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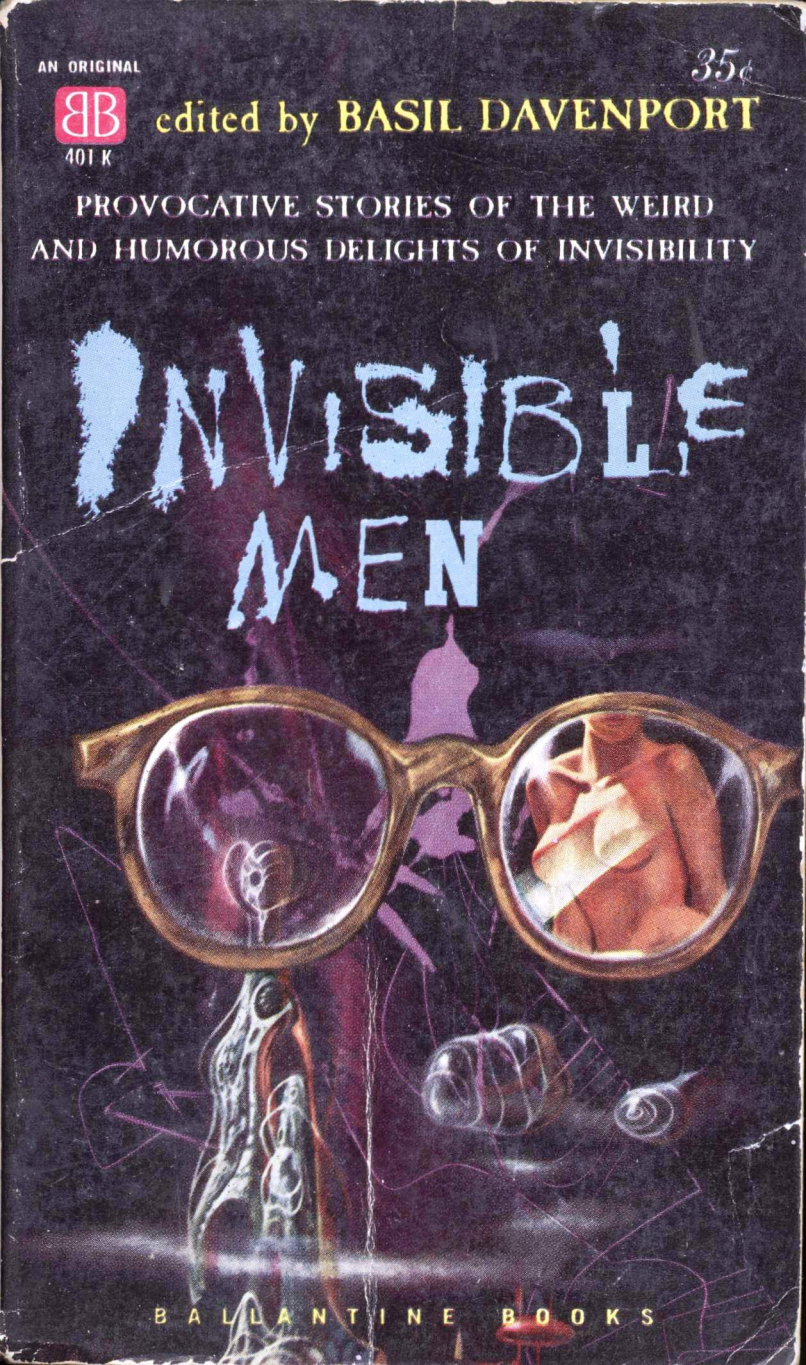
edited by BASIL DAVENPORT

PROVOCATIVE STORIES OF THE WEIRD AND HUMOROUS DELIGHTS OF INVISIBILITY

INVISIBLE MEN



BALLANTINE BOOKS

THERE PROBABLY ISN'T ANYONE who has not, at one time or another, imagined what might happen if they were invisible. But generally speaking, the fantasies are long gone, left behind with other childhood hopes and dreams.

And yet every once in a while the thought comes back. What a marvellous world it would be! And the recurring fascination of the dream lies in the stories that men and women keep writing—

like the story of that beautiful female riding on the air—her shape revealed only by the dancing, swooping, fluttering doves who fly with her (a live fan-dancer if ever there was one).

or the robber who disappeared, right before the outraged eyes of a group of baffled householders or the little man who rode a stone lion to glory . . .

The variations are almost infinite—charming, ingenious, delightful and paralyzingly frightening—but all marvellous reading in a world where one gets terribly bored being opaque.

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INVISIBLE MEN

Edited by
Basil Davenport

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THE WEISSENBROCH SPECTACLES

by L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt

MR. GROSS LAID a package on the bar and said, "My boilermaker, and double on the whisky, Mr. Cohan." He turned a head like a basketball toward the door. "Is that rain? That's all I needed. That *mamzer* of a nephew . . ."

Young Mr. Keating from the library glanced at Mr. Gross and raised his voice firmly to forestall the oncoming anecdote. "I'll check the closed stacks, Doc, but I don't think we have a really good one. However, I can ask interlibrary service."

The snub-nosed Dr. Tobolka appeared to hesitate between the difficulty of dealing with a Gross anecdote and that of following Keating's lead and inventing a reason for not listening. At this moment Gross sipped his boilermaker, emitted a ponderous belch and then a groan of positively subterranean depth.

Tobolka said, "Are you all right, Adolphus?"

Gross said, "If I was any worse, the undertakers are taking me off without even waiting till I fall down. It's my soul." He patted the protuberance just below his sternum to indicate that this was the seat of his soul.

"What's the matter with your soul?" asked Tobolka.

"It's hurt. On account of this." He indicated the package, about three by four feet and flat. "It was all because of that television. Myself, I'd rather be at Gavagan's than looking at it, but you know how it is with kids. While they're supposed to be doing their homework from school, there they are lying in front of it and watching a cowboy shoot off his gun fifty times without having to put no bullets into it, and this Miss Marks comes around—"

"I beg your pardon," said a man who was sitting on a stool a couple of places down from Gross, "but is that the Miss Marks who teaches at Pestalozzi School?"

Gross regarded him with gravity. "She is that one, and why she would be spending her time teaching I cannot tell you, because what she ought to be doing is in the movies, but I guess maybe there is some reason why she does not,

because I heard she got a tryout at the Striped Cat night club and they did not want her after the first show."

"Sorry to interrupt," said the man. He was young, well-dressed and good looking, with a smile that flashed on and off as though controlled by a switch. "I was just about to meet her, and—"

"Make it no matter," said Gross heavily, downing the last of his boilermaker and shoving the glasses toward Mr. Cohan for a refill. "Like I was saying, this Miss Marks comes around and says that if the kids don't do their homework from school no better, they wouldn't get passed, and I better do something about this television they're watching all the time. And my business has been keeping me late, and my wife, how can you expect a woman to keep the kids from doing what they want?"

Gross breathed deeply and looked around with a certain belligerence. Nobody contradicted him, so he went on: "So this is where that nogoodnick Hershie, my nephew, comes in. I am telling him about this, and he says he has got the answer so that I will not have to lose all the money I spend on this television. He says he has got a very valuable picture which is painted by a Frenchman, only he can't sell it himself because he don't know the outlets, but it is about a even trade for a used television set. So I take him up on it. See?"

Gross looked around again. Keating, obviously anxious to get the worst over with, said, "And this is the picture?"

Gross emitted a kind of growl and applied himself to his second boilermaker. "And you know what?" he said. "I take it to Irving Schelmerotter, he's the dealer that buys for the Munson Museum, and he takes one look at it and says it's saloon art and to hell with it. So now all I got for my television set is this picture, and the kids will be wild because the television set is gone, and my wife will be nuts on account I got stuck."

Before he could lapse into gloom again, Tobolka said, "What is it a picture of?"

"A knife," said Gross.

"A what?" said Keating. "Why should anyone paint a picture of a knife? Or for that matter why should they hang it in a saloon?"

"No, you don't get it," said Gross. "It's a woodknife, without no clothes on."

Mr. Cohan leaned across the bar. "You wouldn't be wanting to show it to us now, would you?" he asked.

"I have to cut the string," said Gross.

"String we got, and better than you have on it now," said Mr. Cohan.

"Okay, since you ast me," said Gross. He cut the string

and peeled off the paper. Then he hoisted the picture in its ornate gilt frame onto the bar and balanced it, looking at it with an air of melancholy pride.

"Oh," said Keating and Tobolka in unison.

The painting was one of a wood nymph of extreme, not to say flagrant, nudity. She sat on her curled-up right leg, which in turn rested upon a tree stump. Her left leg was thrust out to the side and rear. Her body was upright, with her head tipped back and her hands clasped behind her neck beneath a coiffure of approximately 1880. She was gazing at a painted sunbeam with a smile of ineffable idiocy, and a pair of gauzy wings, though absurdly small by aerodynamic standards, testified to her supernatural origin. They failed to balance a pair of mammae of transcendental size and salience.

"It's by a Frenchman, see?" said Gross, and indicated the corner where the signature "Guillaume" was visible.

Keating donned a pair of glasses with heavy black frames and said, "Reminds me of the old White Rock ad; the one they had in the magazines thirty years ago, before some advertising man whittled her down."

"Whittled her down?" said Gross.

"Yes. I compared some of the old magazines with the modern ones, and Psyche used to be a hell of a lot more pneumatic."

"Okay," said Gross. "But what am I going to *do* with it?"

"Your art dealer was perfectly right, my friend," said Tobolka. "An unusually perfect example of saloon art, even though Guillaume is a recognized painter. I suggest you get Mr. Cohan to hang it behind the bar as a permanent exhibit."

Mr. Cohan shook his head. "Gavagan would never stand for it," he said. "This is a family bar, this is, and he wants to keep it that way. Would you be wanting your sister to look at a thing like that while she was drinking her whisky sour, now?"

"I beg your pardon," said the young man from down the bar. "May I see it?"

"Help yourself," said Gross.

The young man climbed down from his stool and came around to face the picture. He drew from the inside pocket of his coat an eyeglass case, and with a flourish produced from the case a pair of glasses which he hooked over his ears. They had frames and bows of thin, plain metal, oxidized black, and the thick octagonal lenses gave them an old-fashioned air. An air of satisfaction spread across his face as he contemplated the major features of the composition. He peered at the signature, then turned to face Gross.

"Sir," he said, "I am not a wealthy man, but I would be willing to give you eighty-five dollars for this painting."

In the background Keating gave an audible gasp. Gross lowered the picture to the floor and said, "You couldn't make it a hundred, could you?" he said. "I got to do something for the wife and kids after that television—"

"Eighty-five," said the young man, the lines setting firmly around his mouth. "Take it or leave it." He produced a checkbook and riffled it slightly.

Gross said: "One man to another, this is practically highway robbery, but you got a deal, Mr.—" He extended a hand.

"Bache," said the young man, shaking it, "Septimius Bache. How shall I make out the check?"

"Just make it out to Mr. Cohan here, and he gives me the cash, see?" said Gross. "My name's Gross, and these here are Mr. Keating and Dr. Tobolka."

There was more handshaking. Bache said: "In honor of a successful operation, I think you should serve out a round, Mr. Cohan. I'll add the amount to my check. And oh, yes, will you take care of the picture for me back of the bar for the evening? I'm expecting to meet someone. Gin and bitters for me; the Hollands gin."

The picture was passed across the bar, there was the exhilarating sound of liquor making contact with glasses, and Tobolka raised his drink in salute.

"Pardon me a perhaps very personal question," he said. "But if you're willing to tell, I'd like to hear why you bought that picture. Not that the price you paid for it was extravagant. I'm no expert, but from what I understand, this is about the market price for a picture of the period. But why this particular one?"

Bache fingered his glass, glanced around the bar as though to see whether anyone else was listening, and then gazed at his drink. "I'll tell you," he said. "The same thing that brought me in here tonight. You see, I'm . . ." He hesitated, and sought strength in his gin and bitters. "Well, I suppose you'd say I'm a sort of a fetishist."

Mr. Cohan frowned. "There'll be none of that in here, young fella," he warned. "Not since that Englishman that me brother Julius arrested outside this very bar for molesting."

"But I don't molest. It's just that—"

"Him and his mackintoshes . . ." Mr. Cohan added darkly.

"Oh." Bache seemed a little brighter. "Mine isn't that sort of thing at all. It's what you might almost call a *normal* type of fetishism. Are you a psychiatrist, Doctor Tobolka?"

"No. I'm not even that kind of doctor. I'm a biologist."

"Oh. Well, I—I'd thank you for another gin and bitters, Mr. Cohan.—I've been to see one. I was getting worried and

run down, and after seeing a Marilyn Monroe movie I couldn't sleep very well, and after I saw Gina Lollobrigida . . ."

Keating said, "And this makes *you* queer?" He started to sing an approximation of a tune, which seemed to have the words, "I'm a fetishist, aren't we all?"

"Better you should go to Jersey and see some burlesque," said Mr. Gross. "Tempest Storm and you'll never sleep!"

"Now, gentlemen," said Mr. Cohan. "True enough there's no ladies in here at the moment, but—"

"But the trouble," Bache went on awkwardly, "was that I couldn't get interested in other girls, and I thought there must be something wrong with me. Well, this psychiatrist gave me a lot of tests and asked me some questions, and after a while said there was nothing really the matter: I was just what he called a natural breast-fetishist. He said there was nothing abnormal about it, and I might as well recognize the fact and let it contribute to my own happiness. Only if I picked out a girl to marry, I had better see that she was—well-endowed, because I wouldn't really get along well with any other kind."

Gross drew in his breath noisily. Tobolka motioned for another round, gave a little laugh, and said: "It seems rather like a—er, a counsel of perfection. That is, unless you go to an art school and ask one of the models to marry you on the spot. I understand that even bathing suits are fitted with artificial aids these days."

"Falsies," said Keating. "That's what they call them."

"True," said Bache, "and you'd be surprised at the number of women who use them. However, I have an unusual advantage." He smiled slightly, took off the spectacles, returned them to their case and tapped it with one finger before restoring the case to his pocket. "I have my ancestor's spectacles."

"Your ancestor's?" said Tobolka.

"Well over a hundred years old. In fact about a hundred and seventy. In my state, I wouldn't part with them for anything."

"I should think glasses that old wouldn't be very good," said Tobolka.

"Oh, my eyes need only a slight correction for close vision, as when I was looking at that picture, and they're all right for that. But that is only the minor use to which I put them. As tonight. You know a Mrs. Jonas?"

"Ain't been in yet tonight," said Mr. Cohan.

Bache said, "I know. I'm waiting for her. She was going to bring in this Marian Marks who, she says, is just the girl for me. That's why I came prepared."

"I don't see—" began Keating.

"It's a rather long tale," said Bache. "But I'll tell you. I'll tell you while I'm waiting. Only it's a rather dry tale, too, and I think we ought to have something in the form of a libation to see us through it."

You see (Bache went on) about 170 years ago there used to be an old spectacle-grinder somewhere in the Harz mountains in Germany, named Hein Weissenbroch. This Weissenbroch was not only a craftsman; he was close enough to the court at Erfurt so that some of the enlightenment came off on him, and he wanted to make what were thought of as scientific experiments in those days. One of his ideas was that of making spectacles out of rock quartz.

("But," said Tobolka, "quartz has such a low index of refraction.")

Exactly, doctor, exactly. You have to make the lenses so thick to get a major correction that it isn't worth while. Not to mention that clear rock crystal is expensive and hard to find. But in the first place Weissenbroch didn't know this, and in the second, he wouldn't have cared anyway. He was interested in experimenting, not in proving what everyone knew already. And rock quartz has a better transparency than glass, and gives you less chromatic aberration. I've looked it up.

He used to combine hunting for birds with his fowling piece and prospecting for quartz. One day, when he was out with a peasant named Karl Nickl, somewhere near Blankenburg, he came on an outcrop that had a vein of fine clear quartz. His only equipment that day was the fowling piece, but he explained to Nickl that he wanted a crowbar or something of the kind to pry loose some of that quartz and make a pair of spectacles. Nickl protested that this vein belonged to the kobolds and shouldn't be disturbed. He was a little hazy about any penalties for interfering with the kobold-quartz, but he was so vehement about letting it alone that Weissenbroch dropped the idea for the time being. It doesn't pay to get those peasants down on you. You're apt to get lost in the mountains.

After they got back with their bag of game, Weissenbroch was still fascinated by that kobold-quartz, but he didn't say anything more about it. A few days later, without saying anything to anyone, he went back up the valley where the outcrop was, taking a crowbar, and pried out a good clear piece to take back with him. Well, he split off part of it, being careful not to let anyone know what he was doing, because he didn't want stories about raiding the kobold-quartz to get around, and ground a pair of spectacles. They were designed to give only a slight correction, but that was about all anyone used in those days.

They looked like perfectly ordinary spectacles. But when Hein Weissenbroch put them on, he got the shock of his life. If he looked at the wall of his shop or around in it, they were just glasses and pretty good glasses, too, but when he went into the living room and looked at the floor, the carpet disappeared.

("How could it?" said Keating.

Tobolka said: "Some sort of diffraction-grating effect, I suppose. Go on, Mr. Bache.")

And when his wife came in from the kitchen, her clothes had also become invisible. Weissenbroch's first reaction was that she had gone mad and was going about her housework naked. They must have had a towering row about it, though the letter only hints at that.

("What letter?" asked Tobolka.)

I'm coming to that. Weissenbroch was finally able to determine by feeling that although he could only see textiles as a sort of shimmery shadow through the glasses, they were still there. He had sense enough to keep from telling anyone else about this, even his wife, but not sense enough to keep away from the local inn. Unfortunately, he found there just what he hoped he would find; a couple of local *Mädchen*, not to mention the barmaid herself. From various hints in the letter, I gather that Weissenbroch became so exhilarated that he was impelled to drink a quantity of schnapps, and his conduct toward the women in question partook of the disgraceful. It was fortunate that he did not break the spectacles. What he did do was get himself taken before a magistrate and fined several marks. It was a large sum for his time.

Now, as I remarked, Hein Weissenbroch was a man who had been in touch with the enlightenment movement. He used to correspond occasionally with Goethe and Schiller at the court of Saxe-Weimar in Erfurt, and there is a record that he ground the last pair of spectacles that Schiller wore before his death. It was undoubtedly from someone at the court that he heard of the arrival in France of my ancestor, Dr. Benjamin Franklin, as ambassador of the colonies.

("Are you really a descendant of Benjamin Franklin?" said Keating, with something like admiration.)

So they tell me (Bache went on). Well, Weissenbroch knew of Franklin as a scientist, of course, and thought that he might be able to explain how the kobold-quartz spectacles had worked. Possibly he figured he could always go back to the quartz lode and get more of the material. Anyway, he wrapped the spectacles up and sent them to one of his friends at the Saxe-Weimar court, with a covering letter addressed to Franklin, and a request that the package be forwarded. It

was the only thing to do in those days; the mail service wasn't so good.

I would judge that my ancestor made good use of the spectacles. There are still some of his descendants in France, you know. But he never mentioned them either, and we wouldn't have known about them except for Weissenbroch's letter, in a spidery Eighteenth-Century German hand.

("What did he do about Weissenbroch?" asked Keating.)

We don't know. All we have is Weissenbroch's letter, with a marginal note by Franklin. It says: "Tell M. Weissenbroch d. n. atz. enuz. e. p., 4.13." Nobody knows what he meant by those abbreviations. And all we know about Weissenbroch is his letter to Franklin and his correspondence with Goethe and Schiller. The line of communication was cut. You see, that was about the time when the Landgrave of Hesse-Cassel began selling his soldiers to King George for service in the American colonies. The court of Saxe-Weimar took a very dim view of it and wouldn't have anything to do with Hesse-Cassel for a while. And Weissenbroch lived in Hesse-Cassel.

Mr. Cohan leaned across the bar. "And would you be telling us now, that when you have them on, it looks as though nobody had no more clothes than a monkey?"

"I'm telling you exactly that," said Bache, producing the spectacles again and seating them on his nose as he surveyed the bartender. "For instance, they tell me that you have a large wen on your abdomen, just northeast of your navel and below your belt buckle."

Mr. Cohan turned a color that would have done credit to sparkling Burgundy; but before he could make an appropriate answer, the door opened and the brass-blonde Mrs. Jonas walked in, followed by a taller, younger woman.

"Hello, Mr. Cohan," said Mrs. Jonas, steering her protégé down the bar toward Bache. "Sorry if we kept you waiting, Septimius, but we didn't want to get caught in that shower. Marian, this is Septimius Bache; Septimius, I'd like you to meet Marian Marks. I think you two have a lot in common."

She certainly lived up to the advance notice Gross had given. Hollywood could have used the face that smiled from under a pile of red hair, and the rest of the ensemble down to a pair of very well turned ankles appeared to be in accord with what was visible. But Septimius Bache's face was curiously blank and his voice was curiously cool as he barely touched the hand she offered and said:

"Oh, yes," said Bache, looking through his spectacles. There was a little pause. "Would you—uh—care for a drink?"

"A stinger, please," said the girl.

Any conversation was abruptly halted when the door

opened again and another girl came in, who might have been the antithesis of Marian Marks. She was short, and shell-rimmed glasses sat on a decidedly plain face beneath round-bobbed black hair. In contrast to Miss Marks' rather gorgeous turnout, she was wearing a short coat over a shapeless smock. She handed Mrs. Jonas a package.

"Professor Thott said he had to mark term papers, but he knew you'd be wanting the geranium slip, so he sent me over with it," she said.

"Thank you, Ann," said Mrs. Jonas. "You know Marian Marks, don't you? Ann Carter, this is Septimius Bache."

Bache took her hand. "Won't you stay with us a while?"

"No," said the girl. "I've got to get back to the university. Thanks just the same."

She turned, but Bache took a step after her. "As a matter of fact, I've got to go in that direction myself. Do you mind if I walk back there with you?" He turned to the others. "Glad to have met you, Miss Marks. See you later, Ellie."

He walked beside Ann Carter to the door, gazing down at her through enraptured eyes. As it swung to behind them, Marian Marks said: "Well! Not that I mind his walking out on me just after an introduction like that, but I wonder whatever he sees in her."

THE SHADOW AND THE FLASH

by Jack London

WHEN I LOOK BACK, I realize what a peculiar friendship it was. First, there was Lloyd Inwood, tall, slender, and finely knit, nervous and dark. And then Paul Tichlorne, tall, slender, and finely knit, nervous and blond. Each was the replica of the other in everything except color. Lloyd's eyes were black; Paul's were blue. Under stress of excitement, the blood coursed olive in the face of Lloyd, crimson in the face of Paul. But outside this matter of coloring they were as like as two peas. Both were high-strung, prone to excessive tension and endurance, and they lived at concert pitch.

But there was a trio involved in this remarkable friendship, and the third was short, and fat, and chunky, and lazy, and, loath to say, it was I. Paul and Lloyd seemed born to rivalry with each other, and I to be peacemaker between them. We grew up together, the three of us, and full often have I

received the angry blows each intended for the other. They were always competing, striving to outdo each other, and when entered upon some such struggle there was no limit either to their endeavors or passions.

This intense spirit of rivalry obtained in their studies and their games. If Paul memorized one canto of "Marmion," Lloyd memorized two cantos, Paul came back with three, and Lloyd again with four, till each knew the whole poem by heart. I remember an incident that occurred at the swimming hole—an incident tragically significant of the life-struggle between them. The boys had a game of diving to the bottom of a ten-foot pool and holding on by submerged roots to see who could stay under the longest. Paul and Lloyd allowed themselves to be bantered into making the descent together. When I saw their faces, set and determined, disappear in the water as they sank swiftly down, I felt a foreboding of something dreadful. The moments sped, the ripples died away, the face of the pool grew placid and untroubled, and neither black nor golden head broke surface in quest of air. We above grew anxious. The longest record of the longest-winded boy had been exceeded, and still there was no sign. Air bubbles trickled slowly upward, showing that the breath had been expelled from their lungs, and after that the bubbles ceased to trickle upward. Each second became interminable, and, unable longer to endure the suspense, I plunged into the water.

I found them down at the bottom, clutching tight to the roots, their heads not a foot apart, their eyes wide open, each glaring fixedly at the other. They were suffering frightful torment, writhing and twisting in the pangs of voluntary suffocation; for neither would let go and acknowledge himself beaten. I tried to break Paul's hold on the root, but he resisted me fiercely. Then I lost my breath and came to the surface, badly scared. I quickly explained the situation, and half a dozen of us went down and by main strength tore them loose. By the time we got them out, both were unconscious, and it was only after much barrel-rolling and rubbing and pounding that they finally came to their senses. They would have drowned there, had no one rescued them.

When Paul Tichlorne entered college, he let it be generally understood that he was going in for the social sciences. Lloyd Inwood, entering at the same time, elected to take the same course. But Paul had had it secretly in mind all the time to study the natural sciences, specializing on chemistry, and at the last moment he switched over. Though Lloyd had already arranged his year's work and attended the first lectures, he at once followed Paul's lead and went in for the natural sciences and especially for chemistry. Their ri-

valry soon became a noted thing throughout the university. Each was a spur to the other, and they went into chemistry deeper than did ever students before—so deep, in fact, that ere they took their sheepskins they could have stumped any chemistry or "cow college" professor in the institution, save "old" Moss, head of the department, and even him they puzzled and edified more than once. Lloyd's discovery of the "death bacillus" of the sea toad, and his experiments on it with potassium cyanide, sent his name and that of his university ringing round the world; nor was Paul a whit behind when he succeeded in producing laboratory colloids exhibiting amœba-like activities, and when he cast new light upon the processes of fertilization through his startling experiments with simple sodium chlorides and magnesium solutions on low forms of marine life.

It was in their undergraduate days, however, in the midst of their profoundest plunges into the mysteries of organic chemistry, that Doris Van Benschoten entered into their lives. Lloyd met her first, but within twenty-four hours Paul saw to it that he also made her acquaintance. Of course, they fell in love with her, and she became the only thing in life worth living for. They wooed her with equal ardor and fire, and so intense became their struggle for her that half the student-body took to wagering wildly on the result. Even "old" Moss, one day, after an astounding demonstration in his private laboratory by Paul, was guilty to the extent of a month's salary of backing him to become the bridegroom of Doris Van Benschoten.

In the end she solved the problem in her own way, to everybody's satisfaction except Paul's and Lloyd's. Getting them together, she said that she really could not choose between them because she loved them both equally well; and that, unfortunately, since polyandry was not permitted in the United States she would be compelled to forego the honor and happiness of marrying either of them. Each blamed the other for this lamentable outcome, and the bitterness between them grew more bitter.

But things came to a head soon enough. It was at my home, after they had taken their degrees and dropped out of the world's sight, that the beginning of the end came to pass. Both were men of means, with little inclination and no necessity for professional life. My friendship and their mutual animosity were the two things that linked them in any way together. While they were very often at my place, they made it a fastidious point to avoid each other on such visits, though it was inevitable, under the circumstances, that they should come upon each other occasionally.

On the day I have in recollection, Paul Tichlorne had

been mooning all morning in my study over a current scientific review. This left me free to my own affairs, and I was out among my roses when Lloyd Inwood arrived. Clipping and pruning and tacking the climbers on the porch, with my mouth full of nails, and Lloyd following me about and lending a hand now and again, we fell to discussing the mythical race of invisible people, that strange and vagrant people the traditions of which have come down to us. Lloyd warmed to the talk in his nervous, jerky fashion, and was soon interrogating the physical properties and possibilities of invisibility. A perfectly black object, he contended, would elude and defy the acutest vision.

"Color is a sensation," he was saying. "It has no objective reality. Without light, we can see neither colors nor objects themselves. All objects are black in the dark, and in the dark it is impossible to see them. If no light strikes upon them, then no light is flung back from them to the eye, and so we have no vision-evidence of their being."

"But we see black objects in daylight," I objected.

"Very true," he went on warmly. "And that is because they are not perfectly black. Were they perfectly black, absolutely black, as it were, we could not see them—ay, not in the blaze of a thousand suns could we see them! And so I say, with the right pigments, properly compounded, an absolutely black paint could be produced which would render invisible whatever it was applied to."

"It would be a remarkable discovery," I said non-committally, for the whole thing seemed too fantastic for aught but speculative purposes.

"Remarkable!" Lloyd slapped me on the shoulder. "I should say so. Why, old chap, to coat myself with such a paint would be to put the world at my feet. The secrets of kings and courts would be mine, the machinations of diplomats and politicians, the play of stock-gamblers, the plans of trusts and corporations. I could keep my hand on the inner pulse of things and become the greatest power in the world. And I—" He broke off shortly, then added, "Well, I have begun my experiments, and I don't mind telling you that I'm right in line for it."

A laugh from the doorway startled us. Paul Tichlorne was standing there, a smile of mockery on his lips.

"You forget, my dear Lloyd," he said.

"Forget what?"

"You forget," Paul went on—"ah, you forget the shadow."

I saw Lloyd's face drop, but he answered sneeringly, "I can carry a sunshade, you know." Then he turned suddenly and fiercely upon him. "Look here, Paul, you'll keep out of this if you know what's good for you."

A rupture seemed imminent, but Paul laughed good-naturedly. "I wouldn't lay fingers on your dirty pigments. Succeed beyond your most sanguine expectations, yet you will always fetch up against the shadow. You can't get away from it. Now I shall go on the very opposite tack. In the very nature of my proposition the shadow will be eliminated—"

"Transparency!" ejaculated Lloyd, instantly. "But it can't be achieved."

"Oh, no; of course not." And Paul shrugged his shoulders and strolled off down the brier-rose path.

This was the beginning of it. Both men attacked the problem with all the tremendous energy for which they were noted, and with a rancor and bitterness that made me tremble for the success of either. Each trusted me to the utmost, and in the long weeks of experimentation that followed I was made a party to both sides, listening to their theorizings and witnessing their demonstrations. Never, by word or sign, did I convey to either the slightest hint of the other's progress, and they respected me for the seal I put upon my lips.

Lloyd Inwood, after prolonged and unintermittent application, when the tension upon his mind and body became too great to bear, had a strange way of obtaining relief. He attended prize fights. It was at one of these brutal exhibitions, whither he had dragged me in order to tell his latest results, that his theory received striking confirmation.

"Do you see that red-whiskered man?" he asked, pointing across the ring to the fifth tier of seats on the opposite side. "And do you see the next man to him, the one in the white hat? Well, there is quite a gap between them, is there not?"

"Certainly," I answered. "They are a seat apart. The gap is the unoccupied seat."

He leaned over to me and spoke seriously. "Between the red-whiskered man and the white-hatted man sits Ben Wasson. You have heard me speak of him. He is the cleverest pugilist of his weight in the country. He is also a Caribbean Negro, full-blooded, and the blackest in the United States. He has on a black overcoat buttoned up. I saw him when he came in and took that seat. As soon as he sat down he disappeared. Watch closely; he may smile."

I was for crossing over to verify Lloyd's statement, but he restrained me. "Wait," he said.

I waited and watched, till the red-whiskered man turned his head as though addressing the unoccupied seat; and then, in that empty space, I saw the rolling whites of a pair of eyes and the white double-crescent of two rows of teeth, and for the instant I could make out a Negro's face. But with the

passing of the smile his visibility passed, and the chair seemed vacant as before.

"Were he perfectly black, you could sit alongside him and not see him," Lloyd said; and I confess the illustration was apt enough to make me well-nigh convinced.

I visited Lloyd's laboratory a number of times after that, and found him always deep in his search after the absolute black. His experiments covered all sorts of pigments, such as lamp-blacks, tars, carbonized vegetable matters, soots of oils and fats, and the various carbonized animal substances.

"White light is composed of the seven primary colors," he argued to me. "But it is itself, of itself, invisible. Only by being reflected from objects do it and the objects become visible. But only that portion of it that is reflected becomes visible. For instance, here is a blue tobacco-box. The white light strikes against it, and, with one exception, all its component colors—violet, indigo, green, yellow, orange, and red —are absorbed. The one exception is blue. It is not absorbed, but reflected. Wherefore the tobacco-box gives us a sensation of blueness. We do not see the other colors because they are absorbed. We see only the blue. For the same reason grass is *green*. The green waves of white light are thrown upon our eyes."

"When we paint our houses, we do not apply color to them," he said at another time. "What we do is to apply certain substances that have the property of absorbing from white light all the colors except those that we would have our houses appear. When a substance reflects all the colors to the eye, it seems to us white. When it absorbs all the colors, it is black. But, as I said before, we have as yet no perfect black. *All* the colors are not absorbed. The perfect black, guarding against high lights, will be utterly and absolutely invisible. Look at that, for example."

He pointed to the palette lying on his work-table. Different shades of black pigments were brushed on it. One, in particular, I could hardly see. It gave my eyes a blurring sensation, and I rubbed them and looked again.

"That," he said impressively, "is the blackest black you or any mortal man ever looked upon. But just you wait, and I'll have a black so black that no mortal man will be able to look upon it—*and see it!*"

On the other hand, I used to find Paul Tichlorne plunged as deeply into the study of light polarization, diffraction, and interference, single and double refraction, and all manner of strange organic compounds.

"Transparency: a state or quality of body which permits all rays of light to pass through," he defined for me. "That is what I am seeking. Lloyd blunders up against the shadow

with his perfect opaqueness. But I escape it. A transparent body casts no shadow; neither does it reflect light-waves—that is, the perfectly transparent does not. So, avoiding high lights, not only will such a body cast no shadow, but, since it reflects no light, it will also be invisible."

We were standing by the window at another time. Paul was engaged in polishing a number of lenses, which were ranged along the sill. Suddenly, after a pause in the conversation, he said, "Oh! I've dropped a lens. Stick your head out, old man, and see where it went to."

Out I started to thrust my head, but a sharp blow on the forehead caused me to recoil. I rubbed my bruised brow and gazed with reproachful inquiry at Paul, who was laughing in gleeful, boyish fashion.

"Well?" he said.

"Well?" I echoed.

"Why don't you investigate?" he demanded. And investigate I did. Before thrusting out my head, my senses, automatically active, had told me there was nothing there, that nothing intervened between me and out-of-doors, that the aperture of the window opening was utterly empty. I stretched forth my hand and felt a hard object, smooth and cool and flat, which my touch, out of its experience, told me to be glass. I looked again, but could see positively nothing.

"White quartzose sand," Paul rattled off, "sodic carbonate, slaked lime, cullet, manganese peroxide—there you have it, the finest French plate glass, made by the great St. Gobain Company, who made the finest plate glass in the world, and this is the finest piece they ever made. It cost a king's ransom. But look at it! You can't see it. You don't know it's there till you run your head against it.

"Eh, old boy! That's merely an object-lesson—certain elements, in themselves opaque, yet so compounded as to give a resultant body which is transparent. But that is a matter of inorganic chemistry, you say. Very true. But I dare to assert, standing here on my two feet, that in the organic I can duplicate whatever occurs in the inorganic.

"Here!" He held a test-tube between me and the light, and I noted the cloudy or muddy liquid it contained. He emptied the contents of another test-tube into it, and almost instantly it became clear and sparkling.

"Or here!" With quick, nervous movements among his array of test-tubes, he turned a white solution to a wine color, and a light yellow solution to a dark brown. He dropped a piece of litmus paper into an acid, when it changed instantly to red, and on floating it in an alkali it turned as quickly to blue.

"The litmus paper is still the litmus paper," he enunciated

in the formal manner of the lecturer. "I have not changed it into something else. Then what did I do? I merely changed the arrangement of its molecules. Where, at first, it absorbed all colors from the light but red, its molecular structure was so changed that it absorbed red and all colors except blue. And so it goes, *ad infinitum*. Now, what I purpose to do is this." He paused for a space. "I purpose to seek—ay, and to find—the proper reagents, which, acting upon the living organism, will bring about molecular changes analogous to those you have just witnessed. But these reagents, which I shall find, and for that matter, upon which I already have my hands, will not turn the living body to blue or red or black, but they will turn it to transparency. All light will pass through it. It will be invisible. It will cast no shadow."

A few weeks later I went hunting with Paul. He had been promising me for some time that I should have the pleasure of shooting over a wonderful dog—the most wonderful dog, in fact, that ever man shot over, so he averred, and continued to aver till my curiosity was aroused. But on the morning in question I was disappointed, for there was no dog in evidence.

"Don't see him about," Paul remarked unconcernedly, and we set off across the fields.

I could not imagine, at the time, what was ailing me, but I had a feeling of some impending and deadly illness. My nerves were all awry, and, from the astounding tricks they played me, my senses seemed to have run riot. Strange sounds disturbed me. At times I heard the swish-swish of grass being shoved aside, and once the patter of feet across a patch of stony ground.

"Did you hear anything, Paul?" I asked once.

But he shook his head, and thrust his feet steadily forward.

While climbing a fence, I heard the low, eager whine of a dog, apparently from within a couple of feet of me; but on looking about me I saw nothing.

I dropped to the ground, limp and trembling.

"Paul," I said, "we had better return to the house. I am afraid I am going to be sick."

"Nonsense, old man," he answered. "The sunshine has gone to your head like wine. You'll be all right. It's famous weather."

