long. The rushing 'telephones', the doddering old 'five-cent stamps', the bachelor 'toothpastes', and 'razor blades'.

I could spot them all at a glance. Night after night they dragged up to the counter. I don't know why they even bothered to tell me what they wanted. One look was all I needed to anticipate their slightest wishes. I could have given them what they needed without their asking.

Or, rather, I suppose I couldn't. Because what most of them really needed was a good long drink of arsenic, as far as I was concerned.

Arsenic! Good Lord, how long had it been since I'd been called upon to fill out a *prescription*! None of these stupid idiots wanted *drugs* from a drugstore. Why had I bothered to study pharmacy? All I really needed was a two-week course in pouring chocolate syrup over melting ice cream, and a month's study of how to set up cardboard figures in the window so as to emphasize their enormous busts.

Well——

He came in then. I heard the slow footsteps without bothering to look up. For amusement I tried to guess before I glanced. A 'gimme two packs'. A 'toothpaste'? Well the hell with him. I was closing up.

The male footsteps had shuffled up to the counter before I raised my head. They halted, timidly. I still refused to give any recognition of his presence. Then came a hesitant cough. That did it.

I found myself staring at a middle-aged, thin little fellow with sandy hair and rimless glasses perched on a snub nose. The crease of his froggish mouth underlined the despair of his face.

He wore a frayed \$36.50 suit, a wrinkled white shirt, and a string tie—but humility was his real garment. It covered him completely, that aura of hopeless resignation.

'I beg your pardon, please, but have you any tincture of aconite?'

Well, miracles *do* happen. I was going to get a chance to sell drugs after all. Or was I? When despair walks in and asks for aconite, it means suicide.

I shrugged. 'Aconite?' I echoed. 'I don't know.'

He smiled, a little. Or rather, that crease wrinkled back in a poor imitation of amusement. But on his face a smile had no more mirth in it than the grin you see on a skull.

'I know what you're thinking,' he mumbled. 'But you're wrong. I'm—I'm a chemist. I'm doing some experiments, and I must have four ounces of aconite at once. And some belladonna. Yes, and—wait a minute.'

Then he dragged the book out of his pocket.

I craned my neck, and it was worth it.

The book had rusty metal covers, and was obviously very old. When the thick yellow pages fluttered open under his trembling thumb I saw flecks of dust rise from the binding. The heavy black-lettered type was German, but I couldn't read anything at that distance.

'Let me see now,' he murmured. 'Aconite—belladonna—yes, and I have this—the cat, of course—nightshade—um hum—oh, yes, I'll need some phosphorus of course—have you any blue chalk?—Good—and I guess that's all.'

I was beginning to catch on. But what the devil did it matter to me? A weirdo more or less was nothing new in my life. All I wanted to do was get out of here and soak my feet.

I went back and got the stuff for him, quickly. I peered through the slot above the prescription counter, but he wasn't doing anything—just paging through that black, iron-bound book and moving his lips.

Wrapping the parcel, I came out. 'Anything else, sir?'

'Oh—yes. Could I have about a dozen candles? The large size?'

I opened a drawer and scrabbled for them under the dust.

'I'll have to melt them down and reblend them with the fat,' he said.

'What?'

'Nothing. I was just figuring.'

Sure. That's the kind of figuring you do best when you're counting the pads in your cell. But it wasn't my business, was it?

So I handed over the package, like a fool.

'Thank you. You've been very kind. I must ask you to be kinder—to charge this.'

Oh, great!

'You see, I'm temporarily out of funds. But I can assure you, in a very short time, in fact within three days, I shall pay

you in full. Yes.'

A very convincing plea. I wouldn't give him a cup of coffee on it—and that's what moochers usually ask for, instead of aconite and candles. But if his words didn't move me, his eyes did. They were so lonely behind his spectacles, so pitifully alone, those two little puddles of hope in the desert of despair that was his face.

All right. Let him have his dreams. Let him take his old iron-bound dream book home with him and make like crazy. Let him light his tapers and draw his phosphorescent circle and recite his spells or whatever the hell he wanted to do.

No, I wouldn't give him coffee, but I'd give him a dream.

'That's okay, buddy,' I said. 'We're all down on our luck some time, I guess.'

That was wrong. I shouldn't have patronized. He stiffened at once and his mouth curled into a sneer—of superiority, if you please!

'I'm not asking charity,' he said. 'You'll get paid, never fear, my good man. In three days, mark my words. Now good evening. I have work to do.'

Out he marched, leaving 'my good man' with his mouth open. Eventually I closed my mouth but I couldn't clamp a lid on my curiosity.

That night, walking home, I looked down the dark street with new interest. The black houses bulked like a barrier behind which lurked fantastic mysteries. Row upon row, not houses any more, but dark dungeons of dreams. In what house did my stranger hide? In what room was he intoning to what strange gods?

Once again I sensed the presence of wonder in the world, of lurking strangeness behind the scenes of drugstore and high-rise civilization. Black books still were read, and wild-eyed strangers walked and muttered, candles burned into the night, and a missing alley cat might mean a chosen sacrifice.

But my feet hurt, so I went home.

Same old malted milks, cherry cokes, Vaseline, Listerine, hairnets, bathing caps, cigarettes, and what have you?

Me, I had a headache. It was four days later, almost the same time of night, when I found myself scrubbing off the soda-taps again.

Sure enough, he walked in.

I kept telling myself all evening that I didn't expect him—but I *did* expect him, really. I had that crawling feeling when the door clicked. I waited for the shuffle of the Tom McCann shoes.

Instead there was a brisk tapping of Oxfords. English Oxfords. The \$40 kind.

I looked up in a hurry this time.

It *was* my stranger.

At least he was there, someplace beneath the flashy blue weave of his suit, the immaculate shirt and foulard tie. He had had a shave, a haircut, a manicure, and evidently a winning ticket in the Irish Sweepstakes.

'Hello there.' Nothing wrong with that voice—I've heard it in the big hotel lobbies for years, brimming over with pep and confidence and authority.

'Well, well, well,' was all I could say.

He chuckled. His mouth wasn't a crease any more. It was a trumpet of command. Out of that mouth could come orders, and directions. This wasn't a mouth shaped for hesitant excuses any longer. It was a mouth for requesting expensive dinners, choice vintage wines, heavy cigars; a mouth that barked at taxi drivers and doormen.

'Surprised to see me, eh? Well, I told you it would take three days. Want to pay you your money, thank you for your kindness.'

That was nice. Not the thanks, the money. I like money. The thought of getting some I didn't expect made me genial.

'So your prayers were answered, eh?' I said.

He frowned.

'Prayers—what prayers?'

'Why I thought that——'

'I don't understand,' he snapped, understanding perfectly well. 'Did you perhaps harbor some misapprehension concerning my purchases of the other evening? A few necessary chemicals, that's all—to complete the experiment I spoke of. And the candles, I must confess, were to light my room. They shut off my electricity the day before.'

Well, it *could* be.

'Might as well tell you the experiment was a howling success. Yes, sir. Went right down to Newsohm with the results and they put me on as assistant research director. Quite a break.'

Newsom was the biggest chemical supply house in our section of the country. And he went right down in his rags and was 'put on' as assistant research director! Well, live and learn.

'So here's the money. \$5.39, wasn't it? Can you change a fifty?'

I couldn't.

'That's all right, keep it.'

I refused, I don't know why. Made me feel crawling again, somehow.

'Well, then, tell you what let's do. You are closing up, aren't you? Why not step down the street to the tavern for a little drink? I'll get change there. Come on, I feel like celebrating.'

So it was that five minutes later I walked down the street with Mr. Fritz Gulther.

We took a table in the tavern and ordered quickly. Neither he nor I was at ease. Somehow there was an unspoken secret between us. It seemed almost as though I harbored criminal knowledge against him—I, of all men, alone knowing that behind this immaculately clad figure of success, there lurked a shabby spectre just three days in the past. A spectre that owed me \$5.39.

We drank quickly, both of us. The spectre got a little fainter. We had another. I insisted on paying for the third round.

'It's a celebration,' I argued.

He laughed. 'Certainly is. And let me tell you, this is only the beginning! From now on I'm going to climb so fast it'll make your head swim. I'll be running that place within six months. Going to get a lot of new orders in from the government, and expand.'

'Wait a minute,' I cautioned, reserve gone. 'You're way ahead of yourself. If I were in your shoes I'd still be flipping with what happened to me in the past three days.'

Fritz Gulther smiled. 'Oh, that? I expected *that*. Didn't I tell you so in the store? I've been working for over a year and I knew just what to expect. It was no surprise, I assure you. I had it all planned. I was willing to starve to carry out my necessary studies, and I did starve. Might as well admit it.'

'Sure.' I was on my third drink now, over the barriers. 'When you came into the store I said to myself, "Here's a guy who's been through hell!"'

'Truer words were never spoken,' said Gulther. 'I've been through hell all right, quite literally. But it's all over now, and I didn't get burned.'

'Say, confidentially—what kind of magic did you use?'

'Magic? Magic? I don't know anything about magic.'

'Oh, yes you do, Gulther,' I said. 'What about that little black book with the iron covers you were mumbling around with in the store?'

'German inorganic chemistry text,' he snapped. 'Pretty old. Here, drink up and have another.'

I had another. Gulther began to babble, a bit. About his new clothes and his new apartment and the new car he was going to buy next week. About how he was going to have everything he wanted now, by God, he'd show the fools that laughed at him all these years, he'd pay back the nagging landladies and the cursing grocers, and the sneering rats who told him he was soft in the head for studying the way he did.

Then he got into the kindly stage.

'How'd you like a job at Newsohm?' he asked me. 'You're a good pharmacist. You know your chemistry. You're a nice enough fellow, too—but you've got a terrible imagination. How about it? Be my secretary. Sure, that's it. Be my secretary. I'll put you on tomorrow.'

'I'll drink on that,' I declared. The prospect intoxicated me. The thought of escape from the damned store, escape from the 'coke'-faces, the 'ciggies'-voices, very definitely intoxicated me. So did the next drink.

I began to see something.

We were sitting against the wall and the tavern lights were low. Couples around us were babbling in monotone that was akin to silence. We sat in shadow against the wall. Now I looked at my shadow—an ungainly, flickering caricature of myself, hunched over the table. What a contrast it presented before *his* suddenly erect bulk!

His shadow, now——

I saw it. He was sitting up straight across the table from me. But his shadow on the wall was *standing*!

'No more Scotch for me,' I said, as the waiter came up.

But I continued to stare at his shadow. He was sitting and the shadow was standing. It was a larger shadow than mine, and a blacker shadow. For fun I moved my hands up and down, making heads and faces in silhouette. He wasn't watch-

ing me, he was gesturing to the waiter.

His shadow didn't gesture. I just stood there. I watched and stared and tried to look away. His hands moved but the black outline stood poised and silent, hands dangling at the sides. And yet I saw the familiar shape of his head and nose; unmistakably his.

'Say, Gulther,' I said. 'Your shadow—there on the wall——'

I slurred my words. My eyes were blurred.

But I felt his attitude pierce my consciousness below the alcohol.

Fritz Gulther rose to his feet and then shoved a deadwhite face against mine. He didn't look at his shadow. He looked at me, through me, at some horror behind my face, my thoughts, my brain. He looked *at* me, and *into* some private hell of his own.

'Shadow,' he said. 'There's nothing wrong with my shadow. You're mistaken. Remember that, you're mistaken. And if you ever mention it again, I'll bash your skull in.'

Then Fritz Gulther got up and walked away. I watched him march across the room, moving swiftly but a little unsteadily. Behind him, moving very slowly and not a bit unsteadily, a tall black shadow followed him from the room.

If you can build a better mousetrap than your neighbor, you're liable to put your foot in it.

That's certainly what I had done with Gulther. Here I was, ready to accept his offer of a good job as his secretary, and I had to go and pull a drunken boner!

I was still cursing myself for a fool two days later. Shadows that don't follow body movements, indeed! Who was that shadow I saw you with last night? That was no shadow, that was the Scotch I was drinking. Oh, fine!

So I stood in the drugstore and sprinkled my sundaes with curses as well as chopped nuts.

I nearly knocked the pecans off the counter that second night, when Fritz Gulther walked in again.

He hurried up to the counter and flashed me a tired smile.

'Got a minute to spare?'

'Sure—wait till I serve these people in the booth.'

I dumped the sundaes and raced back. Gulther perched himself on a stool and took off his hat. He was sweating profusely.

'Say—I want to apologize for the way I blew my stack the

other night.'

'Why, that's all right, Mr. Gulther.'

'I got a little too excited, that's all. Liquor and success went to my head. No hard feelings, I want you to understand that. It's just that I was nervous. Your ribbing me about my shadow, that stuff sounded too much like the way I was always kidded for sticking to my studies in my room. Landlady used to accuse me of all sorts of things. Claimed I dissected her cat, that I was burning incense, messing the floor up with chalk. Some damn fool college punks downstairs began to yap around that I was some kind of nut dabbling in witchcraft.'

I wasn't asking for his autobiography, remember. All this sounded a little hysterical. But then, Gulther looked the part. His sweating, the way his mouth wobbled and twitched as he got this out.

'But say, reason I stopped in was to see if you could fix me up a sedative. No, no bromo or aspirin. I've been taking plenty of that stuff ever since the other evening. My nerves are all shot. That job of mine down at Newsohm takes it all out of me.'

'Wait a minute, I'll get something.'

I made for the back room. As I compounded I sneaked a look at Gulther through the slot.

All right, I'll be honest. It wasn't Gulther I wanted to look at. It was his shadow.

When a customer sits at the counter stools, the storelights hit him so that his shadow is just a little black pool beneath his feet.

Gulther's shadow was a complete silhouette of his body, in outline. A black, deep shadow.

I blinked, but that didn't help.

Stranger still, the shadow seemed to be cast *parallel* with his body, instead of at an angle from it. It grew out from his chest instead of his legs. I don't know refraction, the laws of light, all that technical stuff. All I know is that Fritz Gulther had a big black shadow sitting beside him on the floor, and that the sight of it sent cold shivers along my spine.

I wasn't drunk. Neither was he. Neither was the shadow. All three of us existed.

Now Gulther was putting his hat back on.

But not the shadow. It just sat there. Crouched.

It was all wrong.

The shadow was no denser at one spot than at another. It was evenly dark, and—I noted this particularly—the outlines did not blur or jade. They were solid.

I stared and stared. I saw a lot now I'd never noticed. The shadow wore no clothes. Of course! Why should it put on a hat? It was naked, that shadow. But it belonged to Gulther—it wore spectacles. It was his shadow, all right. Which suited me fine, because *I* didn't want it.

Now Gulther was looking down over his shoulder. *He* was looking at his shadow now. Even from a distance I fancied I saw new beads of sweat string a rosary of fear across his forehead.

He knew, all right!

I came out, finally.

'Here it is,' I said. I kept my eyes from his face.

'Good. Hope it works. Must get some sleep, And say—that job offer still goes. How about coming down tomorrow morning?'

I nodded, forcing a smile.

Gulther paid me, rose.

'See you then.'

'Certainly.' And why not? After all, what if you do work for a boss with an unnatural shadow? Most bosses have other faults, worse ones and more concrete. That shadow—whatever it was and whatever was wrong with it—wouldn't bite me. Though Gulther acted as though it might bite *him*.

As he turned away I looked at his departing back, and at the long, swooping black outline which followed it. The shadow rose and stalked after him. Stalked. Yes, it followed quite purposefully. To my now bewildered eyes it seemed larger than it had in the tavern. Larger, and a bolder black.

Then the night swallowed Gulther and his nonexistent companion.

I went back to the rear of the store and swallowed the other half of the sedative I'd made up for that purpose. After seeing that shadow, I needed it as much as he did.

The girl in the ornate outer office smiled prettily. 'Go right in,' she warbled. 'He's expecting you.'

So it was true, then. Gulther was assistant research director, and I was to be his secretary.

I floated in. In the morning sunshine I forgot all about shadows.

The inner office was elaborately furnished—a huge place, with elegant walnut panelling associated with business authority. There was a kidney desk set before closed venetian blinds, and a variety of comfortable leather armchairs. Fluorescent lighting gleamed pleasantly.

But there was no Gulther. Probably on the other side of the little door at the back, talking to his Chief.

I sat down, with the tight feeling of anticipation hugged somewhere within my stomach. I glanced around, taking in the room again. My gaze swept the glass-topped desk. It was bare. Except in the corner, where a small box of cigars rested.

No, wait a minute. That wasn't a cigar-box. It was metal. I'd seen it somewhere before.

Of course! It was Gulther's iron-bound book.

'German inorganic chemistry.' Who was I to doubt his word? So naturally, I just had to sneak a look before he came in.

I opened the yellowed pages.

De Vermis Mysteriis.

'Mysteries of the Worm.'

This was no inorganic chemistry text. It was something entirely different. Something that told you how you could compound aconite and belladonna and draw circles of phosphorescent fire on the floor when the stars were right. Something that spoke of melting tallow candles and blending them with corpse-fat, whispered of the uses to which animal sacrifice might be put.

It spoke of meetings that could be arranged with various parties most people don't either care to meet or even believe in.

The thick black letters crawled across the pages, and the detestable odor arising from the musty thing formed a background for the nastiness of the text. I won't say whether or not I believed what I was reading, but I will admit that there was an air, a suggestion about those cold, deliberate directions for traffic with alien evil, which made me shiver with repulsion. Such thoughts have no place in sanity, even as fantasy. And if *this* is what Gulther had done with the materials, he'd bought himself for \$5.39.

'Years of study,' eh? 'Experiments.' What was Gulther try-

ing to call up, what did he call up, and what bargain did he make?

The man who could answer these questions sidled out from behind the door. Gone was the Fritz Gulther of the come-on-strong personality. It was my original moocher who creased his mouth at me in abject fear. He looked like a man—I had to say it—who was afraid of his own shadow.

The shadow trailed him through the doorway. To my eyes it had grown overnight. Its arms were slightly raised, though Gulther had both hands pressed against his sides. I saw it cross the wall as he walked toward me—and it moved more swiftly than he did.

Make no mistake. I saw the shadow. Since then I've talked to wise boys who assure me that under even fluorescence no shadow is cast. They're wise boys all right, but I saw that shadow.

Gulther saw that book in my hands.

'All right,' he said, simply. 'You know. And maybe it's just as well.'

'Know?'

'Yes. Know that I made a bargain with—someone. I thought I was being smart. He promised me success, and wealth, anything I wanted, on only one condition. Those damned conditions; you always read about them and you always forget, because they sound so foolish! He told me that I'd have only one rival, and that this rival would be a part of myself. It would grow with my success.'

I sat mute, Gulther was wound up for a long time.

'Silly, wasn't it? Of course I accepted. And then I found out what my rival was—what it would be. This shadow of mine. It's independent of me, you know that, and it keeps growing! Oh, not in size, but in *depth*, in intensity. It's becoming—maybe I *am* crazy but you see it, too—more solid. Thicker. As though it had palpable substance.'

Crease-mouth wobbled violently, but the words choked on.

'The further I go the more it grows. Last night I took your sedative and it didn't work. Didn't work at all. I sat up in the darkness and watched my shadow.'

'In darkness?'

'Yes. It doesn't need light. It really *exists*, now. Permanently. In the dark it's just a blacker blur. But you can see it. It doesn't sleep, or rest. It just waits.'

'And you're afraid of it? Why?'

'I don't know. It doesn't threaten me, or make gestures, or even take any notice of me. Shadows taking notice—sounds crazy, doesn't it? But you see it as I do. You can see it waiting. And that's why I'm afraid. What's it waiting for?'

The shadow crept closer over his shoulder. Eavesdropping.

'I don't need you for a secretary. I need a nurse.'

'What you need is a good rest.'

'Rest? How can I rest? I just came out of Newsohm's office. He doesn't notice anything—yet. Too stupid, I suppose. The girls in the office look at me when I pass, and I wonder if they see something peculiar. But Newsohm doesn't. He just made me head of research. Completely in charge.'

'In five days? Marvelous!'

'Isn't it? Except for our bargain—whenever I succeed, my rival gains power with me. That will make the shadow stronger. How, I don't know. I'm waiting. And I can't find rest.'

'I'll find it for you. Just lie down and wait—I'll be back.'

I left him hastily—left him sitting at his desk, all alone. Not quite alone. The shadow was there, too.

Before I went I had the funniest temptation. I wanted to run my hand along the wall, through that shadow. And yet I didn't. It was too black, too solid. What if my hand should actually encounter *something*?

So I just left.

I was back in half an hour. I grabbed Gulther's arm, bared it, plunged the needle home.

'Morphine,' I whispered. 'You'll sleep now.'

He did, resting on the leather sofa. I sat at his side, watching the shadow that didn't sleep.

It stood there towering above him unnaturally. I tried to ignore it, but it was a third party in the room. Once when I turned my back, it moved. I began to pace up and down. I opened my mouth, trying to hold back a scream.

The phone buzzed. I answered mechanically, my eyes never leaving the black outline on the wall that swayed over Gulther's recumbent form.

'Yes? No—he's not in right now. This is Mr. Gulther's secretary speaking. Your message? Yes, I'll tell him. I certainly will. Thank you.'

It had been a woman's voice—a deep, rich voice. Her message was to tell Mr. Gulther she'd changed her mind. She'd be

happy to meet him that evening at dinner.

Another conquest for Fritz Gulther!

Conquest—two conquests in a row. That meant conquests for the shadow, too. But *how*?

I turned to the shadow on the wall, and got a shock. It was lighter! Grayer, thinner, wavering a little!

What was wrong?

I glanced down at Gulther's sleeping face. Then I got another shock. Gulther's face was dark. Not tanned, but dark. Blackish. Sooty. *Shadowy*.

Then I did scream, a little.

Gulther awoke.

I just pointed to his face and indicated the wall mirror. He almost fainted. 'It's combining with me,' he whispered.

His skin was slate-colored. I turned my back because I couldn't look at him.

'We must do something,' he mumbled. 'Fast.'

'Perhaps if you were to use—that book again, you could make another bargain.'

It was a fantastic idea, but it popped out. I faced Gulther again and saw him smile.

'That's it! If you could get the materials now—you know what I need—go to the drugstore—but hurry up because—'

I shook my head. Gulther was nebulous, shimmery. I saw him through a mist.

Then I heard him yell.

'You damned fool! Look at *me*. That's my shadow you're staring at!'

I ran out of the room, and in less than ten minutes I was trying to fill a vial with belladonna with fingers that trembled like lumps of jelly.

I must have looked like a fool, carrying that armful of packages through the outer office. Candles, chalk, phosphorus, aconite, belladonna, and—blame it on my hysteria—the dead body of an alleycat I decoyed behind the store.

Certainly I felt like a fool when Fritz Gulther met me at the door of his sanctum.

'Come on in,' he snapped.

Yes, snapped.

It took only a glance to convince me that Gulther had his cool again. Whatever the black change that frightened us so

had been, he'd shook it off while I was gone.

Once again the trumpet voice held authority. Once again the sneering smile replaced the apologetic crease in the mouth.

Gulther's skin was white, normal. His movements were brisk and no longer frightened. He didn't need any wild spells—or had he ever, really?

Suddenly I felt as though I'd been a victim of my own imagination. After all, men don't make bargains with demons, they don't change places with their shadows.

The moment Gulther closed the door his words corroborated my mood.

'Well, I've snapped out of it. Foolish nonsense, wasn't it?' He smiled easily. 'Guess we won't need that junk after all. Right when you left I began to feel better. Here, sit down and take it easy.'

I sat. Gulther rested on the desk nonchalantly swinging his legs.

'All that nervousness, that strain, has disappeared. But before I forget it, I'd like to apologize for telling you that crazy story about sorcery and my obsession. Matter of fact, I'd feel better about the whole thing in the future if you just forgot all this ever happened.'

I nodded.

Gulther smiled again.

'That's right. Now we're ready to get down to business. I tell you, it's a real relief to realize the progress we're going to make. I'm head research director already, and if I play my cards right I think I'll be running this place in another three months. Some of the things Newsohm told me today tipped me off. So just play ball with me and we'll go a long way. A long way. And I can promise you one thing—I'll never have any of these crazy spells again.'

There was nothing wrong with what Gulther said here. Nothing wrong with any of it. There was nothing wrong with the way Gulther lolled and smiled at me, either.

Then why did I suddenly get that old crawling sensation along my spine?

For a moment I couldn't place it—and then I realized.

Fritz Gulther sat on his desk, before the wall *but now he cast no shadow*.

No shadow. No shadow at all. A shadow had tried to enter the body of Fritz Gulther when I left. Now there was no

shadow.

Where had it gone?

There was only one place for it to go. And it had gone there, then—*where was Fritz Gulther?*

He read it in my eyes.

I read it in his swift gesture.

Gulther's hand dipped into his pocket and reemerged. As it rose, I rose, and sprang across the room.

I gripped the revolver, pressed it back and away, and stared into his convulsed countenance, into his eyes. Behind the glasses, behind the human pupils, there was only a blackness. The cold, grinning blackness of a shadow.

Then he snarled, arms clawing up as he tried to wrest the weapon free, aim it. His body was cold, curiously weightless, but filled with a slithering strength. I felt myself go limp under those icy, scrabbling talons, but as I gazed into those two dark pools of hate that were his eyes, fear, and desperation lent me aid.

A single gesture, and I turned the muzzle in. The gun exploded, and Gulther slumped to the floor.

They crowded in then; they stood and stared down, too. We all stood and stared down at the body lying on the floor.

Body? There was Fritz Gulther's shoes, his shirt, his tie, his expensive blue suit. The toes of the shoes pointed up, the shirt and tie and suit were creased and filled out to support a body beneath.

But there was no body on the floor. There was only a shadow—a deep, black shadow, encased in Fritz Gulther's clothes.

Nobody said a word for a long minute. Then one of the girls whispered, 'Look—it's just a shadow.'

I bent down quickly and shook the clothes. As I did so, the shadow seemed to move beneath my fingers, to move and to melt.

In an instant it slithered free from the garments. There was a flash—or a final retinal impression of blackness, and the shadow was gone. The clothing sagged down into an empty, huddled heap on the floor.

I rose and faced them. I couldn't say it loud, but I could say it gratefully, very gratefully.

'No,' I said. 'You're mistaken. There's no shadow there. There's nothing at all—absolutely nothing at all.'

GIRL FROM MARS

'The wild Man from Borneo—he eats 'em alive—he eats 'em alive——'

Ace Clawson leaned against the side of the platform and listened to Lou, the spieler. Somebody had to listen to him, and there was no crowd in this lousy drizzle.

The rain was letting up now as it got dark, but the afternoon storm had made mudpies in the Midway. Ace stared up the deserted carny street as the lights came on over the soggy tents and the drooping banners of the WORLD OF WONDER shows. He shivered. This was a stinking climate—no wonder these Georgia crackers got malaria.

Maybe it would stop raining soon. Maybe the marks would come down after supper. They'd better. Only two days left to play here and Ace wasn't off the nut yet. Well, that's the way some seasons went, just one bad break after another.

Ace scratched his chin. Better shave. Ah, phooey on that. And phooey for Lou, too—blatting his brains out for nothing up there. He looked at the gawky spieler on the platform and grinned. Punk kid, his first season out, and he needed practice. Ace cocked his head and called.

'Hey, Lou!'

'Yeah?'

'Shut up!'

Lou shut up and climbed down. He tossed his head and Ace ducked the spray of raindrops. 'You damn' fool, barking at nobody! Stuff it. Go inside and take the gang over to Sweeney for chow. We won't see a sucker around here for an hour yet.'

'Sure, Ace.'

Lou went inside and rounded up the Strange People. They came out single file; Fat Phyllis waddling along with little Captain Atom, Hassan the fireeater puffing on one of his rancid shoe pegs, Joe the Alligator Boy wearing a raincoat, Eddie in his wild man outfit.

Ace stood behind the ticket stand. He didn't feel like talking

to them. Somebody was bound to make a crack about Mitzie and Rajah. Nuts to that noise!

He watched them plod through the red clay of the Midway, then squinted up at the banners behind the platform. All the Strange People squinted back with their painted eyes—Phyllis, Captain Atom, the World's Smallest Man, the Mighty Hassan, the Alligator Boy, the Wild Man from Borneo, Rajah the Magician, and the Girl from Mars.

Rajah the Magician, dressed in evening clothes and wearing a turban on his head, was sawing a woman in half. The Girl from Mars spread her batwings over the sky. Ace scowled at them and cursed.

They had to take a powder on him, did they? Had to run out—and together! That's what hurt. They ran off together. Rajah and Mitzie. It was probably her idea, the tramp. Just giving him the old double-X behind his back. Laughing at him. Bad weather, a poor take, and on top of it she had to run out on him too!

Ace bit into his lower lip. That was all the supper he needed. That and a drink.

He sat down on the edge of the platform and pulled out his pint. Almost full. He pulled out the cork and threw it away. It wouldn't be needed again for this bottle.