But, passing along a narrow path through a clump of cottonwoods, some object brushed against my legs and I stumbled and nearly fell. I looked with sudden anxiety at Paul.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Tripping over your own feet?"

I kept my tongue between my teeth and plodded on,

though sore perplexed and thoroughly satisfied that some acute and mysterious malady had attacked my nerves. So far my eyes had escaped; but, when we got to the open fields again, even my vision went back on me. Strange flashes of varicolored, rainbow light began to appear and disappear on the path before me. Still, I managed to keep myself in hand, till the varicolored lights persisted for a space of fully twenty seconds, dancing and flashing in continuous play. Then I sat down, weak and shaky.

"It's all up with me," I gasped, covering my eyes with my hands. "It has attacked my eyes. Paul, take me home."

But Paul laughed long and loud. "What did I tell you?—the most wonderful dog, eh? Well, what do you think?"

He turned partly from me and began to whistle. I heard the patter of feet, the panting of a heated animal, and the unmistakable yelp of a dog. Then Paul stooped down and apparently fondled the empty air.

"Here! Give me your fist."

And he rubbed my hand over the cold nose and jowls of a dog. A dog it certainly was, with the shape and the smooth, short coat of a pointer.

Suffice it to say, I speedily recovered my spirits and control. Paul put a collar about the animal's neck and tied his handkerchief to its tail. And then was vouchsafed us the remarkable sight of an empty collar and a waving handkerchief cavorting over the fields. It was something to see that collar and handkerchief pin a bevy of quail in a clump of locusts and remain rigid and immovable till we had flushed the birds.

Now and again the dog emitted the varicolored light-flashes I have mentioned. The one thing, Paul explained, which he had not anticipated and which he doubted could be overcome.

"They're a large family," he said, "these sun dogs, wind dogs, rainbows, halos, and parhelia. They are produced by refraction of light from mineral and ice crystals, from mist, rain, spray, and no end of things; and I am afraid they are the penalty I must pay for transparency. I escaped Lloyd's shadow only to fetch up against the rainbow flash."

A couple of days later, before the entrance to Paul's laboratory, I encountered a terrible stench. So overpowering was it that it was easy to discover the source—a mass of putrescent matter on the doorstep which in general outlines resembled a dog.

Paul was startled when he investigated my find. It was his invisible dog, or rather, what had been his invisible dog, for it was now plainly visible. It had been playing about but a few minutes before in all health and strength. Closer exami-

nation revealed that the skull had been crushed by some heavy blow. While it was strange that the animal should have been killed, the inexplicable thing was that it should so quickly decay.

"The reagents I injected into its system were harmless," Paul explained. "Yet they were powerful, and it appears that when death comes they force practically instantaneous disintegration. Remarkable! Most remarkable! Well, the only thing is not to die. They do not harm so long as one lives. But I do wonder who smashed in that dog's head."

Light, however, was thrown upon this when a frightened housemaid brought the news that Gaffer Bedshaw had that very morning, not more than an hour back, gone violently insane, and was strapped down at home, in the huntsman's lodge, where he raved of a battle with a ferocious and gigantic beast that he had encountered in the Tichlorne pasture. He claimed that the thing, whatever it was, was invisible, that with his own eyes he had seen that it was invisible; wherefore his tearful wife and daughters shook their heads, and wherefore he but waxed the more violent, and the gardener and the coachman tightened the straps by another hole.

Nor, while Paul Tichlorne was thus successfully mastering the problem of invisibility, was Lloyd Inwood a whit behind. I went over in answer to a message of his to come and see how he was getting on. Now his laboratory occupied an isolated situation in the midst of his vast grounds. It was built in a pleasant little glade, surrounded on all sides by a dense forest growth, and was to be gained by way of a winding and erratic path. But I had travelled that path so often as to know every foot of it, and conceive my surprise when I came upon the glade and found no laboratory. The quaint shed structure with its red sandstone chimney was not. Nor did it look as if it ever had been. There were no signs of ruin, no débris, nothing.

I started to walk across what had once been its site. "This," I said to myself, "should be where the step went up to the door." Barely were the words out of my mouth when I stubbed my toe on some obstacle, pitched forward, and butted my head into something that *felt* very much like a door. I reached out my hand. It *was* a door. I found the knob and turned it. And at once, as the door swung inward on its hinges, the whole interior of the laboratory impinged upon my vision. Greeting Lloyd, I closed the door and backed up the path a few paces. I could see nothing of the building. Returning and opening the door, at once all the furniture and every detail of the interior were visible. It was indeed

startling, the sudden transition from void to light and form and color.

"What do you think of it, eh?" Lloyd asked, wringing my hand. "I slapped a couple of coats of absolute black on the outside yesterday afternoon to see how it worked. How's your head? You bumped it pretty solidly, I imagine."

"Never mind that," he interrupted my congratulations. "I've something better for you to do."

While he talked he began to strip, and when he stood naked before me he thrust a pot and brush into my hand and said, "Here, give me a coat of this."

It was an oily, shellac-like stuff, which spread quickly and easily over the skin and dried immediately.

"Merely preliminary and precautionary," he explained when I had finished; "but now for the real stuff."

I picked up another pot he indicated, and glanced inside, but could see nothing.

"It's empty," I said.

"Stick your finger in it."

I obeyed, and was aware of a sensation of cool moistness. On withdrawing my hand I glanced at the forefinger, the one I had immersed, but it had disappeared. I moved it, and knew from the alternate tension and relaxation of the muscles that I moved it, but it defied my sense of sight. To all appearances I had been shorn of a finger; nor could I get any visual impression of it till I extended it under the skylight and saw its shadow plainly blotted on the floor.

Lloyd chuckled. "Now spread it on, and keep your eyes open."

I dipped the brush into the seemingly empty pot, and gave him a long stroke across his chest. With the passage of the brush the living flesh disappeared from beneath. I covered his right leg, and he was a one-legged man defying all laws of gravitation. And so, stroke by stroke, member by member, I painted Lloyd Inwood into nothingness. It was a creepy experience, and I was glad when naught remained in sight but his burning black eyes, poised apparently unsupported in mid-air.

"I have a refined and harmless solution for them," he said. "A fine spray with an air-brush, and presto! I am not."

This deftly accomplished, he said, "Now I shall move about, and do you tell me what sensations you experience."

"In the first place, I cannot see you," I said, and I could hear his gleeful laugh from the midst of the emptiness. "Of course," I continued, "you cannot escape your shadow, but that was to be expected. When you pass between my eye and an object, the object disappears, but so unusual and in-

comprehensible is its disappearance that it seems to me as though my eyes had blurred. When you move rapidly, I experience a bewildering succession of blurs. The blurring sensation makes my eyes ache and my brain tired."

"Have you any other warnings of my presence?" he asked.

"No, and yes," I answered. "When you are near me I have feelings similar to those produced by dank warehouses, gloomy crypts, and deep mines. And as sailors feel the loom of the land on dark nights, so I think I feel the loom of your body. But it is all very vague and intangible."

Long we talked that last morning in his laboratory; and when I turned to go, he put his unseen hand in mine with nervous grip, and said, "Now I shall conquer the world!" And I could not dare to tell him of Paul Tichlorne's equal success.

At home I found a note from Paul, asking me to come up immediately, and it was high noon when I came spinning up the driveway on my wheel. Paul called me from the tennis court, and I dismounted and went over. But the court was empty. As I stood there, gaping open-mouthed, a tennis ball struck me on the arm, and as I turned about, another whizzed past my ear. For aught I could see of my assailant, they came whirling at me from out of space, and right well was I peppered with them. But when the balls already flung at me began to come back for a second whack, I realized the situation. Seizing a racquet and keeping my eyes open, I quickly saw a rainbow flash appearing and disappearing and darting over the ground. I took out after it, and when I laid the racquet upon it for a half-dozen stout blows, Paul's voice rang out:

"Enough! Enough! Oh! Ouch! Stop! You're landing on my naked skin, you know! Ow! O-w-w! I'll be good! I'll be good! I only wanted you to see my metamorphosis," he said ruefully, and I imagined he was rubbing his hurts.

A few minutes later we were playing tennis—a handicap on my part, for I could have no knowledge of his position save when all the angles between himself, the sun, and me, were in proper conjunction. Then he flashed, and only then. But the flashes were more brilliant than the rainbow—purest blue, most delicate violet, brightest yellow, and all the intermediary shades, with the scintillant brilliancy of the diamond, dazzling, blinding, iridescent.

But in the midst of our play I felt a sudden cold chill, reminding me of deep mines and gloomy crypts, such a chill as I had experienced that very morning. The next moment, close to the net, I saw a ball rebound in mid-air and empty space, and at the same instant, a score of feet away, Paul Tichlorne emitted a rainbow flash. It could not be he from

whom the ball had rebounded, and with sickening dread I realized that Lloyd Inwood had come upon the scene. To make sure, I looked for his shadow, and there it was, a shapeless blotch the girth of his body (the sun was overhead), moving along the ground. I remembered his threat, and felt sure that all the long years of rivalry were about to culminate in uncanny battle.

I cried a warning to Paul, and heard a snarl as of a wild beast, and an answering snarl. I saw the dark blotch move swiftly across the court, and a brilliant burst of varicolored light moving with equal swiftness to meet it; and then shadow and flash came together and there was the sound of unseen blows. The net went down before my frightened eyes. I sprang toward the fighters, crying:

"For God's sake!"

But their locked bodies smote against my knees, and I was overthrown.

"You keep out of this, old man!" I heard the voice of Lloyd Inwood from out of the emptiness. And then Paul's voice crying, "Yes, we've had enough of peacemaking!"

From the sound of their voices I knew they had separated. I could not locate Paul, and so approached the shadow that represented Lloyd. But from the other side came a stunning blow on the point of my jaw, and I heard Paul scream angrily, "Now will you keep away?"

They they came together again, the impact of their blows, their groans and gasps, and the swift flashings and shadow-movings telling plainly of the deadliness of the struggle.

I shouted for help, and Gaffer Bedshaw came running into the court. I could see, as he approached, that he was looking at me strangely, but he collided with the combatants and was hurled headlong to the ground. With despairing shriek and a cry of "O Lord, I've got 'em!" he sprang to his feet and tore madly out of the court.

I could do nothing, so I sat up, fascinated and powerless, and watched the struggle. The noonday sun beat down with dazzling brightness on the naked tennis court. And it *was* naked. All I could see was the blotch of shadow and the rainbow flashes, the dust rising from the invisible feet, the earth tearing up from beneath the straining foot-grips, and the wire screen bulge once or twice as their bodies hurled against it. That was all, and after a time even that ceased. There were no more flashes, and the shadow had become long and stationary; and I remembered their set boyish faces when they clung to the roots in the deep coolness of the pool.

They found me an hour afterward. Some inkling of what had happened got to the servants and they quitted the Tich-

lorne service in a body. Gaffer Bedshaw never recovered from the second shock he received, and is confined in a madhouse, hopelessly incurable. The secrets of their marvellous discoveries died with Paul and Lloyd, both laboratories being destroyed by grief-stricken relatives. As for myself, I no longer care for chemical research, and science is a tabooed topic in my household. I have returned to my roses. Nature's colors are good enough for me.

THE NEW ACCELERATOR

by H. G. Wells

CERTAINLY, if ever a man found a guinea when he was looking for a pin it is my good friend Professor Gibberne. I have heard before of investigators overshooting the mark, but never quite to the extent that he has done. He has really, this time at any rate, without any touch of exaggeration in the phrase, found something to revolutionise human life. And that when he was simply seeking an all-round nervous stimulant to bring languid people up to the stresses of these pushful days. I have tasted the stuff now several times, and I cannot do better than to describe the effect the thing had on me. That there are astonishing experiences in store for all in search of new sensations will become apparent enough.

Professor Gibberne, as many people know, is my neighbour in Folkestone. Unless my memory plays me a trick, his portrait at various ages has already appeared in *The Strand Magazine*—I think late in 1899; but I am unable to look it up because I have lent that volume to someone who has never sent it back. The reader may, perhaps, recall the high forehead and the singularly long black eyebrows that give such a Mephistophelian touch to his face. He occupies one of those pleasant detached houses in the mixed style that make the western end of the Upper Sandgate Road so interesting. His is the one with the Flemish gables and the Moorish portico, and it is in the room with the mullioned bay window that he works when he is down here, and in which of an evening we have so often smoked and talked together. He is a mighty jester, but, besides, he likes to talk to me about his work; he is one of those men who find a help and stimulus in talking, and so I have been able to follow the conception of the New Accelerator right up from a very early stage. Of

course, the greater portion of his experimental work is not done in Folkestone, but in Gower Street, in the fine new laboratory next to the hospital that he has been the first to use.

As everyone knows, or at least as all intelligent people know, the special department in which Gibberne has gained so great and deserved a reputation among physiologists is the action of drugs upon the nervous system. Upon soporifics, sedatives, and anæsthetics he is, I am told, unequalled. He is also a chemist of considerable eminence, and I suppose in the subtle and complex jungle of riddles that centres about the ganglion cell and the axis fibre there are little cleared places of his making, glades of illumination, that, until he sees fit to publish his results, are inaccessible to every other living man. And in the last few years he has been particularly assiduous upon this question of nervous stimulants, and already, before the discovery of the New Accelerator, very successful with them. Medical science has to thank him for at least three distinct and absolutely safe invigorators of unrivalled value to practising men. In cases of exhaustion the preparation known as Gibberne's B Syrup has, I suppose, saved more lives already than any lifeboat round the coast.

"But none of these things begin to satisfy me yet," he told me nearly a year ago. "Either they increase the central energy without affecting the nerves or they simply increase the available energy by lowering the nervous conductivity; and all of them are unequal and local in their operation. One wakes up the heart and viscera and leaves the brain stupefied, one gets at the brain champagne fashion and does nothing good for the solar plexus, and what I want—and what, if it's an earthly possibility, I mean to have—is a stimulant that stimulates all round, that wakes you up for a time from the crown of your head to the tip of your great toe, and makes you go two—or even three to everybody else's one. Eh? That's the thing I'm after."

"It would tire a man," I said.

"Not a doubt of it. And you'd eat double or treble—and all that. But just think what the thing would mean. Imagine yourself with a little phial like this"—he held up a bottle of green glass and marked his points with it—"and in this precious phial is the power to think twice as fast, move twice as quickly, do twice as much work in a given time as you could otherwise do."

"But is such a thing possible?"

"I believe so. If it isn't, I've wasted my time for a year. These various preparations of the hypophosphites, for example, seem to show that something of the sort. . . . Even if it was only one and a half times as fast it would do."

"It *would* do," I said.

"If you were a statesman in a corner, for example, time rushing up against you, something urgent to be done, eh?"

"He could dose his private secretary," I said.

"And gain—double time. And think if *you*, for example, wanted to finish a book."

"Usually," I said, "I wish I'd never begun 'em."

"Or a doctor, driven to death, wants to sit down and think out a case. Or a barrister—or a man cramming for an examination."

"Worth a guinea a drop," said I, "and more—to men like that."

"And in a duel again," said Gibberne, "where it all depends on your quickness in pulling the trigger."

"Or in fencing," I echoed.

"You see," said Gibberne, "if I get it as an all-round thing it will really do you no harm at all—except perhaps to an infinitesimal degree it brings you nearer old age. You will just have lived twice to other people's once——"

"I suppose," I meditated, "in a duel—it would be fair?"

"That's a question for the seconds," said Gibberne.

I harked back further. "And you really think such a thing *is* possible?" I said.

"As possible," said Gibberne, and glanced at something that went throbbing by the window, "as a motorbus. As a matter of fact——"

He paused and smiled at me deeply, and tapped slowly on the edge of his desk with the green phial. "I think I know the stuff. . . . Already I've got something coming." The nervous smile upon his face betrayed the gravity of his revelation. He rarely talked of his actual experimental work unless things were very near the end. "And it may be, it may be—I shouldn't be surprised—it may even do the thing at a greater rate than twice."

"It will be rather a big thing," I hazarded.

"It will be, I think, rather a big thing."

But I don't think he quite knew what a big thing it was to be, for all that.

I remember we had several subsequent talks about the stuff. "The New Accelerator" he called it, and his tone about it grew more confident on each occasion. Sometimes he talked nervously of unexpected physiological results its use might have, and then he would get a bit unhappy; at others he was frankly mercenary, and we debated long and anxiously how the preparation might be turned to commercial account. "It's a good thing," said Gibberne, "a tremendous thing. I know I'm giving the world something, and I think it only reasonable we should expect the world to pay. The dig-

nity of science is all very well, but I think somehow I must have the monopoly of the stuff for, say, ten years. I don't see why *all* the fun in life should go to the dealers in ham."

My own interest in the coming drug certainly did not wane in the time. I have always had a queer twist towards metaphysics in my mind. I have always been given to paradoxes about space and time, and it seemed to me that Gibberne was really preparing no less than the absolute acceleration of life. Suppose a man repeatedly dosed with such a preparation: he would live an active and record life indeed, but he would be an adult at eleven, middle-aged at twenty-five, and by thirty well on the road to senile decay. It seemed to me that so far Gibberne was only going to do for anyone who took his drug exactly what Nature has done for the Jews and Orientals, who are men in their teens and aged by fifty, and quicker in thought and act than we are all the time. The marvel of drugs has always been great to my mind; you can madden a man, calm a man, make him incredibly strong and alert or a helpless log, quicken this passion and allay that, all by means of drugs, and here was a new miracle to be added to this strange armoury of phials the doctors use! But Gibberne was far too eager upon his technical points to enter very keenly into my aspect of the question.

It was the 7th or 8th of August, when he told me the distillation that would decide his failure or success for a time was going forward as we talked, and it was on the 10th that he told me the thing was done and the New Accelerator a tangible reality in the world. I met him as I was going up the Sandgate Hill towards Folkestone—I think I was going to get my hair cut; and he came hurrying down to meet me—I suppose he was coming to my house to tell me at once of his success. I remember that his eyes were unusually bright and his face flushed, and I noted even then the swift alacrity of his step.

"It's done," he cried, and gripped my hand, speaking very fast; "it's more than done. Come up to my house and see."

"Really?"

"Really!" he shouted. "Incredibly! Come up and see."

"And it does—twice!"

"It does more, much more. It scares me. Come up and see the stuff. Taste it! Try it! It's the most amazing stuff on earth." He gripped my arm and, walking at such a pace that he forced me into a trot, went shouting with me up the hill. A whole charabancful of people turned and stared at us in unison after the manner of people in charabancs. It was one of those hot, clear days that Folkestone sees so much of, every colour incredibly bright and every outline hard. There was a breeze, of course, but not so much breeze as sufficed under

these conditions to keep me cool and dry. I panted for mercy.

"I'm not walking fast, am I?" cried Gibberne, and slackened his pace to a quick march.

"You've been taking some of this stuff," I puffed.

"No," he said. "At the utmost a drop of water that stood in a beaker from which I had washed out the last traces of the stuff. I took some last night, you know. But that is ancient history, now."

"And it goes twice?" I said, nearing his doorway in a grateful perspiration.

"It goes a thousand times, many thousand times!" cried Gibberne, with a dramatic gesture, flinging open his Early English carved oak gate.

"Phew!" said I, and followed him to the door.

"I don't know how many times it goes," he said, with his latch-key in his hand.

"And you——"

"It throws all sorts of light on nervous physiology, it kicks the theory of vision into a perfectly new shape! . . . Heaven knows how many thousand times. We'll try all that after—— The thing is to try the stuff now."

"Try the stuff?" I said, as we went along the passage.

"Rather," said Gibberne, turning on me in his study. "There it is in that little green phial there! Unless you happen to be afraid?"

I am a careful man by nature, and only theoretically adventurous. I *was* afraid. But on the other hand there is pride.

"Well," I haggled. "You say you've tried it?"

"I've tried it," he said, "and I don't look hurt by it, do I? I don't even look livery and I *feel*——"

I sat down. "Give me the potion," I said. "If the worst comes to the worst it will save having my hair cut, and that I think is one of the most hateful duties of a civilised man. How do you take the mixture?"

"With water," said Gibberne, whacking down a carafe.

He stood up in front of his desk and regarded me in his easy chair; his manner was suddenly affected by a touch of the Harley Street specialist. "It's rum stuff, you know," he said.

I made a gesture with my hand.

"I must warn you in the first place as soon as you've got it down to shut your eyes, and open them very cautiously in a minute or so's time. One still sees. The sense of vision is a question of length of vibration, and not of multitude of impacts; but there's a kind of shock to the retina, a nasty giddy confusion just at the time if the eyes are open. Keep 'em shut."

"Shut," I said. "Good!"

"And the next thing is, keep still. Don't begin to whack about. You may fetch something a nasty rap if you do. Remember you will be going several thousand times faster than you ever did before, heart, lungs, muscles, brain—everything—and you will hit hard without knowing it. You won't know it, you know. You'll feel just as you do now. Only everything in the world will seem to be going ever so many thousand times slower than it ever went before. That's what makes it so deuced queer."

"Lor'," I said. "And you mean——"

"You'll see," said he, and took up a measure. He glanced at the material on his desk. "Glasses," he said, "water. All here. Mustn't take too much for the first attempt."

The little phial glucked out its precious contents. "Don't forget what I told you," he said, turning the contents of the measure into a glass in the manner of an Italian waiter measuring whisky. "Sit with the eyes tightly shut and in absolute stillness for two minutes," he said. "Then you will hear me speak."

He added an inch or so of water to the dose in each glass.

"By the bye," he said, "don't put your glass down. Keep it in your hand and rest your hand on your knee. Yes—so. And now——"

He raised his glass.

"The New Accelerator," I said.

"The New Accelerator," he answered, and we touched glasses and drank, and instantly I closed my eyes.

You know that blank non-existence into which one drops when one has taken "gas." For an indefinite interval it was like that. Then I heard Gibberne telling me to wake up, and I stirred and opened my eyes. There he stood as he had been standing, glass still in hand. It was empty, that was all the difference.

"Well?" said I.

"Nothing out of the way?"

"Nothing. A slight feeling of exhilaration, perhaps. Nothing more."

"Sounds?"

"Things are still," I said. "By Jove! yes! They *are* still. Except the sort of faint pat, patter, like rain falling on different things. What is it?"

"Analysed sounds," I think he said, but I am not sure. He glanced at the window. "Have you ever seen a curtain before a window fixed in that way before?"

I followed his eyes, and there was the end of the curtain, frozen, as it were, corner high, in the act of flapping briskly in the breeze.

"No," said I; "that's odd."

"And here," he said, and opened the hand that held the glass. Naturally I winced, expecting the glass to smash. But so far from smashing it did not even seem to stir; it hung in mid-air—motionless. "Roughly speaking," said Gibberne, "an object in these latitudes falls 16 feet in the first second. This glass is falling 16 feet in a second now. Only, you see, it hasn't been falling yet for the hundredth part of a second. That gives you some idea of the pace of my Accelerator." And he waved his hand round and round, over and under the slowly sinking glass. Finally he took it by the bottom, pulled it down and placed it very carefully on the table. "Eh?" he said to me, and laughed.

"That seems all right," I said, and began very gingerly to raise myself from my chair. I felt perfectly well, very light and comfortable, and quite confident in my mind. I was going fast all over. My heart, for example, was beating a thousand times a second, but that caused me no discomfort at all. I looked out of the window. An immovable cyclist, head down and with a frozen puff of dust behind his driving-wheel, scorched to overtake a galloping charabanc that did not stir. I gaped in amazement at this incredible spectacle. "Gibberne," I cried, "how long will this confounded stuff last?"

"Heaven knows!" he answered. "Last time I took it, I went to bed and slept it off. I tell you, I was frightened. It must have lasted some minutes, I think—it seemed like hours. But after a bit it slows down rather suddenly, I believe."

I was proud to observe that I did not feel frightened—I suppose because there were two of us. "Why shouldn't we go out?" I asked.

"Why not?"

"They'll see us."

"Not they. Goodness, no! Why, we shall be going a thousand times faster than the quickest conjuring trick that was ever done. Come along! Which way shall we go? Window, or door?"

And out by the window we went.

Assuredly of all the strange experiences that I have ever had, or imagined, or read of other people having or imagining, that little raid I made with Gibberne on the Folkestone Leas, under the influence of the New Accelerator, was the strangest and maddest of all. We went out by his gate into the road, and there we made a minute examination of the statuesque passing traffic. The tops of the wheels and some of the legs of the horses of this charabanc, the end of the whiplash and the lower jaw of the conductor—who was just beginning to yawn—were perceptibly in motion, but all the rest of the lumbering conveyance seemed still. And quite noiseless except for a faint rattling that came from one man's

throat! And as parts of this frozen edifice there were a driver, you know, and a conductor, and eleven people! The effect as we walked about the thing began by being madly queer and ended by being—disagreeable. There they were, people like ourselves and yet not like ourselves, frozen in careless attitudes, caught in mid-gesture. A girl and a man smiled at one another, a leering smile that threatened to last for evermore; a woman in a floppy capelline rested her arm on the rail and stared at Gibberne's house with the unwinking stare of eternity; a man stroked his moustache like a figure of wax, and another stretched a tiresome stiff hand with extended fingers towards his loosened hat. We stared at them, we laughed at them, we made faces at them, and then a sort of disgust of them came upon us, and we turned away and walked round in front of the cyclist towards the Leas.

"Goodness!" cried Gibberne, suddenly; "look there!"

He pointed, and there at the tip of his finger and sliding down the air with wings flapping slowly and at the speed of an exceptionally languid snail—was a bee.

And so we came out upon the Leas. There the thing seemed madder than ever. The band was playing in the upper stand, though all the sound it made for us was a low-pitched, wheezy rattle, a sort of prolonged last sigh that passed at times into a sound like the slow, muffled ticking of some monstrous clock. Frozen people stood erect; strange, silent, self-conscious-looking dummies hung unstably in mid-stride, promenading upon the grass. I passed close to a poodle dog suspended in the act of leaping, and watched the slow movement of his legs as he sank to earth. "Lord, look *here!*" cried Gibberne, and we halted for a moment before a magnificent person in white faint-striped flannels, white shoes, and a Panama hat, who turned back to wink at two gaily-dressed ladies he had passed. A wink, studied with such leisurely deliberation as we could afford, is an unattractive thing. It loses any quality of alert gaiety, and one remarks that the winking eye does not completely close, that under its drooping lid appears the lower edge of an eyeball and a line of white. "Heaven give me memory," said I, "and I will never wink again."

"Or smile," said Gibberne, with his eye on the lady's answering teeth.

"It's infernally hot, somehow," said I. "Let's go slower."

"Oh, come along!" said Gibberne.

We picked our way among the Bath chairs in the path. Many of the people sitting in the chairs seemed almost natural in their passive poses, but the contorted scarlet of the bandsmen was not a restful thing to see. A purple-faced gentleman was frozen in the midst of a violent struggle to refold his newspaper against the wind; there were many evidences that

all these people in their sluggish way were exposed to a considerable breeze, a breeze that had no existence so far as our sensations went. We came out and walked a little way from the crowd, and turned and regarded it. To see all that multitude changed to a picture, smitten rigid, as it were, into the semblance of realistic wax, was impossibly wonderful. It was absurd, of course; but it filled me with an irrational, an exultant sense of superior advantage. Consider the wonder of it! All that I had said and thought and done since the stuff had begun to work in my veins had happened, so far as those people, so far as the world in general went, in the twinkling of an eye. "The New Accelerator——" I began, but Gibberne interrupted me.

"There's that infernal old woman!" he said.

"What old woman?"

"Lives next door to me," said Gibberne. "Has a lapdog that yaps. Gods! The temptation is strong!"

There is something very boyish and impulsive about Gibberne at times. Before I could expostulate with him he had dashed forward, snatched the unfortunate animal out of visible existence, and was running violently with it towards the cliff of the Leas. It was most extraordinary. The little brute, you know, didn't bark or wriggle or make the slightest sign of vitality. It kept quite stiffly in an attitude of somnolent repose, and Gibberne held it by the neck. It was like running about with a dog of wood. "Gibberne," I cried, "put it down!" Then I said something else. "If you run like that, Gibberne," I cried, "you'll set your clothes on fire. Your linen trousers are going brown as it is!"

He clapped his hand on his thigh and stood hesitating on the verge. "Gibberne," I cried, coming up, "put it down. This heat is too much! It's our running so! Two or three miles a second! Friction of the air!"

"What?" he said, glancing at the dog.

"Friction of the air," I shouted. "Friction of the air. Going too fast. Like meteorites and things. Too hot. And, Gibberne! Gibberne! I'm all over pricking and a sort of perspiration. You can see people stirring slightly. I believe the stuff's working off! Put that dog down."

"Eh?" he said.

"It's working off," I repeated. "We're too hot and the stuff's working off! I'm wet through."

He stared at me. Then at the band, the wheezy rattle of whose performance was certainly going faster. Then with a tremendous sweep of the arm he hurled the dog away from him and it went spinning upward, still inanimate, and hung at last over the grouped parasols of a knot of chattering people. Gibberne was gripping my elbow. "By Jove!" he

cried. "I believe it is! A sort of hot pricking and—yes. That man's moving his pocket-handkerchief! Perceptibly. We must get out of this sharp."

But we could not get out of it sharply enough. Luckily, perhaps! For we might have run, and if we had run we should, I believe, have burst into flames. Almost certainly we should have burst into flames! You know we had neither of us thought of that. . . . But before we could even begin to run the action of the drug had ceased. It was the business of a minute fraction of a second. The effect of the New Accelerator passed like the drawing of a curtain, vanished in the movement of a hand. I heard Gibberne's voice in infinite alarm. "Sit down," he said, and flop, down upon the turf at the edge of the Leas I sat—scorching as I sat. There is a patch of burnt grass there still where I sat down. The whole stagnation seemed to wake up as I did so, the disarticulated vibration of the band rushed together into a blast of music, the promenaders put their feet down and walked their ways, the papers and flags began flapping, smiles passed into words, the winker finished his wink and went on his way complacently, and all the seated people moved and spoke.

The whole world had come alive again, was going as fast as we were, or rather we were going no faster than the rest of the world. It was like slowing down as one comes into a railway station. Everything seemed to spin round for a second or two, I had the most transient feeling of nausea, and that was all. And the little dog which had seemed to hang for a moment when the force of Gibberne's arm was expended fell with a swift acceleration clean through a lady's parasol!

That was the saving of us. Unless it was for one corpulent old gentleman in a Bath chair, who certainly did start at the sight of us and afterwards regarded us at intervals with a darkly suspicous eye, and finally, I believe, said something to his nurse about us, I doubt if a solitary person remarked our sudden appearance among them. Plop! We must have appeared abruptly. We ceased to smoulder almost at once, though the turf beneath me was uncomfortably hot. The attention of everyone—including even the Amusements' Association band, which on this occasion, for the only time in its history, got out of tune—was arrested by the amazing fact, and the still more amazing yapping and uproar caused by the fact, that a respectable, over-fed lapdog sleeping quietly to the east of the bandstand should suddenly fall through the parasol of a lady on the west—in a slightly singed condition due to the extreme velocity of its movements through the air. In these absurd days, too, when we are all trying to be as psychic and silly and superstitious as possible! People

got up and trod on other people, chairs were overturned, the Leas policeman ran. How the matter settled itself, I do not know—we were much too anxious to disentangle ourselves from the affair and get out of range of the eye of the old gentleman in the Bath chair to make minute inquiries. As soon as we were sufficiently cool and sufficiently recovered from our giddiness and nausea and confusion of mind to do so we stood up and, skirting the crowd, directed our steps back along the road below the Metropole towards Gibberne's house. But amidst the din I heard very distinctly the gentleman who had been sitting beside the lady of the ruptured sunshade using quite unjustifiable threats and language to one of those chair-attendants who have "Inspector" written on their caps. "If you didn't throw the dog," he said, "who *did?*"

The sudden return of movement and familiar noises, and our natural anxiety about ourselves (our clothes were still dreadfully hot, and the fronts of the thighs of Gibberne's white trousers were scorched a drabbish brown), prevented the minute observations I should have liked to make on all these things. Indeed, I really made no observations of any scientific value on that return. The bee, of course, had gone. I looked for that cyclist, but he was already out of sight as we came into the Upper Sandgate Road or hidden from us by traffic; the charabanc, however, with its people now all alive and stirring, was clattering along at a spanking pace almost abreast of the nearer church.

We noted, however, that the window-sill on which we had stepped in getting out of the house was slightly singed, and that the impressions of our feet on the gravel of the path were unusually deep.

So it was I had my first experience of the New Accelerator. Practically we had been running about and saying and doing all sorts of things in the space of a second or so of time. We had lived half an hour while the band had played, perhaps, two bars. But the effect it had upon us was that the whole world had stopped for our convenient inspection. Considering all things, and particularly considering our rashness in venturing out of the house, the experience might certainly have been much more disagreeable than it was. It showed, no doubt, that Gibberne has still much to learn before his preparation is a manageable convenience, but its practicability it certainly demonstrated beyond all cavil.

Since that adventure he has been steadily bringing its use under control, and I have several times, and without the slightest bad result, taken measured doses under his direction; though I must confess I have not yet ventured abroad

again while under its influence. I may mention, for example, that this story has been written at one sitting and without interruption, except for the nibbling of some chocolate, by its means. I began at 6:25, and my watch is now very nearly at the minute past the half-hour. The convenience of securing a long, uninterrupted spell of work in the midst of a day full of engagements cannot be exaggerated. Gibberne is now working at the quantitative handling of his preparation, with especial reference to its distinctive effects upon different types of constitution. He then hopes to find a Retarder with which to dilute its present rather excessive potency. The Retarder will, of course, have the reverse effect to the Accelerator; used alone it should enable the patient to spread a few seconds over many hours of ordinary time, and so to maintain an apathetic inaction, a glacierlike absence of alacrity, amidst the most animated or irritating surroundings. The two things together must necessarily work an entire revolution in civilised existence. It is the beginning of our escape from that Time Garment of which Carlyle speaks. While this Accelerator will enable us to concentrate ourselves with tremendous impact upon any moment or occasion that demands our utmost sense and vigour, the Retarder will enable us to pass in passive tranquillity through infinite hardship and tedium. Perhaps I am a little optimistic about the Retarder, which has indeed still to be discovered, but about the Accelerator there is no possible sort of doubt whatever. Its appearance upon the market in a convenient, controllable, and assimilable form is a matter of the next few months. It will be obtainable of all chemists and druggists, in small green bottles, at a high but, considering its extraordinary qualities, by no means excessive price. Gibberne's Nervous Accelerator it will be called, and he hopes to be able to supply it in three strengths: one in 200, one in 900, and one in 2000, distinguished by yellow, pink, and white labels respectively.

No doubt its use renders a great number of very extraordinary things possible; for, of course, the most remarkable and, possibly, even criminal proceedings may be effected with impunity by thus dodging, as it were, into the interstices of time. Like all potent preparations it will be liable to abuse. We have, however, discussed this aspect of the question very thoroughly, and we have decided that this is purely a matter of medical jurisprudence and altogether outside our province. We shall manufacture and sell the Accelerator, and, as for the consequences—we shall see.

INVISIBLE BOY

by Ray Bradbury

SHE TOOK the great iron spoon and the mummified frog and gave it a bash and made dust of it, and talked to the dust while she ground it in her stony fists quickly. Her beady gray bird-eyes flickered at the cabin. Each time she looked, a head in the small thin window ducked as if she'd fired off a shotgun.

"Charlie!" cried Old Lady. "You come outa there! I'm fixing a lizard magic to unlock that rusty door! You come out now and I won't make the earth shake or the trees go up in fire or the sun set at high noon!"

The only sound was the warm mountain light on the high turpentine trees, a tufted squirrel chittering around and around on a green-furred log, the ants moving in a fine brown line at Old Lady's bare, blue-veined feet.

"You been starving in there two days, darn you!" she panted, chiming the spoon against a flat rock, causing the plump gray miracle bag to swing at her waist. Sweating sour, she rose and marched at the cabin, bearing the pulverized flesh. "Come out, now!" She flicked a pinch of powder inside the lock. "All right, I'll come get you!" she wheezed.

She spun the knob with one walnut-colored hand, first one way, then the other. "O Lord," she intoned, "fling this door wide!"

When nothing flung, she added yet another philter and held her breath. Her long blue untidy skirt rustled as she peered into her bag of darkness to see if she had any scaly monsters there, any charm finer than the frog she'd killed months ago for such a crisis as this.

She heard Charlie breathing against the door. His folks had pranced off into some Ozark town early this week, leaving him, and he'd run almost six miles to Old Lady for company—she was by way of being an aunt or cousin or some such, and he didn't mind her fashions.

But then, two days ago, Old Lady, having gotten used to the boy around, decided to keep him for convenient company. She pricked her thin shoulder bone, drew out three

blood pearls, spat wet over her right elbow, tromped on a crunch-cricket, and at the same instant clawed her left hand at Charlie, crying, "My son you are, you are my son, for all eternity!"

Charlie, bounding like a startled hare, had crashed off into the bush, heading for home.

But Old Lady, skittering quick as a gingham lizard, cornered him in a dead end, and Charlie holed up in this old hermit's cabin and wouldn't come out, no matter how she whammed door, window, or knothole with amber-colored fist or trounced her ritual fires, explaining to him that he was certainly her son *now*, all right.