Tilting his head back, he swallowed. One swig for the rain. One swig for the lousy Georgia crackers. One swig for Rajah and Mitzie. Yes, and one swig for what he'd do to that broad if he ever caught up with her.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that the rain had stopped. And then, he saw the girl.

She came wandering up the Midway, walking very slow. She was wearing some kind of gray playsuit, but he could tell it was a girl all right, even from far away, because the lights showed off her blonde hair.

Blonde hell, she was platinum; as she got closer he saw the bush on her head was almost white. Her eyebrows, too. Like one of those—what did they call 'em?—albinos. Only her eyes weren't pink. They were kind of platinum too. Starey eyes. She gawked at everything as she went past the pitches.

Ace watched her coming; he had nothing else to do. Besides, she was worth watching. Even with that outfit on, he could see that she was really stacked. But built! Long legs, and plenty of meat on the torso. A disheroo.

He slicked back his hair. When she passed the tent he'd step out and walk over, sort of smiling. Then——

Ace hesitated. Because the girl wasn't passing the tent. She came up to the end of the platform and stopped. She looked up and began to read the banners, moving her lips. She stood kind of funny, swaying a little as if she had a load. Maybe she did, at that. Anyhow, she rocked on her heels and stared up. She kept looking at one banner and mumbling to herself.

Ace turned his head. She was staring at the Girl from Mars. Yes, and that's what she was mumbling out loud, too; he could hear it.

'The Girl from Mars,' she kept saying. She had a kind of a foreign accent. Blondie. Maybe a Swede or something.

'Something I can do for you?'

Ace swung over and came up behind her. She jumped about a foot.

'Teker——'

Swede all right. But built. She didn't wear any makeup. She didn't need to. Ace smiled at her.

'I'm Ace Clawson. Own this show. What can I do for you, sister?'

She sized him up and then looked back at the banner.

'The Girl from Mars,' she said. 'Is that truth?'

'Truth?'

'There is such a' one? Inside there?'

'Uh—no. Not now. She scrambled.'

'Kep?' The girl swallowed quickly. 'I mean—what do you say?'

'She ran away. What's the matter, you don't talk English so good, huh?'

'English? Oh. Speech. Yes, I talk it.' She spoke slowly, frowning. At least her eyebrows frowned, but her forehead didn't wrinkle. Her skin was gray, like the playsuit. No buttons on the suit and she wasn't carrying a purse. Foreigner.

'She did not po—possess wings?'

Ace grinned. 'No. Fakeroo.' She was beginning her frown act again and he remembered she was probably drunk. 'It was a gag, see? There is no Girl from Mars.'

'But I am from *Rekk*.'

'What?'

'I am from *Re*—from Mars.'

She was lushed to the gills. Ace stepped back. 'Oh, yeah.

Sure. You're from Mars, huh?'

'I came today.'

'Well, well. Just like that, huh? Pleasure or business?'

'Kep?'

'Skip it. I mean, what's on your mind? What can I do for you?'

'Hungry.'

Not only a lush, but a mooch, yet. But she *was* built. And when Ace put his hand on her shoulder, she didn't move away. Her shoulder was warm. The heat just poured off her. Hot stuff. And she was hungry——

Ace glanced at the tent flap behind him. He was beginning to get an idea. It came to him when he put his hand on her shoulder. To hell with Mitzie. This was just what the doctor ordered. And the Midway was deserted. The gang wouldn't be back from Sweeney's for forty-five minutes yet.

'Hungry,' the girl repeated.

'Sure. We'll get you something to eat. But let's talk first. Come on inside.' Ace got another grip on her shoulder. Warm. Soft. Good stuff.

The lights inside were dim. Lou had switched off when he left. The flaps were down over the platforms against the tent walls, as they were during the grind when only one freak performed at a time. Ace led her over to the Girl from Mars platform. There was a cot inside and he could lower the flap. Take it easy first though.

She walked on her heels until he held her still and pushed her down on the steps on the side of the platform. Touching her made him want to hurry it up, even though he knew he had to be careful. The heat came off her in waves, and he was warm from the whiskey.

'So you're from Mars,' he said, huskily, bending over her but remembering to keep a grin on his face. 'How did you get here?'

'*Ertells* The—machine. With the others. *Hydron*, very swift. Until we land. Then this, we did not expect. In the atmosphere. Electric.'

'The storm? Lightning?'

She nodded, expressionless. 'You understand. The *kor*—the machine split. Broken. All *flerk*. All but I. I fell. And then I did not know. Because I had no orders. *Pre* was ended. You understand?'

Ace nodded. She was hot. God, she was hot. And built. He stepped back, still nodding. Let her finish. Maybe she'd sober up a little.

'So I walked. Nothing. Nobody. Dark. Then I saw light. This place. And the words. And you. I read the words.'

'And here you are.' Humor them. You got to humor them, dames and drunks. 'How come you read English, and talk?'

'Pre did it. Education. Because he—planned we must come. Much I cannot know. I will understand. Now hungry.'

There was no expression on her face. Lushes always twist their faces a lot. She didn't stagger, just walked on her heels was all. And there was no liquor smell from her. So—she wasn't drunk!

Ace stared.

He stared at the expressionless face, at the platinum hair and eyebrows. He stared at the sandals she wore, at the gray suit without any pockets, without any buttons. No buttons. That was it. *She didn't have all her buttons.*

Yeah. Sure. She was a whack. She came here this afternoon, all right. Busted out of the country nuthouse in the storm. No wonder she didn't carry a purse or anything. Just a lousy whack on the lam from the san.

Wouldn't that have to be the kind of break he got? A screwball with an empty gut and an empty noggin. That's all he needed. But she was *built*. And that's all he needed——

Why not?

Ace figured fast. Half an hour, maybe. Long enough. He'd hustle her out of here right away. Nobody would know. It was a dirty trick, maybe. What the hell, he'd been getting the dirty end long enough himself; rain, no take, that damned Mitzie running out on him, no woman. He needed a change of luck. And besides, it wouldn't hurt her, maybe do her good. Nobody would find out anything and even if they did, she was a whack. Didn't know what she was saying, even. Why not?

'Hungry.'

'Wait a minute, sister, I got a great idea. Come on back here for a second.'

He motioned her to her feet, led the way up the steps, and lifted the flap. It was dark on the platform behind the canvas curtain. He groped for the couch, found it.

'Sit down here.' He made his voice soft. She stood right next to him, not backing away, and when he pulled her down,

pulled down all that heat and softness, she came without a sound.

He made himself wait, kept talking first.

'Yeah, I got a great idea. Why not? You're from Mars, ain'tcha?'

'Yes. From *Rekk*.'

'Sure. And my Girl from Mars skipped. So the way I figure it, why don't you come along with the show? You can have the same setup, sixty a week and chow, travel around and see the country. Nobody to tell you what to do or when to do it, see? Your own boss. Free. Get it—free?'

He wanted it to sound good. Sort of subtle, about being free. Even if she was a whack, she had enough sense to bust out and probably knew she'd have to keep moving. Not that he'd let her tie up with the show, that was all con, but he wanted her to go for the deal. Then he could start.

'But that is not what you speak. Hungry——'

Ah, to hell with it! You don't waste your breath on a screwball. And here in the dark she wasn't a screwball. She was a disheroo, a tall blonde, hot, better than Mitzie, damn Mitzie anyhow, she was here and he could feel her, feel the warmth just busting out of her——

Ace put his hands on her shoulders.

'Hungry, huh? Well, don't you worry about that, sister. I'll take care of you. All you gotta do is cooperate.'

Damn it! He heard the mumbling now, the gang was coming back, filing into the tent, climbing up on platforms and scraping chairs. He wouldn't have time.

But what the hell, he was behind the curtain, it was dark, he'd keep quiet and make her keep quiet and they could sneak out later. Besides, his hands were on her shoulders. Ace felt her lean against him, felt those curves, solid. Instead of drawing back, she kept coming in, she wasn't whacky, she knew what she was doing, this was all right.

Somebody in the outer tent flicked up the lights, and a thin glow filtered through the canvas curtain. He grinned at her upturned face. Her eyes were wide, shining. He ran his hands down her back. She was strong, eager.

'Don't you worry about being hungry, baby,' he whispered. 'I'll take care of you.'

The heat poured out of her as she pressed his shoulders. He bent his head to kiss her. She opened her mouth, wide, and in

the dim light he saw her teeth. They were platinum-colored, too.

Then he wanted to draw back, but something about the heat pouring off her made him feel dizzy. Besides, she held on to him so tight, and she kept whispering 'hungry' over and over again, and now she was drawing him down on the cot and he saw the teeth coming at him. They were long and pointed. He couldn't move, she held him, the heat came out of her eyes to blind him, and the long, sharp teeth were coming closer and closer——

Ace hardly felt any pain. Everything turned to heat and whirled away. Somewhere in the distance a voice began to chant. It was Lou, standing outside, standing under the Girl from Mars banner and beginning his chant. That was the last thing Ace heard or knew. The chant, the spiel.

'The Wild Man From Borneo—he eats 'em alive—he eats 'em alive——'

BEAUTY'S BEAST

PEG and I were like the Smith Brothers—only better, because neither of us had beards. We disagreed so perfectly that we made an irresistible combination. Of course, Peg always permitted me to be boss, provided I did what she told me. And when she invited me to dinner at Leonard Merrill's, whom I detest, I naturally argued and agreed.

So there we were, walking down the street because Peg was energetic and I preferred a taxi. I was walking fast and Peg was dawdling, so she spotted the place first.

'Look at the cute puppy!' she exclaimed. My eyes wandered quickly to surrounding lampposts.

'No—over there, in the windows.'

Peg dragged me before the glass pane of what I perceived to be Mardu's Pet Shop. Of course there was the usual black and white pup crouching wobbly-legged in the sawdust, and Peg began to make those disgusting noises women always make when confronted with puppies, babies, or Tony Bennett.

Now I don't like dogs, and that is putting it mildly. If I were perishing in the snow of the Alps and a St. Bernard came running up with a bottle of brandy under his neck I might fall on him in gratitude—but I'm sure the pooch would bite me in the leg.

Somehow I never could believe that a dog was man's best friend, I know of at least three people who are higher in my affections than a canine.

After Peg stopped squealing at this dopey-looking little mutt, I told her this, adding that if we didn't step on it we'd be late for the party.

'Ooh, let's go inside and look around,' she countered. Always agreeable, was Peg.

'I do not care for animals,' I said, gently. 'In fact I would not go into this foul-smelling joint to see King Kong in a bathing suit. I despise anteaters, dingos, emus, pandas, yaks, aardvaarks, hartebeestes, ocelots, steinbok, dugongs, and elk.'

'My uncle is an Elk,' said Peg.

'And you, my dear, are a kook,' I murmured; following Peggy into the pet shop in response to a charming tug on the lapel which knocked off a button.

'I simply must have that puppy,' she prattled. 'He's so cute, and I could buy him a little red blanket with his name on it, and you could walk him around the block every night——'

Yes, and I could drop dead, too, love, only it's bad for my health. So was the pet shop. To be brutally frank, it smelled in there.

'Come on, Peg, we haven't got much time,' I said, glancing around the dingy, cage-lined walls in a sudden attack of combined *claustro* and *zoophobia*.

'Can I do anything for you, sir?'

The tall, thin man who rounded the counter was obviously not a Caucasian. He had the dark, pointed face of an East Indian, and his voice held a nasal twang.

In all frankness, I must admit he didn't impress me then. It was only afterward, thinking of it, that I realize his movements were those of a panther; that in his pet shop he was a jungle beast. Quiet, quick, supple, amber-eyed, he confronted me.

'That puppy in the window——' Peg began. The tall, dark man shot her a single glance. I don't know exactly what it conveyed, but Peg shut up. I determined to get him alone sometime and find out how he did it.

Then the lean-faced one turned to me.

'You would perhaps wish to look around a little first. I have many pets here, and I think the young lady could find one a little more interesting. Perhaps?'

I can tell you what kind of a glance he gave *me*. It was a look that made it impossible for me to say 'No.' I can't explain that. It wasn't sales personality he turned on, it was the air of command.

'Would you show us?' I heard myself saying.

'But that puppy——' Peg wailed.

'This way.' I nudged Peg to follow the dark shop owner. I was doing a little rationalization on my part. I didn't want Peggy to get that puppy; I didn't want to put on its ittsy-bitsy red blanket and take ums for a nice walk around the block every night. If she could be steered into getting a parrot, or goldfish, or even a pet gorilla it was okay by me. But I had no intention of spending my evenings gazing at the trees. So what if this fellow came on strong?

We walked between the long lines of cages. I stared curiously. There were dogs, lots and lots of dogs. Chinese Chows, Toys, Pekes; exotic little creatures with curiously bright eyes. That was funny. No common western breeds.

'Imported?' I asked.

'Yes, sir. All Imported. I bring them from the East. Fine blood. Some of the best, sir.'

Cages of birds; gilded, ornamental cages with curiously designed bars, teakwood perches of oriental patterns. They held canaries with bodies like golden, living notes; finches and nightingales, scarlet humming-birds with peacock purple crowns. And in larger gridded prisons were blood-beaked macaws, white cockatoos, heavy-crested parrots with blinking eyes.

'Quite a collection,' I said.

'From all over the world,' answered the Hindu, softly. 'From all over the world they come.' But he didn't stop to expound further, didn't offer to show us anything. We passed a crystalline counter of fishbowls, passed the insane eyes of a million wriggling exotics. And then Peg grabbed me in the gloom and I felt her body trembling against mine.

'Snakes!' she shuddered, in a voice hard with loathing.

From their pits the vipers swayed, the cobras crawled, undulating in the evil glory of their poisonous beauty. Eyes bright as Lucifer blazed upward in the darkness, and the air was filled with a sluggish rustling that sounded against my spine in little cold notes of horripilation.

'Beautiful, are they not?' murmured our guide. 'In my country they worship them. I had great trouble procuring these.'

'Get them yourself?' I asked, merely to hear the sound of my own voice.

'I have secured everything in the shop—personally,' answered the tall man.

Peg giggled feebly as I squeezed her arm and we resumed our inspection. A moment later she grabbed me in the shadows with a low scream.

'Here, now, don't get so affectionate,' I cautioned. 'This is no place for——'

'Ooooh! Rats, take them away!'

'Merely white mice,' came the soft voice at my side. 'From Thailand.'

'Sacred in the temples, you understand,' continued our mentor. 'Like that peacock over there.' He gestured in the darkness. 'In fact, I might mention that all the animals in this shop are sacred to Eastern mythology. The snakes, of course, and the Chows in China; the fish are worshiped in Java and the Celebes, and the various birds in Borneo and the Malay States. But I was going to show you the monkeys.'

'Why?'

'I am sure the young lady here will be more satisfied with a monkey. Such as—this one.'

And he stopped before a row of cages at the back of the shop. Stooping, he prodded the bars of a shadow-shielded crate. 'Hanuman,' he whispered. 'Hanuman.'

'What?'

'I call him Hanuman. After the sacred monkey god of India,' came the voice, 'A temple monkey; tame, intelligent, and very hard to procure.'

I began to wonder whether this Mardu, as his sign proclaimed him, was some kind of nut. Sacred animals! I spotted a tortoise, and a Siamese cat. Half-expected a crocodile and a white elephant.

'Hanuman,' called the Hindu. 'Show thyself.'

I stood there in the shadows, Peg at my side, and suddenly something clicked.

It was too quiet. Utterly still. When you go into a pet shop the dogs bark, the parrots squawk, the birds screech, the monkeys chatter. And here it was still. The animals watched us as we passed, but did not move. We had walked down a row of glittering eyes in the darkness, and there wasn't a sound. Something wrong.

'What's the matter?' I asked. 'Is it bedtime in this menagerie?'

'No.' The Hindu smiled. 'But my pets are all very well-trained.'

'Let me assure you, sir, of that. Temple beasts are intelligent; they are bred with human backgrounds almost in their blood. And I have personally instructed every one. I know you will be satisfied with—ah, Hanuman. Show thyself to the lady, here. She might want to buy thee, little friend.'

The monkey appeared suddenly, head pressed against the bars. And Peg stooped down, looked into the monkey's eyes. Very quiet was the monkey, and its bright little orbs were

timid, but they rested on Peg's face in mute appeal. Animal magnetism, or something—but silly as it sounds, the little creature had that trusting, ingratiating sort of gaze that nauseated me and turned Peg on.

'That is the way,' the Hindu whispered. 'Show that you like the lady, that you trust the lady. She wants to buy you. She wants you. Don't you, lady?'

The drone of his voice in the darkness was almost hypnotic, and Peg stared into the beady little eyes. Autosuggestion.

'I want him!' Peg stood up. It wasn't *isn't he cute?* or *what an adorable little thing!* It was *I want him!*

'I thought he would be suited to you when I saw you,' said the Hindu. 'Yes, perfectly suited. You are in complete accord.'

'How much?' I barked.

'To the lady? Ten dollars. A small sum, but they are so perfectly attuned, so beautifully matched that——'

'She isn't going to marry the monkey,' I interrupted. 'Here's your ten. Give us the monkey and let's get going.'

He stooped, opened the door of the cage. The monkey just crouched there. And then Mardu picked him up in slim, almond hands, and held him for a moment against his face. His long fingers stroked the beast's fur in a hypnotically soothing caress. And the Hindu whispered softly, unintelligibly, in a strange tongue. The monkey seemed to nod, and it struck me so funny I let out a guffaw; whereupon Peg kicked me in the shins.

'Ah. Here you are. Treat Hanuman well; I have told him much of you. And do not forget Mardu.'

Peg took the monkey on her shoulder, and we walked down the aisle of the shop, the smiling Hindu behind us.

'Do not forget——'

Peg smiled and the monkey made that ridiculous nodding gesture. I stood on the sidewalk and laughed.

'All right, Peggy. Where do we buy the organ?'

'He's wonderful. I'm going to take him to the party.'

'To Leonard Merrill's?'

'Why not?'

'Well, I admit he's an improvement over the average run of Leonard's guests, but don't you think that——'

We walked down the street. The monkey clung to Peg silently and its eyes never left her face.

'Wasn't that the queerest place?'

'That's what I'm thinking.'

'And that Mardu—he has such an air about him.'

'So has the place. Whew!'

'Oh, don't talk that way. Honestly, I'll bet he's a wonderful man. The way he handled those animals. Like some old Brahmin priest or something. Don't the Hindus believe that animals have human souls? Reincarnation, isn't it?'

'I don't know, I don't like flowers. Hurry up and drag that soulful baboon of yours to dinner.'

What Peg had said started me thinking. It was a queer place, and the Hindu was pretty far out. I determined to go back there and ask a few questions. Sometimes there's a story behind such things; wouldn't hurt to find out. If Mardu were a renegade holy man, now, who collected sacred animals and sold them to those he thought were psychically attuned to the spirit of the beast—but that was a put-on. Still, he *had* steered Peg off the puppy, and almost hypnotized her into buying the monkey. I wondered what he would have picked out for me. I hoped it would be a chicken, fried. I was hungry.

'Here we are, Peg. Upstairs quickly or I'll shove Hanuman here between two slices of rye bread and eat out on the steps.'

'Nasty!' Peg faced me. 'Thanks for buying me the monkey, you fink.' She put her arms around me and her face very close so that I stood on the brink of eternity as we kissed. Sometimes Peg could be very nice that way; so sweet and cuddly that I'd forget she used red nail polish. Right now she turned my heart into a creampuff, and then I drew away and I saw the monkey watching me with glittering little eyes and it clawed at Peg, pulling her face around.

'Well look who's jealous,' Peg giggled. 'You've got a new rival.'

'He needs a shave,' I grumbled.

But I noticed that Peg didn't look at me any more, just stared at the monkey as we went up the stairs and knocked on Leonard Merrill's door.

Inside, everybody stared at the monkey, too.

All during dinner they stared, and Peg told her story, and I just ate. The monkey rested very quietly on Peg's lap, and looked up at her whenever she gave too much attention to one of the other guests. It tugged at her shoulder in the irresistibly human gesture of a small child, and it wasn't long before

everyone noticed it and began making cracks about jealousy, and a few off-color comments that might have made me burn if they weren't so damnably funny and appropriate.

'What you going to call it?' asked Leonard Merrill, as we went into the living room.

'I don't know,' Peg mused.

'Just plain Mr. X will do,' I growled. 'That's the best way of referring to the third member of a romantic triangle.'

'Mr. X it is, then.'

'Beauty and the Beast,' said Merrill. 'Where'd you say you got it, Peg?'

'A place called Mardu's down on Flynn Street. I told you about this funny Hindu that runs it——'

'Mardu's?' It was Mrs. Merrill who interrupted. 'Why, that's where Lillian got Toby.'

'What Toby?'

'That—that snake.' Mrs. Merrill shuddered. 'A fine sister I've got. I can't understand it; she's always hated reptiles, and yet only about a week ago she came home with a nasty little cobra she keeps in a wire cage and feeds live mice to—ugh!'

'Really?'

'It's the truth. And now that you mention it, she got it at Mardu's. She told me she passed there and happened to notice a puppy in the window, but this fellow that runs the shop started talking to her and she——'

I stopped listening. I knew the rest. So she went in to buy a puppy and came out with a snake. Like the guy going to the racetrack, taking bad advice and betting on the wrong horse; listening to the same fellow again and betting on the wrong horse again until he loses all his money; deciding to spend his last dime for a bag of peanuts only to buy popcorn instead on the advice of this same stranger. So the puppy in the window was a decoy, and Mardu sold his customers what he felt was best. All right—but why?

'You know Lillian is absolutely devoted to the horrid thing?' Mrs. Merrill was in full conversational cry. 'Why, the kiddies are beginning to complain that she neglects them to spend all her time with that nasty monster. And she goes to Mardu's every day; he's supposed to be teaching her Hindu philosophy. One would think that the man had hypnotized her.'

Looking suddenly at Peg, I caught her staring at the monkey. And right then and there I had the hunch—the hunch

that was cold along my neck.

'Let's go,' I whispered. 'Let's pick up Mr. X and get out of here.'

Peg shrugged and rose as I made my excuses. We departed. I didn't want Peg to hear any more about Lillian and her pet. It would be too easy—first thing I knew Peggy would be dropping in at the Hindu's place, and hearing some 'philosophy' and I had just one strong notion that I didn't want this to happen.

We walked home very quietly. I was silent, worried by something I couldn't quite shape into thought. As for Peg, she was crooning at the monkey. It clung to her, clung to her; I wondered if it would leave her when she went to bed. Its paws sunk into her shoulder and it clung like a little black leech, like an incubus. Its eyes glittered in the moonlight. What had the Hindu whispered to it when he took it from its cage?

Oh, that was nonsense! But it wasn't nonsense when Peg ignored me in favor of the creature, and it wasn't nonsense as I kissed her goodnight to feel those tiny paws clawing at my hair, pulling my head away from hers. No, that wasn't nonsense.

I went to bed with grim determination of seeing Mardu again the next day. There were some things I had to find out. No need of letting my imagination run riot, but still I intended to interview my Hindu friend and get matters straight.

I awoke next morning as the phone rang. It wasn't Peg. It was Sullivan, my agent, and he bawled out his orders in a peremptory voice. An hour later I was on the train, and for a week I was much too deep in work to think much about Hindus, animal trainers, or pet monkeys with a mother fixation.

But I came back, and I hadn't changed my shoes before the phone tinkled, and Peg's voice did a ditto. No, it didn't tinkle this time. She sounded grave.

'Hello, just get in?'

No, 'darling.' No, 'how are you?' No, 'when can I see you.' And she sounded upset.

'What's happened, Peg?'

'Lillian's dead.'

'Who?'

'Lillian. Mrs. Merrill's sister. You remember, the one that bought the snake from Mardu.'

'Be right over.' I hung up, broke the lace in excitement as I

changed shoes, and dashed.

I don't know what I expected to find at Peg's place, or what I expected to hear. Probably Peg sprawled out, strangled by the monkey; with a wild note revealing that Lillian had been bitten by her snake, and that Mardu was a Hindu murder master who sold killer beasts to his victims. Something like that made my heart thunder as I ran upstairs and knocked on Peg's door.

But there stood Peg, cool and slim. She was all right, then. But the monkey was perched on her shoulder——

Its beady little eyes were stabbing at me, but I could only see the figure of the girl.

'Let's have it,' I said. 'The nitty gritty.'

'Nothing's the matter with me,' Peg answered. 'It's Lillian. And even that isn't so bad. I guess I was a little shook when I called you; it came so suddenly. I just heard today.'

We sank side by side on the sofa, and that damned monkey was grinning on her shoulder, like some eavesdropper. She didn't seem to mind, or even to notice its presence; but every once in a while her hand rose unconsciously to caress the simian. She caressed it the way Mardu had caressed it and its eyes shone.

'It sounded so funny, darling. Merrill called me. It happened last night; heart attack or something. She was in the studio, playing to Toby.'

'Toby?'

'That snake she bought. Mardu had given her a little silver flageolet like snake-charmers use. She was playing it when she keeled over.' Peg paused. 'That's all there was to it. Leonard saw it happen; the doctor came and certified it.'

'Go on.'

'Why, that's all.'

'Oh no it isn't. Don't try and fool me, Peg. Out with it.'

Peggy bit her lip, then plunged ahead hurriedly. 'Oh, nothing else matters much, except for the funny thing that happened today. Mardu showed up at Merrill's house and took the snake.'

'What?'

'This morning. He came to the door and asked for his snake. Said that if the lady was dead she wouldn't need it any more and he would like to buy it back.'

'Did he get it?'

'Merril almost threw it at him. He went away then.' Peg sat staring, one hand caressing the monkey on her shoulder. 'But

that's what upset me so at first. You see, Mardu didn't ask if Mrs. Merrill had died. He *knew* she was dead before he came.'

'Peg.'

'Yes.'

'Have you been to Mardu's since that night? Look at me—have you?'

'I——'

'Thought so! Now what's all this? Why did you go?'

'I had to.'

'Had to?'

'To find out about the dreams. I haven't told you that, have I? That I've been dreaming of Hanuman?'

'I thought the monkey's name was Mr. X?'

'No. His name is Hanuman. That's what Mardu tells me. I must call him Hanuman.'

The look in her eyes, the *vacant* look that was not Peg, unnerved me. I shook her shoulders, none too gently. 'Come on, now; those dreams!'

'All right. They started that first night. I put Hanuman in the kitchen and went to bed. I wasn't conscious of falling asleep, and the first thing I knew Hanuman was in the room, next to my bed. He hopped up to my pillow and snuggled next to me, and began to talk. Not chatter, but talk. At first it was all a drone, then I could make out words, and then I recognized the voice. It was like Mardu's—soft, whispery. He was telling me things; things I could *feel* rather than understand. He talked for a long time, but I wasn't frightened. Then I seemed to wake up. It had all been so real I half expected to find the monkey lying next to me, but of course it wasn't there. I knew then that I'd been dreaming. Funny though, I couldn't remember those important things Hanuman had said to me. I went out to the kitchen and there he was. It may sound kind of foolish, but I was all worked up and in a daze, and I began to speak to the brute. Of course he just blinked at me. So I went back to bed. The next day you left and I went to Mardu's.'

'Go on.'

'I told him. He just smiled, and asked me if I remembered what Hanuman had said, and when I answered no, he laughed and asked me to sit down. I did, and he explained that I must have been unconsciously hypnotized. That was the funniest thing, because you know I'd been thinking so myself. Yes, the night we bought Hanuman in the dark, Mardu's voice had

influenced me. By association—Mardu and the monkey—it had carried over into my subconscious in sleep. Peculiar, wasn't it?

'Very,' I said, curtly.

'Well, this Mardu is really quite a person. He found out I was interested in psychology, and he began to tell me what the Hindus have learned on the subject; how the Brahmin holy men can control the mind, and influence others. He studied in some temple or other himself at one time; I believe it was a temple of Yama, he said, and what he found out about animals in particular was of great help to him in his work. He told me how trappers can hypnotize animals, and how snakes are charmed, and how sometimes in the temples the priests teach certain animals to actually hypnotize human beings!'

'What's that?'

'Oh. it's only a sort of legend in the East; they think that snakes hypnotize birds, and that sometimes the animals can learn that power. It's all mixed up with a lot of other things he taught me, about the theory of reincarnation. You know I said something like that when we first met him; that he might be interested in reincarnation. Funny that he is. He believes absolutely that men go through all kinds of incarnations on earth; starting out as the lowest insects and gradually, life after life, evolving into human form. If a life is good, the soul is rewarded by ascending to a higher form in the next existence; if a life is bad, the soul sinks to a lower animal state.

'Mardu talked about how all religions believe that gods once walked the earth in the shape of beasts; the Egyptians and the Greeks and the Hindus, of course. He told me about lycanthropy as a universal superstition—oh, lots of things! He's quite an educated man. Well, in the end he had me quite calmed down; warned me not to worry about any more dreams, and gave me this.'

Peg pulled it from her blouse—the tiny silver pipe with the worn scroll design in the metal. 'He said I should play the pipes to Hanuman every night before I went to sleep; that it would show my mastery of the beast and thus reassure my own subconscious and keep me from dreaming. So I have. And then—I heard about Lillian.'