"Charlie, you *there?*" she asked, cutting holes in the door planks with her bright little slippery eyes.

"I'm all of me here," he replied finally, very tired.

Maybe he would fall out on the ground any moment. She wrestled the knob hopefully. Perhaps a pinch too much frog powder had grated the lock wrong. She always overdid or underdid her miracles, she mused angrily, never doing them just *exact*, Devil take it!

"Charlie, I only wants someone to night-prattle to, someone to warm hands with at the fire. Someone to fetch kindling for me mornings, and fight off the spunks that come creeping of early fogs! I ain't got no fetchings on you for myself, son, just for your company." She smacked her lips. "Tell you what, Charles, you come out and I *teach* you things!"

"What things?" he suspicioned.

"Teach you how to buy cheap, sell high. Catch a snow weasel, cut off its head, carry it warm in your hind pocket. There!"

"Aw," said Charlie.

She made haste. "Teach you to make yourself shotproof. So if anyone bangs at you with a gun, nothing happens."

When Charlie stayed silent, she gave him the secret in a high fluttering whisper. "Dig and stitch mouse-ear roots on Friday during full moon, and wear 'em around your neck in a white silk."

"You're *crazy*," Charlie said.

"Teach you how to stop blood or make animals stand frozen or make blind horses see, all them things I'll teach you! Teach you to cure a swelled-up cow and unbewitch a goat. Show you how to make yourself invisible!"

"Oh," said Charlie.

Old Lady's heart beat like a Salvation tambourine.

The knob turned from the other side.

"You," said Charlie, "are funning me."

"No, I'm not," exclaimed Old Lady. "Oh, Charlie, why, I'll

make you like a window, see right through you. Why, child, you'll be surprised!"

"Real invisible?"

"Real invisible!"

"You won't fetch onto me if I walk out?"

"Won't touch a bristle of you, son."

"Well," he drawled reluctantly, "all right."

The door opened. Charlie stood in his bare feet, head down, chin against chest. "Make me invisible," he said.

"First we got to catch us a bat," said Old Lady. "Start lookin'!"

She gave him some jerky beef for his hunger and watched him climb a tree. He went high up and high up and it was nice seeing him there and it was nice having him here and all about after so many years alone with nothing to say good morning to but bird-droppings and silvery snail tracks.

Pretty soon a bat with a broken wing fluttered down out of the tree. Old Lady snatched it up, beating warm and shrieking between its porcelain white teeth, and Charlie dropped down after it, hand upon clenched hand, yelling.

That night, with the moon nibbling at the spiced pine cones, Old Lady extracted a long silver needle from under her wide blue dress. Gumming her excitement and secret anticipation, she sighted up the dead bat and held the cold needle steady-steady.

She had long ago realized that her miracles, despite all perspirations and salts and sulphurs, failed. But she had always dreamt that one day the miracles might start functioning, might spring up in crimson flowers and silver stars to prove that God had forgiven her for her pink body and her pink thoughts and her warm body and her warm thoughts as a young miss. But so far God had made no sign and said no word, but nobody knew this except Old Lady.

"Ready?" she asked Charlie, who crouched cross-kneed, wrapping his pretty legs in long goose-pimpled arms, his mouth open, making teeth. "Ready," he whispered, shivering.

"There!" She plunged the needle deep in the bat's right eye. "So!"

"Oh!" screamed Charlie, wadding up his face.

"Now I wrap it in gingham, and here, put it in your pocket, keep it there, bat and all. Go on!"

He pocketed the charm.

"Charlie!" she shrieked fearfully. "Charlie, where *are* you? I can't *see* you, child!"

"Here!" He jumped so the light ran in red steaks up his body. "I'm here, Old Lady!" He stared wildly at his arms, legs, chest, and toes. "I'm here!"

Her eyes looked as if they were watching a thousand fireflies crisscrossing each other in the wild night air.

"Charlie, oh, you went *fast!* Quick as a hummingbird! Oh, Charlie, come *back* to me!"

"But I'm *here!*" he wailed.

"Where?"

"By the fire, the fire! And—and I can see myself. I'm not invisible at all!"

Old Lady rocked on her lean flanks. "Course *you* can see *you!* Every invisible person knows himself. Otherwise, how could you eat, walk, or get around places? Charlie, touch me. Touch me so I *know* you."

Uneasily he put out a hand.

She pretended to jerk, startled, at his touch. *"Ah!"*

"You mean to say you can't *find* me?" he asked. "Truly?"

"Not the least half rump of you!"

She found a tree to stare at, and stared at it with shining eyes, careful not to glance at him. "Why, I sure *did* a trick *that* time!" She sighed with wonder. "Whooeee. Quickest invisible I *ever* made! Charlie. Charlie, how you *feel?*"

"Like creek water—all stirred."

"You'll settle."

Then after a pause she added, "Well, what are you going to do now, Charlie, since you're invisible?"

All sorts of things shot through his brain, she could tell. Adventures stood up and danced like hell-fire in his eyes, and his mouth, just hanging, told what it meant to be a boy who imagined himself like the mountain winds. In a cold dream he said, "I'll run across wheat fields, climb snow mountains, steal white chickens off'n farms. I'll kick pink pigs when they ain't looking. I'll pinch pretty girls' legs when they sleep, snap their garters in schoolrooms." Charlie looked at Old Lady, and from the shiny tips of her eyes she saw something wicked shape his face. "And other things I'll do, I'll do, I will," he said.

"Don't try nothing on me," warned Old Lady. "I'm brittle as spring ice and I don't take handling." Then: "What about your folks?"

"My folks?"

"You can't fetch yourself home looking like that. Scare the inside ribbons out of them. Your mother'd faint straight back like timber falling. Think they want you about the house to stumble over and your ma have to call you every three minutes, even though you're in the room next her elbow?"

Charlie had not considered it. He sort of simmered down and whispered out a little "Gosh" and felt of his long bones carefully.

"You'll be mighty lonesome. People looking through you like a water glass, people knocking you aside because they didn't reckon you to be underfoot. And women, Charlie, *women*——"

He swallowed. "What about women?"

"No woman will be giving you a second stare. And no woman wants to be kissed by a boy's mouth they can't even *find!*"

Charlie dug his bare toe in the soil contemplatively. He pouted. "Well, I'll stay invisible, anyway, for a spell. I'll have me some fun. I'll just be pretty careful, is all. I'll stay out from in front of wagons and horses and Pa. Pa shoots at the nariest sound." Charlie blinked. "Why, with me invisible, someday Pa might just up and fill me with buckshot, thinkin' I was a hill squirrel in the dooryard. Oh . . ."

Old Lady nodded at a tree. "That's likely."

"Well," he decided slowly, "I'll stay invisible for tonight, and tomorrow you can fix me back all whole again, Old Lady."

"Now if that ain't just like a critter, always wanting to be what he can't be," remarked Old Lady to a beetle on a log.

"What you mean?" said Charlie.

"Why," she explained, "it was real hard work, fixing you up. It'll take a little *time* for it to wear off. Like a coat of paint wears off, boy."

"You!" he cried. "You did this to me! Now you make me back, you make me seeable!"

"Hush," she said. "It'll wear off, a hand or a foot at a time."

"How'll it look, me around the hills with just one hand showing!"

"Like a five-winged bird hopping on the stones and bramble."

"Or a foot showing!"

"Like a small pink rabbit jumping thicket."

"Or my head floating!"

"Like a hairy balloon at the carnival!"

"How long before I'm *whole?*" he asked.

She deliberated that it might pretty well be an entire year.

He groaned. He began to sob and bite his lips and make fists. "You magicked me, you did this, you did this thing to me. Now I won't be able to run home!"

She winked. "But you *can* stay here, child, stay on with me real comfort-like, and I'll keep you fat and saucy."

He flung it out: "You did this on purpose! You mean old hag, you want to keep me here!"

He ran off through the shrubs on the instant.

"Charlie, come back!"

No answer but the pattern of his feet on the soft dark turf, and his wet choking cry which passed swiftly off and away.

She waited and then kindled herself a fire. "He'll be back," she whispered. And thinking inward on herself, she said, "And now I'll have me my company through spring and into late summer. Then, when I'm tired of him and want a silence, I'll send him home."

Charlie returned noiselessly with the first gray of dawn, gliding over the rimed turf to where Old Lady sprawled like a bleached stick before the scattered ashes.

He sat on some creek pebbles and stared at her.

She didn't dare look at him or beyond. He had made no sound, so how could she know he was anywhere about? She couldn't.

He sat there, tear marks on his cheeks.

Pretending to be just waking—but she had found no sleep from one end of the night to the other—Old Lady stood up, grunting and yawning, and turned in a circle to the dawn.

"Charlie?"

Her eyes passed from pines to soil, to sky, to the far hills. She called out his name, over and over again, and she felt like staring plumb straight at him, but she stopped herself. "Charlie? Oh, Charles!" she called, and heard the echoes say the very same.

He sat, beginning to grin a bit, suddenly, knowing he was close to her, yet she must feel alone. Perhaps he felt the growing of a secret power, perhaps he felt secure from the world, certainly he was *pleased* with his invisibility.

She said aloud, "Now where *can* that boy be? If he only made a noise so I could tell just where he is, maybe I'd fry him a breakfast."

She prepared the morning victuals, irritated at his continuous quiet. She sizzled bacon on a hickory stick. "The smell of it will draw his nose," she muttered.

While her back was turned he swiped all the frying bacon and devoured it hastily.

She whirled, crying out, "Lord!"

She eyed the clearing suspiciously. "Charlie, that *you?*"

Charlie wiped his mouth clean on his wrists.

She trotted about the clearing, making like she was trying to locate him. Finally, with a clever thought, acting blind, she headed straight for him, groping. "Charlie, where *are* you?"

A lightning streak, he evaded her, bobbing, ducking.

It took all her will power not to give chase; but you can't chase invisible boys, so she sat down, scowling, sputtering,

and tried to fry more bacon. But every fresh strip she cut he would steal bubbling off the fire and run away far. Finally, cheeks burning, she cried, "I know where you are! Right *there!* I hear you run!" She pointed to one side of him, not too accurate. He ran again. "Now you're there!" she shouted. "There, and there!" pointing to all the places he was in the next five minutes. "I hear you press a grass blade, knock a flower, snap a twig. I got fine shell ears, delicate as roses. They can hear the stars moving!"

Silently he galloped off among the pines, his voice trailing back, "Can't hear me when I'm set on a rock. I'll just *set!*"

All day he sat on an observatory rock in the clear wind, motionless and sucking his tongue.

Old Lady gathered wood in the deep forest, feeling his eyes weaseling on her spine. She wanted to babble: "Oh, I see you, I see you! I was only fooling about invisible boys! You're right there!" But she swallowed her gall and gummed it tight.

The following morning he did the spiteful thing. He began leaping from behind trees. He made toad-faces, frog-faces, spider-faces at her, clenching down his lips with his fingers, popping his raw eyes, pushing up his nostrils so you could peer in and see his brain thinking.

Once she dropped her kindling. She pretended it was a blue jay startled her.

He made a motion as if to strangle her.

She trembled a little.

He made another move as if to bang her shins and spit on her cheek.

These motions she bore without a lid-flicker or a mouth-twitch.

He stuck out his tongue, making strange bad noises. He wiggled his loose ears so she wanted to laugh, and finally she did laugh and explained it away quickly by saying, "Sat on a salamander! Whew, how it poked!"

By high noon the whole madness boiled to a terrible peak.

For it was at that exact hour that Charlie came racing down the valley stark boy-naked!

Old Lady nearly fell flat with shock!

"Charlie!" she almost cried.

Charlie raced naked up one side of a hill and naked down the other—naked as day, naked as the moon, raw as the sun and a newborn chick, his feet shimmering and rushing like the wings of a low-skimming hummingbird.

Old Lady's tongue locked in her mouth. What could she say? Charlie, go dress? For *shame? Stop* that? *Could* she? Oh, Charlie, Charlie, God! Could she say that now? *Well?*

Upon the big rock, she witnessed him dancing up and

down, naked as the day of his birth, stomping bare feet, smacking his hands on his knees and sucking in and out his white stomach like blowing and deflating a circus balloon.

She shut her eyes tight and prayed.

After three hours of this she pleaded, "Charlie, Charlie, come here! I got something to *tell* you!"

Like a fallen leaf he came, dressed again, praise the Lord.

"Charlie," she said, looking at the pine trees, "I see your right toe. *There* it is."

"You do?" he said.

"Yes," she said very sadly. "There it is like a horny toad on the grass. And there, up there's your left ear hanging on the air like a pink butterfly."

Charlie danced. "I'm forming in, I'm forming in!"

Old Lady nodded. "Here comes your ankle!"

"Gimme *both* my feet!" ordered Charlie.

"You got 'em."

"How about my hands?"

"I see one crawling on your knee like a daddy longlegs."

"How about the other one?"

"It's crawling too."

"I got a body?"

"Shaping up fine."

"I'll need my head to go home, Old Lady."

To go home, she thought wearily. "No!" she said, stubborn and angry. "No, you ain't got no head. No head at all," she cried. She'd leave that to the very last. "No head, no head," she insisted.

"No head?" he wailed.

"Yes, oh my God, yes, yes, you got your blamed head!" she snapped, giving up. "Now, fetch me back my bat with the needle in his eye!"

He flung it at her. "Haaaa-yoooo!" His yelling went all up the valley, and long after he had run toward home she heard his echoes, racing.

Then she plucked up her kindling with a great dry weariness and started back toward her shack, sighing, talking. And Charlie followed her all the way, *really* invisible now, so she couldn't see him, just hear him, like a pine cone dropping or a deep underground stream trickling, or a squirrel clambering a bough; and over the fire at twilight she and Charlie sat, him so invisible, and her feeding him bacon he wouldn't take, so she ate it herself, and then she fixed some magic and fell asleep with Charlie, made out of sticks and rags and pebbles, but still warm and her very own son, slumbering and nice in her shaking mother arms. . . . and they talked about golden things in drowsy voices until dawn made the fire slowly, slowly wither out. . . .

THE INVISIBLE PRISONER

by Maurice LeBlanc

ONE DAY, about four o'clock, as evening was drawing in, Farmer Goussot, with his four sons, returned from a day's shooting. They were stalwart men, all five of them, long of limb, broad-chested, with faces tanned by sun and wind. And all five displayed, planted on an enormous neck and shoulders, the same small head with the low forehead, thin lips, beaked nose and hard and repellent cast of countenance. They were feared and disliked by all around them. They were a money-grubbing, crafty family; and their word was not to be trusted.

On reaching the old barbican-wall that surrounds the Héberville property, the farmer opened a narrow, massive door, putting the big key back in his pocket after his sons had passed in. And he walked behind them, along the path that led through the orchards. Here and there stood great trees, stripped by the autumn winds, and clumps of pines, the last survivors of the ancient park now covered by old Goussot's farm.

One of the sons said:

"I hope mother has lit a log or two."

"There's smoke coming from the chimney," said the father.

The outhouses and the homestead showed at the end of a lawn; and, above them, the village church, whose steeple seemed to prick the clouds that trailed along the sky.

"All the guns unloaded?" asked old Goussot.

"Mine isn't," said the eldest. "I slipped in a bullet to blow a kestrel's head off. . . ."

He was the one who was proudest of his skill. And he said to his brothers:

"Look at that bough, at the top of the cherry tree. See me snap it off."

On the bough sat a scarecrow, which had been there since spring and which protected the leafless branches with its idiot arms.

He raised his gun and fired.

The figure came tumbling down with large, comic gestures, and was caught on a big, lower branch, where it remained lying stiff on its stomach, with a great top hat on its head

of rags and its hay-stuffed legs swaying from right to left above some water that flowed past the cherry tree through a wooden trough.

They all laughed. The father approved:

"A fine shot, my lad. Besides, the old boy was beginning to annoy me. I couldn't take my eyes from my plate at meals without catching sight of that oaf. . . ."

They went a few steps farther. They were not more than thirty yards from the house, when the father stopped suddenly and said:

"Hullo! What's up?"

The sons also had stopped and stood listening. One of them said, under his breath:

"It comes from the house . . . from the linen-room. . . ."

And another spluttered:

"Sounds like moans. . . . And mother's alone!"

Suddenly, a frightful scream rang out. All five rushed forward. Another scream, followed by cries of despair.

"We're here! We're coming!" shouted the eldest, who was leading.

And, as it was a roundabout way to the door, he smashed in a window with his fist and sprang into the old people's bedroom. The room next to it was the linen-room, in which Mother Goussot spent most of her time.

"Damnation!" he said, seeing her lying on the floor, with blood all over her face. "Dad! Dad!"

"What? Where is she?" roared old Goussot, appearing on the scene. "Good lord, what's this? . . . What have they done to your mother?"

She pulled herself together and, with outstretched arm, stammered:

"Run after him! . . . This way! . . . This way! . . . I'm all right . . . only a scratch or two. . . . But run, you! He's taken the money."

The father and sons gave a bound:

"He's taken the money!" bellowed old Goussot, rushing to the door to which his wife was pointing. "He's taken the money! Stop thief!"

But a sound of several voices rose at the end of the passage through which the other three sons were coming:

"I saw him! I saw him!"

"So did I! He ran up the stairs."

"No, there he is, he's coming down again!"

A mad steeplechase shook every floor in the house. Farmer Goussot, on reaching the end of the passage, caught sight of a man standing by the front door trying to open it. If he succeeded, it meant safety, escape through the market square and the back lanes of the village.

Interrupted as he was fumbling at the bolts, the man turning stupid, lost his head, charged at old Goussot and sent him spinning, dodged the eldest brother and, pursued by the four sons, doubled back down the long passage, ran into the old couple's bedroom, flung his legs through the broken window and disappeared.

The sons rushed after him across the lawns and orchards, now darkened by the falling night.

"The villain's done for," chuckled old Goussot. "There's no way out for him. The walls are too high. He's done for, the scoundrel!"

The two farm-hands returned, at that moment, from the village; and he told them what had happened and gave each of them a gun:

"If the swine shows his nose anywhere near the house," he said, "let fly at him. Give him no mercy!"

He told them where to stand, went to make sure that the farm-gates, which were only used for the carts, were locked, and, not till then remembered that his wife might perhaps be in need of aid:

"Well, mother, how goes it?"

"Where is he? Have you got him?" she asked, in a breath.

"Yes, we're after him. The lads must have collared him by now."

The news quite restored her; and a nip of rum gave her the strength to drag herself to the bed, with old Goussot's assistance, and to tell her story. For that matter, there was not much to tell. She had just lit the fire in the living-hall; and she was knitting quietly at her bedroom window, waiting for the men to return, when she thought that she heard a slight grating sound in the linen-room next door:

"I must have left the cat in there," she thought to herself.

She went in, suspecting nothing, and was astonished to see the two doors of one of the linen-cupboards, the one in which they hid their money, wide open. She walked up to it, still without suspicion. There was a man there, hiding, with his back to the shelves.

"But how did he get in?" asked old Goussot.

"Through the passage, I suppose. We never keep the back door shut."

"And then did he go for you?"

"No, I went for him. He tried to get away."

"You should have let him."

"And what about the money?"

"Had he taken it by then?"

"Had he taken it! I saw the bundle of banknotes in his hands, the sweep! I would have let him kill me sooner. . . . Oh, we had a sharp tussle, I give you my word!"

"Then he had no weapon?"

"No more than I did. We had our fingers, our nails and our teeth. Look here, where he bit me. And I yelled and screamed! Only, I'm an old woman you see. . . . I had to let go of him. . . ."

"Do you know the man?"

"I'm pretty sure it was old Trainard."

"The tramp? Why, of course it's old Trainard!" cried the farmer. "I thought I knew him too. . . . Besides, he's been hanging round the house these last three days. The old vagabond must have smelt the money. Aha, Trainard, my man, we shall see some fun! A number-one hiding in the first place; and then the police. . . . I say, mother, you can get up now, can't you? Then go and fetch the neighbours. . . . Ask them to run for the gendarmes. . . . By the by, the attorney's youngster has a bicycle . . . How that damned old Trainard scooted! He's got good legs for his age, he has. He can run like a hare!"

Goussot was holding his sides, revelling in the occurrence. He risked nothing by waiting. No power on earth could help the tramp escape or keep him from the sound thrashing which he had earned and from being conveyed, under safe escort, to the town gaol.

The farmer took a gun and went out to his two labourers:

"Anything fresh?"

"No, Farmer Goussot, not yet."

"We sha'n't have long to wait. Unless old Nick carries him over the walls. . . ."

From time to time, they heard the four brothers hailing one another in the distance. The old bird was evidently making a fight for it, was more active than they would have thought. Still, with sturdy fellows like the Goussot brothers. . . .

However, one of them returned, looking rather crestfallen, and made no secret of his opinion:

"It's no use keeping on at it for the present. It's pitch dark. The old chap must have crept into some hole. We'll hunt him out to-morrow."

"To-morrow! Why, lad, you're off your chump!" protested the farmer.

The eldest son now appeared, quite out of breath, and was of the same opinion as his brother. Why not wait till next day, seeing that the ruffian was as safe within the demesne as between the walls of a prison?

"Well, I'll go myself," cried old Goussot. "Light me a lantern, somebody!"

But, at that moment, three gendarmes arrived; and a number of village lads also came up to hear the latest.

The sergeant of gendarmes was a man of method. He first insisted on hearing the whole story, in full detail; then he stopped to think; then he questioned the four brothers, separately, and took his time for reflection after each deposition. When he had learnt from them that the tramp had fled toward the back of the estate, that he had been lost sight of repeatedly and that he had finally disappeared near a place known as the Crows' Knoll, he meditated once more and announced his conclusion:

"Better wait. Old Trainard might slip through our hands, amidst all the confusion of a pursuit in the dark, and then good-night, everybody!"

The farmer shrugged his shoulders and, cursing under his breath, yielded to the sergeant's arguments. That worthy organized a strict watch, distributed the brothers Goussot and the lads from the village under his men's eyes, made sure that the ladders were locked away and established his headquarters in the dining-room, where he and Farmer Goussot sat and nodded over a decanter of old brandy.

The night passed quietly. Every two hours, the sergeant went his rounds and inspected the posts. There were no alarms. Old Trainard did not budge from his hole.

The battle began at break of day.

It lasted four hours.

In those four hours, the thirteen acres of land within the walls were searched, explored, gone over in every direction by a score of men who beat the bushes with sticks, trampled over the tall grass, rummaged in the hollows of the trees and scattered the heaps of dry leaves. And old Trainard remained invisible.

"Well, this is a bit thick!" growled Goussot.

"Beats me altogether," retorted the sergeant.

And indeed there was no explaining the phenomenon. For, after all, apart from a few old clumps of laurels and spindle-trees, which were thoroughly beaten, all the trees were bare. There was no building, no shed, no stack, nothing, in short, that could serve as a hiding-place.

As for the wall, a careful inspection convinced even the sergeant that it was physically impossible to scale it.

In the afternoon, the investigations were begun all over again in the presence of the examining-magistrate and the public-prosecutor's deputy. The results were no more successful. Nay, worse, the officials looked upon the matter as so suspicious that they could not restrain their ill-humour and asked:

"Are you quite sure, Farmer Goussot, that you and your sons haven't been seeing double?"

"And what about my wife?" retorted the farmer, red with

anger. "Did she see double when the scamp had her by the throat? Go and look at the marks, if you doubt me!"

"Very well. But then where is the scamp?"

"Here, between those four walls."

"Very well. Then ferret him out. We give it up. It's quite clear, that if a man were hidden within the precincts of this farm, we should have found him by now."

"I swear I'll lay hands on him, true as I stand here!" shouted Farmer Goussot. "It shall not be said that I've been robbed of six thousand francs. Yes, six thousand! There were three cows I sold; and then the wheat-crop; and then the apples. Six thousand-franc notes, which I was just going to take to the bank. Well, I swear to Heaven that the money's as good as in my pocket!"

"That's all right and I wish you luck," said the examining-magistrate, as he went away, followed by the deputy and the gendarmes.

The neighbours also walked off in a more or less facetious mood. And, by the end of the afternoon, none remained but the Goussots and the two farm-labourers.

Old Goussot at once explained his plan. By day, they were to search. At night, they were to keep an incessant watch. It would last as long as it had to. Hang it, old Trainard was a man like other men; and men have to eat and drink! Old Trainard must needs, therefore, come out of his earth to eat and drink.

"At most," said Goussot, "he can have a few crusts of bread in his pocket, or even pull up a root or two at night. But, as far as drink's concerned, no go. There's only the spring. And he'll be a clever dog if he gets near that."

He himself, that evening, took up his stand near the spring. Three hours later, his eldest son relieved him. The other brothers and the farm-hands slept in the house, each taking his turn of the watch and keeping all the lamps and candles lit, so that there might be no surprise.

So it went on for fourteen consecutive nights. And for fourteen days, while two of the men and Mother Goussot remained on guard, the five others explored the Héberville ground.

At the end of that fortnight, not a sign.

The farmer never ceased storming. He sent for a retired detective-inspector who lived in the neighbouring town. The inspector stayed with him for a whole week. He found neither old Trainard nor the least clue that could give them any hope of finding old Trainard.

"It's a bit thick!" repeated Farmer Goussot. "For he's there, the rascal! As far as being anywhere goes, he's there. So . . ."

Planting himself on the threshold, he railed at the enemy at the top of his voice:

"You blithering idiot, would you rather croak in your hole than fork out the money? Then croak, you pig!"

And Mother Goussot, in her turn, yelped, in her shrill voice:

"Is it prison you're afraid of? Hand over the notes and you can hook it!"

But old Trainard did not breathe a word; and the husband and wife tired their lungs in vain.

Shocking days passed. Farmer Goussot could no longer sleep, lay shivering with fever. The sons became morose and quarrelsome and never let their guns out of their hands, having no other idea but to shoot the tramp.

It was the one topic of conversation in the village; and the Goussot story, from being local at first, soon went the round of the press. Newspaper-reporters came from the assize-town, from Paris itself, and were rudely shown the door by Farmer Goussot.

"Each man his own house," he said. "You mind your business. I mind mine. It's nothing to do with any one."

"Still, Farmer Goussot . . ."

"Go to blazes!"

And he slammed the door in their face.

Old Trainard had now been hidden within the walls of Héberville for something like four weeks. The Goussots continued their search as doggedly and confidently as ever, but with daily decreasing hope, as though they were confronted with one of those mysterious obstacles which discourage human effort. And the idea that they would never see their money again began to take root in them.

One fine morning, at about ten o'clock, a motor-car, crossing the village square at full speed, broke down and came to a dead stop.

The driver, after a careful inspection, declared that the repairs would take some little time, whereupon the owner of the car resolved to wait at the inn and lunch. He was a gentleman on the right side of forty, with close-cropped side-whiskers and a pleasant expression of face; and he soon made himself at home with the people at the inn.

Of course, they told him the story of the Goussots. He had not heard of it before, as he had been abroad; but it seemed to interest him greatly. He made them give him all the details, raised objections, discussed various theories with a number of people who were eating at the same table and ended by exclaiming:

"Nonsense! It can't be so intricate as all that. I have had

some experience of this sort of thing. And, if I were on the premises . . ."

"That's easily arranged," said the inn-keeper. "I know Farmer Goussot. . . . He won't object. . . ."

The request was soon made and granted. Old Goussot was in one of those frames of mind when we are less disposed to protest against outside interference. His wife, at any rate, was very firm:

"Let the gentleman come, if he wants to."

The gentleman paid his bill and instructed his driver to try the car on the high-road as soon as the repairs were finished:

"I shall want an hour," he said, "no more. Be ready in an hour's time."

Then he went to Farmer Goussot's.

He did not say much at the farm. Old Goussot, hoping against hope, was lavish with information, took his visitor along the walls down to the little door opening on the fields, produced the key and gave minute details of all the searches that had been made so far.

Oddly enough, the stranger, who hardly spoke, seemed not to listen either. He merely looked, with a rather vacant gaze. When they had been round the estate, old Goussot asked, anxiously:

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Do you think you know?"

The visitor stood for a moment without answering. Then he said:

"No, nothing."

"Why, of course not!" cried the farmer, throwing up his arms. "How should you know! It's all hanky-panky. Shall I tell you what I think? Well, that old Trainard has been so jolly clever that he's lying dead in his hole . . . and the bank-notes are rotting with him. Do you hear? You can take my word for it."

The gentleman said, very calmly:

"There's only one thing that interests me. The tramp, all said and done, was free at night and able to feed on what he could pick up. But how about drinking?"

"Out of the question!" shouted the farmer. "Quite out of the question! There's no water except this; and we have kept watch beside it every night."

"It's a spring. Where does it rise?"

"Here, where we stand."

"Is there enough pressure to bring it into the pool of itself?"

"Yes."

"And where does the water go when it runs out of the pool?"

"Into this pipe here, which goes under ground and carries it to the house, for use in the kitchen. So there's no way of drinking, seeing that we were there and that the spring is twenty yards from the house."

"Hasn't it rained during the last four weeks?"

"Not once: I've told you that already."

The stranger went to the spring and examined it. The trough was formed of a few boards of wood joined together just above the ground; and the water ran through it, slow and clear.

"The water's not more than a foot deep, is it?" he asked.

In order to measure it, he picked up from the grass a straw which he dipped into the pool. But, as he was stooping, he suddenly broke off and looked around him.

"Oh, how funny!" he said, bursting into a peal of laughter.

"Why, what's the matter?" spluttered old Goussot, rushing toward the pool, as though a man could have lain hidden between those narrow boards.

And Mother Goussot clasped her hands.

"What is it? Have you seen him? Where is he?"

"Neither in it nor under it," replied the stranger, who was still laughing.

He made for the house, eagerly followed by the farmer, the old woman and the four sons. The inn-keeper was there also, as were the people from the inn who had been watching the stranger's movements. And there was a dead silence, while they waited for the extraordinary disclosure.

"It's as I thought," he said, with an amused expression. "The old chap had to quench his thirst somewhere; and, as there was only the spring. . . ."

"Oh, but look here," growled Farmer Goussot, "we should have seen him!"

"It was at night."

"We should have heard him . . . and seen him too, as we were close by."

"So was he."

"And he drank the water from the pool?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"From a little way off."

"With what?"

"With this."

And the stranger showed the straw which he had picked up:

"There, here's the straw for the customer's long drink. You will see, there's more of it than usual: in fact, it is made of

three straws stuck into one another. That was the first thing I noticed: those three straws fastened together. The proof is conclusive."

"But, hang it all, the proof of what?" cried Farmer Goussot, irritably.

The stranger took a shotgun from the rack.

"Is it loaded?" he asked.

"Yes," said the youngest of the brothers. "I use it to kill the sparrows with, for fun. It's small shot."

"Capital! A peppering where it won't hurt him will do the trick."

His face suddenly assumed a masterful look. He gripped the farmer by the arm and rapped out, in an imperious tone:

"Listen to me, Farmer Goussot. I'm not here to do policeman's work; and I won't have the poor beggar locked up at any price. Four weeks of starvation and fright is good enough for anybody. So you've got to swear to me, you and your sons, that you'll let him off without hurting him."

"He must hand over the money!"

"Well, of course. Do you swear?"

"I swear."

The gentleman walked back to the door-sill, at the entrance to the orchard. He took a quick aim, pointing his gun a little in the air, in the direction of the cherry tree which overhung the spring. He fired. A hoarse cry rang from the tree; and the scarecrow which had been straddling the main branch for a month past came tumbling to the ground, only to jump up at once and make off as fast as its legs could carry it.

There was a moment's amazement, followed by outcries. The sons darted in pursuit and were not long in coming up with the runaway, hampered as he was by his rags and weakened by privation. But the stranger was already protecting him against their wrath:

"Hands off there! This man belongs to me. I won't have him touched. . . . I hope I haven't stung you up too much, Trainard?"

Standing on his straw legs wrapped round with strips of tattered cloth, with his arms and his whole body clad in the same materials, his head swathed in linen, tightly packed like a sausage, the old chap still had the stiff appearance of a lay-figure. And the whole effect was so ludicrous and so unexpected that the onlookers screamed with laughter.

The stranger unbound his head; and they saw a veiled mask of tangled gray beard encroaching on every side upon a skeleton face lit up by two eyes burning with fever.

The laughter was louder than ever.

"The money! The six notes!" roared the farmer.

The stranger kept him at a distance:

"One moment . . . we'll give you that back, sha'n't we, Trainard?"

And, taking his knife and cutting away the straw and cloth, he jested, cheerily:

"You poor old beggar, what a guy you look! But how on earth did you manage to pull off that trick? You must be confoundedly clever, or else you had the devil's own luck. . . . So, on the first night, you used the breathing-time they left you to rig yourself in these togs! Not a bad idea. Who could ever suspect a scarecrow? . . . They were so accustomed to seeing it stuck up in its tree! But, poor old daddy, how uncomfortable you must have felt, lying flat up there on your stomach, with your arms and legs dangling down! All day long, like that! The deuce of an attitude! And how you must have been put to it, when you ventured to move a limb, eh? And how you must have funked going to sleep! . . . And then you had to eat! And drink! And you heard the sentry and felt the barrel of his gun within a yard of your nose! Brrr! . . . But the trickiest of all, you know, was your bit of straw! . . . Upon my word, when I think that, without a sound, without a movement so to speak, you had to fish out lengths of straw from your toggery, fix them end to end, let your apparatus down to the water and suck up the heavenly moisture drop by drop. . . . Upon my word, one could scream with admiration. . . . Well done, Trainard . . ." And he added, between his teeth, "Only you're in a very unappetizing state, my man. Haven't you washed yourself all this month, you old pig? After all, you had as much water as you wanted! . . . Here, you people, I hand him over to you. I'm going to wash my hands, that's what I'm going to do."

Farmer Goussot and his four sons grabbed at the prey which he was abandoning to them:

"Now then, come along, fork out the money."

Dazed as he was, the tramp still managed to simulate astonishment.

"Don't put on that idiot look," growled the farmer. "Come on. Out with the six notes. . . ."

"What? . . . What do you want of me?" stammered old Trainard.

"The money . . . on the nail. . . ."

"What money?"

"The bank-notes."

"The bank-notes?"

"Oh, I'm getting sick of you! Here, lads. . . ."

They laid the old fellow flat, tore off the rags that composed his clothes, felt and searched him all over.

There was nothing on him.

"You thief and you robber!" yelled old Goussot. "What have you done with it?"

The old beggar seemed more dazed than ever. Too cunning to confess, he kept on whining:

"What do you want of me? . . . Money? I haven't three sous to call my own. . . ."

But his eyes, wide with wonder, remained fixed upon his clothes; and he himself seemed not to understand.

The Goussots' rage could no longer be restrained. They rained blows upon him, which did not improve matters. But the farmer was convinced that Trainard had hidden the money before turning himself into the scarecrow:

"Where have you put it, you scum? Out with it! In what part of the orchard have you hidden it?"

"The money?" repeated the tramp with a stupid look.

"Yes, the money! The money which you've buried somewhere. . . . Oh, if we don't find it, your goose is cooked! . . . We have witnesses, haven't we? . . . All of you, friends, eh? And then the gentleman. . . ."

He turned, with the intention of addressing the stranger, in the direction of the spring, which was thirty or forty steps to the left. And he was quite surprised not to see him washing his hands there:

"Has he gone?" he asked.

Some one answered:

"No, he lit a cigarette and went for a stroll in the orchard."

"Oh, that's all right!" said the farmer. "He's the sort to find the notes for us, just as he found the man."

"Unless . . ." said a voice.

"Unless what?" echoed the farmer. "What do you mean? Have you something in your head? Out with it, then! What is it?"

But he interrupted himself suddenly, seized with a doubt; and there was a moment's silence. The same idea dawned on all the country-folk. The stranger's arrival at Héberville, the breakdown of his motor, his manner of questioning the people at the inn and of gaining admission to the farm: were not all these part and parcel of a put-up job, the trick of a cracksman who had learnt the story from the papers and who had come to try his luck on the spot? . . .

"Jolly smart of him!" said the inn-keeper. "He must have taken the money from old Trainard's pocket, before our eyes, while he was searching him."

"Impossible!" spluttered Farmer Goussot. "He would have

been seen going out that way . . . by the house . . . whereas he's strolling in the orchard."

Mother Goussot, all of a heap, suggested:

"The little door at the end, down there? . . ."

"The key never leaves me."

"But you showed it to him."

"Yes; and I took it back again. . . . Look, here it is."

He clapped his hand to his pocket and uttered a cry:

"Oh, dash it all, it's gone! . . . He's sneaked it! . . ."

He at once rushed away, followed and escorted by his sons and a number of the villagers.

When they were halfway down the orchard, they heard the throb of a motor-car, obviously the one belonging to the stranger, who had given orders to his chauffeur to wait for him at that lower entrance.

When the Goussots reached the door, they saw scrawled with a brick, on the worm-eaten panel, the two words:

"ARSENE LUPIN."

Stick to it as the angry Goussots might, they found it impossible to prove that old Trainard had stolen any money. Twenty persons had to bear witness that, when all was said, nothing was discovered on his person. He escaped with a few months' imprisonment for the assault.