I gave her a long look. What I saw didn't satisfy me yet.

'All of it,' I whispered. 'Come on, all of it. You went back to Mardu's again, didn't you? And your dreams didn't stop, did

they? And before Lillian died you saw her and she told you——'

'That Mardu was a wizard and that the little silver pipe was a token of his power, and that the snake came to her in dreams and whispered, and she was afraid of——'

Peg blurted it out as though she couldn't stop. But *it* stopped her. Crawling up to her mouth its tiny paws raked her lips. And Peg fainted.

I grabbed at the furry little monstrosity, but it chittered and leapt to the floor. Then I was chafing Peg's wrists and whispering her name, kissing away the bright trickle of blood from her lips. She sat up and clung to me for a long, shuddering moment, and then she got control of herself.

'See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil,' she said, in a voice with a ghost of amusement. 'The three monkeys. Well, indeed.'

'Where's that damned pipe?' I demanded. 'I'm going to smash it. And then I'm going down and see Mardu.'

'It's raining,' said Peg. She was staring out the window. The drops thundered down. 'The pipe? Why—Hanuman has it.' The monkey, now perching on the mantel, clutched the silver pipe to its bosom.

I went for that monkey. I went for him for half an hour, in the midst of the most torrential rainstorm I've ever seen. The lights went out, and I stumbled after the elusive beast in the dark. Then Peg got frightened and began to cry, and I comforted her. Chasing an inhuman intelligence in pitch blackness isn't a pleasant thing, and I'd rather not talk about it. But the way that diabolical little simian eluded me was uncanny. At the end of the half hour I was nearly as upset as Peggy, and quite willing to believe her story. Mardu hadn't hypnotized me, but I knew.

I knew as I took Peg in my arms, there in the rainswept darkness, and I understood her murmurings.

'You know what Lillian was afraid of, don't you? And why Mardu knew she died, and wanted that snake back—— You know why he keeps those pets now, and why they are so quiet, and why he only gives certain ones to certain people? You know what he means by reincarnation, and animals that can hypnotize, just as music can. Little silver pipes. You know what the dreams mean, and why every night they get stronger and stronger and Mardu calls me and pulls me out of myself into——'

'But why?' I said. 'If it's all a trap to do—what you're hinting—Mardu must have some purpose behind it all. He hasn't, so your notion is absurd.'

Only inside my head it wasn't absurd. I'd figured it out. Peggy had said he was a priest of Yama. Yama is the god of Death and Hell. Mardu was the Hindu equivalent of a devil worshiper. Now a devil worshiper has one aim; to degrade God and His works, to pull men's souls to Satan. A Hindu devoted to Yama and working for the devil, would degrade others. If he believed in reincarnation, used hypnotic powers, he would try to degrade others by dragging them back, lowering them on the reincarnative past by putting their human souls into——

But no. This was the Twentieth Century. Snakes and monkeys, even temple snakes and monkeys, cannot hypnotize human beings, cannot whisper in dreams, cannot pull a human soul out of its body and—oh, this was the Twentieth Century——

Or it was a way-out world of thunder and lightning and swirling rain. I went to the window. The streets swirled in water. It was rising from the river. Flood level or over.

Peg whispered behind me very softly.

'I went there today. I took a look at the snake Mardu had given Lillian. He tried to hide it, but it was lying there in a box. When it saw me it opened its eyes and I knew, and then I screamed und ran out before he could stop me. But I knew.'

'I'm going to Mardu's now,' I said.

'In this storm? The river might——'

'Take a chance. Got to. You stay here. Get hold of that monkey—he's hiding somewhere here. And beat its brains out. Yes, kill it! Then wait for me. I'll be back.'

She clung to me in the darkness, and I could hear the rain, and her heartbeat, and above that a faint, evil rustling as the unseen simian scampered grinning around the room.

'Be careful,' Peg whispered.

I slammed the door and raced through water-swept streets. The pools rose above my ankles, but I made my apartment. I ran in, opened my desk drawer, and pulled out the gun lying there.

Then the phone rang. I knew right away who it was. Peg. She'd dissuade me. Well, let her——

'Hello.'

The phone just buzzed. I held the receiver close. Brrrr. And then, a chattering. A chattering. Monkey-chattering.

I never stopped to hang up. In a moment I was out on the swirling streets, running madly with the revolver in my hand. I banged on Peg's door, then forced it with my shoulder.

Blackness within, but I had matches. Peg lay there on the floor, the little silver flageolet in her hand. She hadn't fainted.

It must have come to her suddenly in the darkness; dozing off, then the drone of monkey voice, Mardu's voice, compelling her to play. And in that playing, a hypnotic linkage took place.

But that was insane. She'd had a shock, heart attack. That devilish little beast had done it. Where was it?

Tugging at my ankle. I looked down, striking a second match. The monkey was at my side. The monkey that always hated me. It was tugging at my leg, whining, and it looked upward with a gaze so startlingly familiar that my own heart skipped a beat.

'Devil,' I muttered and struck out. It avoided the blow, but made no move to scurry away. It just looked up, patiently, and then it pointed. First at the body, then at its own chest. And it tugged my leg. It led me over to the phone, indicated the mouthpiece.

Sure. Peg had suffered a heart attack, and then she had phoned me and chattered like a monkey.

But it had to be that way. This other was too much.

And still the monkey whined, and when I picked it up it tugged at my shoulders and pointed at the door.

All right. I was crazy. I was going to be guided by a monkey. I was going out on the dark, flooded streets, down to the river front where the water was rising; all at the instigation of a pet monkey.

Then I looked at the white body of Peg on the floor and I looked at the monkey and I made my decision.

'Come on,' I said.

I stopped thinking right there. The streets were knee deep in water. Through thunder and storm-streaked flashes of fury I waded, a wet-furred monkey chattering on my shoulder. Crashing through flooded darkness, down toward the river, down to the dark shop on Flynn Street.

The shop was a blur of darkness in a sea of ink. The monkey chattered shrilly, urging me forward through the circling

waters. I rattled the door as thunder boomed, then drew my gun.

The monkey screeched and left my shoulders. It climbed the lintel. And then the wet brown form wriggled upward through the transom, dropped inside the shop. A moment later the door opened, and a flood of water drenched the floor as I swept inside.

It was silent. Even in the storm the animals did not cry out, but a thousand eyes burned through the darkness. The monkey scampered before me, leading me.

A hundred eyes watched our progress. A hundred—how many of them *were* animals? Mardu had traveled all over the world, he said. In how many cities had he opened a pet shop, sold his beasts, and had them *returned*? How many of these strangely silent animals had come back? I must avenge Lillian, and Peg, and how many others?

We were almost at the end of the shop when the simian paused before me. It crouched next to a low, boxlike cage with a netting front. It chattered. And answering through the blackness came a hiss.

Monkeys hate snakes. But Lillian had a snake——

The beast fumbled at the netting. And then something moved, something wriggled across the floor ahead of me. There was hissing and chattering. I tiptoed forward and we came to the door. Then the monkey tugged at my leg, looked up with those bright eyes I knew too well. I pushed open the door, just a crack.

A single candle burned in the room within. Mardu was lying on a cot in the small back room. Whether he slept or whether his attitude was one of Yogilike repose I cannot say. He was motionless as though in a trance. I raised my weapon but the monkey squealed softly.

I stood there in the doorway as surging water rocked the timbers of the shop; stood there as the monkey and serpent crept through the small opening, scurried across the floor. I could not move, I could only stare. The waters groaned against the house, and I felt a swaying. I knew it was time to be getting out; the river was loose. But I couldn't move. I could only watch the grotesque brown figure moving across the floor to Mardu's cot.

The sleeping face, the brown, impassive face of Mardu, suddenly quickened with animation. The Hindu opened his eyes,

and it was as though all Hell yawned within their lambent depths.

'You here?' he whispered, staring at the creeping monkey before him. 'But this must not be. Tonight was the night—yes—I directed that. But I meant to call tomorrow for you. You would not come of your own free will—or would you?'

The monkey stared. And then I understood. It was stalling for time. For, unobserved, up the side of the cot, the snake was crawling.

Thunder sounded, the waters crashed against the timbers, and still I watched through the crack of the doorway as the Hindu gazed down at the monkey, his face a mask of perplexity. Suddenly his tone, his word choice altered.

'Ah! Can it be that I have failed? Hast thou failed, Hanuman? Did I not direct thee, animate thy purpose in dreams? Didst thou not take the woman's psyche and incarnate——'

I watched the snake, wriggling unnoticed at the Hindu's side. It lashed upward. Again the thunder blared, but Mardu's scream of terror drowned out the very voice of Nature. The Hindu sat bolt upright as a green band of horror tightened against his throat. His hands tore at the surging coils, his eyes bulged.

And then the monkey raced forward, chattering in triumph. Its tiny claws raked Mardu's chest, its teeth sank again and again near the heart. The snake tightened its embrace, encircling Mardu's brown throat with a jade necklace of death.

A crash, the tinkle of glass, and the sudden scream of animal terror sounded from the shop without. The place was flooding.

I fought my way through the shop as the water rose. From behind me I heard a gurgling moan, but I didn't look back.

Roiling water filled the streets, but I went on. There were no thoughts left to think, no emotions left to feel. Somehow I made it back to the apartment. The forced door swung open on darkness. I stumbled in.

'Peg!'

She was lying limply on the sofa, but a single candle burned, and as I moved forward she sat up, opening her eyes and arms.

'Darling——' Her voice was faint but unfaltering.

'You're all right?'

'Of course. I must have passed out when you left, but the

monkey's gone. What happened?'

'Don't you *know*?'

'Of course not. How could I?'

I told her, whispering within the circle of her arms; told her what I *thought* had happened.

Peg shook her head. 'You must have been imagining things,' she said. And then she smiled.

So I kissed her. It was better to kiss her than to see her smile. For Peg was grinning at me like a monkey . . .

TELL YOUR FORTUNE

THE scales aren't here any more. Look, Buster, I don't want any trouble. I run a nice quite little place here, no rough stuff. I'm telling you—the scales aren't here. You must be the twentieth guy this week who come in looking for those scales. But they're gone. Damned good thing, too, if you ask me.

No, I'm not the bouncer. I'm the manager. So help me, I am. If you're looking for Big Pete Mosko, he's gone. Tarelli's gone, too, and the girl.

Didn't you read about it in the papers? I thought everybody knew it by now, but like I said, guys keep coming in. The heat was on here for a month before I bought the place and made the fix. Now I run it strictly on the percentages; I level with the customers. Not like Mosko, with his crooked wheels and the phony cubes. Look the house over. No wires, no gimmicks. You want to make a fast buck at the table, you get your chance. But the sucker stuff is out. And I wouldn't be caught dead with those scales in here, after what has happened.

No, I don't think you're nosey. I'll take that drink, sure. Might as well tell you about it. Like I say, it was in the papers—but only part of it. Screwiest thing you ever heard of. Matter of fact, a guy needs a drink or two if he wants to finish the story.

If you come in here in the old days, then you probably remember Big Pete Mosko all right. Six feet four, three hundred pounds, built like a brick backhouse, with that Polack haircut and the bashed-in nose. Don't like to give anyone the finger, but it looks like Pete Mosko had to be that big to hold all the meanness in him. Kind of a guy they'd have to bury with a corkscrew, too. But a very smart apple.

He come here about three years ago when this pitch was nothing but a combination tavern and bowling alley. A Mom and Pop setup, strictly for Saturday nights and a beer licence. He made this deal with the county boys and tore out the bowling alley. Put in this layout downstairs here and hired a couple of sticks to run tables. Crap games only, at first. A fast

operation.

But Mosko was a smart apple, like I say. The suckers come downstairs here and dropped their bundles one-two-three. Mosko, he stayed upstairs in the bar and made like your genial host. Used to sit there in a big chair with a ten-dollar smile plastered all over his ugly mush. Offering everybody drinks on the house when they come up from the cleaners. Let everybody kid him about how fat he was and how ugly he was and how dumb he was. Mosko dumb? Let me tell you, he knew what he was doing.

Way he worked it, he didn't even need to keep a bouncer on the job. Never any strong arm stuff, even though business got good and some of the Country Club gang used to come out here and drop maybe a G or so at a time on Saturdays. Mosko saw to that. He was the buffer. A guy got a rimming on Mosko's tables, but he never got sore at Mosko. Mosko stayed upstairs and kidded him along.

Show you how smart he was, Mosko played up his fatness. Played it up so he could be ribbed. Did it on purpose—wearing those big baggy suits to make him look even heavier—and putting that free lunch in front of himself when he sat in his chair at the end of the bar. Mosko wasn't really what you call a big eater, but he kept nibbling away at the food all evening, whenever somebody was around to look. Suffered something awful from indigestion, and he used to complain in private, but he put on a good show for the marks.

That's why he got a scale put in the tavern, to begin with. All a part of Mosko's smart act. He used to weigh himself in front of the suckers. Made little bets—fin or a sawbuck—on what he weighed. Lost them on purpose, too, just to make the marks feel good.

But that was an ordinary scale, understand. And Mosko was running an ordinary place, too—until Tarelli came.

Seems like Mosko wasn't happy just to trim suckers on the dice tables. If his appetite for food wasn't so good, he made up for it in his appetite for a fast buck. Anyhow, when he had the bowling alleys ripped out downstairs, the carpenters built him a couple of little rooms, way in back. Rooms to live in.

Of course Mosko himself lived upstairs, over the tavern. These rooms weren't for him. They were for any of Mosko's private pals.

He had a lot of private pals. Old buddies from Division

Street in Chi. Fraternity brothers from Joliet. Any lamster was a pal of Mosko's when the heat was on—if he had the moola to pay for hiding out in one of those private rooms downstairs. Mosko picked up a nice hunk of pocket money hiding hot items—and I guess he had visitors from all over the country staying a week or a month in his place. Never asked about it; you didn't ask Mosko about such things if you wanted to keep being a good insurance risk.

Anyhow, it was on account of those rooms that Tarelli come here. He was out of Havana—illegal entry, of course—but he wasn't a Cuban. Eytie, maybe, from the looks of him. Little dark customer with gray hair and big brown eyes, always grinning and mumbling to himself. Funny to see a squirt like him standing next to a big tub of lard like Mosko.

I saw him the day he arrived. I was working for Big Pete Mosko then, bouncing and keeping the customers quiet. Mosko never talked about his little private deals handling hot characters in the back room, and I clammed up whenever I was with him—it was strictly business between us. But even though I kept my mouth shut, I kept my eyes open, and I saw plenty.

Like I say, I saw Tarelli arrive. He got off the five-spot bus right in front of the tavern, just at twilight. I was out front switching on the neon when he ambled up, tapped me on the shoulder, and said, 'Pardon. Can you inform me if this is the establishment of Signor Mosko?'

I gave him a checkup, a fastie. Funny little guy, about the size of a watch charm, wearing a set of checkered threads. He carried a big black suitcase, holding it stiff-armed in a way that made it easy to tell he had a full load. He wasn't wearing a hat, and his gray hair was plastered down on his head with some kind of perfume or tonic on it which smelled like DDT and was probably just as deadly.

'Inside, Buster,' I told him.

'Pardon?'

'Mosko's inside. Wait, I'll take you.' I steered him toward the door.

'Thank you.' He gave me the big grin—full thirty-two-tooth salute—and lugged the keister inside after me, mumbling to himself.

What he could possibly want with Mosko I didn't know, but I wasn't being paid to figure it out. I just led him up to Big Pete

behind the bar and pointed. Then I went outside again.

Of course, I couldn't help hearing some stuff through the screen door. Mosko had a voice that could kill horseflies at five hundred feet. He talked and Tarelli mumbled. Something like this:

'Finally made it, huh? Rico fly you in?'

'Mumble-mumble-mumble.'

'All set. Where's the cash?'

'Mumble-mumble.'

'Okay. Stay as long as you want. Rico tells me you can do a few jobs for me, too.'

'Mumble-mumble-mumble.'

'Brought your own equipment, eh? That's fine. We'll see how good you are, then. Come on, I'll show you where you'll bunk. But remember, Tarelli—you stay out of sight when customers are here. Don't want you to show your profile to any strangers. Just stick downstairs and do what you're told and we'll get along fine.'

That told me all I needed to know, except what Tarelli was going to do for Big Pete Mosko while he hid out from the fuzz in the basement back rooms. But I found out the rest soon enough.

Couple of days later, I'm downstairs stashing liquor in the storage room and I come back through the crap table layout. First thing I see is a couple of roulette wheels, some big new tables, and little Tarelli.

Tarelli is sitting on an orange crate, right in the middle of the wheels and furniture, and he's having himself a ball. Got a mess of tools laying around, and a heap more in his big black suitcase. He's wiring the undersides of the tables and using instruments on the wheels, squatting on this crate and grinning like a gnome in Santy Claus's workshop. I hear him mumbling to himself, and I figure it's only sociable I should stop by and maybe case the job a little.

He pays me no attention at all, just keeps right on with his wiring, soldering connections and putting some small batteries under the wheels. Even though he grins and mumbles, I can tell when I watch his hands that Tarelli knows what he is doing. The little foreign character is a first-class mechanic.

I watch him slip some weights under the rims of the three roulette wheels and it's easy to see that he's bored holes through them for an electric magnet below the Zero and

Double-Zero, and then—*wham!*

Something smacks me in the back of the neck and I hear Big Pete Mosko yelling, 'Whaddya think you're doing here? Get out before I break your lousy neck!'

I took the hint and ducked, but I learned something, again. Big Pete Mosko was putting in three crooked roulette wheels, and business was picking up.

Sure enough, less than a week later the tables were installed and ready for action. I kept out of the basement as much as possible, because I could see Mosko didn't want anybody around or asking questions. I made it my business to steer shy of Tarelli, too. There was no sense asking for trouble.

Must have been all of ten days before I saw him again. This was just after the wheels were operating. Mosko brought in two more sharpies to run them, and he was taking them into town one afternoon, leaving me and the day bartender on duty. I went downstairs to clean up, and I swear I wasn't getting my nose dirty. It was Tarelli who started it.

He heard me walking around, and he come out from his room. 'Pardon,' he said. 'Pardon, signor.'

'Sure,' I said. 'What's the pitch?'

'Ees no pitch. Ees only that I weesh to explain that I am sorry I make trouble between you and Signor Mosko.'

'You mean when he caught me watching you? That's all right, Tarelli. He loses his cool—I'm used to it. Guess I shouldn't have butted into his business.'

'Ees dirty business. Dirty.'

I stared at him. He was grinning and nodding, but he wasn't kidding.

'Feelthy!' He grinned harder. 'I hate of myself that I do thees for Signor Mosko. For cheating people. Ees feelthy! That I, Antonio Tarelli, would come to such an end——'

'Take it easy, Buster. We all gotta live.'

'You call thees living?' He shrugged at me, at the tables, at the cellar, at the whole damned world. 'I come to thees country to make a new life. Rico, he tells me I can do good here. Signor Mosko, I pay him the monies, he weel arrange. Ees no good. I am—how you say?—hung up. I must do as Signor Mosko tells. He discovers I am craftsman, he makes me do thees dirty work.'

'Why don't you blow out of here, then? I mean, it's none of my business, but why don't you just scram right this after-

noon? Even if Mosko plays it below the belt and hollers copper, you can split into town and take a room. Nobody would find you. Lotsa guys in this country on illegal entry; they make out. Like I say, Tarelli, I'm not trying to steer you. But if you don't like crooked dealing, better cut out fast. How about it?'

Tarelli cocked his head up at me and grinned again. Then he squeezed my arm.

'You know sometheeng? I like you. You are honest man.'

That was a laugh. But who was I to argue with a dumb foreigner? I just grinned back.

'Look,' he mumbled. 'Come, I show you why I not leave here right away now.'

He took me down to his little room—an ordinary little room, with a rickety old bed, a straight chair, a second-hand dresser, and a dirty rug on the floor. 'Come een,' he said, and I stepped inside.

I wish somebody had cut my legs off, instead.

Tarelli went to the closet and dragged out his big black suitcase. He opened it up and pulled something out—a little picture, in a frame.

'Look,' he said, and I looked.

I wish somebody had torn my eyes out, instead.

'Rosa,' he mumbled. 'Ees my daughter. Eighteen years. You like?'

I liked, and I said so.

I wish somebody had cut my tongue off, instead.

But I walked into his little room and looked at the girl with the black hair and the black eyes, and I told him she was beautiful and I sat there staring at her and he grinned and he spilled it all out to me. Everything.

I can remember almost every word, just as I can remember almost everything that happened from that afternoon on until the end.

Yeah, I learned a lot. Too much.

Let me boil it down, though. About Tarelli—he wasn't a lamster, in the old country. He was a Professor. Sounds screwy, but the way he pitched it, I knew he was levelling with me. He was a Professor in some big college over there, university, I don't know what they call it. Had to blow during the war, got as far as Cuba, got mixed up in some mess down there, and then met Big Pete Mosko's pal, Rico. Rico got him

into this country, which is what he wanted, and now he was looking for a way to latch onto a bundle.

'I am what you call financial embarrass,' he said. 'Rico, for bringing me here take all I have save up.'

This I could understand. Any pal of Big Pete Mosko would be apt to be like that. A grabber.

'So now I work. Mosko employs the physicist, the most eminent of metaphysicians, to—rig, they say it?—games of chance. Ha! But I weel do anytheeng to earn money, to have Rosa here.'

The deal was all set, I gathered. All Tarelli needed to do was scrape together a G-note and Rico would fetch Rosa on the plane. Easy as *goniffing* candy from a brat.

'So you're saving your pennies, huh?' I said, taking another look at Rosa's picture. 'What's Mosko paying you for this machine job?'

'Twenty dollar.'

Twenty dollars for a piece of work Mosko would have to pay easy two-three grand for if he got it done by any professional. Twenty dollars for three crooked wheels that would pay off maybe a grand or more a week clear profit. Big-hearted guy, Mister Mosko. And at that rate, Tarelli would have his Rosa over here just in time to collect her old-age pension.

I took another look at Rosa's picture and decided it wasn't fair to make poor old Tarelli wait that long. Matter of fact, I didn't want to wait that long, either.

It wouldn't do much good to tell Tarelli that Mosko was playing him for a sucker. The thing to do was figure an angle, and fast.

I put Rosa's picture away. 'We'll work something out,' I said. 'We got to.'

'Thank you,' said Tarelli.

Which was a funny thing for him to say, because I was talking to the picture.

I didn't have much time to talk to pictures the next couple weeks. Because Mosko had his roulette wheels operating and the take was good. I kept busy quieting the squawkers, hustling out the phonies, and handling the guys who were sauced up. The two hotshots he hired to handle the wheels kept rolling.

Mosko was busy, too—just sitting in his office and counting the take. Must have been about two-three weeks after the

wheels went in that I happened to pass his little private back office when Tarelli went in and gave him a pitch.

I couldn't help but hear what they were saying, because both of them were yelling pretty loud.

'But you promise,' Tarelli was saying. 'Rosa, she ees all alone. Ees not good for young girl to be alone. She must come here.'

'That's your worry. Blow now. I got things to do.'

'Theengs to do like counteeng monies? Monies you make from the crooked wheels I feex?'

'Never mind. Get outta here before I lose my temper.'

'Ees worth plenty, thees job I do for you. Get Rosa for me. I pay you back. I work long, hard. Anytheeng you say.'

'Blow.'

'You must do sometheeng. You must!' Tarelli was almost bawling, now. 'How you like, I tell somebody about crooked wheels?'

'Listen. One peep outta you and I tell somebody,' said Big Pete Mosko. 'I tell somebody about a guy who sneaked into this country without a passport. Get me?'

'You would not do thees!'

'Wait and see.'

Everything was quiet for a minute. Way I figured it, things would stay quiet. Mosko had Tarelli, but good. If the little guy didn't watch his step, Mosko could turn him over to the Feds. There was nothing anybody could do about it. Except——

'One theeng more——' Tarelli said.

'Blow.'

'No. Leesten. Suppose I construct for you something very special?'

'How special?'

'Sometheeng—how can I tell you?—no one ever has before.'

'Gambling device?'

'Perhaps.'

'Cost money to make?'

'A few pennies.'

'New, huh?'

'Special.'

'All right, go ahead. We'll see.'

'Then you weel send for Rosa?'

'We'll see.'

Mosko let it go at that, and I didn't butt in. I was willing to

see, too. And in another couple of weeks, I saw.

I was there the morning Tarelli took the wraps off his big secret. It was on a Sunday, and Mosko and the four sharpies who worked his wheels for him were downstairs, divvying up the take from the big Saturday night play.

Me and Al, the bartender, were sitting around in the tavern upstairs all alone, chopping the heads off a couple glasses of beer. There weren't any customers—never were on Sunday—so Al looked kind of surprised when he saw this little truck drive up and stop outside.

'We got company,' he said.

'Company? Why, it's Tarelli,' I told him.

Sure enough, little Tarelli hopped out of the truck and made some motions to the big lug who was driving it. The lug went around back and then he and Tarelli lifted down a big weighing machine. Before I knew what was happening, they dragged it into the tavern and set it up right in the corner.

'Hey,' says Al. 'Whatsa big idea?'

'Ees no idea. Ees scales. For weighing,' Tarelli said, turning on his grin.

'Who ordered scales around here?'

Al came around the bar and we walked up to the weighing machine.

'I order,' Tarelli told him. 'I promise Mistair Mosko to find sometheeng wonderful.'

'Don't see anything wonderful about a penny scale machine,' I said, giving it a fast case.

And there wasn't anything wonderful to see. It was just a regular weighing machine with a round clock face, glass front, and a pointer that spun up to four hundred pounds, depending on who stood on it and dropped a penny in the slot. It was made by the Universal Scale Company of Waterville, Indiana, and the decal on the back said, 'This machine property of Acme Coin Machine Distributors.'

I noticed all this stuff kind of quick, without paying too much attention—but later, I memorized it. Checked up on it, too, when the time came, and it was all true. Just an ordinary weighing machine, made at the factory and rented out to Mosko for ten bucks a month plus 30 percent of the take in pennies.

Oh, one other thing. Besides the big glass front over the dial showing the weight, there was another little hunk of glass and

a spinner knob you turned when you dropped your penny. This knob turned about twenty slides up, for fortune-telling. You know, the regular questions you always find on scales. Like, *'Will I marry rich?'* Then when you dropped your penny, out comes a card with a gag answer on it, like, *'No, you won't marry rich. You'll marry Eddie.'* Corny stuff. And on top of the machine it said, *'Tell your fortune—1¢. Honest weight, no springs.'*

Al and I looked at the scales and the guy driving the truck went away from there. Tarelli kept grinning up at us and at last he said, 'How you like?'

'Phooey!' said Al. 'Whatsa matter with you, Tarelli? You oughtta know better'n to louse up the joint with a penny machine. We got customers come in here to drop a big wad at the tables; you think they gonna fish out pennies to get their weight told?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Does Mosko know you ordered this?'

'No,' Tarelli answered. 'But he find out fast.'

'And he'll get sore faster,' I told him.

'No he don't. You see.'

'I'm gonna hate to see, Tarelli. When Big Pete sees this phony fortune-telling gimmick he'll go through the roof. He thought you were coming through with something big.'

'Right. Thees ees of the most wonderful. Wait until I feex.'

Tarelli waved at me and went downstairs. Al and I got back to our beers. Every once in a while Al would look over at the big, ugly white scales in the corner and shake his head. Neither of us said anything, though.

In a little while Tarelli come upstairs again. This time he was lugging his suitcase and a big canvas tarp. He set his suitcase down right next to the scales and then he got out a hammer and nailed up the tarp, right across the corner. It hid the scales and it hid Tarelli and his suitcase.

'Hey, now what you up to?' Al yelled.

'No questions. I feex. You cannot see.'

'Lissen, you sawed-off little jerk—who you giving orders to around here?' Al hollered.

He got up, but I held his arm. 'Take it easy,' I said. 'Give the little guy a chance. He's doing this for Mosko, remember? Maybe he's got some angle. Look what he did for the wheels.'

'All right. But what's the big idea of the tarpaulin?'

'Secret,' Tarelli called out. 'Nobody must know. Three weeks

I work to do. Ees miracle. You see.'

We didn't see anything. We didn't even hear much of anything; some banging and clanking around, but not much. I guessed. Tarelli was working on the weighing machine with special tools from his suitcase, but I couldn't figure the angle. All I know is he worked on and on, and Al and I kept drinking beers and waiting for Big Pete Mosko to come upstairs and bust up the act.

But Mosko must have been plenty busy counting the take. He didn't show. And the fidgeting went on behind the curtain until Al and I were going screwy trying to figure things out.