He did not regret them. As soon as he was released, he was secretly informed that, every quarter, on a given date, at a given hour, under a given milestone on a given road, he would find three gold louis.

To a man like old Trainard that means wealth.

LOVE IN THE DARK

by H. L. Gold

BEING LIVY RANDOM wasn't easy. It meant having a face a little too long, a figure a little too plump, brown hair brushed and brushed yet always uncurling at the ends. It meant not being able to make herself more than passably attractive. Worse than that, being Livy Random meant being Mrs. Mark Random, the wife of that smug lump asleep in the other bed.

Mark wasn't snoring; he was too neat for that. He was always making even stacks of things, or putting them in alphabetical order on shelves, or straightening rugs and pictures, or breathing neatly in the other bed.

Livy closed the bedroom door with a bang. Mark didn't stir; he could fall asleep in one infuriating minute, and wake up, eight hours later to the second, in exactly the same unlovely position and disposition. Her high-heeled shoes didn't bother him when she kicked them off, and neither did scraping the chair back against the wall—he hated chair marks on walls—when she sat down to take off her stockings. And Livy Random wanted, venomously, to bother her husband.

Mark Random had married her because he had been made sales manager of the electric battery factory, and he'd had enough of eating in restaurants while he had been a traveling salesman. Besides, it looked better for a man in his position to be married. Livy had accepted him because she was past thirty and nobody else might ask her; besides, she needed someone to support her. So she cooked for him. She cleaned for him. She even tried to keep a budget for him, though that was his idea. He gave her a meager household allowance and nothing else.

Nothing, in this case, must be understood as the complete and humiliating absence of everything. When Livy was particularly incensed about her marriage, which was generally, it was some comfort to know that she could have it easily annulled. And Mark couldn't do a thing to stop her. He hadn't, at least, and there was no sign that he intended to, cared to, or even thought of it.

Pulling her slip over her head, Livy wondered about this. She had heard, at least as often as any other girl, that all men were beasts. Mark was, of course, a beast in a way—in his special, primly exasperating way. But he wasn't a beast in the usual sense. With Livy, anyway. Maybe some woman in a back street hovel thought he was. But that wasn't likely; he would have wedded the lady and saved the cost of this apartment.

What was wrong with Mark? It wasn't Livy, because she had known her duty and had been grimly prepared for it, though God knew this tall and pudgy person inspired nothing at all in her.

"Short and pudgy," she thought, reaching around back for the snaps. "Why doesn't somebody put snaps in front where they belong and where a body can get at them, and make a fortune? Short and pudgy is bad enough, but Mark's got to be *tall* and pudgy, with a stomach that pulls his shoulders down and caves in his chest. And those black-rimmed glasses —some oculist must have been stuck with them for years.

That hair of his—thick, oily, wavy and *yellow*. Like butter starting to melt—"

She looked at him again. What had made her think that marrying him was better than not being married at all? She could have got at least a housekeeper's job somewhere. With the possibility that some man in the household would fall in love with her.

Livy stopped. She crossed her arms over her breasts. It was the oddest sensation.

Somebody was staring at her as she undressed.

Mark? It didn't seem possible, but she held her slip in front of her and flipped the switch and looked. He was on his side, one arm under his head, and his back was to her. He never looked at her in the light, so why should he stare at her in the dark?

Livy peered under the window shades. They reached the sills; nobody could see beneath them or around them. She felt like a fool bending to glance under the beds, poking warily among the dresses and suits in the closets, and searching behind the furniture.

The light aroused Mark; that was something. He twisted around to face her blurrily.

"What's the matter?" he asked, his thin voice fuzzily peevish.

"Somebody was watching me undress," she said.

"Here?"

She tightened her lips. "I haven't undressed in the street in years," she said. "Of course it was here!"

"You mean somebody's in the room with us?" He reached out for his glasses on the night table. "I don't see anyone."

"I know," she said flatly. "I searched the place. It's empty. Or it might as well be."

He stared at her. He wasn't, of course, looking below her face, though she still had her slip clutched in front of her. He was staring at her face as if she had a smudge on it.

"Do you often have these ideas?" he asked.

"Go on back to sleep," she said. "If you want to act like a psychiatrist, your own case would keep you busy for years."

He was still looking at her face, so she turned off the light. She held the slip until she heard him turn heavily, then grunt as he spread himself in the same position as before.

Livy hung up her slip and began peeling off her girdle. There it was again—hungry eyes peering out of the dark, touching her body with ocular caresses.

It wasn't imagination. It couldn't be. She'd been mentally undressed as often as any other not too attractive girl, and she knew the shrinking, exposed feeling too well to mistake it.

No use turning on the light again. She wouldn't find anyone in the room.

"Let's be reasonable," she thought, fighting an urge to leap into bed and scream. "I'm tired. Pooped, if you want to know. That dreary little Mrs. Hall made a hash out of the bridge game. Why do I always draw town idiots as partners? Is it some curse that was put on my family back in the Middle Ages? That's all I need; it's not enough playing house with this inspecting officer searching for dust under the furniture.

"All right, I'm exhausted and jumpy. I'm normal, or what passes for normal. If anybody mentions Freud to me, I'll start swinging this girdle like a night stick. I'm not losing my mind. I'm not having a wish-fulfillment either, if that's what you're thinking. Livy dear, it's just time I went to bed—and don't go twisting *that* statement around."

Her eyes did ache a bit; all that smoke. Maybe she should cut out cigarettes. Aching eyes could make you see things that weren't there. This wasn't exactly seeing, but maybe it was connected somehow.

Livy closed her eyes experimentally, and the effect was more startling than the skin sensation.

In the dark, with her eyes shut, she could *see* who was staring at her. It gave her a shock until she realized that she could *imagine* it, rather; she couldn't see unless her eyes were open, could she? She tried it, and the image disappeared. She closed them again and there it was.

As long as it was her imagination, she studied the imaginary owner of the imaginary eyes. She stared at him just as intently as she imagined he was staring at her.

"Stunning," was her first verdict, and then, "What a build! I must have been peering unconsciously at those physical culture magazines on the newsstands. That long blue hair and those wide blond eyes and a cute little straight nose—I always *did* love a man with a cleft in his chin! Heavens, did you ever see such *muscles?* And—wait a minute!"

She opened her eyes quickly. A girl had to have some modesty, even if her imagination didn't. And then something jarred her sense of logic.

Long *blue* hair and wide *blond* eyes? It must have been a twist of her subvocal tongue. She meant long blond hair and wide blue eyes. Of course.

She closed her eyes and rechecked. The hair was blue and the eyes were blond, or close enough to it. That wasn't all, either. It wasn't really hair. It was feathers. Long, very fine, like bird-of-paradise plumage; but feathers. As long as they were sort of combed flat, she could never have guessed. But her stunning imaginary man frowned as she stared at him,

and the frown lifted his—well, feathers, into an attractive crest. Very attractive, in fact. She liked the effect much better than hair. . . .

Peculiar. The dazzling creature was blushing under her stare, and turning his head away shyly. Was it possible to blush a beautiful shocking pink? And to have pointed leprechaun ears much handsomer than the regular male clamshell variety? And since when does a mental image turn bashful?

"Who cares?" thought Livy. "You're a gorgeous thing, and any psychiatrist cures me of this particular delusion over my dead body! Now go away or I won't get a wink of sleep all night."

With her eyes shut, she saw the unearthly vision walk dutifully toward the bedroom door, open it and close it behind him.

"That you, Livy?" asked Mark from his bed.

"Is what me?"

"Opening the door."

"I haven't budged from this spot."

She heard him roll over and sit up again. "I'm a practical man with both feet on the ground," he said. "I don't hear things unless there's something to hear. And I heard the door open and close."

Livy pulled on her nightgown over her head—warm, thick flannel because texture and sheerness didn't matter. "All right, you heard the door open and close," she said, falling back luxuriously on her soft mattress and dragging the heavy blankets up. "You can't get me to argue with you this time of the night."

"Something's wrong with you," said Mark. "We'll find out what it is tomorrow."

As far as she was concerned, there was nothing whatever wrong with her. Why shouldn't an unhappy woman imagine a handsome, thrilling man admiring her? Maybe there was some hidden and sinister significance in the blue plumage and pointed ears, but she didn't care to know about it.

She knew Mark wouldn't risk one of her tempers by waking her up to talk, so she firmly pretended to be sleeping while he dressed, made his own breakfast, and drove away. Then she got out of bed and took off the nightgown.

Sure enough, her flesh shrank. She felt as if she were being spied on.

"Look," she said testily to her subconscious, or libido, or whatever the term was, "not the first thing in the morning. Let me at least brush my teeth and have some of that black mud Mark calls coffee."

Anyway, it was ridiculous, right in broad daylight. Phan-

tasms are for the dark. Any decent neurosis ought to know that.

Nevertheless, Livy closed her eyes to test her memory. The exciting dreamboat with the blue plumage, blond eyes and gay ears was exactly the same—staring hungrily at her from somewhere near the vanity. Certainly she saw the vanity; she knew it was there, didn't she? She tried staring back, to see if her imaginary lover boy would blush and turn away again. He didn't, which probably meant that some quirk in her mind had grown bolder, for he grinned becomingly and his blond eyes smiled up and down her body.

"I never would have believed it," she muttered moodily, opening her eyes and proceeding to dress. "Rainy evenings I can understand, but I usually feel so nasty in the morning."

She was washing the dishes after breakfast when she felt the first physical symptoms of her delusion. It was a light, airy kiss on the back of her neck. Goosebumps bloomed, her spine went sirupy, her knees came unhinged.

She swiftly disposed of the thrill by blaming it on a loose end of hair. But she cautiously pinned her thatch all up under a kerchief; another few ethereal kisses there, whether uncurled hair or psychological, and she would climb the wall.

Next time she felt the kiss, it started at her neck and worked down to her shoulder, six distinct and passionate touches of warm, hard lips. Weakly she realized that her hair was still tightly bound and pinned up, and that left only one conclusion to be drawn.

"All right," she said, dizzily happy, "I'm going nutty. Wonder why I never thought of it before."

There were more kisses during the day, enough to keep her glowing. Hallucinations, of course, but wonderful ones, and she resolved to hang grimly onto them. So she left Mark his dinner and a note, and then went out to a movie.

In the theater, peculiarly, she felt more alone than she had at home. The picture was nothing to rave about, but she saw it three times to make sure Mark would be in bed when she returned.

He was, and breathing. She undressed in no great hurry, finally accustomed to the peeping sensation. But when she was under the covers, she screamed suddenly and scrambled out. Mark was awake by the time she turned on the light.

"Now what?" he grumbled.

She goggled at him in alarm. "It wasn't you?" she asked.

"*What* wasn't me?"

She sat tentatively on the edge of the bed and rubbed her arm. "Somebody—I thought it was you—I could feel his fingers on my arm just as plain—"

"Whom," Mark asked, confused, "are you talking about?"

She put her chin out. "Somebody tried to get into bed with me."

"M-mm," Mark nodded solemnly, acting not at all astonished. He put his plump, white, flat feet into slippers and wrestled into a bathrobe. He said anxiously, "Now don't get alarmed, Livy. We'll see this thing through."

"Don't bother," she said. "As long as I know it wasn't you, I'm satisfied."

"I am not in the habit of *slinking.*"

"No," she admitted, looking at him appraisingly. "You haven't the physique. Then again, if you did have, you wouldn't have to slink." She gave her head a shake. "I don't know what to think." And she began to cry.

"Now, none of that," he said. "We'll have you all right in a jiffy."

She stood up, ready to run over the beds, if necessary. "Oh, no, not now, you're not."

"I don't know what you mean," he said, and he went to the telephone extension and called Ben Dashman. He agreed with Ben that it was rather late, but added, "It's urgent, Ben, and you're the only one I can turn to. It's Livy's nerves. They've—snapped! You'll have to get your clothes on and come right over."

"Ben Dashman," said Livy scornfully. "Here's one consumer whose resistance that business psychologist can't break down. The two of you will just get to your offices all tired out tomorrow, and for what?"

"When there is a crisis, sleep is a secondary consideration," Mark said. "Ben and I are men of action. This will not be the first time we've worked through the night."

But Ben, when he arrived, sat on a chair at one side of her bed, and Mark sat on his own bed and explained to Ben, over Livy's indignant body, the little he knew of what he referred to as her case. Though the information didn't amount to much, it made her just as embarrassed as the first peeping incident.

If Mark Random was pompous and oratorical, and he was, Ben Dashman could claim the doubtful credit. Mark had modeled himself after that successful expert on business psychology, who had read his way up to the vice-presidency-in-charge-of-sales. Ben could quote whole chapters of inspirational and analytical studies, whereas Mark had mastered no more than brief sentences and paragraphs. The voice had a lot to do with Ben's sensational rise, however. Mark had a slightly petulant voice, about Middle C, while Ben had learned to pitch his a full octave below comfort and to propel his words like strung spitballs.

Physically, Ben was even less appetizing than Mark. He had a bigger stomach, wider hips, rounder shoulders, white hair split in the center and stuck damply to his pink head, heavy lips that he loved to pucker thoughtfully, and pince-nez. Mark would have paid a lot for a pince-nez that would stay on him, but they either stopped his circulation or fell off.

"Well," said Ben when Mark was through. Livy won the bet she had made with herself that that would be his first response; it gave him time to think. "Do you have anything to add, Livy?"

"Sure. Go home, or take Mark out to a bar. I want to go to sleep."

"I mean about your—strange feeling," Ben persisted.

"I recommend it to all women," she said. "If I knew how, I'd manufacture and sell these dream admirers on the installment plan, and give them free to the needy. It's made me ten years younger. Now go away. I've a date with my delusion."

"Listen," said Mark earnestly. "Ben got out of bed and came over here to help you. We both want to help you. Ben has read all there is to know about mental cases."

"I'm not a mental case," Livy said. "I was until now, but I'm not any more. If you both want to help me, you can develop amnesia and wander out of my life. For good. If I'm sick, it's of you."

Mark's face went purple, but Ben pacified him hastily: "Don't answer her, Mark. She doesn't know what she's saying. You know how it is with these things."

"The only reason he married me was to save money on a housekeeper," she said in a deliberate tone.

"That's right—" Ben encouraged her, patronizingly.

"Are you agreeing with her?" Mark shouted.

"I mean that's right—let her get things off her chest," Ben explained. "It releases tension."

So Livy kept talking and it was wonderful. She said the most insultingly true things about Mark and he didn't dare turn them into argument. She didn't know much about psychiatry, but she accused him of all the terms she could remember. It was the first time she had examined out loud the facts of her limitation marriage.

"Come to think of it," she concluded, "I don't know why I stayed here this long. As soon as I can get some money together, or a job, I'll let you know my forwarding address."

Then she went to sleep. Ben assured Mark that she seemed to have unburdened her grievances and should have no further disturbances. Her threat to leave he considered mere bravado. He advised rest and a sympathetic attitude.

Taking Ben to the door, Mark thanked him abjectly: "I don't know what I would have done without you."

"Forget it," said Ben. "If we didn't all pitch in and help each other when the footing gets rocky, there'd be no co-operation in this world."

"That's right," Mark said, brightening. "Wasn't it Emerson who pointed out that co-operation is the foundation of civilization?"

"It's always safe to give Emerson the credit," Ben answered. "Now just don't worry about Livy. If she shows any alarming signs of tension, call me up, day or night, and I'll be glad to do what I can."

It was two months before Livy moved out, actually, and then only because she had no real choice. Finding a job had been harder than she anticipated. She had no experience and the best part of the day to go job-hunting had usually been taken up by cooking, cleaning, shopping, sending out the laundry, and reading. For she had begun consuming psychology books—both normal and abnormal—searching for a parallel to her condition.

She found roughly similar cases, some which were almost identical in unimportant respects. But the really significant symptom, which urged her on in her hunt, she found nowhere.

None of the systematically deluded women had ever had a baby by an imaginary sweetheart. And Livy, her doctor had told her after the usual tests, was indisputably pregnant.

"But that's impossible," she had protested.

"I thought so myself," the doctor, who was Mark's physician also, had confessed. "But, you see, the profession is full of surprises."

"That isn't what I mean," Livy said in a panic.

She asked for some aromatic spirits in water. She wanted a chance to rehearse her answer. It sounded absurd even to herself.

She and Mark had not changed the basis of her marriage. Mark *couldn't* be the father of her child. He wasn't. It was impossible. Under the circumstances, it was absolutely impossible. Yet it was also impossible for her to be pregnant. She had an alibi for every minute of their marriage.

But these days, she realized numbly, when a doctor tells a woman she is going to have a baby, she can start buying a layette. So she shuffled out of the doctor's office, clutching her list of medical instructions, and that night she told Mark.

Mark didn't bark or howl; he called Ben Dashman instead. Ben understood the situation instantly.

"Livy's conscience caused those delusions," he said. "She has obviously been having an affair."

"There was nothing obvious about it," Livy said. "It was so *un*obvious, in fact, that I didn't know about it myself."

This time Ben Dashman's presence didn't stop Mark from losing his temper. "Are you denying," he yelled, "that you *have* been having an affair?"

"Certainly," said Livy. "I'd know about it, wouldn't I?"

"Well, that's a point, Mark," Ben said ponderously. "In the condition Livy's been in lately, she might not have been responsible."

"*I'm* not going to be responsible, and that's for sure," Mark said. "We'll find out who the man is if we have to dig clean through her unconscious and down to her pituitary gland!"

Mark threw his glasses, the big black-rimmed ones, on the floor and trampled on them. Livy felt a little proud. She had never seen him so angry before. She had never suspected that she could have such an effect on him, or she might have tried it long ago.

"Livy," Ben said gently, "you do know who the man was, don't you?"

"Sure," she said. "It was my dreamboat, my lover boy—the one who ogled me while I was undressing, the one who tried to get into bed with me. I didn't let him until you convinced me he wasn't real. Then I didn't see any reason to be afraid."

"You mean," said Mark, terrible in his self-control, "right here in the same room with me?"

"Why not?" she asked reasonably. "It was just a delusion. Do I go around censoring *your* dreams? Though heaven knows they're probably just about selling campaigns and how to make people battery-conscious!"

Ben waved Mark to silence. "Then am I to understand," he said, "that your only meetings with your so-called dreamboat have been here in your own bedroom, with your husband asleep in the next bed?"

"That's right," Livy said. "Exactly."

Ben stood up and pointed unpleasantly at Mark. "You," he said nastily, "are an ungrateful, inconsiderate, lying scoundrel."

"I am?" Mark asked, baffled out of his outrage. "How do you figure that, Ben?"

"Because for some obscure reason you're trying to blacken the name of your wife, when it's perfectly clear that the only man who could be the father is you."

"Oh, no! I can prove it isn't!"

"I'll bet," Livy said, "he could at that. But he doesn't have to, Ben. I'll give him an affidavit that he isn't."

"You see?" Mark cried triumphantly.

Ben nodded. "I guess I do. Livy, I respect your gallantry, but it's a mistake to protect the guilty party."

"You don't catch me getting gallant at a time like this," Livy said. "I can't tell you his name, because I don't know it, but I'll be glad to tell you who he is."

She described the phantom who loved her.

"Blue feathers!" yelled Mark. "Blond eyes! She isn't crazy, Ben. Oh, no, she thinks *we* are!"

Ben stood up. "Mark, I think we need a conference." Mark followed him unwillingly and when Livy opened the door carefully, a few moments later, she heard Ben say, "I've read about cases like this. It's a very grave, very deep disturbance—too deep for me to handle, though I'd love to try and I believe I'd do pretty well. But the first thing she needs is protection. From herself and this unscrupulous vandal she imagines has blue plumage and blond eyes."

And Mark asked, "Then you think she really believes this nonsense?"

And Ben said, "Of course, poor girl. She's batty. Use your head."

And Mark said slowly, "I never thought of that. But why would she claim he's invisible?"

Livy could picture Ben lifting his fat shoulders. "It might take months or years to find out, and the important thing right now is to protect her. That wouldn't hurt you either, Mark. Nobody puts any stock in what a patient at a rest home says."

There was more discussion, but Livy didn't stay to hear it. She had climbed out the kitchen window and over the low backyard fence. Finding a taxi took a while, but she got downtown and closed out her savings account.

Now all she had to do was find a place to live. She couldn't go back to Mark, of course, and she had some bad moments imagining that her description had been broadcast and that she would be picked up and sent to an asylum. She wasn't worried for herself. But lover boy might not find her, and she wouldn't be able to get out and search for him.

Among the classified ads she came across a two-room furnished apartment. It turned out to be across the street from a lumber yard, far enough away from Mark to be relatively safe; and the rental was low. She could live on her savings until the baby was born. What would happen after that didn't seem to matter much right now.

When she went to bed, she felt strangely alone. It wasn't Mark sleeping in the other bed that she missed. She had felt alone in the same room with him up until she thought up Dreamboat. Where was *he?* She squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated. No, he wasn't there. Mark's house must have been the special habitat of that particular hallucination.

She disliked facing Mark again, and perhaps Ben too, but

there apparently was no other way to bring back her blue-plumed, stunning mental phantom. She dressed and called a cab.

There was a light in the bedroom, but she saved investigating that for last. She let herself in with her own key and took off her shoes, then slid through all the other rooms with her eyes firmly shut. Establishing no contact, she opened the bedroom door—and there he was.

His lips were grim, his cleft chin jutted, his blond eyes were savage, and he held his fists in uppercut position as he crouched like a boxer over Mark's raging face. He seemed to be rapping out some harsh words, but even Livy couldn't understand him.

"You stinker," she heard Mark snarl. "You hit me when I wasn't looking."

And Ben protested, "Don't be an idiot. Your unconscious is punishing you for the way you treated that sweet, troubled girl. I can show you cases just like yours—"

And Mark said, "Are you telling me I walked into something?"

Ben told him in a calm voice, "Every psychiatrist knows about the unconscious wish for punishment."

Mark yelled, "There's nothing unconscious about my wish to sock you on that fat jaw." And he did.

Lover boy looked past the battle and saw her in the doorway. His angry face brought forth a slow, unearthly smile, and he walked carefully around the fighting fat men and took her hand. It may have been her imagination, but she *felt* the passionately warm, hard flesh.

She had to open her eyes outside the house and on the way back to her apartment. But she held desperately to his hand.

It was after she came home from the hospital that Ben found her. He told her he had heard of mothers radiating, but this was the first time he had seen it. She could feel the glow in her face as she showed him the empty crib.

"I know you can't see him," she said, "but I can when I close my eyes. He's a beautiful baby. He has his father's features."

"You caused a little stir at the hospital," Ben said. "That's how I found you."

She laughed. "Oh, you mean the doctor? I thought he'd order himself a straitjacket."

"Well, delivering an invisible baby is no joke, especially when you're called away from a stag party," Ben said soberly. "He was finally convinced that it was only the liquor, but he hasn't touched a drop since. They never did discover the baby, did they?"

"I had it in my room all the time. They were afraid I'd sue and give them a lot of bad publicity, but I said it was all right." She turned away from the crib. "I don't suppose Mark minded the Reno divorce, did he?"

"He knew he was getting off lucky. These kissless-marriage annulments can drive a man to changing his name and moving to another state. But tell me, Livy, how did you arrange the second marriage?"

"By telephone," she said. "I guess you've heard the groom's name and birthplace."

Ben hissed on his glasses, wiped them meticulously. "There was some mention in the newspapers."

"Clrkxsdyl 93J16," she said gaily. "I call him Clark for short. And he comes from Alpha Centauri somewhere. I wouldn't have known that, except he learned to use a typewriter—we don't hear the same frequencies, he says."

Ben's eyes slid away from hers and looked around the shabby apartment. "Well, you do seem happy, I must say."

"There's only one thing that bothers me," she said. "Clark could have picked any woman on Earth. I'm about as average as you can get without being a freak. Why did he want *me*?"

"There's no explaining love," Ben evaded uneasily. He put his pudgy hand in his inside pocket and looked directly at her. "Let's not have any false pride," he said. "You haven't asked Mark for a cent, but you have no income and I'd be glad—"

"Oh, we're doing fine," said Livy, shaking her hair, which she had let grow long and straight with no sign of a permanent. "We're getting a raise soon."

"A raise?" Ben was surprised. "From where? For doing what?"

"I'm supposed to be working for Grant's Detective Agency. But it's really Clark who's the operative—private eye, he calls it now, after reading all those mystery stories—and he types up the reports. All I have to do is correct his English now and then. Imagine, he's even learning slang. Grant can't figure out how we get information that's so hard to uncover, but it's easier than pie for Clark."

"Sure," said Ben, going to the door. "But what are you laughing at?"

"Those blue feathers. They tickle!"

Although Ben could have dropped the situation there, there was one thing you could say for him: he was conscientious. He made one more investigation.

"What do you want to know about her for?" Mr. Grant asked coldly and suspiciously.

"I'm a friend of hers," Ben explained, handing Grant his business card. "I just want to make sure she's earning a good

living. She divorced a—well, somebody I used to know, and she wouldn't take any alimony. I offered to help out, but she said she's doing all right working for you."

Grant's professionally slitted eyes developed a glint of smug possession. "Oh, I was afraid you might want to hire her away from me," he said. "That girl is the best operative I ever had. She could shadow a nervous sparrow. Why, she's got methods—"

"Good, huh?"

"Good?" repeated Grant. "You'd think she was invisible!"

WHAT WAS IT?

by Fitz-James O'Brien

It is, I confess, with considerable diffidence that I approach the strange narrative which I am about to relate. The events which I purpose detailing are of so extraordinary a character that I am quite prepared to meet with an unusual amount of incredulity and scorn. I accept all such beforehand. I have, I trust, the literary courage to face unbelief. I have, after mature consideration, resolved to narrate, in as simple and straightforward a manner as I can compass, some facts that passed under my observation, in the month of July last, and which, in the annals of the mysteries of physical science, are wholly unparalleled.

I live at No. — Twenty-sixth Street, in New York. The house is in some respects a curious one. It has enjoyed for the last two years the reputation of being haunted. It is a large and stately residence, surrounded by what was once a garden, but which is now only a green enclosure used for bleaching clothes. The dry basin of what has been a fountain, and a few fruit trees ragged and unpruned, indicate that this spot in past days was a pleasant, shady retreat, filled with fruits and flowers and the sweet murmur of waters.

The house is very spacious. A hall of noble size leads to a large spiral staircase winding through its centre, while the various apartments are of imposing dimensions. It was built some fifteen or twenty years since by Mr. A——, the well-known New York merchant, who five years ago threw the commercial world into convulsions by a stupendous bank fraud. Mr. A——, as everyone knows, escaped to Europe, and died not long after, of a broken heart. Almost immedi-

ately after the news of his decease reached this country and was verified, the report spread in Twenty-sixth Street that No. — was haunted. Legal measures had dispossessed the widow of its former owner, and it was inhabited merely by a caretaker and his wife, placed there by the house agent into whose hands it had passed for purposes of renting or sale. These people declared that they were troubled with unnatural noises. Doors were opened without any visible agency. The remnants of furniture scattered through the various rooms, were, during the night, piled one upon the other by unknown hands. Invisible feet passed up and down the stairs in broad daylight, accompanied by the rustle of unseen silk dresses, and the gliding of viewless hands along the massive balusters. The caretaker and his wife declared they would live there no longer. The house agent laughed, dismissed them, and put others in their place. The noises and supernatural manifestations continued. The neighborhood caught up the story, and the house remained untenanted for three years. Several persons negotiated for it; but, somehow, always before the bargain was closed they heard the unpleasant rumors and declined to treat any further.

It was in this state of things that my landlady, who at that time kept a boarding-house in Bleecker Street, and who wished to move further up town, conceived the bold idea of renting No. — Twenty-sixth Street. Happening to have in her house rather a plucky and philosophical set of boarders, she laid her scheme before us, stating candidly everything she had heard respecting the ghostly qualities of the establishment to which she wished to remove us. With the exception of two timid persons—a sea-captain and a returned Californian, who immediaately gave notice that they would leave—all of Mrs. Moffat's guests declared that they would accompany her in her chivalric incursion into the abode of spirits.

Our removal was effected in the month of May, and we were charmed with our new residence. The portion of Twenty-sixth Street where our house is situated, between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, is one of the pleasantest localities in New York. The gardens back of the houses, running down nearly to the Hudson, form, in the summer time, a perfect avenue of verdure. The air is pure and invigorating, sweeping, as it does, straight across the river from the Weehawken heights, and even the ragged garden which surrounded the house, although displaying on washing days rather too much clothesline, still gave us a piece of greensward to look at, and a cool retreat in the summer evenings, where we smoked our cigars in the dusk, and watched the fireflies flashing their dark lanterns in the long grass.

Of course we had no sooner established ourselves at No. — than we began to expect the ghosts. We absolutely awaited their advent with eagerness. Our dinner conversation was supernatural. One of the boarders, who had purchased Mrs. Crowe's "Night Side of Nature" for his own private delectation, was regarded as a public enemy by the entire household for not having bought twenty copies. The man led a life of supreme wretchedness while he was reading this volume. A system of espionage was established, of which he was the victim. If he incautiously laid the book down for an instant and left the room, it was immediately seized and read aloud in secret places to a select few. I found myself a person of immense importance, it having leaked out that I was tolerably well versed in the history of supernaturalism, and had once written a story the foundation of which was a ghost. If a table or a wainscot panel happened to warp when we were assembled in the large drawing-room, there was an instant silence, and every one was prepared for an immediate clanking of chains and a spectral form.

After a month of psychological excitement, it was with the utmost dissatisfaction that we were forced to acknowledge that nothing in the remotest degree approaching the supernatural had manifested itself. Once the black butler asseverated that his candle had been blown out by some invisible agency while he was undressing himself for the night; but as I had more than once discovered this colored gentleman in a condition when one candle must have appeared to him like two, I thought it possible that, by going a step further in his potations, he might have reversed this phenomenon, and seen no candle at all where he ought to have beheld one.

Things were in this state when an incident took place so awful and inexplicable in its character that my reason fairly reels at the bare memory of the occurrence. It was the tenth of July. After dinner was over I repaired, with my friend Dr. Hammond, to the garden to smoke my evening pipe. Independent of certain mental sympathies which existed between the Doctor and myself, we were linked together by a vice. We both smoked opium. We knew each other's secret, and respected it. We enjoyed together that wonderful expansion of thought, that marvellous intensifying of the perceptive faculties, that boundless feeling of existence when we seem to have points of contact with the whole universe—in short, that unimaginable spiritual bliss, which I would not surrender for a throne, and which I hope you, reader, will never—never taste.

Those hours of opium happiness which the Doctor and I spent together in secret were regulated with a scientific ac-

curacy. We did not blindly smoke the drug of paradise, and leave our dreams to chance. While smoking, we carefully steered our conversation through the brightest and calmest channels of thought. We talked of the East, and endeavored to recall the magical panorama of its glowing scenery. We criticised the most sensuous poets—those who painted life ruddy with health, brimming with passion, happy in the possession of youth and strength and beauty. If we talked of Shakespeare's "Tempest," we lingered over Ariel, and avoided Caliban. Like the Guebers, we turned our faces to the east, and saw only the sunny side of the world.

This skillful coloring of our train of thought produced in our subsequent visions a corresponding tone. The splendors of Arabian fairyland dyed our dreams. We paced that narrow strip of grass with the tread and port of kings. The song of the *rana arborea*, while he clung to the bark of the ragged plum tree, sounded like the strains of divine musicians. Houses, walls, and streets melted like rain clouds, and vistas of unimaginable glory stretched away before us. It was a rapturous companionship. We enjoyed the vast delight more perfectly because, even in our most ecstatic moments, we were conscious of each other's presence. Our pleasures, while individual, were still twin, vibrating and moving in musical accord.

On the evening in question, the tenth of July, the Doctor and myself drifted into an unusually metaphysical mood. We lit our large meerschaums, filled with fine Turkish tobacco, in the core of which burned a little black nut of opium, that, like the nut in the fairy tale, held within its narrow limits wonders beyond the reach of kings; we paced to and fro, conversing. A strange perversity dominated the currents of our thought. They would *not* flow through the sun-lit channels into which we strove to divert them. For some unaccountable reason, they constantly diverged into dark and lonesome beds, where a continual gloom brooded. It was in vain that, after our old fashion, we flung ourselves on the shores of the East, and talked of its gay bazaars, of the splendors of the time of Haroun, of harems and golden palaces. Black afreets continually arose from the depths of our talk, and expanded, like the one the fisherman released from the copper vessel, until they blotted everything bright from our vision. Insensibly, we yielded to the occult force that swayed us, and indulged in gloomy speculation. We had talked some time upon the proneness of the human mind to mysticism, and the almost universal love of the terrible, when Hammond suddenly said to me, "What do you consider to be the greatest element of terror?"

The question puzzled me. That many things were terrible, I

knew. Stumbling over a corpse in the dark; beholding, as I once did, a woman floating down a deep and rapid river, with wildly lifted arms, and awful, upturned face, uttering, as she drifted, shrieks that rent one's heart, while we, the spectators, stood frozen at a window which overhung the river at a height of sixty feet, unable to make the slightest effort to save her, but dumbly watching her last supreme agony and her disappearance. A shattered wreck, with no life visible, encountered floating listlessly on the ocean, is a terrible object, for it suggests a huge terror, the proportions of which are veiled. But it now struck me, for the first time, that there must be one great and ruling embodiment of fear—a King of Terrors, to which all others must succumb. What might it be? To what train of circumstances would it owe its existence?

"I confess, Hammond," I replied to my friend, "I never considered the subject before. That there must be one Something more terrible than any other thing, I feel. I cannot attempt, however, even the most vague definition."

"I am somewhat like you, Harry," he answered. "I feel my capacity to experience a terror greater than anything yet conceived by the human mind—something combining in fearful and unnatural amalgamation hitherto supposed incompatible elements. The calling of the voices in Brockden Brown's novel of 'Wieland' is awful; so is the picture of the Dweller of the Threshold, in Bulwer's 'Zanoni'; but," he added, shaking his head gloomily, "there is something more horrible still than these."

"Look here, Hammond," I rejoined, "let us drop this kind of talk, for heaven's sake! We shall suffer for it, depend on it."

"I don't know what's the matter with me to-night," he replied, "but my brain is running upon all sorts of weird and awful thoughts. I feel as if I could write a story like Hoffman, to-night, if I were only master of a literary style."

"Well, if we are going to be Hoffmanesque in our talk, I'm off to bed. Opium and nightmares should never be brought together. How sultry it is! Good-night, Hammond."

"Good-night, Harry. Pleasant dreams to you."

"To you, gloomy wretch, afreets, ghouls, and enchanters."

We parted, and each sought his respective chamber. I undressed quickly and got into bed, taking with me, according to my usual custom, a book, over which I generally read myself to sleep. I opened the volume as soon as I had laid my head upon the pillow, and instantly flung it to the other side of the room. It was Goudon's "History of Monsters," a curious French work, which I had lately imported from Paris,

but which, in the state of mind I had then reached, was anything but an agreeable companion. I resolved to go to sleep at once; so, turning down my gas until nothing but a little blue point of light glimmered on the top of the tube, I composed myself to rest.

The room was in total darkness. The atom of gas that still remained alight did not illuminate a distance of three inches round the burner. I desperately drew my arm across my eyes, as if to shut out even the darkness, and tried to think of nothing. It was in vain. The confounded themes touched on by Hammond in the garden kept obtruding themselves on my brain. I battled against them. I erected ramparts of would-be blankness of intellect to keep them out. They still crowded upon me. While I was lying still as a corpse, hoping that by a perfect physical inaction I should hasten mental repose, an awful incident occurred. A Something dropped, as it seemed, from the ceiling, plumb upon my chest, and the next instant I felt two bony hands encircling my throat, endeavoring to choke me.

I am no coward, and am possessed of considerable physical strength. The suddenness of the attack, instead of stunning me, strung every nerve to its highest tension. My body acted from instinct, before my brain had time to realize the terrors of my position. In an instant I wound two muscular arms around the creature, and squeezed it, with all the strength of despair, against my chest. In a few seconds the bony hands that had fastened on my throat loosened their hold, and I was free to breathe once more. Then commenced a struggle of awful intensity. Immersed in the most profound darkness, totally ignorant of the nature of the Thing by which I was so suddenly attacked, finding my grasp slipping every moment, by reason, it seemed to me, of the entire nakedness of my assailant, bitten with sharp teeth in the shoulder, neck, and chest, having every moment to protect my throat against a pair of sinewy, agile hands, which my utmost efforts could not confine—these were a combination of circumstances to combat which required all the strength, skill, and courage that I possessed.

At last, after a silent, deadly, exhausting struggle, I got my assailant under by a series of incredible efforts of strength. Once pinned, with my knee on what I made out to be its chest, I knew that I was victor. I rested for a moment to breathe. I heard the creature beneath me panting in the darkness, and felt the violent throbbing of a heart. It was apparently as exhausted as I was; that was one comfort. At this moment I remembered that I usually placed under my pillow, before going to bed, a large yellow silk pocket handkerchief. I felt for it instantly; it was there. In a few seconds

more I had, after a fashion, pinioned the creature's arms.

I now felt tolerably secure. There was nothing more to be done but to turn on the gas, and, having first seen what my midnight assailant was like, arouse the household. I will confess to being actuated by a certain pride in not giving the alarm before; I wished to make the capture alone and unaided.

Never losing my hold for an instant, I slipped from the bed to the floor, dragging my captive with me. I had but a few steps to make to reach the gas burner; these I made with the greatest caution, holding the creature in a grip like a vise. At last I got within arm's length of the tiny speck of blue light which told me where the gas burner lay. Quick as lightning I released my grasp with one hand and let on the full flood of light. Then I turned to look at my captive.

I cannot even attempt to give any definition of my sensations the instant after I turned on the gas. I suppose I must have shrieked with terror, for in less than a minute afterward my room was crowded with the inmates of the house. I shudder now as I think of that awful moment. *I saw nothing!* Yes; I had one arm firmly clasped round a breathing, panting, corporeal shape, my other hand gripped with all its strength a throat as warm, and apparently fleshly, as my own; and yet, with this living substance in my grasp, with its body pressed against my own, and all in the bright glare of a large jet of gas, I absolutely beheld nothing! Not even an outline—a vapor!

I do not, even at this hour, realize the situation in which I found myself. I cannot recall the astounding incident thoroughly. Imagination in vain tries to compass the awful paradox.

It breathed. I felt its warm breath upon my cheek. It struggled fiercely. It had hands. They clutched me. Its skin was smooth, like my own. There it lay, pressed close up against me, solid as stone—and yet utterly invisible!

I wonder that I did not faint or go mad on the instant. Some wonderful instinct must have sustained me; for, absolutely, in place of loosening my hold on the terrible Enigma, I seemed to gain an additional strength in my moment of horror, and tightened my grasp with such wonderful force that I felt the creature shivering with agony.

Just then Hammond entered my room at the head of the household. As soon as he beheld my face—which, I suppose, must have been an awful sight to look at—he hastened forward, crying, "Great heaven, Harry! what has happened?"

"Hammond! Hammond!" I cried, "come here. O, this is awful! I have been attacked in bed by something or other,

which I have hold of; but I can't see it—I can't see it!"

Hammond, doubtless struck by the unfeigned horror expressed in my countenance, made one or two steps forward with an anxious yet puzzled expression. A very audible titter burst from the remainder of my visitors. This suppressed laughter made me furious. To laugh at a human being in my position! It was the worst species of cruelty. *Now*, I can understand why the appearance of a man struggling violently, as it would seem, with an airy nothing, and calling for assistance against a vision, should have appeared ludicrous. *Then*, so great was my rage against the mocking crowd that had I the power I would have stricken them dead where they stood.

"Hammond! Hammond!" I cried again, despairingly, "for God's sake come to me. I can hold the—the Thing but a short while longer. It is overpowering me. Help me! Help me!"

"Harry," whispered Hammond, approaching me, "you have been smoking too much opium."

"I swear to you, Hammond, that this is no vision," I answered, in the same low tone. "Don't you see how it shakes my whole frame with its struggles? If you don't believe me, convince yourself. Feel it—touch it."

Hammond advanced and laid his hand in the spot I indicated. A wild cry of horror burst from him. He had felt it!

In a moment he had discovered somewhere in my room a long piece of cord, and was the next instant winding it and knotting it about the body of the unseen being that I clasped in my arms.

"Harry," he said, in a hoarse, agitated voice, for, though he preserved his presence of mind, he was deeply moved, "Harry, it's all safe now. You may let go, old fellow, if you're tired. The Thing can't move."

I was utterly exhausted, and I gladly loosed my hold.

Hammond stood holding the ends of the cord that bound the Invisible, twisted round his hand, while before him, self-supporting as it were, he beheld a rope laced and interlaced, and stretching tightly around a vacant space. I never saw a man look so thoroughly stricken with awe. Nevertheless his face expressed all the courage and determination which I knew him to possess. His lips, although white, were set firmly, and one could perceive at a glance that, although stricken with fear, he was not daunted.

The confusion that ensued among the guests of the house who were witnesses of this extraordinary scene between Hammond and myself—who beheld the pantomime of binding this struggling Something—who beheld me almost sinking from physical exhaustion when my task of jailer was over

—the confusion and terror that took possession of the bystanders, when they saw all this, was beyond description. The weaker ones fled from the apartment. The few who remained clustered near the door and could not be induced to approach Hammond and his Charge. Still incredulity broke out through their terror. They had not the courage to satisfy themselves, and yet they doubted. It was in vain that I begged of some of the men to come near and convince themselves by touch of the existence in that room of a living being which was invisible. They were incredulous, but did not dare to undeceive themselves. How could a solid, living, breathing body be invisible, they asked. My reply was this. I gave a sign to Hammond, and both of us—conquering our fearful repugnance to touch the invisible creature—lifted it from the ground, manacled as it was, and took it to my bed. Its weight was about that of a boy of fourteen.

"Now, my friends," I said, as Hammond and myself held the creature suspended over the bed, "I can give you self-evident proof that here is a solid, ponderable body, which, nevertheless, you cannot see. Be good enough to watch the surface of the bed attentively."

I was astonished at my own courage in treating this strange event so calmly; but I had recovered from my first terror, and felt a sort of scientific pride in the affair, which dominated every other feeling.

The eyes of the bystanders were immediately fixed on my bed. At a given signal Hammond and I let the creature fall. There was the dull sound of a heavy body alighting on a soft mass. The timbers of the bed creaked. A deep impression marked itself distinctly on the pillow, and on the bed itself. The crowd who witnessed this gave a low cry, and rushed from the room. Hammond and I were left alone with our Mystery.

We remained silent for some time, listening to the low, irregular breathing of the creature on the bed, and watching the rustle of the bedclothes as it impotently struggled to free itself from confinement. Then Hammond spoke.

"Harry, this is awful."

"Ay, awful."

"But not unaccountable."

"Not unaccountable! What do you mean? Such a thing has never occurred since the birth of the world. I know not what to think, Hammond. God grant that I am not mad, and that this is not an insane fantasy!"

"Let us reason a little, Harry. Here is a solid body which we touch, but which we cannot see. The fact is so unusual that it strikes us with terror. Is there no parallel, though, for such a phenomenon? Take a piece of pure glass. It is

tangible and transparent. A certain chemical coarseness is all that prevents its being so entirely transparent as to be totally invisible. It is not *theoretically impossible,* mind you, to make a glass which shall not reflect a single ray of light—a glass so pure and homogeneous in its atoms that the rays from the sun will pass through it as they do through the air, refracted but not reflected. We do not see the air, and yet we feel it."

"That's all very well, Hammond, but these are inanimate substances. Glass does not breathe, air does not breathe. *This* thing has a heart that palpitates—a will that moves it—lungs that play and inspire and respire."

"You forget the phenomena of which we have so often heard of late," answered the Doctor, gravely. "At the meetings called 'spirit circles,' invisible hands have been thrust into the hands of those persons round the table—warm, fleshly hands that seemed to pulsate with mortal life."

"What? Do you think, then, that this thing is—"

"I don't know what it is," was the solemn reply; "but please the gods I will, with your assistance, thoroughly investigate it."

We watched together, smoking many pipes, all night long, by the bedside of the unearthly being that tossed and panted until it was apparently wearied out. Then we learned by the low, regular breathing that it slept.

The next morning the house was all astir. The boarders congregated on the landing outside my room, and Hammond and myself were lions. We had to answer a thousand questions as to the state of our extraordinary prisoner, for as yet not one person in the house except ourselves could be induced to set foot in the apartment.

The creature was awake. This was evidenced by the convulsive manner in which the bedclothes were moved in its efforts to escape. There was something truly terrible in beholding, as it were, those second-hand indications of the terrible writhings and agonized struggles for liberty which themselves were invisible.

Hammond and myself had racked our brains during the long night to discover some means by which we might realize the shape and general appearance of the Enigma. As well as we could make out by passing our hands over the creature's form, its outlines and lineaments were human. There was a mouth; a round, smooth head without hair; a nose, which, however, was little elevated above the cheeks; and its hands and feet felt like those of a boy. At first we thought of placing the being on a smooth surface and tracing its outline with chalk, as shoemakers trace the outline of the foot.

This plan was given up as being of no value. Such an outline would give not the slightest idea of its conformation.

A happy thought struck me. We would take a cast of it in plaster of Paris. This would give us the solid figure, and satisfy all our wishes. But how to do it? The movements of the creature would disturb the setting of the plastic covering, and distort the mould. Another thought. Why not give it chloroform? It had respiratory organs—that was evident by its breathing. Once reduced to a state of insensibility, we could do with it what we would. Doctor X—— was sent for; and after the worthy physician had recovered from the first shock of amazement, he proceeded to administer the chloroform. In three minutes afterward we were enabled to remove the fetters from the creature's body, and a modeller was busily engaged in covering the invisible form with the moist clay. In five minutes more we had a mould, and before evening a rough facsimile of the Mystery. It was shaped like a man—distorted, uncouth, and horrible, but still a man. It was small, not over four feet and some inches in height, and its limbs revealed a muscular development that was unparalleled. Its face surpassed in hideousness anything I had ever seen. Gustave Doré, or Callot, or Tony Johannot never conceived anything so horrible. There is a face in one of the latter's illustrations to *Un Voyage où il vous plaira,* which somewhat approaches the countenance of this creature, but does not equal it. It was the physiognomy of what I should fancy a ghoul might be. It looked as if it was capable of feeding on human flesh.

Having satisfied our curiosity, and bound everyone in the house to secrecy, it became a question what was to be done with our Enigma? It was impossible that we should keep such a horror in our house; it was equally impossible that such an awful being should be let loose upon the world. I confess that I would have gladly voted for the creature's destruction. But who would shoulder the responsibility? Who would undertake the execution of this horrible semblance of a human being? Day after day this question was deliberated gravely. The boarders all left the house. Mrs. Moffat was in despair, and threatened Hammond and myself with all sorts of legal penalties if we did not remove the Horror. Our answer was, "We will go if you like, but we decline taking this creature with us. Remove it yourself if you please. It appeared in your house. On you the responsibility rests." To this there was, of course, no answer. Mrs. Moffat could not obtain for love or money a person who would even approach the Mystery.

The most singular part of the affair was that we were entirely ignorant of what the creature habitually fed on. Every-

thing in the way of nutriment that we could think of was placed before it, but was never touched. It was awful to stand by, day after day, and see the clothes toss, and hear the hard breathing, and know that it was starving.

Ten, twelve days, a fortnight passed, and it still lived. The pulsations of the heart, however, were daily growing fainter, and had now nearly ceased. It was evident that the creature was dying for want of sustenance. While this terrible life struggle was going on, I felt miserable. I could not sleep. Horrible as the creature was, it was pitiful to think of the pangs it was suffering.

At last it died. Hammond and I found it cold and stiff one morning in the bed. The heart had ceased to beat, the lungs to inspire. We hastened to bury it in the garden. It was a strange funeral, the dropping of that viewless corpse into the damp hole. The cast of its form I gave to Doctor X——, who keeps it in his museum in Tenth Street.

As I am on the eve of a long journey from which I may not return, I have drawn up this narrative of an event the most singular that has ever come to my knowledge.

THE INVISIBLE DOVE DANCER OF STRATHPHEEN ISLAND

by John Collier

I CAME AGAIN to Doyle's Hotel, at Ballymalley in Connemara, and unpacked my bags in a bedroom smelling of brine and damp towels. A little heap of sand lay in the grate, spilled out from someone else's shoes. Outside there was the wind and the dunes, and a sea already ragged with night. Downstairs was the bar.

Doyle was standing behind the bar, holding forth about Strathpheen Island. "And here," said he to his listener, "here is the gentleman to tell you it's the wonder of the world for the sight of the wild sea-birds, and the breeding places of them."

"No doubt about it," said I.

"A gentleman from America," said Doyle to me, indicating the stranger. "And him touring around, mourning over the graves of his forefathers."

The American gave me a big handshake. "Thomas P. Rymer," said he. "And I want to tell you, sir, this is the sort

of place we read about in story-books, and can't altogether believe in."

"I'm only a visitor, myself," said I. "It's a romantic corner."

"Romance," said he. "Don't talk to me about romance. I'm what we call a hard-headed business man, but what this old Emerald Isle has done for me in the way of romance——! Nothing immoral, of course. Don't get me wrong."

"Is Mrs. Rymer with you?" said I.

"No, sir," said he. "I'm sorry to have to tell you, there isn't a Mrs. Rymer. Now don't laugh at me as a sentimentalist, or idealist, but a man in my line of business gets mighty particular about what I might call the finesse of the female form. Has to be. Foundation garments—girdles, corsets, brassières. And, well, I've not seen just that bit of perfection—— You know what I mean."

"Well, you won't see her on Strathpheen Island," said I. "All the same, why don't we go together? We'll get the boots here, the fellow they call old Danny, to help with the boat. Doyle'll pack us a bit of lunch."

"Now that's a grand idea," said he.

"Fine!" said I. "Tomorrow, then, if the weather's right."

It was. The sea was as flat as a mill-pond and as blue as a cornflower. We soon got out the creaky old boat, and were off on the three-mile trip to the island. Rymer was delighted. "To me, as a business man," said he, "this is something like a bit of *Man of Aran* got into the *March of Time*. Boy! Look at those rocks! Look at that colour! Look at the birds!"

Up they got. The whole blue sky was full of winging and crying. "Come ashore," said I. "This is just a sample."

"Just a minute," said Rymer, standing quite still on the beach. "I'm just trying to hear what this little out-of-the-world islet is saying to me. Now don't start calling me poetical, but if ever I came to a place where the concentrated atmosphere and romance seemed to have a special message for me—this is it. Is this island by any chance in the market?"

"I don't think so," said I. "In fact, I know it isn't."

"That's tough," said he. "Never mind. Maybe it's just a feeling I had. I don't know if you've ever felt you've been sort of missing something all your life? You want to get out, make a break—I don't know. Let's get on."

We went on, through the bracken and the bluebells, where the terns' eggs were lying about on every side, round by the cliffs, and over to the flatter side of the island. By the time we got there, we were ready for lunch.

We were just finishing, when Rymer, looking over behind me, broke off in the middle of a sentence, and looked, and stared. "What is it?" said I, turning round.

"What in God's name," said he, "are those birds there? What are they doing?"

"Ah, 'tis them island pigeons the gentleman means," said old Danny. "And a surprising sort of bird entirely."

"It certainly is," said I. For there were five white pigeons, all close together in the air, four of them swooping down and diving in and out, quite near the ground, and the fifth hovering and fluttering, more like a hawk than a pigeon, and staying always in the middle.

"And I'll be telling you the reason why," said Danny. " 'Tis that old farm-house, and the walls of it standing to this day, just over the rise there. Now the farmer's wife, I've heard tell, was the one for keeping every sort of dove and pigeon, the white ones, and the fan-tailed ones, and the hairy-legged ones, and them that tumble in the air. And now the folks are dead, and the house in ruins, and no farm on the island, and them birds have mixed and mingled with the wild pigeons of these parts, and many a time they'll be throwing up a white one, and one with a queer way of flying."

"Very queer," said I.

Rymer seized me by the arm. "Don't think I'm kinda crazy," said he, "but—but—I know the measurements. It's my line of business. I can't see her, but—there's a dove-dancer among those birds."

"A dove-dancer?" said Danny. "Would you be telling us what a dove-dancer may be?"

I told him of the World's Fair and its crowning symbol of peace and freedom.

"Would you believe it?" said he. "Flip over that bit of a stone, your honour, that lies against your hand. Make the brazen hussy skip a bit higher."

"Don't on your life!" cried Rymer. "Have you no reverence, man?"

"You're right," said Danny. "I'm thinking she may be one of the Good People and all—saints defend us!"

"Thirty-four to the fraction of an inch!" said Rymer.

"Thirty-four?" said I. "Thirty-four what?"

"Those hips," said he. "Thirty-four—— twenty-five—— thirty-five—— Boy, it's perfection!"

"Listen," I said. "You've got a touch of the sun. There's nothing but the pigeons there."

"Watch their flight," said he. "I'm in the corset and girdle line; I got an eye for the measurements. I've been to the World's Fair. I know a dove-dancer when I see one, my boy —and even when I don't. And can she dance? What a peach! What a honey! Boy, is she the dove-dancing Venus of all time! Look, they're moving away!"

"So they are!" cried Danny. "And all in formation, like a flock of the government aeroplanes."

"Excuse me, please," said Rymer. "I can't pass this up. I can't let that wonderful little invisible lady go right out of my life like this."

With that he sprang up, and began to lumber after the pigeons, which increased their pace. Too astonished to move, we saw him trip, fall, pick himself up again, and rush after the retreating birds faster than before. Soon he disappeared over the little rise.

"Did you ever see the like of that?" said Danny.

"Look here," I said. "He may get over by the cliffs. I'll go round to cut him off. You follow him in case he goes the other way."

I hurried round to the cliff edge, but there was no sign of Rymer. After waiting a long time I saw Danny come climbing up from below.

"He's stretched out under a rock, poor man," said he. "With his wind gone, and the heart broken in him, and saying over his numbers like a reverend father telling of his beads, and measuring with his hands like a fisherman, and crying like a child. Will it be a madness on him, your honour, or was he after seeing something he couldn't see entirely?"

"It must be the sun," said I. "We'd better get him home."

We clambered down to where Rymer lay. He was in a piteous state. "I'm beat," said he. "My approach was all wrong. Rushing at her like that! She got the wrong impression."

"You come home," said I.

We rowed home in silence. When we landed, he looked back at the island. "If she'd given me just a chance!" said he. "Just a chance to explain!"

"You go up to your room," said I, "and lie down."

"That's what I mean to do," said he. "That's all I'm fit for."

He stayed in his room all that day, and all the next, and the day after. On the third day I was out for a while. When I came back I asked Doyle if all was well.

"Devil a bit of it," said Doyle, "for he's keening like a woman over the dead."

I listened at the foot of the stairs. "That's all right," said I, coming back. "That's just his version of a song—*'Night and day, you are the one.'* There's a note of optimism at the end of it. I've an idea he's bucking up."

Sure enough, we soon heard his foot on the stairs. He was in the highest of spirits, a tremendous reaction. "Well, pal," he said, "I'm afraid I've been a bit of a dead weight the last two or three days. She had me knocked right out, and that's the truth, brother. I didn't have an idea left in me. Mr. Doyle, I want you to hunt me up some canes or osiers

or something, and I want your man Danny to help me build a little contraption I got in mind."

I gave Doyle the wink to humour him, and he took the particulars of what was wanted.

"You see the idea?" said Rymer to me. "I make me these two sort of cages, like the bird traps we used to make in the Midwest when I was a boy. In the little one, I put some boiled corn. That's for the doves. The big one's for her."

"What's the bait there?" said I.

"She's a woman," said he. "Divine, if you like, but still a *femme*." With that he pulled out a leather case from his pocket and opened it to display a very handsome little wrist-watch, set in diamonds. "Picked it up in Paris," said he modestly. "Thought of presenting it to a young lady in Cleveland. Thirty-six hips, though. And here we have thirty-four, twenty-five, thirty-five! So this goes for bait, you see. It'll fetch her. And when I see it picked up in the air, I pull the strings, and I have them goddam doves in one cage and her in the other. Then I can talk. Nothing immoral, mind you. I want to proposition that little lady to be Mrs. Thomas P. Rymer."

"But if you can't see her——" said I.

"Wait," said he, "till I get the Max Factor Studios on her. A sort of simonizing job, only in technicolour, if you get me. It'll be," said he, bursting into song, "'*Oh, say can you see, by the dawn's early light*——' Nothing unpatriotic, mind you, only it's kind of appropriate." Still singing, he went out to the wood-shed, where I heard hammering going on for the rest of the day.

Next morning, as I was shaving, I happened to glance out of the window, and there I saw the boat pulling out, with Danny at the oars, Rymer in the bow, and two vast and crazy contraptions swaying on the stern. I called out; Rymer waved his hand, and they went on toward the island.

That evening, as I approached the hotel, I saw the boat pulled up on the beach, and hurried in to find Rymer. He was sitting in the bar, with a big whiskey in front of him, looking very grim. "What happened?" said I.

"Don't ask me what happened," said he curtly. Then, relenting, "I'll tell you," said he. "I'm afraid that little lady's out to make a monkey of me, and I don't like it."

"What did she do?" I asked.

"I had Danny land me on that island," said he, "and pull out and wait off shore so as not to crowd her. I fixed up my cages and my baits, and I got behind a rock, and I waited awhile. Then I saw those birds coming along, swooping and diving at top speed—I reckon it was a marvellous number—and the old hen in the middle fluttering her damned-

est to keep up with them. When they saw the traps, they slowed up. I could tell she was interested."

"Go on," said I.

"Well," said he, "they visited the small trap first, and the top left-hand dove flew down and picked up bits of the corn and fed all the others."

"I'll be damned!" said I.

"Then," said he, "they moved over to where the big cage was, and the dexter dove flew in and picked up the wristwatch in its beak, and she did a sort of humoresque dance with it, and threw it over the cliff into the sea in front of my eyes. What do you think of that?"

"That's pretty tough," I said.

"It's downright inconsiderate!" said he, banging on the table. "And if that dame thinks she's going to get away with it with Thomas P. Rymer, well—— Landlord, I want another highball."

"Why don't you just give her the air?" said I.

"I'd have given her the world," said he. "And I would yet. But she's gotta see reason. I'll make her listen to me somehow. Let me get her within reach of my arms, that's all! Landlord, I'll have a bottle of this hooch up in my room, I reckon. I gotta do a bit of thinking. Good night, pal. I'm no company. She's roused up the old cave man in me, that's how it is. I'm not claiming to be any sort of sheik, but this little Irish wonder lady's gotta learn she can't make a monkey of a straightforward American business man. Good night!"

Most of the night I heard him tramping up and down his room. It was pretty late when I got to sleep, and when I did I slept heavily and woke late. I went downstairs and looked about for my friend. "Where's Mr. Rymer?" said I to Doyle.

"God alone knows," said he. "Were you not hearing the great cry he gave in the grey of the dawn?"

"What?" said I.

"I woke up," said Doyle, "and heard him muttering. Suddenly he lets a yell out of him: 'Marriage license! That'll get her!' And then he went silent entirely, and I dropped off to sleep again. And when I came down this morning, he was missing. And his car was missing. There was a note on the bar here: 'Back in a few days.' "

"He's gone to Galway," said I, "to get his confounded license."

"Like enough," said Doyle. "It's a great affliction, to be sure."

Sure enough, after a few days I was wakened in the early morning by the sound of a car driving up. I looked out in the half-light and recognized the impressive lines of Rymer's

huge American roadster. At breakfast time I hurried downstairs, eager to have a word with him.

I met Doyle in the passage. "So Mr. Rymer's come back?" I said.

"He's come," said Doyle. "And he's gone."

"Gone? Where?"

"It must be to the island," said Doyle. "He must have drove up in the night and took the boat out right away. I've sent Danny for the loan of Murphy's boat from the fishing lodge. I told him to row straight out to the island, to see what's happened to the poor unfortunate gentleman."

There were no field glasses in the place. We waited impatiently till Danny came in sight, rowing the borrowed boat and towing the other. We saw that Danny was alone.

"Did you not find him?" shouted Doyle.

"Never the hide nor hair of him," said Danny, making fast the painter. "Sure it was one of the Good People he was after, right enough. The poor man has vanished entirely."

"Could he have fallen over a cliff?" said I.

"I see'd the pigeons," said Danny, shaking his head. "Four of 'em I saw, sitting each alone in a bush, just round the place we first saw them, and the creatures were mourning."

"And the fifth?" said I.

"The misfortunate bird was lying on the grass in the middle," said Danny, "with its neck wrung."

THE VANISHING AMERICAN

by Charles Beaumont

HE GOT THE NOTION shortly after 5 o'clock; at least, a part of him did, a small part hidden down beneath all the conscious cells—*he* didn't get the notion until some time later. At exactly 5 P.M. the bell rang. At two minutes after, the chairs began to empty. There was the vast slamming of drawers, the straightening of rulers, the sound of bones snapping and mouths yawning and feet shuffling tiredly.

Mr. Minchell relaxed. He rubbed his hands together and relaxed and thought how nice it would be to get up and go home, like the others. But of course there was the tape, only three-quarters finished. He would have to stay.

He stretched and said good night to the people that filed

past him. As usual, no one answered. When they had gone, he set his fingers pecking again over the keyboard. The click-clicking grew loud in the suddenly still office, but Mr. Minchell did not notice. He was lost in the work. Soon, he knew, it would be time for the totaling, and his pulse quickened at the thought of this.

He lit a cigarette. Heart tapping, he drew in smoke and released it.

He extended his right hand and rested his index and middle fingers on the metal bar marked TOTAL. A mile-long ribbon of paper lay gathered on the desk, strangely festive. He glanced at it, then at the manifest sheet. The figure 18037448 was circled in red. He pulled breath into his lungs, locked it there; then he closed his eyes and pressed the TOTAL bar.

There was a smooth low metallic grinding, followed by absolute silence.

Mr. Minchell opened one eye, dragged it from the ceiling on down to the adding machine.

He groaned, slightly.

The total read: 18037447.

"God." He stared at the figure and thought of the 53 pages of manifest, the 3,000 separate rows of figures that would have to be checked again. "God."

The day was lost, now. Irretrievably. It was too late to do anything. Madge would have supper waiting, and F. J. didn't approve of overtime; also—

He looked at the total again. At the last two digits.

He sighed. 47. And thought, startled: Today, for the Lord's sake, is my birthday! Today I am 40—what? 47. And that explains the mistake, I suppose. Subconscious kind of thing . . .

Slowly he got up and looked around the deserted office.

Then he went to the dressing room and got his hat and his coat and put them on, carefully.

"Pushing fifty now . . ."

The outside hall was dark. Mr. Minchell walked softly to the elevator and punched the *down* button. "Forty-seven," he said, aloud; then, almost immediately, the light turned red and the thick door slid back noisily. The elevator operator, a bird-thin, tan-fleshed girl, swiveled her head, looking up and down the hall. "Going down," she said.

"Yes," Mr. Minchell said, stepping forward.

"Going down." The girl clicked her tongue and muttered, "Damn kids." She gave the lattice gate a tired push and moved the smooth wooden-handled lever in its slot.

Odd, Mr. Minchell decided, was the word for this particular girl. He wished now that he had taken the stairs. Being alone with only one other person in an elevator had always made

him nervous: now it made him very nervous. He felt the tension growing. When it became unbearable, he cleared his throat and said, "Long day."

The girl said nothing. She had a surly look, and she seemed to be humming something deep in her throat.

Mr. Minchell closed his eyes. In less than a minute—during which time he dreamed of the cable snarling, of the car being caught between floors, of himself trying to make small talk with the odd girl for six straight hours—he opened his eyes again and walked into the lobby, briskly.

The gate slammed.

He turned and started for the doorway. Then he paused, feeling a sharp increase in his heartbeat. A large, red-faced, magnificently groomed man of middle years stood directly beyond the glass, talking with another man.

Mr. Minchell pushed through the door, with effort. He's seen me now, he thought. If he asks any questions, though, or anything, I'll just say I didn't put it on the time card; that ought to make it all right. . . .

He nodded and smiled at the large man. "Good night, Mr. Diemel."

The man looked up briefly, blinked, and returned to his conversation.

Mr. Minchell felt a burning come into his face. He hurried on down the street. Now the notion—though it was not even that yet, strictly: it was more a vague feeling—swam up from the bottom of his brain. He remembered that he had not spoken directly to F. J. Diemel for over ten years, beyond a good morning. . . .

Ice-cold shadows fell off the tall buildings, staining the streets, now. Crowds of shoppers moved along the pavement like juggernauts, exhaustedly, but with great determination. Mr. Minchell looked at them. They all had furtive appearances, it seemed to him, suddenly, even the children, as if each was fleeing from some hideous crime. They hurried along, staring.

But not, Mr. Minchell noticed, at him. Through him, yes. Past him. As the elevator operator had done, and now F. J. And had anyone said good night?

He pulled up his coat collar and walked toward the drugstore, thinking. He was 47 years old. At the current life-expectancy rate, he might have another seventeen or eighteen years left. And then death.

If you're not dead already.

He paused and for some reason remembered a story he'd once read in a magazine. Something about a man who dies and whose ghost takes up his duties, or something; anyway,

the man didn't know he was dead—that was it. And at the end of the story, he runs into his own corpse.

Which is pretty absurd: he glanced down at his body. Ghosts don't wear $36 suits, nor do they have trouble pushing doors open, nor do their corns ache like blazes, and what the devil is wrong with me today?

He shook his head.

It was the tape, of course, and the fact that it was his birthday. That was why his mind was behaving so foolishly.

He went into the drugstore. It was an immense place, packed with people. He walked to the cigar counter, trying not to feel intimidated, and reached into his pocket. A small man elbowed in front of him and called loudly: "Gimme coupla nickels, will you, Jack?" The clerk scowled and scooped the change out of his cash register. The small man scurried off. Others took his place. Mr. Minchell thrust his arm forward. "A pack of Luckies, please," he said. The clerk whipped his fingers around a pile of cellophaned packages and, looking elsewhere, droned: "Twenty-six." Mr. Minchell put his twenty-six cents exactly on the glass shelf. The clerk shoved the cigarettes toward the edge and picked up the money, deftly. Not once did he lift his eyes.

Mr. Minchell pocketed the Luckies and went back out of the store. He was perspiring now, slightly, despite the chill wind. The word *ridiculous* lodged in his mind and stayed there. Ridiculous, yes, for Heaven's sake. Still, he thought—now just answer the question—isn't it true? Can you honestly say that that clerk saw you?

Or that anyone saw you today?

Swallowing dryly, he walked another two blocks, always in the direction of the subway, and went into a bar called the Chez When. One drink would not hurt, one small, stiff, steadying shot.

The bar was a gloomy place, and not very warm, but there was a good crowd. Mr. Minchell sat down on a stool and folded his hands. The bartender was talking animatedly with an old woman, laughing with boisterous good humor from time to time. Mr. Minchell waited. Minutes passed. The bartender looked up several times, but never made a move to indicate that he had seen a customer.

Mr. Minchell looked at his old gray overcoat, the humbly floraled tie, the cheap sharkskin suit-cloth, and became aware of the extent to which he detested this ensemble. He sat there and detested his clothes for a long time. Then he glanced around. The bartender was wiping a glass, slowly.

All right, the hell with you. I'll go somewhere else.

He slid off the stool. Just as he was about to turn he saw

the mirrored wall, pink-tinted and curved. He stopped, peering. Then he almost ran out of the bar.

Cold wind went into his head.

Ridiculous. The mirror was curved, you jackass. How do you expect to see yourself in curved mirrors?

He walked past high buildings, and now past the library and the stone lion he had once, long ago, named King Richard; and he did not look at the lion, because he'd always wanted to ride the lion, ever since he was a child, and he'd promised himself he would do that, but he never did.

He hurried on to the subway, took the stairs by twos, and clattered across the platform in time to board the Express.

It roared and thundered. Mr. Minchell held onto the strap and kept himself from staring. No one watched him. No one even glanced at him when he pushed his way to the door and went out onto the empty platform.

He waited. Then the train was gone, and he was alone.

He walked up the stairs. It was fully night now, a soft, unshadowed darkness. He thought about the day and the strange things that were gouging into his mind and thought about all this as he turned down a familiar street which led to his familiar apartment.

The door opened.

His wife was in the kitchen, he could see. Her apron flashed across the arch, and back, and across. He called: "Madge, I'm home."

Madge did not answer. Her movements were regular. Jimmy was sitting at the table, drooling over a glass of pop, whispering to himself.

"I said—" Mr. Minchell began.

"Jimmy, get up and go to the bathroom, you hear? I've got your water drawn."

Jimmy promptly broke into tears. He jumped off the chair and ran past Mr. Minchell into the bedroom. The door slammed viciously.

"Madge."

Madge Minchell came into the room, tired and lined and heavy. Her eyes did not waver. She went into the bedroom, and there was a silence; then a sharp slapping noise, and a yelling.

Mr. Minchell walked to the bathroom, fighting down the small terror. He closed the door and locked it and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. Ridiculous, he thought, and ridiculous and ridiculous. I am making something utterly foolish out of nothing. All I have to do is look in the mirror, and—

He held the handkerchief to his lips. It was difficult to breathe.

Then he knew that he was afraid, more so than ever before in a lifetime of being afraid.

Look at it this way, Minchell: why shouldn't *you vanish?*

"Young man, just you wait until your father gets here!"

He pushed the handkerchief against his mouth and leaned on the door and gasped.

"What do you mean, vanish?"

Go on, take a look. You'll see what I mean.

He tried to swallow, couldn't. Tried to wet his lips, they stayed dry.

"Lord—"

He slitted his eyes and walked to the shaving mirror and looked in.

His mouth fell open.

The mirror reflected nothing. It held nothing. It was dull and gray and empty.

Mr. Minchell stared at the glass, put out his hand, drew it back hastily.

He squinted. Inches away. There was a form now: vague, indistinct, featureless: but a form.

"Lord," he said. He understood why the elevator girl hadn't seen him, and why F. J. hadn't answered him, and why the clerk at the drugstore and the bartender and Madge . . .

"I'm not dead."

Of course you're not dead—not that way.

"—tan your hide, Jimmy Minchell, when he gets home."

Mr. Minchell suddenly wheeled and clicked the lock. He rushed out of the steam-filled bathroom, across the room, down the stairs, into the street, into the cool night.

A block from home he slowed to a walk.

Invisible! He said the word over and over, in a half-voice. He said it and tried to control the panic that pulled at his legs, and at his brain, and filled him.

Why?

A fat woman and a little girl passed by. Neither of them looked up. He started to call out and checked himself. No. That wouldn't do any good. There was no question about it now. He was invisible.

He walked on. As he did, forgotten things returned; they came and they left, too fast. He couldn't hold onto them. He could only watch, and remember. Himself as a youngster, reading: the Oz books, and Tarzan, and Mr. Wells. Himself, going to the University, wanting to teach, and meeting Madge; then not planning any more, and Madge changing, and all the dreams put away. For later. For the right time. And then Jimmy—little strange Jimmy, who ate filth and picked his nose and watched television, who never read books, never; Jimmy, his son, whom he would never understand . . .

He walked by the edge of the park now. Then on past the park, through a maze of familiar and unfamiliar neighborhoods. Walking, remembering, looking at the people and feeling pain because he knew that they could not see him, not now or ever again, because he had vanished. He walked and remembered and felt pain.

All the stagnant dreams came back. Fully. The trip to Italy he'd planned. The open sports car, bad weather be damned. The first-hand knowledge that would tell him whether he did or did not approve of bull fighting. The book . . .

Then something occurred to him. It occurred to Mr. Minchell that he had not just suddenly vanished, like that, after all. No; he had been vanishing gradually for a long while. Every time he said good morning to that bastard Diemel he got a little harder to see. Every time he put on this horrible suit he faded. The process of disappearing was set into action every time he brought his pay-check home and turned it over to Madge, every time he kissed her, or listened to her vicious unending complaints, or decided against buying that novel, or punched the adding machine he hated so, or . . .

Certainly.

He had vanished for Diemel and the others in the office years ago. And for strangers right afterwards. Now even Madge and Jimmy couldn't see him. And he could barely see himself, even in a mirror.

It made terrible sense to him. *Why* shouldn't *you disappear?* Well, why, indeed? There wasn't any very good reason, actually. None. And this, in a nightmarish sort of a way, made it as brutally logical as a perfect tape.

Then he thought about going back to work tomorrow and the next day and the day after that. He'd have to, of course. He couldn't let Madge and Jimmy starve; and, besides, what else would he do? It wasn't as if anything important had changed. He'd go on punching the clock and saying good morning to people who didn't see him, and he'd run the tapes and come home beat, nothing altered, and some day he'd die and that would be that.

All at once he felt tired.

He sat down on a cement step and sighed. Distantly he realized that he had come to the library. He sat there, watching the people, feeling the tiredness seep through him, thickly.

Then he looked up.

Above him, black and regal against the sky, stood the huge stone lion. Its mouth was open, and the great head was raised proudly.

Mr. Minchell smiled. King Richard. Memories scattered in his mind: old King Richard, well, my God, here we are.

He got to his feet. Fifty thousand times, at least, he had

passed this spot, and every time he had experienced that instant of wild craving. Less so of late, but still, had it ever completely gone? He was amazed to find that now the childish desire was welling up again, stronger than ever before. Urgently.

He rubbed his cheek and stood there for several minutes. It's the most ridiculous thing in the world, he thought, and I must be going out of my mind, and that must explain everything. But, he inquired of himself, even so, why not?

After all, I'm invisible. No one can see me. Of course, it didn't have to be this way, not really. I don't know, he went on, I mean, I believed that I was doing the right thing. Would it have been right to go back to the University and the hell with Madge? I couldn't change that, could I? Could I have done anything about that, even if I'd known?

He nodded sadly.

All right, but don't make it any worse. Don't for God's sake *dwell* on it!