'I got it!' Al says, at last. 'Sure, I got it. Plain as daylight. Tarelli fixed the wheels downstairs for the bigtime marks, didn' he? Well, this is for the little sucker—Mr. Bates, who comes in upstairs for a drink. We work the old routine on him, see? Plant a steerer at the bar, get him into an argument about what he weighs, work him into a bet. Five, ten, twenty bucks. I hold the dough, get it? Then we take him over to the scales. Mr. Bates knows what he weighs, because before the show-down the steerer goes away to wash his hands, and I say to Mr. Bates, "Quick, hop on the scales before he gets back. Then we'll know what you weigh for sure." So the chump weighs himself and let's say he weighs 165. The steerer comes back and this time Mr. Bates offers to double or triple the bet. He can't lose, see? So the steerer falls for it and we have Mr. Bates for fifty or a hundred bucks. Then we weigh him official. And of course the scales says 170 or 175—whatever I want. Because I got my foot down on the pedal that fixes the scales. Get it? A natural!'

Somehow it didn't seem like such a natural to me. In the first place, no Mr. Bates was going to be dumb enough not to see through the routine with the crooked scales, and he'd raise a holy stink about being cleaned. Secondly, Tarelli had promised Mosko something really wonderful. And for some funny reason I had faith in Tarelli. I knew he was working to get Rosa over here—and he'd do anything for her. After seeing her picture, I could understand that. No, I expected Tarelli to come through. A big scientist, physicist, or whatever kind of Professor he was in the old country, would do better than fix a weighing machine.

So I waited to see what would happen when Tarelli finished and took the tarp down.

Finally he did, and I saw—exactly nothing. Tarelli ripped down the canvas, carried his bag back downstairs, and left the scales standing there, exactly like before. I know, because Al and I rushed up to look at the machine.

Only two things were changed, and you had to look pretty hard to realize that much. First of all, the little selector knob you could spin to choose your fortune-telling question just didn't spin any more. And second, the small glass-covered opening above it which gave the questions was now blank. Instead of printed questions like, '*Will I marry rich?*' there was now a sort of black disk behind the glass. It kind of moved when you got up close to it, as though it was a mirror, only black.

I know that sounds screwy and it was screwy; but that's the only way I can describe it. It was a little black disk that sort of caught your reflection when you stood on the scales, only of course you can't get a reflection off something dull and black.

But it was as if the scales were *looking at you*.

I hopped up and fished around for a penny. Closer I stood, the more I felt like something or somebody inside the scales was giving me a cold, fishy stare. Yes, and there was, come to think of it, a soft humming noise when I stood on the platform. Deep down humming from inside.

Al went around back and said, 'Little jerk opened up the machinery here, all right. Soldered the back on tight again, though. Wonder what he was up to? Coin company's sure gonna squawk when they see this.'

I found my penny and got ready to drop it in. I could see my reflection in the big glass dial where the weight pointer was. I had a kind of funny grin, but I guess that came from looking at the black disk below and listening to the humming and wondering about the wonderful thing Tarelli had done.

I held my penny over the slot, and——

Big Pete Mosko come running up the stairs. Tarelli was right behind him, and right behind Tarelli were the four sharpies.

'What's the pitch?' Mosko yelled. 'Get off that machine and throw it out of here.'

I got off the machine, fast. If I hadn't, Mosko would of knocked me off.

'Wait,' Tarelli chattered. 'Wait—you see—ees what I promise you. Wonderful.'

'Scales!' Mosko grabbed Tarelli by the collar and shook him until his hair flopped all over his face. 'What do I need with scales?'

'But they tell fortunes——'

'Tell fortunes?' Mosko began to shake Tarelli until it looked like his hair would be torn right out of his head. 'What do I need with phony fortunes?'

'Ees—ees not phony fortunes like you say. That ees the wonderful. The fortunes, they are true!'

'True?'

Mosko was still yelling, but the shaking stopped. He put Tarelli down and stared at him, hard.

Tarelli managed another one of his grins. 'Yes, true. You get on machine. You put een penny. Fortune card comes out. Ees really true fortune. Tell your future.'

'Malarkey!'

One of the sharpies, character named Don, started to laugh. He was a lanky blond guy with buck teeth, and he looked like a horse. In a minute we were all laughing. All but Tarelli.

'Take it easy, Tarelli,' said Don, grinning and sticking out his big yellow teeth. He walked over to the little old man and stood looking down at him. It was funny to see the two of them together; Tarelli in his old overalls, and this sharpie Don in a handsome set of threads that matched the color of his convertible parked outside in the driveway. It was funny, and then it wasn't so funny, because the grin on Don's face was mean, and I knew he was just working up to something nasty.

'Look, Tarelli,' Don said, still grinning. 'Maybe you're a big scientist back in the University of Boloney or wherever you come from. But for my money, over here, you're just a schmoe, see? And I never heard that any scientist could invent a machine that really reads a person's future.' Don reached down and patted Tarelli on the shoulder. 'Now you know Mister Mosko here is a busy man,' he said. 'So if you got anything else to say, spit it out. Then I won't waste any more time before I kick you out in the road.'

'Huh!' Mosko grunted. 'I got no time for screwballs at all, Don. Telling what's gonna happen to you by science——'

'Ees not science.' Tarelli talked real soft and looked at the floor.

'Not science?'

'No. I do anytheeng to get Rosa here, remember, I tell you that? I do what science cannot do. I make pact. Make vow. Make bargain.'

'What kind of a bargain? With who?'

'I not say. My business, eh? But eet work. So I can build what I need for machine. Ees not science work here. Ees magic.'

'What's the——'

Mosko was yelling again, but Tarelli's soft voice cut him right off. 'Magic,' he repeated. 'Black magic. I don' care who you are, what you are. You get on scales. Scales read your soul, your past, see you like you really are. Drop penny, scales tell your fortune. Read your future. Here, try eet—you see.'

Then Don cut loose with his horse-laugh. Only this time he laughed alone. And when he shut up, Tarelli turned to Mosko again.

'Understan' what I tell you? Thees scale read the future. Tell anybody's fortune. Ees worth much money to have here. You can make beeg business from thees. Now you get Rosa for me?'

'Sure,' said Mosko. 'I'll get Rosa. If it works. Hey, Tarelli, whyn-cha get on the machine and see if it tells your fortune about Rosa? Maybe it'll say she's coming. Ha!'

Mosko was ribbing him, but Tarelli didn't know it. He turned kind of pale and stepped back.

'Oh no, Meestair Mosko. Not me! I not get on thees machine for anytheeng. Ees black magic. I do it only for Rosa—but I fear.'

'Well, what we all wasting time standing around for?' Don snickered. 'Tarelli's chicken. Afraid he'll get on the scales and nothing will happen, so we boot him out. Well, I'm not scared. Here, gimme that.'

He snatched the penny out of my hand, hopped on the scales, and slid the penny down. I could hear the faint humming, and then when the penny disappeared I could hear the humming a little louder. The black disk on the scales got cloudy for a second. The pointer on the big dial behind the glass swung over to 182. Don stood on the scales, 182 pounds of what the well-dressed man will wear, including his nasty grin.

'So?' he shrugged. 'Nothing happens.'

There was a click, and a little white card slid out of the slot

below the black disk. Don picked it up and read it. He shook his head and passed the card to Mosko and the others. Eventually it got to me.

It was a plain white card with plain lettering on it—but it wasn't regular printing, more like a mimeograph in black ink that was still damp. I read it twice.

WHEN THE BLACK CAT CROSSES
YOUR PATH YOU DIE.

That's all it said. The old superstition. Kid stuff.

'Kid stuff!' Don sneered. 'Tell you what. This faker musta gummed up the machinery in this scale and put in a lot of phony new fortune-telling cards of his own. He's crazy.'

Tarelli shook his head. 'Please,' he said. 'You no like me. Well, I no like you, much. But even soo, I geev you the warning—watch out for black cats. Scales say black cat going to breeng you death. Watch out.'

Don shrugged. 'You handle this deal, Mosko,' he said. 'I got no more time to waste. Heavy date this afternoon.'

Mosko nodded at him. 'Just make sure you don't get loaded. I need you at the tables tonight.'

'I'll be here,' Don said, from the doorway. 'Unless some mangy alley cat sneaks up and conks me over the head with a club.'

For a little while nobody said anything. Tarelli tried to smile at me, but it didn't go over. He tugged at Mosko's sleeve but Mosko ignored him. He stared at Don. We all stared at Don.

We watched him climb into his convertible and back out of the driveway. We watched him give it the gun and he hit the road. We watched him race by toward town. We watched the black cat come out of nowhere and scoot across the highway, watched Don yank the wheel to swerve out of its path, watched the car zoom off to one side toward the ditch, watched it crash into the culvert, then turn a somersault and go rolling over and over and over into the gully.

There was running and yelling and swearing and tugging and hauling, and finally we found all that was left of 182 pounds and a brand new suit under the weight of that wrecked convertible. We never saw Don's grin again, and we never saw the cat again, either.

But Tarelli pointed at the fortune-telling card and smiled.

And that afternoon, Big Pete Mosko phoned Rico to bring Rosa to America.

She arrived on Saturday night. Rico brought her from the plane; big Rico with his waxed mustache and plastered-down hair, with his phony diamond ring and his phony polo coat that told everybody what he was, just as if he had a post office reader pinned to his back.

But I didn't pay any attention to Rico. I was looking at Rosa. There was nothing phony about her black hair, her white skin, her red mouth. There was nothing phony about the way she threw herself into Tarelli's arms, kissing the little man and crying for joy.

It was quite a reunion downstairs in the back room, and even though she paid no attention when she was introduced to me, I felt pretty good about it all. It did something to me just to watch her smiling and laughing, a few minutes later, while she talked to her old man. Al, the bartender, and the sharpies stood around and grinned at each other, too, and I guess they felt the same way I did.

But Big Pete Mosko felt different. He looked at Rosa, too, and he did his share of grinning. But he wasn't grinning at her—he was grinning at something inside himself. Something came alive in Mosko, and I could see it—something that wanted to grab and paw and rip and tear at Rosa.

'It's gonna be nice having you here,' he told her. 'We gotta get acquainted.'

'I must thank you for making this possible,' she said, in her soft little voice—the kid spoke good English, grammar and everything, and you could tell she had class. 'My father and I are very, very grateful. I don't know how we are going to repay you.'

'We'll talk about that later,' said Big Pete Mosko, licking his lips and letting his hands curl and uncurl into fists. 'But right now you gotta excuse me. Looks like a heavy night for business.'

Tarelli and Rosa disappeared into his room, to have supper off a tray Al brought down. Mosko went out to the big downstairs pitch to case the tables for the night's play. Rico hung around for a while, kidding with the wheel operators. I caught him mumbling in the corner and dragged him upstairs for a drink.

That's where Mosko found us a couple minutes later. Rico gave him the office.

'How's about the dough?' he said.

'Sure, sure, justa minute.' Mosko hauled out a roll and peeled off a slice for Rico. I saw it—five Cs. And it gave me a bad time to watch Rico take the money because I knew Mosko wouldn't hand out five hundred bucks without getting plenty in return.

And I knew what he wanted in return. Rosa.

'Hey, what's the big idea of this?' Rico asked, pointing over at the scales in the corner.

I didn't say anything, and I wondered if Mosko would spill. All week long the weighing machine had stood there with a sign on it, OUT OF ORDER. Mosko had it lettered the day after Don got killed, and he made sure nobody got their fortune told. Nobody talked about the scales, and I kept wondering if Mosko was going to yank the machine out of the place or use it, or what he had in the back of his head.

But Mosko must have figured Rico was one of the family, seeing as how he flew in illegal immigrants and all, because he told Rico the whole story. There wasn't many around the bar yet that early—our Saturday night players generally got in about ten or so—and Mosko yapped without worrying about listeners.

'So help me, it's a truth,' he told Rico. 'Machine'll tell just what's gonna happen to your future. For a stinkin' penny.'

Rico laughed.

'Don't give me that con,' he said. 'Business with Don and the cat was just a whatchacallit—coincidence.'

'Yeah? Well, you couldn't get me on those scales for a million bucks, brother,' Mosko told him.

'Maybe so. But I'm not scared of any machine in the world,' Rico snorted. 'Here, watch me.'

And he walked over to the scales and dropped a penny. The pointer went up. 177. The black disk gleamed. I heard the humming and the click, and out came the white card. Rico looked at it and grinned. I didn't crack a smile. I was thinking of Don.

But Rico chuckled and handed the card around for all of us to see. It said:

'Good enough,' he said, waving the card under Mosko's nose. 'Now if I was a sucker, I'd go downstairs and bet this five hundred smackers on one of your crooked wheels, red to win. If I was a superstitious jerk, that is.'

Mosko shrugged. 'Suit yourself,' he said. 'Look, customers. I gotta get busy.' He walked away.

I got busy myself, then. The marks started to arrive and it looked like a big Saturday night. I didn't get downstairs until after midnight and that was the first time I noticed that Rico must have kidded himself into believing the card after all.

Because he was playing the wheel. And playing it big. A new guy, name of Spencer, had come in to replace Don, and he was handling the house end on this particular setup. A big crowd was standing around the rig, watching Rico place his bets. Rico had a stack of chips a foot high and he was playing them fast.

And winning.

I must have watched him for about fifteen minutes, and during that time he raked in over three Gs, cold. Played odds, played numbers. Played red, and played black, too. Won almost every spin.

Mosko was watching, too. I saw him signal Spencer the time Rico put down a full G in blue chips on black to win. I saw Spencer wink at Mosko. But I saw the wheel stop on black.

Mosko was ready to bust, but what could he do? A crowd of marks was watching, it had to look legit. Three more spins and Rico had about six or seven Gs in chips in front of him. Then Mosko stepped in and took the table away from Spencer.

'See you in my office,' he mumbled, and Spencer nodded. He stared at Rico but Rico only smiled and said, 'Excuse me, I'm cashing in.' Mosko looked at me and said, 'Tail him.'

Then he shook his head. 'Don't get it,' he said. He was working the wire now, finding everything in order.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Rico over at the cashier's window, counting currency and stuffing it into his pocket. Spencer had disappeared. Rico began walking upstairs, his legs scissoring fast. I followed, hefting the brass knucks in my pocket.

Rico went outside. I went outside. He heard my feet behind him on the gravel and turned around.

'Hey,' I said. 'What's your hurry?'

Rico just laughed. Then he winked. That wink was the last

thing I saw before everything exploded.

I went down on the gravel, and I didn't get up for about a minute. Then I was just in time to see the car pull away with Rico waving at me, still laughing. The guy who had sapped me was now at the wheel of the car. I recognized Spencer.

'It's a frame, is it?' Big Pete Mosko had come up from downstairs and was standing behind me, spitting out pieces of his cigar. 'If I'da known what those dirty rats would pull on me—he was working with Spencer to trim me——'

'You did know,' I reminded him.

'Did I?'