To his surprise, Mr. Minchell found that he was climbing up the concrete base of the statue. It ripped the breath from his lungs—and he saw that he could much more easily have gone up a few extra steps and simply stepped on—but there didn't seem anything else to do but just this, what he was doing. Once upright, he passed his hand over the statue's flank. The surface was incredibly sleek and cold, hard as a lion's muscles ought to be, and tawny.

He took a step backwards. Lord! Had there ever been such power? Such marvelous downright power and . . . majesty, as was here? From stone—no, indeed. It fooled a good many people, but it did not fool Mr. Minchell. He knew. This lion was no mere library decoration. It was an animal, of deadly cunning and fantastic strength and unbelievable ferocity. And it didn't move for the simple reason that it did not care to move. It was waiting. Some day it would see what it was waiting for, its enemy, coming down the street. Then look out, people!

He remembered the whole yarn now. Of everyone on Earth, only he, Henry Minchell, knew the secret of the lion. And only he was allowed to sit astride this mighty back.

He stepped onto the tail, experimentally. He hesitated, gulped, and swung forward, swiftly, on up to the curved rump.

Trembling, he slid forward, until finally he was over the shoulders of the lion, just behind the raised head.

His breath came very fast.

He closed his eyes.

It was not long before he was breathing regularly again. Only now it was the hot, fetid air of the jungle that went

into his nostrils. He felt the great muscles ripple beneath him and he listened to the fast crackle of crushed foliage, and he whispered:

"Easy, fellow."

The flying spears did not frighten him. He sat straight, smiling, with his fingers buried in the rich, tawny mane of King Richard, while the wind tore at his hair. . . .

Then, abruptly, he opened his eyes.

The city stretched before him, and the people, and the lights. He tried quite hard not to cry, because he knew that forty-seven-year-old men never cried, not even when they had vanished, but he couldn't help it. So he sat on the stone lion and lowered his head and cried.

He didn't hear the laughter at first.

When he did hear it, he thought that he was dreaming. But it was true: somebody was laughing.

He grasped one of the statue's ears for balance and leaned forward. He blinked. Below, some fifteen feet, there were people. Young people. Some of them with books. They were looking up and smiling and laughing.

Mr. Minchell wiped his eyes.

A slight horror came over him, and fell away. He leaned farther out.

One of the boys waved and shouted: "Ride him, Pop!"

Mr. Minchell almost toppled. Then, without understanding, without even trying to understand—merely knowing—he grinned, widely, showing his teeth, which were his own and very white.

"You . . . see me?" he called.

The young people roared.

"You do!" Mr. Minchell's face seemed to melt upwards. He let out a yell and gave King Richard's shaggy stone mane an enormous hug.

Below, other people stopped in their walking and a small crowd began to form. Dozens of eyes peered sharply, quizzically.

A woman in gray furs giggled.

A thin man in a blue suit grunted something about these damned exhibitionists.

"You pipe down," another man said. "Guy wants to ride the goddamn lion it's his own business."

There were murmurings. The man who had said pipe down was small and he wore black-rimmed glasses. "I used to do it all the time." He turned to Mr. Minchell and cried: "How is it?"

Mr. Minchell grinned. Somehow, he realized, in some mysterious way, he had been given a second chance. And this time he knew what he would do with it. "Fine!" he

shouted, and stood up on King Richard's back and sent his derby spinning out over the heads of the people. "Come on up!"

"Can't do it," the man said. "Got a date." There was a look of profound admiration in his eyes as he strode off. Away from the crowd he stopped and cupped his hands and cried: "I'll be seeing you!"

"That's right," Mr. Minchell said, feeling the cold new wind on his face. "You'll be seeing me."

Later, when he was good and ready, he got down off the lion.

SHOTTLE BOP

by Theodore Sturgeon

I'D NEVER SEEN the place before, and I lived just down the block and around the corner. I'll even give you the address, if you like. "The Shottle Bop," between Twentieth and Twenty-first Streets, on Tenth Avenue in New York City. You can find it if you go there looking for it. Might even be worth your while, too.

But you'd better not.

"The Shottle Bop." It got me. It was a small shop with a weather-beaten sign swung from a wrought crane, creaking dismally in the late fall wind. I walked past it, thinking of the engagement ring in my pocket and how it had just been handed back to me by Audrey, and my mind was far removed from such things as shottle bops. I was thinking that Audrey might have used a gentler term than "useless" in describing me: and her neatly turned remark about my being a "constitutional psychopathic incompetent" was as uncalled-for as it was spectacular. She must have read it somewhere, balanced as it was by "And I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth!" which is a notably worn cliché.

"Shottle Bop!" I muttered, and then paused, wondering where I had picked up such oddly rhythmic syllables with which to express myself. I'd seen it on that sign, of course, and it had caught my eye. "And what," I asked myself, "might be a Shottle Bop?" Myself replied promptly, "Dunno. Toddle back and have a look." So toddle I did, back along the east side of Tenth, wondering what manner of man might be running such an establishment in pursuance of what kind

of business. I was enlightened on the second point by a sign in the window, all but obscured by the dust and ashes of apparent centuries, which read:

WE SELL BOTTLES

There was another line of smaller print there. I rubbed at the crusted glass with my sleeve and finally was able to make out

With things in them.

Just like that:

WE SELL BOTTLES
With things in them.

Well of course I went in. Sometimes very delightful things come in bottles, and the way I was feeling, I could stand a little delighting.

"Close it!" shrilled a voice, as I pushed through the door. The voice came from a shimmering egg adrift in the air behind the counter, low-down. Peering over, I saw that it was not an egg at all, but the bald pate of an old man who was clutching the edge of the counter, his scrawny body streaming away in the slight draft from the open door, as if he were made of bubbles. A mite startled, I kicked the door with my heel. He immediately fell on his face, and then scrambled smiling to his feet.

"Ah, it's so good to see you again," he rasped.

I think his vocal cords were dusty, too. Everything else here was. As the door swung to, I felt as if I were inside a great dusty brain that had just closed its eyes. Oh yes, there was light enough. But it wasn't the lamp light and it wasn't daylight. It was like—like light reflected from the cheeks of pale people. Can't say I enjoyed it much.

"What do you mean, 'again'?" I asked irritably. "You never saw me before."

"I saw you when you came in and I fell down and got up and saw you again," he quibbled, and beamed. "What can I foo for do?"

"Huh?" I huhed, and then translated it into "What can I do for you?"

"Oh," I said. "Well, I saw your sign. What have you got in a bottle that I might like?"

"What do you want?"

"What've you got?"

He broke into a piping chant—I remember it yet, word for word.

"For half a buck, a vial of luck
Or a bottle of nifty breaks
Or a flask of joy, or Myrna Loy
For luncheon with sirloin steaks.

"Pour out a mug from this old jug,
And you'll never get wet in rains.
I've bottles of grins and racetrack wins
And lotions to ease your pains.

"Here's bottles of imps and wet-pack shrimps
From a sea unknown to man,
And an elixir to banish fear,
And the sap from the pipes of Pan.

"With the powdered horn of a unicorn
You can win yourself a mate;
With the rich hobnob; or get a job—
It's yours at a lowered rate."

"Now wait right there!" I snapped. "You mean you actually sell dragon's blood and ink from the pen of Friar Bacon and all such mumbo-jum?"

He nodded rapidly and smiled all over his improbable face.

I went on—"The genuine article?"

He kept on nodding.

I regarded him for a moment. "You mean to stand there with your teeth in your mouth and your bare face hanging out and tell me that in this day and age, in this city and in broad daylight, you sell such trash and then expect me—me, an enlightened intellectual—"

"You are very stupid and twice as bombastic," he said quietly.

I glowered at him and reached for the doorknob—and there I froze. And I mean froze. For the old man whipped out an ancient bulb-type atomizer and squeezed a couple of whiffs at me as I turned away; and so help me, *I couldn't move!* I could cuss, though, and boy, did I.

The proprietor hopped over the counter and ran over to me. He must have been standing on a box back there, for now I could see he was barely three feet tall. He grabbed my coat tails, ran up my back and slid down my arm, which was extended doorward. He sat down on my wrist and swung his feet and laughed up at me. As far as I could feel, he weighed absolutely nothing.

When I had run out of profanity—I pride myself on never

repeating a phrase of invective—he said, "Does that prove anything to you, my cocky and unintelligent friend? That was the essential oil from the hair of the Gorgon's head. And until I give you an antidote, you'll stand there from now till a week from text Nuesday!"

"Get me out of this," I roared, "or I smack you so hard you lose your brains through the pores in your feet!"

He giggled.

I tried to tear loose again and couldn't. It was as if all my epidermis had turned to high-carbon steel. I began cussing again, but quit in despair.

"You think altogether too much of yourself," said the proprietor of the Shottle Bop. "Look at you! Why, I wouldn't hire you to wash my windows. You expect to marry a girl who is accustomed to the least of animal comfort, and then you get miffed because she turns you down. Why does she turn you down? Because you won't get a job. You're a no-good. You're a bum. He, he! And you have the nerve to walk around pelling teople where to get off. Now if I were in your position I would ask politely to be released, and then I would see if anyone in this shop would be good enough to sell you a bottle full of something that might help out."

Now I never apologize to anybody, and I never back down, and I never take any guff from mere tradesmen. But this was different. I'd never been petrified before, nor had my nose rubbed in so many galling truths. I relented. "O. K., O. K.; let me break away then. I'll buy something."

"Your tone is sullen," he said complacently, dropping lightly to the floor and holding his atomizer at the ready. "You'll have to say 'Please. Pretty please.' "

"Pretty please," I said, almost choking with humiliation.

He went back of the counter and returned with a paper of powder which he had me sniff. In a couple of seconds I began to sweat, and my limbs lost their rigidity so quickly that it almost threw me. I'd have been flat on my back if the man hadn't caught me and solicitously led me to a chair. As strength dribbled back into my shocked tissues, it occurred to me that I might like to flatten this hobgoblin for pulling a trick like that. But a strange something stopped me—strange because I'd never had the experience before. It was simply the idea that once I got outside I'd agree with him for having such a low opinion of me.

He wasn't worrying. Rubbing his hands briskly, he turned to his shelves. "Now let's see . . . what would be best for you, I wonder? Hm-m-m. Success is something you couldn't justify. Money? You don't know how to spend it. A good job? You're not fitted for one." He turned gentle eyes on me

and shook his head. "A sad case. *Tsk, tsk.*" I crawled. "A perfect mate? Uh-huh. You're too stupid to recognize perfection, too conceited to appreciate it. I don't think that I can—Wait!"

He whipped four or five bottles and jars off the dozens of shelves behind him and disappeared somewhere in the dark recesses of the store. Immediately there came sounds of violent activity—clinkings and little crashes; stirrings and then the rapid susurrant grating of a mortar and pestle; then the slushy sound of liquid being added to a dry ingredient during stirring; and at length, after quite a silence, the glugging of a bottle being filled through a filtering funnel. The proprietor reappeared triumphantly bearing a four-ounce bottle without a label.

"This will do it!" he beamed.

"That will do what?"

"Why, cure you!"

"Cure—" My pompous attitude, as Audrey called it, had returned while he was mixing. "What do you mean cure? I haven't got anything!"

"My dear little boy," he said offensively, "you most certainly have. Are you happy? Have you ever been happy? No. Well, I'm going to fix all that up. That is, I'll give you the start you need. Like any other cure, it requires your cooperation.

"You're in a bad way, young fellow. You have what is known in the profession as retrogressive metempsychosis of the ego in its most malignant form. You are a constitutional unemployable; a downright sociophagus. I don't like you. Nobody likes you."

Feeling a little bit on the receiving end of a blitz, I stammered, "W-what do you aim to do?"

He extended the bottle. "Go home. Get into a room by yourself—the smaller the better. Drink this down, right out of the bottle. Stand by for developments. That's all."

"But—what will it do to me?"

"It will do nothing *to* you. It will do a great deal *for* you. It can do as much for you as you want it to. But mind me, now. As long as you use what it gives you for your self-improvement, you will thrive. Use it for self-glorification, as a basis for boasting, or for revenge, and you will suffer in the extreme. Remember that, now."

"But what is it? How—"

"I am selling you a talent. You have none now. When you discover what kind of a talent it is, it will be up to you to use it to your advantage. Now go away. I still don't like you."

"What do I owe you?" I muttered, completely snowed under by this time.

"The bottle carries its own price. You won't pay anything unless you fail to follow my directions. Now will you go, or must I uncork a bottle of jinn—and I don't mean London Dry?"

"I'll go," I said. I'd seen something swirling in the depths of a ten-gallon carboy at one end of the counter, and I didn't like it a bit. "Good-by."

"Bood-gy," he returned.

I went out and I headed down Tenth Avenue and I turned east up Twentieth Street and I never looked back. And for many reasons I wish now that I had, for there was, without doubt, something very strange about that Shottle Bop.

I didn't simmer down until I got home; but once I had a cup of black Italian coffee under my belt I felt better. I was skeptical about it at last. I was actually inclined to scoff. But somehow I didn't want to scoff too loudly. I looked at the bottle a little scornfully, and there was a certain something about the glass of it that seemed to be staring back at me. I sniffed and threw it up behind some old hats on top of the closet, and then sat down to unlax. I used to love to unlax. I'd put my feet on the doorknob and slide down in the upholstery until I was sitting on my shoulder blades, and as the old saying has it, "Sometimes I sets and thinks, and sometimes I just sets." The former is easy enough, and is what even an accomplished loafer has to go through before he reaches the latter and more blissful state. It takes years of practice to relax sufficiently to be able to "just set." I'd learned it years ago.

But just as I was about to slip into the vegetable status, I was annoyed by something. I tried to ignore it. I manifested a superhuman display of lack of curiosity, but the annoyance persisted. A light pressure on my elbow, where it draped over the arm of the chair. I was put in the unpleasant predicament of having to concentrate on what it was; and realizing that concentration on anything was the least desirable thing there could be. I gave up finally, and with a deep sigh, opened my eyes and had a look.

It was the bottle.

I screwed up my eyes and then looked again, but it was still there. The closet door was open as I had left it, and its shelf almost directly above me. Must have fallen out. Feeling that if the damn thing were on the floor it couldn't fall any farther, I shoved it off the arm of the chair with my elbow.

It bounced. It bounced with such astonishing accuracy that

it wound up in exactly the same spot it had started from—on the arm of the easy-chair, by my elbow. Startled, I shoved it violently. This time I pushed it hard enough to send it against the wall, from which it rebounded to the shelf under my small table, and thence back to the chair arm—and this time it perched cozily against my shoulder. Jarred by the bouncing, the stopper hopped out of the bottle mouth and rolled into my lap; and there I sat, breathing the bitter-sweet fumes of its contents, feeling frightened and silly as hell.

I grabbed the bottle and sniffed. I'd smelled that somewhere before—where was it? Uh—oh, yes; that mascara the Chinese honkytonk girls use in Frisco. The liquid was dark—smoky black. I tasted it cautiously. It wasn't bad. If it wasn't alcoholic, then the old man in the shop had found a darn good substitute for alcohol. At the second sip I liked it and at the third I really enjoyed it and there wasn't any fourth because by then the little bottle was a dead marine. That was about the time I remembered the name of the black ingredient with the funny smell. Kohl. It is an herb the Orientals use to make it possible to see supernatural beings. Silly superstition!

And then the liquid I'd just put away, lying warm and comfortable in my stomach, began to fizz. Then I think it began to swell. I tried to get up and couldn't. The room seemed to come apart and throw itself at me piecemeal, and I passed out.

Don't you ever wake up the way I did. For your own sake, be careful about things like that. Don't swim up out of a sodden sleep and look around you and see all those things fluttering and drifting and flying and creeping and crawling around you—puffy things dripping blood, and filmy, legless creatures, and little bits and snatches of pasty human anatomy. It was awful. There was a human hand afloat in the air an inch away from my nose; and at my startled gasp it drifted away from me, fingers fluttering in the disturbed air from my breath. Something veined and bulbous popped out from under my chair and rolled across the floor. I heard a faint clicking, and looked up into a gnashing set of jaws without any face attached. I think I broke down and cried a little. I know I passed out again.

The next time I awoke—must have been hours later, because it was broad daylight and my clock and watch had both stopped—things were a little better. Oh, yes, there were a few of the horrors around. But somehow they didn't bother me much now. I was practically convinced that I was nuts; now that I had the conviction, why worry about it? I dunno; it must have been one of the ingredients in the bottle that had calmed me down so. I was curious and excited, and

that's about all. I looked around me and I was almost pleased.

The walls were green! The drab wallpaper had turned to something breathtakingly beautiful. They were covered with what seemed to be moss; but never moss like that grew for human eyes to see before. It was long and thick, and it had a slight perpetual movement—not that of a breeze, but of growth. Fascinated, I moved over and looked closely. Growing indeed, with all the quick magic of spore and cyst and root and growth again to spore; and the swift magic of it was only a part of the magical whole, for never was there such a green. I put out my hand to touch and stroke it, but I only felt the wallpaper. But when I closed my fingers on it, I could feel that light touch of it in the palm of my hand, the weight of twenty sunbeams, the soft resilience of jet-darkness in a closed place. The sensation was a delicate ecstasy, and never have I been happier than I was at that moment.

Around the baseboards were little snowy toadstools, and the floor was grassy. Up the hinged side of the closet door climbed a mass of flowering vines, and their petals were hued in tones indescribable. I felt as if I had been blind until now, and deaf, too; for now I could hear the whispering of scarlet, gauzy insects among the leaves and the constant murmur of growth. All around me was a new and lovely world, so delicate that the wind of my movements tore petals from the flowers, so real and natural that it defied its own impossibility. Awestruck, I turned and turned, running from wall to wall, looking under my old furniture, into my old books; and everywhere I looked I found newer and more beautiful things to wonder at. It was while I was flat on my stomach looking up at the bed springs, where a colony of jewellike lizards had nested, that I first heard the sobbing.

It was young and plaintive, and had no right to be in my room where everything was so happy. I stood up and looked around, and there in the corner crouched the translucent figure of a little girl. She was leaning back against the wall. Her thin legs were crossed in front of her, and she held the leg of a tattered toy elephant dejectedly in one hand and cried into the other. Her hair was long and dark, and it poured and tumbled over her face and shoulders.

I said, "What's the matter, kiddo?" I hate to hear a child cry like that.

She cut herself off in the middle of a sob and shook the hair out of her eyes, looking up and past me, all fright and olive skin and big, filled violet eyes. "Oh!" she squeaked.

I repeated, "What's the matter? Why are you crying?"

She hugged the elephant to her breast defensively, and whimpered, "W-where are you?"

Surprised, I said, "Right here in front of you, child. Can't you see me?"

She shook her head. "I'm scared. Who are you?"

"I'm not going to hurt you. I heard you crying, and I wanted to see if I could help you. Can't you see me at all?"

"No," she whispered. "Are you an angel?"

I guffawed. "By no means!" I stepped closer and put my hand on her shoulder. The hand went right through her and she winced and shrank away, uttering a little wordless cry. "I'm sorry," I said quickly. "I didn't mean . . . you can't see me at all? I can see you."

She shook her head again. "I think you're a ghost," she said.

"Do tell!" I said. "And what are you?"

"I'm Ginny," she said. "I have to stay here, and I have no one to play with." She blinked, and there was a suspicion of further tears.

"Where did you come from?" I asked.

"I came here with my mother," she said. "We lived in lots of other rooming houses. Mother cleaned floors in office buildings. But this is where I got so sick. I was sick a long time. Then one day I got off the bed and came over here, but then when I looked back I was still on the bed. It was awful funny. Some men came and put the 'me' that was on the bed onto a stretcher-thing and took it—me—out. After a while Mummy left, too. She cried for a long time before she left, and when I called to her she couldn't hear me. She never came back, and I just got to stay here."

"Why?"

"Oh, I got to. I—don't know why. I just—got to."

"What do you do here?"

"I just stay here and think about things. Once a lady lived here, had a little girl just like me. We used to play together until the lady watched us one day. She carried on somethin' awful. She said her little girl was possessed. The girl kept callin' me, 'Ginny! Ginny! Tell Mamma you're here!'; an' I tried, but the lady couldn't see me. Then the lady got scared an' picked up her little girl an' cried, an' so I was sorry. I ran over here an' hid, an' after a while the other little girl forgot about me, I guess. They moved," she finished with pathetic finality.

I was touched. "What will become of you, Ginny?"

"I dunno," she said, and her voice was troubled. "I guess I'll just stay here and wait for Mummy to come back. I been here a long time. I guess I deserve it, too."

"Why, child?"

She looked guiltily at her shoes. "I couldn' stand feelin' so awful bad when I was sick. I got up out of bed before it was time. I shoulda stayed where I was. This is what I get for quittin'. But Mummy'll be back; just you see."

"Sure she will," I muttered. My throat felt tight. "You take it easy, kid. Any time you want someone to talk to, you just pipe up, I'll talk to you any time I'm around."

She smiled, and it was a pretty thing to see. What a raw deal for a kid! I grabbed my hat and went out.

Outside things were the same as in the room to me. The hallways, the dusty stair carpets wore new garments of brilliant, nearly intangible foliage. They were no longer dark, for each leaf had its own pale and different light. Once in a while I saw things not quite so pretty. There was a giggling thing that scuttled back and forth on the third floor landing. It was a little indistinct, but it looked a great deal like Barrelhead Brogan, a shanty-Irish bum who'd returned from a warehouse robbery a year or so ago, only to shoot himself accidentally with his own gun. I wasn't sorry.

Down on the first floor, on the bottom step, I saw two youngsters sitting. The girl had her head on the boy's shoulder, and he had his arms around her, and I could see the banister through them. I stopped to listen. Their voices were faint, and seemed to come from a long way away.

He said, "There's one way out."

She said, "Don't talk that way, Tommy!"

"What else can we do? I've loved you for three years, and we still can't get married. No money, no hope—no nothing. Sue, if we did do it, I just *know* we'd always be together. Always and always—"

After a long time she said, "All right, Tommy. You get a gun, like you said." She suddenly pulled him even closer. "Oh, Tommy, are you sure we'll always be together just like this?"

"Always," he whispered, and kissed her. "Just like this."

Then there was a long silence, while neither moved. Suddenly they were as I had first seen them, and he said:

"There's only one way out."

And she said, "Don't talk that way, Tommy!"

And he said, "What else can we do? I've loved you for three years—" It went on like that, over and over and over.

I felt lousy. I went on out into the street.

It began to filter through to me what had happened. The man in the shop had called it a "talent." I couldn't be crazy, could I? I didn't *feel* crazy. The draught from the bottle had opened my eyes on a new world. What was this world?

It was a thing peopled by ghosts. There they were—

storybook ghosts, and regular haunts, and poor damned souls —all the fixings of a storied supernatural, all the things we have heard about and loudly disbelieve and secretly wonder about. So what? What had it all to do with me?

As the days slid by, I wondered less about my new, strange surroundings, and gave more and more thought to that question. I had bought—or been given—a talent. I could see ghosts. I could see all parts of a ghostly world, even the vegetation that grew in it. That was perfectly reasonable —the trees and birds and fungi and flowers. A ghost world is a world as we know it, and a world as we know it must have vegetation. Yes, I could see them. But they couldn't see me!

O. K.; what could I get out of it? I couldn't talk about it or write about it because I wouldn't be believed; and besides, I had this thing exclusive, as far as I knew; why cut a lot of other people in on it?

On what, though?

No, unless I could get a steer from somewhere, there was no percentage in it for me that I could see. And then, about six days after I took that eye-opener, I remembered the one place where I might get that steer.

The Shottle Bop!

I was on Sixth Avenue at the time, trying to find something in a five-and-dimie that Ginny might like. She couldn't touch anything I brought her but she enjoyed things she could look at—picture books and such. By getting her a little book of photographs of trains since the "De Witt Clinton," and asking her which of them was like ones she had seen, I found out approximately how long it was she'd been there. Nearly eighteen years. Anyway, I got my bright idea and headed for Tenth Avenue and the Shottle Bop. I'd ask that old man—he'd tell me.

At the corner of Ninth Avenue I bumped into Happy Sam Healy and Fred Bellew. Fred was good people, but I never had much use for Happy Sam. He went for shaggy hats and lapelled vests, and he had patent-leather hair and too much collar-ad good looks. I was in a hurry and didn't want to talk to anyone, but Sam grabbed me by the arm.

"Slow down, mug, slow down! Long time no see. Where you bound in such a hurry?"

"Going over to Tenth to see a man about you."

Sam quit grinning and Fred walked over. "Why can't you guys quit knocking each other?" he asked quietly.

If it weren't for Fred, Sam and I would have crossed bows even more than we did, which was still altogether too much.

"I'll always speak civilly to a human being," I said. "Sam's different."

Sam said, "Don't set yourself up, chum. I'm cutting some ice with a certain party that froze you out."

"If you say exactly what you mean, I'll probably rap you for it," I flared.

Fred pushed hastily between us. "I'll see you later, Sam," he said. He pushed me with some difficulty away from the scene.

Sam stood staring after us for a minute and then put his hands in his pockets, shrugged, grinned, and went jauntily his own way.

"Aw, why do you always stand in front of that heel when I want to scrape him off the sidewalk?" I complained.

"Calm down, you big lug," Fred grinned. "That bantam wants trouble with you because of Audrey. If you mess him up, he'll go running to her about it, and you'll be really out."

"I am already, so what?"

He glanced at me. "That's up to you." Then, seeing my face, he said quickly, "O. K., don't tell me. It's none of my business. I know. How've you been?"

I was quiet for a while, walking along. Fred was a darn good egg. You could tell a guy like that practically anything. Finally I said, "I'm looking for a job, Fred."

He nodded, "Thought you would. Doing what?" Anybody else, knowing me, would have hooted and howled.

"Well, I—" Oh, what the hell, I thought, I'll tell him. If he thinks I'm nuts, he won't say so to anyone but me. Old Fred didn't look like much, with his sandy hair and his rimless specs and those stooped shoulders that too much book reading gave him, but he had sense.

"I was walking down Tenth," I began—

By the time I had come to the part about the ghost of the kid in my room, we had reached Tenth Avenue in the late Twenties, and turned south. I wasn't paying much attention to where we were, to tell you the truth, and that's why what happened did happen.

Before I had a chance to wind up with the question that was bothering me—"I have it . . . what will I do with it?" Fred broke in with "Hey! Where is this place of yours?"

"Why—between Nineteenth and Twentieth," I said. "Holy smoke—we're at Eighteenth! We walked right past it!"

Fred grinned and swung around. We went back up the avenue with our eyes peeled, and not a sign of the Shottle Bop did we see. For the first time a doubtful look crept onto Fred's bland face. He said:

"You wouldn't kid me, would you, lug?"

"I tell you—" I began.

Then I saw a penny lying on the sidewalk. I bent to pick

it up, and heard him say, "Hey! There it is! Come on."

"Ah! I knew it was on this block!" I said, and turned toward Fred. Or where Fred had been. Facing me was a blank wall. The whole side of the block was void of people. There was no sign of a shop or of Fred Bellew.

I stood there for a full two minutes not even daring to think. Then I walked downtown toward Twentieth, and then uptown to Twenty-first. Then I did it again. No shop. No Bellew.

I stood frothing on the uptown corner. What had that guy done; hopped a passing truck or sunk into the ground or vanished into the shop? Yeah; and no shop there! A wise guy after all. I trod the beat once more with the same results. Then I headed for home. I hadn't gone twenty feet when I heard the pound of someone running, and Fred came panting up and caught my shoulder. We both yelped at once— "Hey! Where've you been?"

I said, "What was the idea of ducking out like that? Man, you must've covered a hundred yards in about six seconds to get away from me while I picked up a penny off the sidewalk!"

"Duck out nothing!" said Bellew, angrier than I'd ever seen him. "I saw the store and went in. I thought you were right behind me. I look around and you're outside, staring at the shop like it was something you didn't believe. Then you walk off. Meanwhile the little guy in the store tries to sell me some of his goods. I stall him off, still looking for you. You walk past two or three times, looking in the window. I call you; you don't bat an eyelash. I tell the little guy: 'Hold on—I'll be back in a second with my friend there.' He rears back on his heels and laughs like a maniac and waves me out. Come on, dope. Let's go back. That old man really has something there. I'd say I was in the market for some of that stuff of his!"

"O. K., O. K.," I said. "But Fred—I'll swear I didn't see the place. Come on then; lead me to it. I must be going really screwball."

"Seems like," said Fred.

So we went back, and there was no shop at all. Not a sign of one. And then and there we had one pip of an argument. He said I'd lied about it in the first place, and I said, well, why did he give me that song-and-dance about his seeing it, and he said it was some kind of a joke I'd pulled on him; and then we both said, "Oh, yeah?" a couple of times and began to throw punches. I broke his glasses for him. He had them in his pocket and fell down on them. I wound up minus a very good friend and without my question answered—what was I going to do with this "talent"?

I was talking to Ginny one afternoon about this and that when a human leg, from the knee down, complete and puffy, drifted between us. I recoiled in horror, but Ginny pushed it gently with one hand. It bent under the touch, and started toward the window, which was open a little at the bottom. The leg floated toward the crack and was sucked through like a cloud of cigarette smoke, reforming again on the other side. It bumbled against the pane for a moment and then ballooned away.

"My gosh!" I breathed. "What *was* that?"

Ginny laughed. "Oh, just one of the Things that's all 'e time flying around. Did it scare you? I used to be scared, but I saw so many of them that I don't care any more, so's they don't light on me."

"But what in the name of all that's disgusting are they?"

"Parts." Ginny was all childish savoir-faire.

"Parts of what?"

"People, silly. It's some kind of a game, *I* think. You see, if someone gets hurt and loses something—a finger or an ear or something, why, the ear—the *inside* part of it, I mean, like me being the inside of the 'me' they carried out of here—it goes back to where the person who owned it lived last. Then it goes back to the place before that, and so on. It doesn't go very fast. Then when something happens to a whole person, the 'inside' part comes looking for the rest of itself. It picks up bit after bit—Look!" She put out a filmy forefinger and thumb and nipped a flake of gossamer out of the air.

I leaned over and looked closely; it was a small section of semitransparent human skin, ridged and whorled.

"Somebody must have cut his finger," said Ginny matter-of-factly, "while he was living in this room. When something happens to um—you see! He'll be back for it!"

"Good heavens!" I said. "Does this happen to everyone?"

"I dunno. Some people have to stay where they are—like me. But I guess if you haven't done nothing to deserve bein' kept in one place, you have to come all around pickin' up what you lost."

I'd thought of more pleasant things in my time.

For several days I'd noticed a gray ghost hovering up and down the block. He was always on the street, never inside. He whimpered constantly. He was—or had been—a little inoffensive man of the bowler hat and starched collar type. He paid no attention to me—none of them did, for I was apparently invisible to them. But I saw him so often that pretty soon I realized that I'd miss him if he went away. I decided I'd chat with him the next time I saw him.

I left the house one morning and stood around for a few

minutes in front of the brownstone steps. Sure enough, pressing through the flotsam of my new, weird coexistent world, came the slim figure of the wraith I had noticed, his rabbit face screwed up, his eyes deep and sad, and his swallowtail coat and striped waistcoat immaculate. I stepped up behind him and said, "Hi!"

He started violently and would have run away, I'm sure, if he'd known where my voice was coming from.

"Take it easy, pal," I said. "I won't hurt you."

"Who are you?"

"You wouldn't know if I told you," I said. "Now stop shivering and tell me about yourself."

He mopped his ghostly face with a ghostly handkerchief, and then began fumbling nervously with a gold toothpick. "My word," he said. "No one's talked to me for years. I'm not quite myself, you see."

"I see," I said. "Well, take it easy. I just happen to've noticed you wandering around here lately. I got curious. You looking for somebody?"

"Oh, no," he said. Now that he had a chance to talk about his troubles, he forgot to be afraid of this mysterious voice from nowhere that had accosted him. "I'm looking for my home."

"Hm-m-m," I said. "Been looking a long time?"

"Oh, yes." His nose twitched. "I left for work one morning a long time ago, and when I got off the ferry at Battery Place I stopped for a moment to watch the work on that newfangled elevated railroad they were building down there. All of a sudden there was a loud noise—my goodness! It was terrible—and the next thing I knew I was standing back from the curb and looking at a man who looked just like me! A girder had fallen, and—my word!" He mopped his face again. "Since then I have been looking and looking. I can't seem to find anyone who knows where I might have lived, and I don't understand all the things I see floating around me, and I never thought I'd see the day when grass would grow on lower Broadway—oh, it's terrible." He began to cry.

I felt sorry for him. I could easily see what had happened. The shock was so great that even his ghost had amnesia! Poor little egg—until he was whole, he could find no rest. The thing interested me. Would a ghost react to the usual cures for amnesia? If so, then what would happen to him?

"You say you got off a ferryboat?"

"Yes."

"Then you must have lived on the Island . . . Staten Island, over there across the bay!"

"You really think so?" He stared through me, puzzled and hopeful.

"Why sure! Say, how'd you like me to take you over there? Maybe we could find your house."

"Oh, that would be splendid! But—oh, my, what will my wife say?"

I grinned. "She might want to know where you've been. Anyway, she'll be glad to have you back, I imagine. Come on; let's get going!"

I gave him a shove in the direction of the subway and strolled down behind him. Once in a while I got a stare from a passer-by for walking with one hand out in front of me and talking into thin air. It didn't bother me very much. My companion, though, was very self-conscious about it, for the inhabitants of his world screeched and giggled when they saw him doing practically the same thing. Of all humans, only I was invisible to them, and the little ghost in the bowler hat blushed from embarrassment until I thought he'd burst.

We hopped a subway—it was a new experience for him, I gathered—and went down to South Ferry. The subway system in New York is a very unpleasant place to one gifted as I was. Everything that enjoys lurking in the dark hangs out there, and there is quite a crop of dismembered human remains. After this day I took the bus.

We got a ferry without waiting. The little gray ghost got a real kick out of the trip. He asked me about the ships in the harbor and their flags, and marveled at the dearth of sailing vessels. He *tsk, tsked* at the Statue of Liberty; the last time he had seen it, he said, was while it still had its original brassy gold color, before it got its patina. By this I placed him in the late '70s; he must have been looking for his home for over sixty years!

We landed at the Island, and from there I gave him his head. At the top of Fort Hill he suddenly said, "My name is John Quigg. I live at 45 Fourth Avenue!" I've never seen anyone quite so delighted as he was by the discovery. And from then on it was easy. He turned left, and then right, and then left again, straight down for two blocks and again right. I noticed—he didn't—that the street was marked "Winter Avenue." I remembered vaguely that the streets in this section had been numbered years ago.

He trotted briskly up the hill and then suddenly stopped and turned vaguely. "I say, are you still with me?"

"Still here," I said.

"I'm all right now. I can't tell you how much I appreciate this. Is there anything I could do for you?"

I considered. "Hardly. We're of different times, you know. Things change."

He looked, a little pathetically, at the new apartment house on the corner and nodded. "I think I know what happened to me," he said softly. "But I guess it's all right. . . . I made a will, and the kids were grown." He sighed. "But if it hadn't been for you I'd still be wandering around Manhattan. Let's see—ah; come with me!"

He suddenly broke into a run. I followed as quickly as I could. Almost at the top of the hill was a huge old shingled house, with a silly cupola and a complete lack of paint. It was dirty and it was tumble-down, and at the sight of it the little fellow's face twisted sadly. He gulped and turned through a gap in the hedge and down beside the house. Casting about in the long grass, he spotted a boulder sunk deep into the turf.

"This is it," he said. "Just you dig under that. There is no mention of it in my will, except a small fund to keep paying the box rent. Yes, a safety-deposit box, and the key and an authorization are under that stone. I hid it"—he giggled—"from my wife one night, and never did get a chance to tell her. You can have whatever's any good to you." He turned to the house, squared his shoulders, and marched in the side door, which banged open for him in a convenient gust of wind. I listened for a moment and then smiled at the tirade that burst forth. Old Quigg was catching real hell from his wife, who'd sat waiting for over sixty years for him! It was a bitter stream of invective, but—well, she must have loved him. She couldn't leave the place until she was complete, if Ginny's theory was correct, and she wasn't really complete until her husband came home! It tickled me. They'd be all right now!

I found an old pinchbar in the drive and attacked the ground around the stone. It took quite a while and made my hands bleed, but after a while I pried the stone up and was able to scrabble around under it. Sure enough, there was an oiled silk pouch under there. I caught it up and carefully unwrapped the strings around it. Inside was a key and a letter addressed to a New York bank, designating only "Bearer" and authorizing use of the key. I laughed aloud. Little old meek and mild John Quigg, I'd bet, had set aside some "mad money." With a layout like that, a man could take a powder without leaving a single sign. The son-of-a-gun! I would never know just what it was he had up his sleeve, but I'll bet there was a woman in the case. Even fixed it up with his will! Ah, well—I should kick!

It didn't take me long to get over to the bank. I had a little

trouble getting into the vaults, because it took quite a while to look up the box in the old records. But I finally cleared the red tape, and found myself the proud possessor of just under eight thousand bucks in small bills—and not a yellowback among 'em!