'Sure. Remember what the fortune-telling card said? Told Rico, YOU WILL WIN WITH RED, didn't it?'

'But Rico was winning with both colors,' Mosko yelled. 'It was that dog Spencer who let him win.'

'That's what the card said,' I told him. 'What you and I forget is that "Red" is Spencer's nickname.'

We went back inside because there was nothing else to do—no way of catching Rico or Spencer without rough stuff and Mosko couldn't afford that. Mosko went back to the tables and took the suckers for a couple hours straight, but it didn't make him any happier.

He was still in a lousy temper the next morning when he cut up the week's take. It was probably the worst time in the world to talk to him about anything—and that's, of course, where Tarelli made his mistake.

I was sitting downstairs when Tarelli came in with Rosa and said, 'Please, Meestair Mosko.'

'Whatcha want?' Mosko would have yelled it if Rosa hadn't been there, looking cool and sweet in a black dress that curved in and out and in again.

'I want to know if Rosa and I, we can go now?'

'Go?'

'Yes. Away from here. Into town, to stay. For Rosa to get job, go to school nights maybe.'

'You ain't goin' no place, Tarelli?'

'But you have what you weesh, no? I feex machines. I make for you the marvelous scale of fortune, breeng you luck——'

'Luck?' Rosa or no Rosa, Mosko began to yell. He stood up and shoved his purple face right against Tarelli's button nose. 'Luck, huh? You and your lousy machine—in one week it kills my best wheel man, and lets another one frame me with Rico

for over seven grand! That's the kind of luck you bring me with your magic! You're gonna stick here, Tarelli, like I say, unless you want Uncle Sam on your tail, but fast!'

'Please, Meestair Mosko—you let Rosa go alone, huh?'

'Not on your life!' He grinned, then. 'I wouldn't let a nice girl like Rosa go up into town with nobody to protect her. Don't you worry about Rosa, Tarelli, I got plans for her. Lotsa plans.'

Mosko turned back to the table and his money. 'Now, blow and lemme alone,' he said.

They left. I went along, too, because I didn't like to leave Rosa out of my sight now.

'What is this all about, Father?' Rosa asked the question softly as we all three of us sat in Tarelli's little room.

Tarelli looked at me and shrugged.

'Tell her,' I said. 'You must.'

So Tarelli explained about being here illegally and about the phony roulette wheels.

'But the machine—the scales of fortune, what do you mean by this?'

Again Tarelli looked at me. I didn't say anything. He sighed and stared down at the floor. But at last, he told her.

A lot of it I didn't understand. About photoelectric cells and mirrors and a tripping lever he was supposed to have invented. About books with funny names and drawing circles in rooster blood and something called evocations or invocations or whatever they call it. And about a bargain with Sathanas, whoever that is. That must have been the magic part.

I guess it was, because of the way Rosa acted when she heard it. She turned pale and began to stare and breathe funny, and she stood up and shook Tarelli's shoulders.

'No—you did not do this thing! You couldn't! It is evil, and you know the price——'

'Necromancy, that ees all I can turn to to get you here,' Tarelli said. 'I do anytheeng for you, Rosa. No cost too much.'

'It is evil,' Rosa said. 'It must not be permitted. I will destroy it.'

'But Mosko, he owns the machine now. You cannot——'

'He said himself it brought bad luck. And he will never know. I will replace it with another scale, an ordinary one from the same place you got this. But your secret, the fortune-

telling mechanism, must go.'

'Rosa,' I said, 'you can't. He's a dangerous customer. Look, why don't you and your old man scam out of here today? I'll handle Mosko, somehow. He'll be sore, sure, but I'll cool him off. You can hide out in town, and I'll join you later. Please, Rosa, listen to me. I'll do anything for you, that's why I want you to go. Leave Mosko to me.'

She smiled, then, and stared up into my eyes. She stood very close and I could smell her hair. Almost she touched me. And then she shook her head. 'You are a good man,' she said. 'It is a brave thing you propose. But I cannot go. Not yet. Not while the machine of evil still exists. It will bring harm into the world, for my father did a wicked thing when he trafficked with darkness to bring it into being. He did it for me, so I am in a way responsible. And I must destroy it.'

'But how? When?'

'Tonight,' Rosa said. 'Tomorrow we will order a new scale brought in. But we must remove the old one tonight.'

'Tarelli,' I said. 'Could you put the regular parts back in this machine if you take out the new stuff?'

'Yes.'

'Then that's what we'll do. Too dangerous to try a switch. Just stick the old fortune-telling gimmick back in, maybe we can get by for a while without Mosko noticing. He won't be letting anybody near it now for a while, after what happened.'

'Good,' said Tarelli. 'We find a time.'

'Tonight,' Rosa repeated. 'There must be no more cursed fortunes told.'

But she was wrong.

She was wrong about a lot of things. Like Mosko not having any use for the fortune-telling scales, for instance. He lied when he told Tarelli the machine was useless.

I found that out later the same afternoon, when Mosko cornered me upstairs in the bar. He'd been drinking a little and trying to get over his burn about the stolen money.

'I'll get it back,' he said. 'Got a gold mine here. Bigges' gold mine inna country. Only nobody know it yet but you and me.' He laughed, and the bottles rattled behind the bar. 'If that dumb guy only could figure it, he'd go crazy.'

'Something worked up for the fortune-telling,' I needed.

'Sure. Look, now. I get rich customers in here, plenty of

'em. Lay lotsa dough onna line downstairs. Gamblers, plungers, superstitious. You see 'em come in. Rattling lucky charms and rabbit foots and four-leaf clovers. Playin' numbers like seven and thirteen on hunches. What you think? Wouldn't they pay plenty for a chance to know what's gonna happen to them tomorrow or next year? Why it's a natural, that's what—I can charge plenty to give 'em a fortune from the scales. Tell you what, I'm gonna have a whole new setup just for this deal. Tomorrow we build a new special room, way in back. I got a pitch figured out, how to work it. We'll set the scales up tomorrow, lock the door of the new room, and then we really operate.'

I listened and nodded, thinking about how there wasn't going to be any tomorrow. Just tonight.

I did my part. I kept pouring the drinks into Mosko, and after supper he had me drive him into town. There wasn't any play on the wheels on Monday, and Mosko usually hit town on his night off to relax. His idea of relaxation was a little poker game with the boys from the City Hall—and tonight I was hot to join him.

We played until almost one, and I kept him interested as long as I could, knowing that Rosa and Tarelli would be working on the machine back at the tavern. But it couldn't last forever, and then we were driving back and Big Pete Mosko was mumbling next to me in the dark.

'Only the beginning, boy,' he said. 'Gonna make a million off that scales. Talk about fortunes—I got one when I got hold of Tarelli! A million smackers and the girl. Hey, watch it!'

I almost drove the car off the road when he mentioned the girl. I wish I had, now.

'Tarelli's a brainy apple,' Mosko mumbled. 'Dumb, but brainy—you know what I mean. I betcha he's got some other cute tricks up his sleeve, too. Whatcha think? You believe that stuff about magic, or is it just a machine?'

'I don't know,' I told him. 'I don't know nothing about science, or magic, either. All I know is, it works. And it gives me the creeps just to think about it—the scales sort of look at you, size you up, and then give you a payoff. And it always comes true.' I began to pitch then. 'Mosko, that thing's dangerous. It can make you a lot of trouble. You saw what it did to Don, and what happened to you when Rico had his fortune told. Why don't you get rid of it before something else hap-

pens? Why don't you let Tarelli and Rosa go and forget about it?

'You going soft inna head?' Mosko grabbed my shoulder and I almost went off the road again. 'Leave go of a million bucks and a machine that tells the truth about the future? Not me, buddy! And I want Tarelli, too. But most of all I want Rosa. And I'm gonna get her. Soon. Maybe—tonight.'

What I wanted to do to Big Pete Mosko would have pinned a murder rap on me for sure. I had to have time to think, to figure out some other angle. So I kept driving, kept driving until we pulled up outside the dark entrance to the tavern.

Everything was quiet, and I couldn't see any light, so I figured whatever Rosa and Tarelli had done was finished. We got out and Mosko unlocked the front door. We walked in.

Then everything happened at once.

I heard the clicking noise from the corner. Mosko heard it, too. He yelled and grabbed at something in the dark. I heard a crash, heard Tarelli curse in Italian. Mosko stepped back.

'No, you don't!' he hollered. He had a gun, the gun had a bullet, the bullet had a target.

That's all.

Mosko shot, there was a scream and a thud, and then I got the lights on and I could see.

I could see Tarelli standing there next to the scales. I could see the tools scattered around and I could see the queer-looking hunk of flashing mirrors that must have been Tarelli's secret machinery. I could see the old back of the scales, already screwed into place again.

But I didn't look at these things, and neither did Mosko and neither did Tarelli.

We looked at Rosa, lying on the floor.

Rosa looked back, but she didn't see us, because she had a bullet between her eyes.

'Dead!' Tarelli screamed. 'You murdered her!'

Mosko blinked, but he didn't move.

'How was I to know?' he said. 'Thought somebody was busting into the place. What's the big idea, anyhow?'

'Ees no idea. You murder her.'

Mosko had his angle figured, now. He sneered down at Tarelli. 'You're a fine one to talk, you lousy little crook! I caught you in the act, didn't I—tryin' to steal the works, that's what you was doing. Now get busy and put that machinery

back into the scales before I blow your brains out.'

Tarelli looked at Mosko, then at Rosa. All at once he shrugged and picked the little box of mirrors and flashing disks from the floor. It was small, but from the way he hefted it I could tell it was heavy. When he held it, it hummed and the mirrors began to slide every which way, and it hurt my eyes to look at it.

Tarelli lifted the box full of science, the box full of magic, whatever it was; the box of secrets, the box of the future. Then he smiled at Mosko and opened his arms.

The box smashed to the floor.

There was a crash, and smoke, and a bright light. Then the noise and smoke and light went away, and there was nothing but old Tarelli standing in a little pile of twisted wires and broken glass and tubes.

Mosko raised his gun. Tarelli stared straight into the muzzle and grinned.

'You murder me, too, now, eh? Go 'head, Meestair Mosko. Rosa dead, the fortune-telling machine dead, too, and I do not weesh to stay alive either. Part of me dies with Rosa, and the rest—the rest was machine.'

'Machine?' I whispered under my breath, but he heard me.

'Yes. Part of me went to make machine. What you call the soul.'

Mosko tightened his finger on the trigger. 'Never mind that, you crummy little rat! You can't scare me with none of that phony talk about magic.'

'I don't scare you. You are too stupid to un'rstand. But before I die I tell you one theeng more. I tell your fortune. And your fortune is—death. You die, too, Meestair Mosko. You die, too!'

Like a flash Tarelli stooped and grabbed the wrench from the tools at his feet. He lifted it and swung—and then Mosko let him have it. Three slugs in a row.

Tarelli toppled over next to Rosa. I stepped forward. I didn't know what I'd of done next—jumped Mosko, tried to kill him with his own gun. I was in a daze.

Mosko turned around and barked. 'Quit staring,' he said. 'Help me clean up this mess and get rid of them, fast. Or do you wanna get tied in as an accessory for murder?'

That word, *murder*—it stopped me cold. Mosko was right.

I'd be in on the deal if they found the bodies. Rosa was dead, Tarelli was dead, the scales and their secret were gone.

So I helped Mosko.

I helped him clean up, and I helped him load the bodies into the car. He didn't ask me to go along with him on the trip, and that was good.

Because it gave me a chance, after he'd gone, to go to the phone and ring up the Sheriff. It gave me a chance to tell the Sheriff and the two deputies the whole story when they came out to the tavern early in the morning. It gave me a chance to see Big Pete Mosko's face when he walked in and found us waiting for him there.

They collared him and accused him and he denied everything. He must of hid the bodies in a good safe place, to pull a front act like that, but he never cracked. He denied everything. My story, the murders, the works.

'Look at him,' he told the Sheriff, pointing at me. 'He's shakin' like a leaf. Outta his head. Everybody knows he's punchy. Why the guy's off his rocker—spilling a yarn like that! Magic scales that tell your fortune! Ever hear of such a thing? Why that alone ought to show you the guy's slugnutt.''

Funny thing is, I could see him getting to them. The Sheriff and his buddies began to give me a look out of the corner of their eyes.

'First of all,' said Mosko, 'there never was no such person as Tarelli, and he never had a daughter. Look around—see if you can find anything that looks like we had a fight in here, let alone a double murder. All you'll see is the scales here. The rest this guy made up out of his cracked head.'

'About those scales——' the Sheriff began.

Mosko walked over and put his hand on the side of the big glass dial on top of the scales, bold as you please. 'Yeah, what about the scales?' he asked. 'Look 'em over. Just ordinary scales. See for yourself. Drop a penny, out comes a fortune. Regular stuff. Wait, I'll show you.'

We all looked at Mosko as he climbed up the scales and fumbled in his pocket for a penny. I saw the deputies edge closer to me, just waiting for the payoff.

And I gulped. Because I knew the magic was gone. Tarelli had put the regular works back into the scales and it was just an ordinary weighing machine, now. *Honest weight, no springs*. Mosko would dial a fortune and one of the regular

printed cards would come out.

We'd hidden the bodies, cleaned up Tarelli's room, removed his clothes, the tools, everything. No evidence left, and nobody would talk except me. And who would believe me, with my crazy guff about a magic scales that told the real future? They'd lock me up in the nuthouse, fast, when Mosko got off the scales with his fortune told for a penny.

I heard the click when the penny dropped. The dial behind the glass went up to 297 pounds. Big fat Mosko turned and grinned at all of us. 'You see?' he said.

Then it happened. Maybe he was clumsy, maybe there was oil on the platform, maybe there was a ghost and it pushed him. I don't know. All I know is that Mosko slipped, leaned forward to catch himself, and rammed his head against the glass top.

He gurgled once and went down, with a two-foot razor of glass ripping across his throat. As he fell he tried to smile, and one pudgy hand fumbled at the side of the scales, grabbing out the printed slip that told Big Pete Mosko's fortune.

We had to pry that slip out of his hands—pry it out and read the dead man's future.

Maybe it was just an ordinary scale now, but it told Mosko's fortune, for sure. You figure it out. All I know is what I read, all I know is what Tarelli's scale told Mosko about what was going to happen, and what did happen.

The big white scale stood grinning down on the dead man, and for a minute the cracked and splintered glass sort of fell into a pattern and I had the craziest feeling that I could see Tarelli's face. He was grinning, the scale was grinning, but we didn't grin.

We just pried the little printed slip out of Big Pete Mosko's hand and read his future written there. It was just a single sentence, but it said all there was to be said . . .

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