Well, from then on I was pretty well set. What did I do? Well, first I bought clothes, and then I started out to cut ice for myself. I clubbed around a bit and got to know a lot of people, and the more I knew the more I realized what a lot of superstitious dopes they were. I couldn't blame anyone for skirting a ladder under which crouched a genuine basilisk, of course, but what the heck—not one in a thousand have beasts under them! Anyway, my question was answered. I dropped two grand on an elegant office with drapes and dim indirect lighting, and I got me a phone installed and a little quiet sign on the door—Psychic Consultant. And, boy, I did all right.

My customers were mostly upper crust, because I came high. It was generally no trouble to get contact with people's dead relatives, which was usually what they wanted. Most ghosts are crazy to get in contact with this world anyway. That's one of the reasons that almost anyone can become a medium of sorts if he tries hard enough; Lord knows that it doesn't take much to contact the average ghost. Some, of course, were not available. If a man leads a pretty square life, and kicks off leaving no loose ends, he gets clear. I never did find out where these clear spirits went to. All I knew was that they weren't to be contacted. But the vast majority of people have to go back and tie up those loose ends after they die—righting a little wrong here, helping someone they've hindered, cleaning up a bit of dirty work. That's where luck itself comes from, I do believe. You don't get something for nothing.

If you get a nice break, it's been arranged that way by someone who did you dirt in the past, or someone who did wrong to your father or your grandfather or your great-uncle Julius. Everything evens up in the long run, and until it does, some poor damned soul is wandering around the earth trying to do something about it. Half of humanity is walking around crabbing about its tough breaks. If you and you and you only knew what dozens of powers were begging for the chance to help you if you'll let them! And if you let them, you'll help clear up the mess they've made of their lives here, and free them to go wherever it is they go when they're cleaned up. Next time you're in a jam, go away somewhere by yourself and open your mind to these folks. They'll cut in and guide you all right, if you can drop your smugness and your mistaken confidence in your own judgment.

I had a couple of ghostly stooges to run errands for me.

One of them, an ex-murderer by the name of One-eye Rachuba, was the fastest spook ever I saw, when it came to locating a wanted ancestor; and then there was Professor Grafe, a frog-faced teacher of social science who'd embezzled from a charity fund and fallen into the Hudson trying to make a getaway. He could trace the most devious genealogies in mere seconds, and deduce the most likely whereabouts of the ghost of a missing relative. The pair of them were all the office force I could use, and although every time they helped out one of my clients they came closer to freedom for themselves, they were both so entangled with their own sloppy lives that I was sure of their services for years.

But do you think I'd be satisfied to stay where I was, making money hand over fist without really working for it? Oh, no. Not me. No, I had to bigtime. I had to brood over the events of the last few months, and I had to get dramatic about that screwball Audrey, who really wasn't worth my trouble. I had to lie awake nights thinking about Happy Sam and his gibes. It wasn't enough that I'd proved Audrey wrong when she said I'd never amount to anything. I wasn't happy when I thought about Sam and the eighteen a week he pulled down driving a light delivery truck. Uh-huh. I had to show them up.

I even remembered what the little man in the Shottle Bop had said to me about using my "talent" for bragging or for revenge. That didn't make any difference to me. I figured I had the edge on everyone, everything. Cocky, I was. Why, I could send one of my ghostly stooges out any time and find out exactly what anyone had been doing three hours ago come Michaelmas. With the shade of the professor at my shoulder, I could back-track on any far-fetched statement and give immediate and logical reasons for back-tracking. No one had anything on me, and I could out-talk, out-maneuver, and out-smart anyone on earth. I was really quite a feller. I began to think, "What's the use of my doing as well as this when the gang on the West Side don't know anything about it?" and "Man, would that half-wit Happy Sam burn up if he saw me drifting down Broadway in my new eight-thousand-dollar roadster!" and "To think I used to waste my time and tears on a dopé like Audrey!" In other words, I was tripping up on an inferiority complex. I acted like a veridam fool, which I was. I went over to the West Side.

It was a chilly, late winter night. I'd taken a lot of trouble to dress myself and my car so we'd be bright and shining and would knock some eyes out. Pity I couldn't brighten my brains up a little.

I drove up in front of Casey's pool room, being careful to

do it too fast, and concentrating on shrieks from the tires and a shuddering twenty-four-cylinder roar from the engine before I cut the switch. I didn't hurry to get out of the car, either. Just leaned back and lit a fifty-cent cigar, and then tipped my hat over one ear and touched the horn button, causing it to play "Tuxedo Junction" for forty-eight seconds. Then I looked over toward the pool hall.

Well, for a minute I thought that I shouldn't have come, if that was the effect my return to the fold was going to have. And from then on I forgot about anything except how to get out of here.

There were two figures slouched in the glowing doorway of the pool room. It was up a small side street, so short that the city had depended on the place, an old institution, to supply the street lighting. Looking carefully, I made out one of the silhouetted figures as Happy Sam, and the other was Fred Bellew. They just looked out at me; they didn't move; they didn't say anything, and when I said, "Hiya, small fry—remember me?" I noticed that along the darkened walls flanking the bright doorway were ranked the whole crowd of them—the whole gang. It was a shock; it was a little too casually perfect. I didn't like it.

"Hi," said Fred quietly. I knew he wouldn't like the big-timing. I didn't expect any of them to like it, of course, but Fred's dislike sprang from distaste, and the others' from resentment, and for the first time I felt a little cheap. I climbed out over the door of the roadster and let them have a gander at my fine feathers.

Sam snorted and said, "Jellybean!" very clearly. Someone else giggled, and from the darkness beside the building came a high-pitched, "Woo-woo!"

I walked up to Sam and grinned at him. I didn't feel like grinning. "I ain't seen you in so long I almost forgot what a heel you were," I said. "How you making?"

"I'm doing all right," he said, and added offensively, "I'm still *working* for a living."

The murmur that ran through the crowd told me that the really smart thing to do was to get back into that shiny new automobile and hoot along out of there. I stayed.

"Wise, huh?" I said weakly.

They'd been drinking, I realized—all of them. I was suddenly in a spot. Sam put his hands in his pockets and looked at me down his nose. He was the only short man that ever could do that to me. After a thick silence he said:

"Better get back to yer crystal balls, phony. We like guys that sweat. We even like guys that have rackets, if they run

them because they're smarter or tougher than the next one. But luck and gab ain't enough. Scram."

I looked around helplessly. I was getting what I'd begged for. What had I expected, anyway? Had I thought that these boys would crowd around and shake my hand off for acting this way? There was something missing somewhere, and when I realized what it was, it hit me. Fred Bellew—he was just standing there saying nothing. The old equalizer wasn't functioning any more. Fred wasn't aiming to stop any trouble between me and Sam. I was never so alone in my life!

They hardly moved, but they were all around me suddenly. If I couldn't think of something quickly, I was going to be mobbed. And when those mugs started mobbing a man, they did it up just fine. I drew a deep breath.

"I'm not asking for anything from you, Sam. Nothing; that means advice, see?"

"You're gettin' it!" he flared. "You and your seeanses. We heard about you. Hanging up widdow-women for fifty bucks a throw to talk to their 'dear departed'! P-sykik investigator! What a line! Go on; beat it!"

I had a leg to stand on now. "A phony, huh? Why you gabby Irishman, I'll bet I could put a haunt on you that would make that hair of yours stand up on end, if you have guts enough to go where I tell you to."

"You'll bet? That's a laugh. Listen at that, gang." He laughed, then turned to me and talked through one side of his mouth. "All right, you wanted it. Come on, rich guy; you're called. Fred'll hold the stakes. How about ten of your lousy bucks for every one of mine? Here, Fred—hold this sawbuck."

"I'll give you twenty to one," I said half hysterically. "And I'll take you to a place where you'll run up against the homeliest, plumb-meanest old haunt you ever heard of."

The crowd roared. Sam laughed with them, but didn't try to back out. With any of that gang, a bet was a bet. He'd taken me up, and he'd set odds, and he was bound. I just nodded and put two century notes into Fred Bellew's hand. Fred and Sam climbed into the car, and just as we started, Sam leaned out and waved.

"See you in hell, fellas," he said. "I'm goin' to raise me a ghost, and one of us is going to scare the other one to death!"

I honked my horn to drown out the whooping and hollering from the sidewalk and got out of there. I turned up the parkway and headed out of town.

"Where to?" Fred asked after a while.

"Stick around," I said, not knowing.

There must be some place not far from here where I could find an honest-to-God haunt, I thought, one that would make Sam back-track and set me up with the boys again. I opened the compartment in the dashboard and let Ikey out. Ikey was a little twisted imp who'd got his tail caught in between two sheets of steel when they were assembling the car, and had to stay there until it was junked.

"Hey, Ike," I whispered. He looked up, the gleam of the compartment light shining redly in his bright little eyes. "Whistle for the professor, will you? I don't want to yell for him because those mugs in the back seat will hear me. They can't hear you."

"O. K., boss," he said; and putting his fingers to his lips, he gave vent to a blood-curdling, howling scream.

That was the prof's call-letters, as it were. The old man flew ahead of the car, circled around and slid in beside me through the window, which I'd opened a crack for him.

"My goodness," he panted, "I wish you wouldn't summon me to a location which is traveling with this high degree of celerity. It was all I could do to catch up with you."

"Don't give me that, professor," I whispered. "You can catch a stratoliner if you want to. Say, I have a guy in the back who wants to get a real scare from a ghost. Know of any around here?"

The professor put on his ghostly pince-nez. "Why, yes. Remember my telling you about the Wolfmeyer place?"

"Golly—he's bad."

"He'll serve your purpose admirably. But don't ask me to go there with you. None of us ever associates with Wolfmeyer. And for Heaven's sake, be careful."

"I guess I can handle him. Where is it?"

He gave me explicit directions, bade me good night and left. I was a little surprised; the professor traveled around with me a great deal, and I'd never seen him refuse a chance to see some new scenery. I shrugged it off and went my way. I guess I just didn't know any better.

I headed out of town and into the country to a certain old farmhouse. Wolfmeyer, a Pennsylvania Dutchman, had hung himself there. He had been, and was, a bad egg. Instead of being a nice guy about it all, he was the rebel type. He knew perfectly well that unless he did plenty of good to make up for the evil, he'd be stuck where he was for the rest of eternity. That didn't seem to bother him at all. He got surly and became a really bad spook. Eight people had died in that house since the old man rotted off his own rope. Three of them were tenants who had rented the place, and three were hobos, and two were psychic investigators. They'd

all hung themselves. That's the way Wolfmeyer worked. I think he really enjoyed haunting. He certainly was thorough about it anyway.

I didn't want to do any real harm to Happy Sam. I just wanted to teach him a lesson. And look what happened!

We reached the place just before midnight. No one had said much, except that I told Fred and Sam about Wolfmeyer, and pretty well what was to be expected from him. They did a good deal of laughing about it, so I just shut up and drove. The next item of conversation was Fred's, when he made the terms of the bet. To win, Sam was to stay in the house until dawn. He wasn't to call for help and he wasn't to leave. He had to bring in a coil of rope, tie a noose in one end and string the other up on "Wolfmeyer's Beam"—the great oaken beam on which the old man had hung himself, and eight others after him. This was as an added temptation to Wolfmeyer to work on Happy Sam, and was my idea. I was to go in with Sam, to watch him in case the thing became dangerous. Fred was to stay in the car a hundred yards down the road and wait.

I parked the car at the agreed distance and Sam and I got out. Sam had my tow rope over his shoulder, already noosed. Fred had quieted down considerably, and his face was dead serious.

"I don't think I like this," he said, looking up the road at the house. It hunched back from the highway, and looked like a malign being deep in thought.

I said, "Well, Sam? Want to pay up now and call it quits?"

He followed Fred's gaze. It sure was a dreary-looking place, and his liquor had fizzed away. He thought a minute, then shrugged and grinned. I had to admire the rat. "Hell, I'll go through with it. Can't bluff me with scenery, phony."

Surprisingly, Fred piped up, "I don't think he's a phony, Sam. He showed me something one day, over on Tenth Avenue. A little store. There was something funny about it. We had a little scrap afterward, and I was sore for a long time, but—I think he has something there."

The resistance made Sam stubborn, though I could see by his face that he knew better. "Come on, phony," he said and swung up the road.

We climbed into the house by way of a cellar door that slanted up to a window on the first floor. I hauled out a flashlight and lit the way to the beam. It was only one of many that delighted in turning the sound of one's footsteps into laughing whispers that ran round and round the rooms and halls and would not die. Under the famous beam the dusty floor was dark-stained.

I gave Sam a hand in fixing the rope, and then clicked off the light. It must have been tough on him then. I didn't mind, because I knew I could see anything before it got to me, and even then, no ghost could see me. Not only that, for me the walls and floors and ceilings were lit with the phosphorescent many-hued glow of the ever-present ghost plants. For its eerie effect I wished Sam could see the ghost-molds feeding greedily on the stain under the beam.

Sam was already breathing heavily, but I knew it would take more than just darkness and silence to get his goat. He'd have to be alone, and then he'd have to have a visitor or so.

"So long, kid," I said, slapping him on the shoulder; and I turned and walked out of the room.

I let him hear me go out of the house and then I crept silently back. It was without doubt the most deserted place I have ever seen. Even ghosts kept away from it, excepting, of course, Wolfmeyer's. There was just the luxurious vegetation, invisible to all but me, and the deep silence rippled by Sam's breath. After ten minutes or so I knew for certain that Happy Sam had more guts than I'd ever have credited him with. He had to be scared. He couldn't—or wouldn't—scare himself.

I crouched down against the wall of an adjoining room and made myself comfortable. I figured Wolfmeyer would be along pretty soon. I hoped earnestly that I could stop the thing before it got too far. No use in making this any more than a good lesson for a wiseacre. I was feeling pretty smug about it all, and I was totally unprepared for what happened.

I was looking toward the doorway opposite when I realized that for some minutes there had been the palest of pale glows there. It brightened as I watched; brightened and flickered gently. It was green, the green of things moldy and rotting away; and with it came a subtly harrowing stench. It was the smell of flesh so very dead that it had ceased to be really odorous. It was utterly horrible, and I was honestly scared out of my wits. It was some moments before the comforting thought of my invulnerability came back to me, and I shrank lower and closer to the wall and watched.

And Wolfmeyer came in.

His was the ghost of an old, old man. He wore a flowing, filthy robe, and his bare forearms thrust out in front of him were stringy and strong. His head, with its tangled hair and beard, quivered on a broken, ruined neck like the blade of a knife just thrown into soft wood. Each slow step as he crossed the room set his head to quivering again. His eyes were alight; red they were, with deep green flames buried in them. His canine teeth had lengthened into yellow, blunt tusks, and they were like pillars supporting his crooked grin.

The putrescent green glow was a horrid halo about him. He was a bright and evil thing.

He passed me, completely unconscious of my presence, and paused at the door of the room where Sam waited by the rope. He stood just outside it, his claws extended, the quivering of his head slowly dying. He stared in at Sam, and suddenly opened his mouth and howled. It was a quiet, deadly sound, one that might have come from the throat of a distant dog, but, though I couldn't see into the other room, I knew that Sam had jerked his head around and was staring at the ghost. Wolfmeyer raised his arms a trifle, seemed to totter a bit, and then moved into the room.

I snapped myself out of the crawling terror that gripped me and scrambled to my feet. If I didn't move fast—

Tiptoeing swiftly to the door, I stopped just long enough to see Wolfmeyer beating his arms about erratically over his head, a movement that made his robe flutter and his whole figure pulsate in the green light; just long enough to see Sam on his feet, wide-eyed, staggering back and back toward the rope. He clutched his throat and opened his mouth and made no sound, and his head tilted, his neck bent, his twisted face gaped at the ceiling as he clumped backward away from the ghost and into the ready noose. And then I leaned over Wolfmeyer's shoulder, put my lips to his ear, and said:

"Boo!"

I almost laughed. Wolfmeyer gave a little squeak, jumped about ten feet, and, without stopping to look around, high-tailed out of the room so fast that he was just a blur. That was one scared old spook!

At the same time Happy Sam straightened, his face relaxed and relieved, and sat down with a bump under the noose. That was as close a thing as ever I want to see. He sat there, his face soaking wet with cold sweat, his hands between his knees, staring limply at his feet.

"That'll show you!" I exulted, and walked over to him. "Pay up, scum, and may you starve for that week's pay!" He didn't move. I guess he was plenty shocked.

"Come on!" I said. "Pull yourself together, man! Haven't you seen enough? That old fellow will be back any second now. On your feet!"

He didn't move.

"Sam!"

He didn't move.

"Sam!" I clutched at his shoulder. He pitched over sideways and lay still.

He was quite dead.

I didn't do anything and for a while I didn't say anything. Then I said hopelessly, as I knelt there, "Aw, Sam. Sam—cut it out, fella."

After a minute I rose slowly and started for the door. I'd taken three steps when I stopped. Something was happening! I rubbed my hand over my eyes. Yes, it—it was getting dark! The vague luminescence of the vines and flowers of the ghost-world was getting dimmer, fading, fading—

But that had never happened before!

No difference. I told myself desperately, it's happening now, all right. *I got to get out of here!*

See? You see? It was the stuff—that damn stuff from the Shottle Bop. It was wearing off! When Sam died it . . . it stopped working on me! Was this what I had to pay for the bottle? Was this what was to happen if I used it for revenge?

The light was almost gone—and now it was gone. I couldn't see a thing in the room but one of the doors. Why could I see that doorway? What was that pale-green light that set off its dusty frame?

Wolfmeyer!

I got to get out of here!

I couldn't see ghosts any more. Ghosts could see me now. I ran. I darted across the dark room and smashed into the wall on the other side. I reeled back from it, blood spouting from between the fingers I slapped to my face. I ran again. Another wall clubbed me. Where was that other door? I ran again, and again struck a wall. I screamed and ran again. I tripped over Sam's body. My head went through the noose. It whipped down on my windpipe, and my neck broke with an agonizing crunch. I floundered there for half a minute, and then dangled.

Dead as hell, I was. Wolfmeyer, he laughed and laughed.

Fred found me and Sam in the morning. He took our bodies away in the car. Now I've got to stay here and haunt this damn old house. Me and Wolfmeyer.

THE INVISIBLE MAN MURDER CASE

by Henry Slesar

WHEN YOU COME right down to it, I'm a pretty nice guy. I'm not so homely that you couldn't face me across a luncheon

table, and not so handsome that you wouldn't mind bringing your girl along. I make pleasant small talk, and know how to listen sympathetically. I'm relatively modest about my accomplishments, even if I am a sort of celebrity (my last book sold one million four hundred thousand copies in the paperback edition). So, being fully aware of the general niceness of me, Jeff Oswald, it came as a rude shock to realize that there was somebody in this world who hated my guts. Someone who despised me.

I got my first hint of this alarming fact when the Mystery Authors Association extended me an invitation to take their podium for half an hour. It was a big moment for me, being asked to speak before such an auspicious gathering. I had just published my first novel (*Kill Me Quietly*, Wharton Publishers, $2.95) and the ink hadn't dried on my second contract. As you might know, the book became something of an instantaneous best-seller, and there was a public clamor for further adventures of my private eye hero, Rufe Armlock. Always alert to public demand, I've since responded with nine more novels, each slightly gorier (and more successful) than the last.

Anyway, the MAA slipped me a nice note, asking me to lecture, and I willingly obliged. I don't believe my speech made any great impression, but I think the membership was amused to get a look at me. After reading about Rufe Armlock, they must have expected something different. (*His face was like a granite slab, chiseled on by a bad sculptor. His shoulders were too wide for most doorways. When he smiled, he could chill a hood's blood or boil a woman's.*) Actually, my face is more the kind you see in graduation class photos, the big-eared kid in the back row with the pink cheeks and silly grin. I guess I didn't look like the author of *Kill Me Quietly* at all.

It was after the lecture that I met the man who hated me. I didn't realize the enmity at first; I was too flattered just to be introduced to Kirk Evander. Evander had been a kind of hero of my childhood, when I discovered his intricate detective novels after exhausting the output of Conan Doyle, S. S. Van Dine, John Dickson Carr, Ellery Queen, and the rest. Once I had thought that an Evander novel was the epitome of the classic mystery yarn, but his most recent efforts hadn't held the old magic. He was past sixty now; he was beginning to plagiarize himself.

"Gee, Mr. Evander," I said, in a voice that sounded boyish to my own ears, "this is a great pleasure for me."

He was a small, wispy man with mournful features, but

there was a lot of incandescence in his eyes and he shook hands as if we were trading fish.

"Thank you," he said dryly. "This book of yours, Mr. Oswald. Did you say it was called *Kill Me Quickly?*"

"*Quietly*," I corrected. "I'm afraid it's one of these hard-boiled novels, Mr. Evander. Nothing like the things you write."

"I imagine not." He pursed his lips. "And do you seriously classify this work as a mystery?"

"I don't classify it at all. You see, I have this private detective character called Rufe Armlock. He's a sort of tough—"

"Spare me," Evander said, shutting his eyes. "I've heard quite enough about private detectives, Mr. Oswald. The occupation has been an excuse for the worst offenses against good taste that I have ever known. You will pardon me if I am *not* amused."

I admit I was disappointed. Not because Evander didn't like my book; I expected that. But my picture of the author was shattered by meeting him. He looked like a dissipated college professor, and talked like a refugee from a bad English play. I shifted uncomfortably, and began to eye the crowd in search of interesting females.

But Evander wasn't through with me yet.

"Do you know something, Mr. Oswald? Young men like yourself, with their Freudian nightmares translated into violent images of 'private eyes' and 'naked blondes' and assorted cruelties, are primarily responsible for the decline of the detective story."

"Gee, I'm sorry, Mr. Evander—"

"Sorry? If you were truly sorry, Mr. Oswald, you would do the world a favor. You could chop off your hands before they ever touched a typewriter again. Or, if that cure seems too drastic, you would burn every manuscript you write before the world ever sees it."

I still didn't get upset. I told you I was nice.

"Well, Mr. Evander, I don't think I could do that. You see, I write for money."

"Why?"

"To eat, I guess."

"Why?"

I began to get the idea that Mr. Evander wasn't partial to me. I took the hint and wandered off in search of the before-mentioned females. Luckily, I found one. Her name was Eileen, and she turned out to be an admirer of mine. It was nice to talk to her, especially since she was a lot prettier than Kirk Evander. After the meeting, we went to her apartment in Greenwich Village. Eileen was an Associate

Member of the Mystery Authors, which meant she hadn't sold anything yet. She read me the first chapter of a suspense novel called *Black Night at Bennington*. It was terrible. Unfortunately, I said so, and the evening ended badly.

It was almost six months before I saw Kirk Evander again, and by that time, my second novel (*A Fistful of Blood*) had become the best-selling paperback on the stands. I went to another MAA meeting, with the vague hope of running into Eileen again. I had already forgotten Evander's acid comments, and even if I hadn't, I was too swelled with my own success to let them worry me. When I saw the little guy, looking as if he had worn the same rumpled suit from the last meeting to this, I greeted him cheerfully.

"How's everything?" I asked. "Got a new book on the fire, Mr. Evander?"

The man standing next to the writer, a snooty-looking guy that worked for *Wharton Publishing*, the outfit that produced my books and Evander's, coughed and moved away. Evander turned on me and smiled without humor.

"My new book," he said bitingly, "is, indeed, on the fire. As I'm sure you've heard."

I batted my eyes. "Huh?"

"It seems the public doesn't want crime literature any more. It wants filth. It wants garbage! Unfortunately, there are people like you, Mr. Oswald, to provide it in ready supply."

He whirled on his heel and stalked away. Just then, Eileen appeared out of the crowd and pulled me to one side.

"For heaven's sake!" she said, tapping her foot. "Are you still shooting off your mouth, Jeff Oswald?"

"Gosh, it's nice to see you again, Eileen." It *was* nice. She was a remarkably pretty girl, with Oriental eyes and auburn hair.

"I guess you'll never learn," she sighed. "Why must you be so tactless?"

I shifted my feet guiltily. "I'm sorry about that. I wouldn't have told you that about your novel, but you *begged* me for an honest opinion—"

"I don't mean that. I mean Kirk Evander. Didn't you know about his last book?"

"No."

"Well, it was the flop of the year. He considered it his masterpiece, but the reviewers called it a pompous bore. One of these real period pieces. A locked-room murder in the family mansion, with millions of obscure clues."

"Gee, that's too bad. I used to admire that guy."

"He's nothing but an old fool. And maybe something

else . . ." She looked into the crowd thoughtfully. Then she bit her lip, and added: "And how he hates *you.*"

"Hates me?"

"I've heard him carry on about you in other meetings. He thinks you're the sole reason for his failure. He practically has a stroke when your name is mentioned."

"Gosh! I hardly even know the guy."

"That doesn't matter. You're some kind of symbol to him. All the hate that's been building up in him for the last few years—he's directing it at you."

I frowned. I didn't like being hated.

"Ah, the heck with it," I said, trying to be bright. "You and me need a drink."

"You and *I,*" she said primly. "Some writer you are."

So we had a drink. As a matter of fact, we had several. That was my mistake.

Around eleven o'clock, I was carrying seven or eight martinis in my pouch, and my head felt like a sputnik, revolving slowly around the meeting room. I wasn't used to so much alcohol, even if my hero, Rufe Armlock, was. (*He cracked the cap on a bottle of bourbon and tilted the neck into his mouth. He didn't lower it until the brown stuff was below the plimsoll line, but when he put it down, his steely eyes hadn't changed in focus or alertness.*) As a matter of fact, I was pie-eyed, and saying a lot of stupid things. Like telling Kirk Evander just what I thought of him and his "classic" detective novels.

"You're a bore," I said, poking a finger into his chest. "Thash what you are. A bore. And you know what your novels are? Impopable. I mean *improbable.* All those locked-room murders and junk like that. That kind of thing never happens. Never!"

Evander remained calm while I lectured him. But out of my drunken fog, his eyes shone like yellow lanterns.

"Never happens," I said again. "People don't get bumped off that way. Unnerstand, Mister Evander?"

"Of course," he said bowing slightly. "Thank you for the opinion, Mr. Oswald."

"S'all right," I grinned. "Nice to help. You jus' listen to ol' Rufe Armlock. I mean Jeff Oswald. The public does not *believe* that stuff any more. They want *action.* Not that ol' locked-room junk. Unnerstand?"

"Perfectly," Kirk Evander told me.

By this time, Eileen had the good sense to pull me away. She coaxed me out of the meeting hall and took me to her apartment, where I made one slobbering attempt to kiss her.

It failed miserably, and she thrust me out the door like a cat. Somehow, I got myself home.

In the morning, an air-raid siren woke me up. After a while, I realized it was only the doorbell. I got up and let my visitor in. It was Aaron Snow, my agent.

"What's the matter with *you*?" he said.

"What time's it?" I groaned.

"Three." Aaron frowned at me, in his fatherly way. He was a year older and fifty years wiser, and he looked like an aging quiz kid. "I've been trying to reach you, but your phone's off the hook. I wanted to report on that Wharton meeting this morning."

"What meeting?"

"I guess you didn't know. Kirk Evander stormed in there this morning, and gave 'em an ultimatum. Either they strike you from their list, or him."

"What?"

"That's the truth. He must have been crazy to do it; his last book sold about eight hundred copies, and I suspect he bought 'em all himself. He should have known they wouldn't drop a hot-rock like you."

"So what happened?"

"They tried to placate him, of course. He was once important to their Mystery Division. And who knows? He might come through with a big book yet. But Evander stood his ground. Either you go—or he does."

"What did Wharton say?"

"What could they say? They simply refused to accept. He stormed out again, promising never to darken their door." Aaron sighed. "Feel sorry for the old guy. He was really a great writer. He'll never get lined up with a first-grade publisher now."

"Gee, that's rough."

"Don't let it worry you. Just concentrate on that next opus of yours. Got a title yet?"

"Yeah, tentatively. *To Kiss A Corpse*. Like it?"

Aaron grimaced. "No. That must mean it's good."

It took me four months to reach the last chapter of that novel. One night, hammering away on my old Remington, the doorbell sounded. I cursed at the interruption, because I had just reached a very crucial moment. (*She swayed toward him, her arms reaching out for the unfinished caress, the shreds of her clothing waving in the breeze from the opened window. But Rufe Armlock wasn't interested; he raised the automatic in his hand and tenderly squeezed the trigger. The bullet ripped into her soft white . . .*)

"All right, all right!" I shouted, as the ringing persisted.

I flung open the door, and there was Kirk Evander.

For a moment, I was frightened. To tell you the truth, I scare easily. Even the stories I write sort of scare me sometimes, and the realization that my visitor was a man who hated me intensely was disturbing.

But he was smiling.

"Good evening," he said cordially. "I wonder if I could come in, Mr. Oswald?"

"Sure," I gulped.

When he got inside, he took off his shabby homburg and peeled off a pair of gray suede gloves. There was a large hole in the right index finger.

"I hope you'll pardon this intrusion. But I discovered something very interesting in the evening paper, and I thought you'd like to see it."

I blinked at him.

"It relates to our conversation at the MAA meeting," Evander said sweetly. "I believe you made certain statements, about the type of crimes I write about. You said they were —improbable."

"Listen, Mr. Evander, I'm sorry if—"

"No, no," he said quickly, lifting his hand. "I quite understand. But I knew you would be as intrigued as I was—to read this."

He handed me a newspaper clipping. I took it to the desk lamp and read:

PUBLISHER'S AIDE
KILLED IN LOCKED
HOTEL ROOM

INEXPLICABLE MURDER
BAFFLES POLICE

March 12, New York. A murder mystery straight out of a Kirk Evander novel took place last night at the Hotel Belmartin, where Winston Kale, 46, publisher's assistant, met his death under mysterious circumstances. Mr. Kale, an employee of the Wharton Publishing Company, whose specialty is mystery novels, was shot and killed in a room securely locked and bolted from the inside.

The unusual nature of the crime was noted by the police when they were called to the scene by Zora Brewster, 24, a friend of the deceased. Miss Brewster claimed that she had left Mr. Kale's hotel-apartment at one, leaving him in "good spirits." When she closed the door behind her, she heard Mr. Kale lock and bolt the door. As she was waiting outside for the elevator, she heard a shot, and rushed back

to the door. When Mr. Kale failed to respond, she called the police. Mr. Kale's body was discovered on the floor, a bullet having penetrated the back of his head, causing instantaneous death. Upon examination of the room, the police could find no trace of any intruder or weapon. The room was located on the nineteenth floor of the residential hotel, and the windows were locked.

In an interview with Captain William Spencer, Homicide Detail, the police official stated: "The circumstances of Mr. Kale's death are certainly unusual, but we are confident that a logical explanation will be found. We have ruled out suicide completely, due to the direction of the bullet and the lack of any weapon."

Miss Brewster, an actress and singer, is being held as a material witness.

I looked up from the clipping with astonishment evident in my face, because Evander chuckled and said:

"An 'improbable' murder, wouldn't you say, Mr. Oswald?"

"Gosh," I said. "Winston Kale! I saw him only last week—"

"The poor man," Evander clucked. "But if he had to die, what a delicious way to do it. I'm sure the Wharton Publishing Company is pleased by the publicity."

I realized that Wharton wasn't the only one pleased. Kirk Evander's glowing eyes indicated that he was pretty happy himself. The news story was practically an advertisement for his novels. It was a natural promotion gimmick.

"What about this girl?" I said. "Zora Brewster. Maybe she's the one."

"Nonsense. Miss Brewster is an old, er, acquaintance of mine. She's charming and harmless, and her brain compares in size to a pea. She wouldn't have either motive or intellect to commit such a crime."

I decided to be a good sport. I grinned.

"Well, I guess you made your point, Mr. Evander. Guess there *are* improbable crimes. Too bad about old Winston, though."

"Bah. Winston Kale's not worth mourning. He was a sycophant, a yes-man for Douglas Wharton."

I scratched my head and studied the item again.

"But how was it done? You've had experience with this kind of thing, Mr. Evander. In your novels, I mean. How could he get killed in a locked room?"

"That," and Kirk Evander smiled, "is a story I just might reveal. In my next novel, for Gorgon Press. I've just signed a contract with them, for a book to be called *Death of a Publisher*. I imagine this publicity won't harm sales, eh? Good night, Mr. Oswald!"

He picked up his hat and gloves, and left with an air of triumph.

I couldn't get back to work after that visit. I felt as I had when I was a kid, puzzling over a John Dickson Carr or Kirk Evander murder mystery, trying to solve it before the author's revelation on page umptieth. But the fact that this murder was *real*, and that I actually knew the dead man made it too upsetting for logical thought. It could have been coincidental, but that seemed as improbable as the fact that such a crime had actually taken place.

And then an even more disturbing idea intruded. The mysterious death of Winston Kale had come along as a stroke of luck for Kirk Evander. People wold be talking about "locked room" murders again, and that meant talk about Kirk Evander fiction. It seemed awfully convenient.

Was it maybe *too* convenient?

I gave a shiver, and tried to warm myself over the typewriter.

A few weeks later, I learned that I was right about one thing, and wrong about another. People talked about the locked-room murder, all right, and Gorgon Press announced the new Kirk Evander novel with appropriate fanfare. But the publicity didn't last. The newspapers got awfully quiet about the strange death of Winston Kale, and people started to forget.

Then they were sharply reminded.

Late one morning, I opened the newspaper and saw a front-page bulletin:

ACTRESS KILLED ON STAGE; POLICE BAFFLED BY "IMPOSSIBLE" CRIME

CHIEF WITNESS IN KALE MURDER STABBED DURING PERFORMANCE

April 7, New York. Zora Brewster, attractive songstress in the Broadway production of "Live It Up," was killed last night in circumstances as unusual as the death of Winston Kale on March 11.

Miss Brewster, chief witness to the "locked room" murder of the publishing company executive, suddenly collapsed on stage during a musical number and was taken to her dressing room. It was later revealed that she had been stabbed to death by a blow from behind. However, Miss Brewster was the only performer on the stage of the theatre at the time . . .

The article went on for considerable more lineage, and once more the death of Winston Kale came in for examination. Kirk Evander's name was mentioned three times, and

his new novel, *Death of a Publisher*, was also cited. It was great publicity, all right.

Too great.

The thought that had troubled me some weeks ago came back. It was all too pat. Evander knew both Kale and Zora Brewster; he might not have liked either one too much. More importantly, they may have been natural victims of some nutty scheme to revive interest in the "classic" detective yarn.

"No," I said aloud. "That's crazy! He wouldn't do such a thing—"

Then I remembered Kirk Evander's eyes, and I began to wonder if he was more than just an embittered author. Maybe he was a mental case, a desperate man.

If anybody could concoct such murders, Evander was the one. He'd spent his whole life thinking about them.

And what if Zora Brewster's death wasn't the last? What if the murders went on, maintaining interest in Kirk Evander's books? All he had to do was keep knocking off people he didn't like, in some inexplicable manner. . . .

People he didn't like?

I swallowed the boulder that had lodged in my throat.

If Evander killed the people he didn't like—who was a better choice than Mrs. Oswald's son, Jeff?

My hand was shaking like a bongo-player's, but I got it steady enough to pick up a phone.

Aaron Snow's voice had a nice quality of gruff reality.

"I think you're nuts," he said, when I babbled out my suspicions. "But if it's going to worry you, why not get in touch with Captain Spencer, the detective on the case? At this point, I think he'd be happy to listen to *any* theory."

"Then you really think I should?"

"Sure. It's about time you met a *real* detective, anyway."

I was too nervous to take offense. I hung up the phone, squared my shoulders, and called police headquarters.

I got even more rattled when I met Captain Bill Spencer. I mean, it was a shock. He was a great big guy, with shoulders almost too wide for my apartment door. He had a strong, rugged face, like chiselled granite. He was practically a double for Rufe Armlock.

"Okay," Spencer frowned, taking a seat. "Let's get down to business, Mr. Oswald. And do me one favor."

"What's that?"

"Stick to the facts. I'm not fond of fiction; particularly your kind."

"You've read my novels?"

"If you want literary criticism, Mr. Oswald, you called the

wrong guy. All I'm interested in is murder. Real murder."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," I said eagerly. "I've got an idea about these two crimes, and I think it makes sense."

"I'm listening," Captain Spencer said.

He leaned back and lit a cigarette while I talked. I told him everything, right from the beginning. I told him about Evander and his hatred for me, and how he bemoaned the decline of the classic detective story. I told him about his fight with Wharton Publishers, and how he knew the girl, Zora Brewster. I told him all I could think of, without putting my theory into a single crisp sentence.

He finally forced me into it.

Spencer said: "Let's get it straight, Mr. Oswald. Are you making an accusation?"

I blinked.

"I guess I am," I said. "I don't have any proof, of course. But I think Kirk Evander killed them both. He had plenty of motive."

"And did you also figure out how?"

"No. But if anybody could, Evander could. His own books prove it."

The Captain stood up.

"Well, it's an interesting theory, Mr. Oswald . . ."

"But you don't believe it?"

"As a matter of fact, I think you may be right. I'll follow it up at once."

I couldn't help looking surprised.

Spencer scowled. "I know what you're thinking. You've read so many novels, you always think the cops never listen to anybody, and go blundering ahead on their own. Well, you're wrong. Some of our best leads come from outside. I happen to believe your theory's a damn good one."

And he went out.

I have to admit I was flabbergasted. I *had* expected Spencer to scoff at my idea; I thought the cops always did. They sure did it in Rufe Armlock novels.

About three days later, I learned that Captain Spencer had acted swiftly.

I was hunched over the typewriter, trying to get Rufe into trouble, when I heard the pounding on the door. It was Kirk Evander, and he was too angry to use the doorbell. He burst into the room like a small tweedy cyclone and said:

"So! I meet my accuser face to face!"

"I don't understand—"

"You don't, eh? Then you deny it? You deny that you accused me of murder? That you were responsible for hav-

ing me dragged into the dirty hands of the police, like some common hoodlum?"

I didn't know what to say. I would have gladly invented a lie, but I couldn't think of one.

"You thought I wouldn't realize, eh? But I know it was you, Oswald. You couldn't *bear* the fact of my success, could you? So you resort to *this*!"

"Look, Mr. Evander, I'm sorry if—"

"I don't want your apologies!"

He went to the door, but turned before going out.

"All I have to say is this, Mr. Oswald. *Be careful.*"

He laughed, and shut the door.

Well, let me tell you, I was scared. Evander hadn't actually *denied* anything, and his last words sounded like a pure and simple threat.

Even though it was only eight-thirty, I decided that the best place for me was in bed and under the covers.

I couldn't fall asleep until an hour later, and then my dreams weren't the kind I liked to dream.

About ten-fifteen, I thought I heard a sound outside. It might have been a knock on the door, so I padded out of the bedroom and opened the front door. There was nothing there but a breeze, so I went back to my comforter.

A few minutes later, I was in the middle of a dream involving a guillotine. I didn't care for it. I forced myself awake, but when I opened my eyes, I saw that the shreds of the dream were still clinging. There was a shining blade over my head.

"Go 'way," I murmured.

But the blade didn't go away. It started descending. Only now it wasn't a guillotine blade any more; it was a meat-chopper, and it seemed interested in the white meat on my neck.

I froze on the bed.

Then the doorbell rang, and just as suddenly, the meat-cleaver disappeared out of sight.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. It *had* been a dream, then. But what a dream.

I opened the door and there was Eileen, tapping her foot.

"Well," she said. "Is that how you usually dress for a night out?"

"Huh?" I looked down at my pajamas.

"It's rather unusual, but you might start a fad. Or did you just forget about our date?"

I slapped my forehead. "Holy cow! I was supposed to meet you at ten. I forgot—"

"I suppose you were keeping a date with dear old Rufe

Armlock. Or was it one of those blonde beauties he's always shooting in their soft white—"

"Gosh, I'm sorry, Eileen, it slipped my mind completely. And for good reason, believe me."

I pulled her inside and made her sit down. She was pretty cool towards me, but when I told her about Evander's visit, she got all warm and solicitous.

"You poor thing," she said, patting my cheek. "No wonder you were upset."

I took advantage of her sympathetic attitude for a while, but half an hour later, the telephone's jangle cut off any further ministrations of mercy. I picked it up, and Spencer's rough voice said:

"Oswald? This is Captain Spencer. Thought you might like to know that there's been another murder."

I gasped. "Whose?" I said.

"That's the tough part. I decided tonight that we had enough on him to pull him in for serious questioning, so we dispatched a couple of men to bring him back. That's when we found him."

"Evander?"

"Dead, murdered, just like the others. Only maybe a little worse. Think maybe you ought to come down here."

"All right," I said, trying to stop my trembling. "Where are you?"

"At Evander's apartment, on Central Park South. Better get here before midnight."

"Right," I said.

Eileen insisted on coming down with me, but the police barricade that had been stationed outside Evander's apartment door declined to admit her. She waited outside while I walked in. Captain Spencer was standing by the body, and at first, all I could see was Kirk Evander's slippered feet.

"Just like the last time," Spencer said quietly. "Door was locked from the inside, and so were all the windows. But this is how we found him."

I looked down. Nobody had to tell me that Kirk Evander was dead.

His head was missing, neatly severed from his body.

I didn't get sick or anything. Not me. But when I got outside, *then* did I get sick! Boy!

As you might guess, the news of Evander's murder, the third such mysterious event in a period of less than three months, brought about a journalistic picnic. There wasn't exactly rejoicing in the streets, but in certain circles, like *Gorgon Press,* there were secret smiles of satisfaction. They

knew that Evander's last book would be a best-seller, even before the galleys were made up.

Evander's earthly remains were put in the family vault by the author's only living relation, a brother named Borg Evander. This Borg was quite a character, too, and here's how I came to meet him.

About a week after the murder, my agent Aaron Snow showed up at my apartment, looking enthused. Aaron doesn't get enthused very often.

"Great idea," he said, tossing his hat on a chair. "I didn't think Wharton's publicity department had a good idea in them, but this time they came across."

"What are you talking about?"

"Take a look."

He pulled a mimeographed sheet from his pocket. I saw it was a standard news release, with the *Wharton Publishing Company* masthead. I'd seen them before, but this one made me sit up. The heading read:

MYSTERY AUTHOR VOWS TO DISCOVER MURDERER OF KIRK EVANDER

Jeff Oswald, author of "Kill Me Quietly," "A Fistful of Blood," and the forthcoming "To Kiss A Corpse" (Wharton Pub. Co.) has vowed to find the killer of his friend, Kirk Evander, the famed mystery novelist. Evander met his death in circumstances as strange as . . .

I stopped reading, and said:

"This is screwy!"

"No, it isn't. It's a real sweet publicity idea. I know you don't like that 'friendship' bit, but it was necessary."

"That's not what I mean. How can I solve these murders? Even the police don't know where to start. I couldn't possibly—"

"You can make a try, just for appearances sake. Nobody will blame you if you fail."

"But we're doing all right without phony stunts—"

"We want it to continue, don't we? The public's fickle. Look at the way Kirk Evander's old novels are selling; you couldn't give 'em away six months ago. They could forget about Rufe Armlock in an awful hurry."

"But how do I go about it?"

"Well, you know Captain Spencer pretty well. He can supply you with information. And you can pay a call on Borg Evander, for instance."

"Borg Evander? Who's that?"

"Kirk's brother, who showed up when he was killed. He

might know something. Look, I even brought you his address." He dug into his wallet for a scrap of paper. "Dr. Borg Evander, 80 Wiffletree Road, Queens . . ."

"All right," I said glumly. "If I have to."

"You have to. Especially since I okayed the release this morning."

"You mean the papers will be printing this thing?"

"I hope so."

"But then—what if the murderer sees it? What if he thinks I really *know* something?"

"You're not scared, are you?"

"Who, me? Of course."

The next morning was bright and clear, and the sunshine helped dispel some of the murkiness that surrounded my errand. I went to pay a call on Borg Evander, who lived in a section of town I knew nothing about. After wandering about the streets, I finally found the old wood-frame house at the end of the unpaved street. It was isolated from the rest of the structures on the avenue, and from the moment I walked up to the front door, I knew it was just as well. The place smelled bad.

I rang the doorbell, but heard no sound. Instead, a panel in the door slid open noiselessly, and a light shone in my eyes. I blinked and swore I saw a lens staring at me. Then the panel slid shut hastily, and a voice said:

"Please state your name and business."

I did, and the door opened. I started to say how-do-you-do to the man behind it, but there wasn't any man. As the door shut behind me, I got the idea that Dr. Borg Evander was one of these gadgeteers.

"Enter the door at the end of the hallway," the voice said.

I obeyed the instruction, but I gasped when I opened the door. There was nothing but air behind it, and a railed platform some four feet square.

"Please step on the platform," the voice told me.

I stepped on. A motor whined, and the platform descended. It took me down about fifteen feet, to the floor of what was obviously a basement laboratory, crowded with scientific paraphernalia. It all looked very imposing and professional, but I couldn't tell if the junk scattered around the place was intended to locate a cure for warts or repair television sets. My host was nowhere in sight.

Then, out of a partitioned area at the end of the basement, out he came. He looked a lot like Kirk Evander, but he was easily five years older. He didn't have Kirk's hot-lamped eyes, either. They were brown and soft.

"I hope you don't mind the elevator," he said gently. "I detest stairs. And my heart—"

"I understand. I, er, gather you're some kind of scientist, Dr. Evander?"

"Ah," was all he said.

"Dr. Evander, I thought maybe you could help me. You see, your brother was a close friend of mine, and I'm interested in uncovering his murderer. I thought if we had a little talk—"

"But I've already spoken to the police," he said, looking bewildered.

"And what did you tell them?"

"Very little, I'm afraid. I hadn't seen Kirk for almost eight years, until he showed up a few months ago. He was always rather distant towards me . . . Then, when I learned of his death, I came forward to claim his body. That's really all I know."

It was a disappointment, but out of politeness, I chatted a few minutes longer. I was just about ready to leave when he said:

"Would you care to look around? I've been working on several fascinating experiments. The police didn't seem very interested, but you, a writer—"

"Well," I said, looking at my watch.

"It won't take very long. I don't see people very often, Mr. Oswald. I suppose they consider me—odd."

"I wouldn't say that, doctor. But you'll have to admit. That odor—"

"Odor? What odor?"

"Well, frankly, Dr. Evander, there's a smell in this house that's a little hard to take."

"Oh, dear." He put a finger on his mouth. "It's been here so long I've become immune. It's the acaphenimatin compound, probably, a new kind of plant food I'm working on. Or perhaps you're smelling the sulfaborgonium." He lowered his eyes shyly. "A chemical I have named after myself; a scientist's vanity. It has a pungent odor, but only in formulation. I suppose I *could* stop making it, since it doesn't seem to have any practical application."

"Well," I laughed feebly, "it sure stinks, don't it?"

"Yes," he answered vaguely. "Kirk used just that word. Yet he seemed infinitely more interested in the sulfaborgonium than any of my experiments."

I perked up at that.

"Kirk was interested? Why?"

"I really don't know. He seemed utterly fascinated by its properties. As a matter of fact, he suggested a splendid use

for it, if I could manufacture it in sufficient quantities. But that would be most impractical. The distillation process requires months, and produces only the smallest quantities from an exorbitant amount of raw materials."

"What use did he suggest?"

"Oh, an esthetic one. Kirk was always the esthete of the family. He thought that the unsightly portions of public structures might be painted with the chemical. Bridges and things. In order to make them more attractive."

"I don't think I understand."

"Well, since sulfaborgonium is an anti-pigment and a total barrier of light rays, it would naturally render these ugly portions invisible. However, I don't think—"

"Wait a minute. Would you go around that corner again, doctor?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Did you use the word *invisible*?"

"Yes, of course. Once transmuted into chemical form, sulfaborgonium becomes a soluble fat, with the consistency of a—well, a facial cream, for instance." He chuckled impetuously. "Yes, Kirk was very amusing about that. He called it Vanishing Cream."

I was staring at the doctor until my eyes were hurting.

"Go on," I said. "Tell me more."

"Well, because of its resistance to pigmentation, and its complete barrierization of light, the chemical renders anything it covers invisible. If I didn't stain it with methyl blue, I wouldn't be able to find it myself." He chuckled again.

My head was swimming, and I wasn't sure if it was the odor or the wild words of Dr. Evander.

"Let me get this straight. If you spread this stuff on something, that something can't be seen?"

"Exactly."

"Anything?"

"Oh, yes."

"Even a human being?"

The doctor looked puzzled.

"I suppose so. But why would anybody want to be invisible?"

"Dr. Evander," I said, licking my lips, "you mean to say you can't think of a single, solitary reason why somebody would want to be invisible? Have you ever heard of H. G. Wells? Have you ever been to the movies? Have you ever—" He wasn't reacting, so I put it more simply. "Criminals, doctor! Just think about what an invisible criminal can accomplish! Or a spy! An army, doctor! Think of how many battles you could win with an invisible army! A plane, a tank, a ship

—imagine those invisible! Big things, little things. Good men, bad men! A general or a peeping Tom or a detective . . ."

"I never thought of it that way," Dr. Evander murmured. "But now that you put it into words . . ." His face suddenly had more wrinkles than before. "But most of the things you mentioned are terrible things. Evil things—"

"That's right," I said grimly. "Take murder, for example. It would be pretty easy to kill somebody, and not get detected—if you were invisible. In a locked room for instance. All you have to do is walk in and kill somebody, then lock all the doors and windows. When the police finally break in, you walk out. Or on a stage, in front of thousands of witnesses—you could kill someone without the fear of being detected. The perfect crime."

"How awful!"

"I think your brother might have realized these potentials, doctor. I'm not saying he used your chemical to commit the murders which took place. He might have made it available to someone else, however. And that someone may be responsible for all the deaths—including the death of Kirk Evander. And he's free to kill again."

"It can't be true!"

"It must be true, doctor. If this stuff can do what you say—"

Something was making my ankle itch. I reached down and scratched it. My hand touched something furry.

"What the hell," I said.

"Oh," Doctor Borg said, seeing my expression. "That must be Socrates."

He reached down and picked up an armful of nothing. Then he stroked the nothing tenderly.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"It's Socrates, my cat. I rubbed the sulfaborgonium on her last week, as an experiment. To see if the substance was harmful to animals. But she appears to be perfectly all right."

I put my hand out, gingerly.

Socrates was fine. When I pulled my hand away, there were three thin scratches on the skin.

When I got home, I sat down and stared at the typewriter and talked to it like an old friend.

"What would Rufe Armlock do in a case like this?" I said.

The Remington didn't answer, but the thought of Rufe Armlock conjured up another image. Why not go right to Captain Spencer, and tell him the story? It was simple and it was direct, so that's what I did.

"Oh, no," he said. "No, no, no."

"What do you mean, no?"

"I mean no, and that's all I mean. I appreciate your ideas, Mr. Oswald, don't misunderstand. But now you've gotten into fantasy—"

"But what if I could *prove* the story? What if I prove this sulfaborgonium stuff exists?"

"Can you?"

"I wanted to bring you a sample. That's one of the first things I asked Dr. Evander, but he said it was all gone. The last drop went on his cat. But it's my theory that either Kirk Evander or an accomplice swiped some."

"Then you can't really *show* me this sulfawhatever-you-call it? You only have his word for it?"

"But there's the *cat*," I said anxiously. "The cat itself is proof that things can be made invisible. Animals. People!"

"And you seriously think that an invisible man is walking around this minute, bumping off people?"

"I do!"

He screwed up his face and rapped his desk.

"All right. You bring me the cat. Then I'll follow through."

"Right. I'll see Dr. Evander again tomorrow morning, and I'll produce Socrates. Then I'll leave it up to you to find this invisible murderer. I don't envy you the job."

I saw Eileen that evening, and despite the fact that I wanted to keep my discovery quiet, I couldn't help shooting off my mouth. That's a problem of mine.

She listened to me in evident amazement, and then she said something that had us both unnerved.

"But Jeff! If this killer's invisible, then he could be any place. He could be right in this room!"

We both looked around, wide-eyed. Then I took an umbrella from the rack and started to parry it around the room. Eileen did the same, with a rolled-up magazine. It became a kind of crazy game after a while, and we both started to giggle. Pretty soon we were laughing hysterically, poking into the closets and under the chairs and out the window, and we finally collapsed in helpless mirth, hugging each other like a couple of nutty kids. It wasn't the most romantic moment of our lives, but for some reason it seemed right. We got pretty silly and tender for a few minutes, and when we got up off the floor, we were engaged to be married. Funny how a thing like that happens, but that's the way it was with us.

We didn't discuss the invisible murderer much after that. We had too much else to talk about.

In the morning, I took the subway out to Queens and whistled merrily all the way. The world seemed like a pretty nice place, even underground.

But when I rang the front doorbell of Dr. Borg Evander's house, the little panel in the door didn't slide back, and the

television lens didn't pop out to examine me. There was no response at all.

I rattled the knob, but the door was locked.

After five minutes of useless pounding, I went around to the other side of the house and tried to find another method of entry. There wasn't any. The back door was bolted, and all the windows were tightly shut.

I didn't have any reason to get panicky. I hadn't told the doctor of my intentions to return. He could have been out. And it was only natural for someone to lock up their house when they left it.

Still, I didn't like it.

There was a luncheon counter at the northwest corner. I went there in the hope of finding a telephone booth; I found one. But the call I placed to the doctor's home wasn't answered. I came out and spoke to the counterman. He said:

"Old Doc Evander? Why, he must be home. Never known the Doc to leave that nutty house of his. Has everything delivered. Regular hermit."

That settled it. I went back to the Evander house and began to pound on the front door. I almost busted my shoulder doing it, but I finally snapped whatever screwy kind of electronic lock held it closed. When it swung open, a bell began clanging a warning throughout the house, but I didn't pay it any attention. I took the elevator platform down to the basement.

Of course, my suspicions had been right. The old man was spread-eagled on the stone floor, and the man who had wanted him dead didn't care about being neat. His head had been struck several times with something blunt and hard, and the result was sickening.

I called the police, and then roamed the house, calling out:

"Here, kitty, kitty, kitty. Here, Socrates. Here kitty, kitty . . ."

But I knew it was useless. The invisible killer had been thorough, and now every speck of evidence was gone.

I won't say that Captain Spencer completely disbelieved my story. After the murder of Borg Evander, it almost seemed like corroboration. But he was a practical man, too, and he knew that my fantastic explanation for the murders—without tangible evidence—would only produce raised eyebrows and embarrassed coughs if he proposed the theory himself. It was all right for me to suggest the explanation—I was a fiction writer. But he was a detective of homicide, and his stock-in-trade was fact.

So the theory remained private, among Captain Bill Spencer and myself and the girl I wanted to marry.

It might have stayed that way forever, if Douglas Wharton, president of the publishing company, hadn't gone loony.

Now Douglas Wharton is kind of a legendary figure in publishing. As a young man, running a hand-press in the back of a stationery shop, he had established a distinguished reputation for integrity and daring. His company was one of the first to recognize the growing American hunger for mystery stories, and he also published one of the first regular series of science fiction novels. He established the Wharton Fellowships for new authors in both fields, the first of their kind. He was one of the first truly cooperative publishers in the history of the various authors' leagues.

He was in his sixties when I joined the list of the Wharton Publishing Company, but you'll rarely see a better-looking or more vigorous man of forty. He was a tall, slim guy, with movie-actor distinction in his handsome features and graying temples. He looked like a retired British major, but he could talk like a retired U. S. Army First Sergeant.

I liked Douglas Wharton. So I wasn't happy to hear the rumors about him shifting his trolley.

I asked Aaron Snow about it one day.

"Seems to be some truth in it," he said gravely. "The old man's been acting pretty jumpy lately, and saying a lot of queer things. His friends have been trying to get him to take a vacation, but he won't hear of it."

"What's the matter with him?"

Aaron shrugged. "I'm no psychiatrist. But from what I hear, he's seeing things. Things nobody else sees. Hearing them, too. He gets mad as hell when the people around him deny it. Like last week . . ."

"What happened?"

"The way I get the story, there was a board meeting of the editors. Company policy, stuff like that. The Mystery Book Editor was making a report, when Wharton suddenly starts to curse—and if you've ever heard Doug Wharton curse, you know how fluent he can be. Everybody looks at him, and he accuses the man next to him of tickling his ankle."

"What?"

"That's right," Aaron said sadly. "Raised hell about it. Swore up and down that his ankle was being tickled. The man next to him was Bosley Morse, Senior Editor of the Classical Department. White hair and whiskers, you know the guy, looks like Walt Whitman. Last guy in the world you'd accuse of tickling your ankle. But that's what Wharton claimed."

I whistled.

"Gee, that's tough. Fine man like that."

"Yeah, it's a shame, all right. Of course, he absolutely refuses to get medical attention. Some of his friends tried sneaking a headshrinker in to see him, pretending it was a social call. But Doug was too smart for 'em. Ticked off the doctor immediately, and threw him out of his house."

Maybe you can guess what I was thinking.

"Listen, Aaron," I said. "Can you get me an appointment to see Wharton?"

"What?"

"I'd like to see him. I only met him once, when we were signing the contracts. Maybe you could fix up a lunch date or something."

"What for?"

"I've got an idea. It's a nutty idea, but then most of my ideas are. I'd just like to *see* the man before I do anything about it."

"Well, if that's what you really want. I suppose I can arrange it through the mystery editor." He narrowed his eyes shrewdly. "You got something up your sleeve, Jeff?"

"Who, me?" I said innocently.

But when I left Aaron, I knew I did have something up my sleeve. I had an invisible man, who had killed three people and a cat, and who just might be after a fifth victim—in a slightly different manner.

Aaron went to work quickly to make the arrangements. There was only one snag. Since his "trouble" had started, Douglas Wharton had stopped dining out at lunch time, and confined his noontime meal to a sandwich in the office. However, he didn't mind my joining him.

I kept the appointment promptly at twelve, walking through the impressive oak-rimmed doorway of the presidential office. Wharton was at his desk, looking older and more tired than I remembered him, but his smile was wide and cordial when he greeted me.

"Sit down, Jeff," he invited. "My secretary will bring the lunch in a few minutes. Ordered you a steak sandwich. Okay?"

"Suits me fine," I said.

"How's everything going? You must be working on novel number four now, eh?"

"That's right. It's called *The Noose Hangs High.*"

"Well, if it's as successful as the others, we both won't have any cause for complaint. That's quite a character you've got there, that Rufe Armlock."

"Yes, sir. Sometimes I wish he really existed."

He looked up at me sharply. "Why?"

"Oh, I dunno. He just never seems to have any trouble. If there's a case to be solved, he just moves right in and solves it. You always know things'll come out all right in the end."

"Yes," Wharton sighed. "I see what you mean."

The lunch arrived, and we ate in silence for a few minutes. I kept watching Wharton's face, anxious to see if I could detect any signs of the looniness I'd been hearing about. He looked okay to me.

Then it happened.

We were sipping our coffee, and I was giving the president a rough outline of the plot of *The Noose Hangs High* when he seemed to stiffen and look past me towards the closed door. My blood went icy when I saw the change in him.

"What's wrong, Mr. Wharton?"

He continued to stare past me, and his lips were moving soundlessly.

"The knife . . ." he said hoarsely.

I whirled around, but there was nothing there. When I looked back at the publisher, his hands were covering his eyes.

"Mr. Wharton . . ."

"I'll be okay, Jeff. I'm sort of—tired."

"Mr. Wharton, you said something about a knife."

"It was nothing."

"Did you *see* a knife?"

"No, no . . ."

Then suddenly, shockingly, he was laughing, laughing wildly, uncontrollably, dancing and gyrating in the swivel chair.

"Mr. Wharton!" I shouted, standing up.

"Stop it, stop it!" He was shrieking in anguish, even as he laughed, and there were tears running down his cheeks.

"Mr. Wharton, are you all right?"

He stopped as quickly as he had started, and slumped exhausted over the desk blotter. I went to him, and he pointed feebly towards the pitcher of water. I poured him a glass and he drank it quickly, coughing.

"What is it?" I said. "What happened to you?"

He couldn't answer for a moment. Then the door of the office slammed shut violently, and he said:

"I was being tickled. So help me God, I was being tickled. It was horrible . . ."

It sounded funny. Tickling is a funny word. But I didn't feel funny. Only horrified.

"Has this happened before?"

"Yes, often. I don't know what's the matter with me. Maybe I'm afraid to find out. But first I *see* things . . . like a knife, floating in midair. Or something else. And then I know it's going to happen, then I know the tickling will start, that awful tickling . . ."

He broke down and sobbed. Like I said, he was a man in his sixties, but he sounded like a heartbroken child, sobbing on the impressive desk in front of me.

"This is terrible," I said. "Don't you think you should get help, Mr. Wharton? A doctor?"

He looked up at me, trying to compose himself.

"I'll tell you the truth. I've seen a doctor, my own doctor. He knows of nothing organically wrong. I have a slight heart condition, but nothing major. His only suggestion was that my trouble was mental." His face hardened. "And I know that's not true. I *know* it. No matter what insane symptoms I have, I know that my mind is sound. I'm sure most people wouldn't believe that . . ."

"I believe it, Mr. Wharton."

"What?"

"I believe it. Because I think I know what's happening to you."

He stared at me, not sure what I meant.

"Mr. Wharton, will you let me tell you a story?" I said. "Not fiction, Mr. Wharton. What I believe is a true story."

He didn't reply, but I took his silence for an affirmative.

I told him the story of Zora Brewster, and the two Evanders. I told him about the missing cat, and the mysterious chemical called sulfaborgonium. I told him my theory about the invisible killer.

"I don't understand," he said, when I was through. "What does that have to do with me?"

"Just this, Mr. Wharton. I think this invisible madman's decided upon *you* as his next victim. Only now he's getting fancy. He must be bored with his old hit-and-run tactics. He wants something more—delicious. That's why he's doing what he's doing. Making you *see* things. Making knives appear out of nowhere. Tickling you. Tickling you to death."

"It's madness," Wharton said hoarsely. "The worst madness I ever heard of."

"There's a Captain of Homicide that believes it, too. His name is Bill Spencer, and you can check with him about it if you like."

"But what can we do against such a man? How can we fight him?"

"I don't know yet. It's a terrible power he's got, a power that's hard to stop. He can be anywhere, any time, and we'd

never know it. The way he was here a few minutes ago. The way he may *still* be here."

"The door—" Wharton stood up.

"Yes, the door slammed. But he could have stayed on this side, couldn't he? And heard all we said."

"Then he must realize you know about him. He must realize how dangerous you are to him—"

I swallowed, and tried to look placid.

"He must know a lot of things. He hasn't hurt me yet."

"What do you think I should do?"

"I'm not sure. Try and stop him. Carry a gun. The next time he tries his tricks—shoot. Don't be afraid of appearing ridiculous, Mr. Wharton. Grapple with air if you have to, but try and hold on to your man. Meanwhile, I'll talk to Spencer about this and try to develop some more positive action."

I left the office, without knowing whether Douglas Wharton had been convinced by my strange theory. But at least he was warned.

I was just about to leave the building when Greta, Mr. Wharton's secretary, called to me.

"Oh, Mr. Oswald," she said. "Did you want to pick up your mail, while you're here?"

I nodded. Usually, I average about two dozen fan letters a week, addressed to the publishers. A lot of them are crank letters, mostly from women. Sometimes, I'd get proposals of marriage.

Greta was looking through her files, and her face was puzzled.

"That's funny. I could swear there were nine letters, but I can only find eight. That smelly one is missing—"

"Smelly one?" I grinned. "You mean a perfumed letter?"

"I wouldn't exactly call it perfume," she said. "It arrived last Friday, and we practically had to fumigate the office. It smelled like rotten eggs to me."

"Must be somebody who doesn't like Rufe Armlock," I said. Then I thought it over and exclaimed: "Did you say rotten eggs?"

"Yes. I put it in the bottom drawer of my desk, and forgot all about it. I would have forwarded it to you, but I thought it would be best to deliver it in person. I was afraid I'd get arrested if I sent that awful thing through the mails." She chuckled.

Rotten eggs. Sulphur. The words were stirring a memory in my brain. That was the smell which had pervaded Dr. Borg Evander's house!

"And you say it's missing?"

"Yes. I'll keep looking for it; maybe it went to the mail room by mistake. Do you think it might be something important?"

"Could be," I said. "Could be *very* important. Keep searching for it, huh?"

"I will, Mr. Oswald."

I returned to my apartment, my head aching with the thoughts that were crowding my brain. The letter must have been written by Dr. Evander, and it must have concerned our discussion. It might afford me the proof that I was looking for, the proof that was destroyed by Dr. Evander's murder.

I sat on the sofa, feeling suddenly exhausted. I wanted to forget the whole business, forget about murder and madness and invisible killers and locked rooms. I wanted a little peace and quiet. I wanted to marry Eileen, and head off to some corny honeymoon spot like Niagara Falls, and settle down to the simple life, have a couple of kids, take a trip to Europe now and then. Let somebody else chase around catching insane murderers. I wasn't Rufe Armlock; I was only Jeff Oswald, and I was tired of the whole affair.

Then all Hell broke loose.

First it was Eileen, and her hysterical voice on my telephone sent shivers from one end of my spine to the other. It was some time before I got her to give me a coherent story.

"It's awful, awful," she sobbed. "I can't stand it another minute, Jeff, not another minute . . ."

"But what's happening, Eileen?"

"It must be *him*. He's been following me, doing awful things. Tearing my clothes, touching me . . ." She went off into a wave of tearful gasps. "I just can't stand it, Jeff! You've got to help me!"

"I'll be right over!"

I got to Greenwich Village in less than twenty minutes, and found Eileen lying on her bed. She was more than just disheveled. Her dress had been ripped and torn in a dozen places, and her hair was wildly disordered. She was still crying uncontrollably, and I had to hold her in my arms like a child before she could talk sensibly.

"He—he must have followed me home," she said, her voice muffled against my chest. "I suddenly felt this—touch on my leg. I jumped, and then something tore my dress. I started to scream and he stopped. I thought of calling the police, and then I realized what they would think. For a while, nothing happened, and then it started all over again. Out of nowhere, I'd feel this *hand* on me. And then he'd tear at my clothes again—"

"Easy, baby," I said, my heart pounding so hard I thought it would crack inside me.

"Then it stopped again. For almost an hour. I heard the door open and shut, and I thought he was gone. I tried telephoning you at home, but you weren't there. Then I called Aaron Snow, and he told me you were at Wharton. I called there, too. Then it started again—" She began to sob again quietly.

"He's a madman," I said tensely. "No question of that. He's pulling the same kind of stuff on Douglas Wharton. And he must realize that you know about him, too." I grasped her arms. "Listen, Eileen, you've got to get away from here . . ."

"But where could I go? How can you stop someone like that from finding you?"

"We'll figure something out. But you've got to get out of town before he—God knows *what* he'll do!"

"I—I've got an aunt who lives out in Sauter Beach. I could go there for a few weeks."

"Good idea. Meanwhile, I want to call Bill Spencer and tell him what's been happening. I think we've got to stop playing it so safe. I think we've got to get some official help —even if the whole damn world thinks we're crazy!"

I called Police Headquarters on Eileen's phone, but Captain Spencer was off-duty. I talked the desk sergeant into giving me his home telephone number, and dialed it.

From the moment I heard Spencer's voice, I knew that he wasn't alone.

"What is it, Captain?" I said. "Is anything wrong?"

"No," he said tensely. "Nothing's wrong. Everything's just fine. Just remember this, Jeff. If I don't report in tomorrow at the station, and they find the doors locked and bolted—*he'll* still be in the room. That's how they can trap him. Remember that!"

"What are you saying?"

"I think he's with me, right now. He hasn't done anything yet, but I *feel* his presence. But I'm ready for him. One noise, one movement, and I'll have him. . . ."

Even though Spencer's voice was calm, I couldn't help detecting the undercurrent of hysteria. The Captain wasn't a guy that scared easily, but there was something unearthly and horrible about an opponent you couldn't see. . . .

"Look," I said, "suppose we get some help? Suppose I call the police—"

"No! I'll take care of this myself. If he wants a fight, I'm—"

He stopped talking.

"Captain!" I said. "Bill!"

There was no answer.

"What is it?" Eileen said.

"Bill, are you okay?"

Eileen must have realized what was happening on the other end of the phone, because she began to sob again, fearfully.

I slammed the receiver down and said:

"I've got to get over there!"

"Jeff, don't leave me—"

"I've got to! That *thing* is in Bill's apartment. I've got to help him!"

I burst out of the house and into the street, and almost went frantic at my failure to hail a taxi. When I finally got one, I sat in the back seat and knew that my attempt would come too late.

I was right, of course. The door of his apartment wasn't locked or bolted; it was flung open. But Bill Spencer was dead, a dagger wound between his wide shoulders.

The next afternoon, I saw Eileen off at LaGuardia Airport. I hated to see her go, but I was glad, too. The plane would take her three hundred miles from New York, and three hundred miles from the invisible lunatic that was tormenting her.

As far as I knew, now there were only two people left in the city that the killer was interested in. Douglas Wharton, and me.

Back in the city, I called Wharton's office and suggested a council of war. He agreed, and I went to his penthouse apartment that evening to talk things over.

"What I can't understand is this," I told the publisher, as we sat in his plushly-decorated living room. "This fiend has killed or tormented everybody but me. He hasn't laid a finger on me, or made any attempts against my life. Yet if anybody can do him harm, it's me."

"There was that guillotine stuff you told me about," Wharton said. "How about that?"

"That's true. It must have been the killer that was hovering over my bed. But if he wanted to kill me with that meat-chopper, he could have done it. Yet he didn't."

"Obviously, he wants you alive. He must have his reasons."

"But why? The only people I know who *really* care if I'm alive or dead are (1) Me, (2) Eileen, and (3) Aaron Snow. Why should this nut care?"

Wharton chewed his lip thoughtfully.

"Aaron Snow," he repeated. "Wasn't Snow Kirk Evander's agent, at one time?"

"Yes, come to think of it. It was back a few years. They

had a violent disagreement over money, and Evander asked for them to cancel the arrangement."

"That was quite a loss for Snow, wasn't it? At that time, Evander was a hot-selling author. Ten percent of his income was a lot of dough."

"Well, Aaron's doing okay now. Thanks mostly to Rufe Armlock, to tell the truth."

"That's right," Wharton said musingly. "And that in itself would be a good reason to want you alive—"

I stared at him.

"Now, look. You're not suggesting—"

"I'm not suggesting anything."

He got up and mixed us a drink. I watched him, trying to digest the new thought he had planted in my mind. Then I saw him snap his fingers, as if in recollection.

"Just thought of something. Greta gave me a letter for you. Said something about it smelling bad—"

"*What?*" I shot out of the chair.

Wharton looked surprised at my reaction. "What's wrong? Something important?"

"Maybe very important! Let me see it!"

He put down his drink and went out of the room. When he returned, he was holding a long, rumpled envelope. He put it to his nose and sniffed distastefully.

"I see what she meant," he said. "Damn thing smells like rotten eggs."

I grabbed it from his hands and ripped it open.

There were two scrawled sheets inside. The handwriting was almost indecipherable, but I finally made it out.

Dear Mr. Oswald:

I have been thinking over what you told me this morning, and have decided to reveal the entire truth. I must admit that the evil potentialities of my chemical had never occurred to me before this. But now that I realize them, I think it is better for you to know the facts.

As I told you, I have not seen my brother Kirk for many years, despite the fact that we resided in the same city. A few months ago, he suddenly decided to renew his family ties, and called upon me. I was delighted, of course, since I have always admired my talented younger brother.

However, I begin to suspect that his interest in me was only the result of his interest in my work. On several occasions, I have provided Kirk with scientific information which he has utilized in his novels, and some years ago, I informed him of my experiments with sulfaborgonium. It was this particular chemical which held his interest now.

Two weeks ago, Kirk came to me and told me a very sad

story. It seemed that there was a great deal of public apathy towards the kind of detective fiction which he wrote, and that apathy was costing him his livelihood. He seemed truly broken-hearted about it, and even though I know nothing of literary matters, I was deeply moved by his plight.

Then he told me that he had an unusual plan, a plan which he believed would restore the lost interest in the classic detective novel. It was actually a hoax, he informed me, an amusing prank which he would play on the public in order to increase interest in his work. As a scientist, of course, I have little interest in practical jokery, but Kirk seemed genuinely convinced that this "joke" would have a very practical effect upon his career.

Reluctantly, I agreed to cooperate.

Kirk's plan was this. Quite recently, there had been two highly improbable murders, and he wished to create the semblance of a third—the murder of himself. He was quite delighted with the details of this hoax, for he intended to spread the sulfaborgonium over his head, giving his body the appearance of being decapitated. Then I was to supply him with a chemical means for him to appear truly dead, a method which is used for the performance of heart surgery.

He planned to be discovered this way, and for the world to believe that he had been murdered by some impossible means, just as the victims in his novels have been killed. Then I was to claim his body for burial in the family vault. His "body" of course, would be perfectly alive and well.

We went through the plan as outlined. There were some difficult moments (the county coroner, as you probably know, wanted to perform an autopsy; fortunately, I was able to stop it in time) but in general, everything went smoothly. When I brought Kirk's "body" home, I promptly counteracted the heart-stoppage and he was completely restored to health and vitality. He swore me to secrecy, and told me that he planned to conceal himself in another part of the country until the proper time came to reveal the hoax.

I have not heard from Kirk since.

While I cannot believe the terrible idea that Kirk himself is behind the murders, I now feel that I must tell you the true circumstances of his disappearance.

If there is anything further I can do to help, please feel free to call upon me.

Sincerely,
Dr. Borg Evander.

I read the letter with the growing conviction that the answer to our problem was in our hands. I read the letter aloud

to Douglas Wharton, whose face showed a confused mixture of bewilderment and surprise.

"But what does it mean?" he said. "Is it really Kirk that's playing these invisible tricks?"

"Of course! Only Kirk would be interested in the death and torture of these victims. He killed Winston Kale as an example. He didn't have any great grievance against Kale, but he didn't like him much, either—especially after Wharton Publishing refused his ultimatum. Then, to keep interest alive in these puzzle murders, he killed Zora Brewster —the one person who saw Kale alive before the locked-room murder. Then, he plotted his own 'murder,' when the police got on his trail. Now he's killing everyone who knows the story of the chemical—his own brother, Captain Spencer. In order to complete his insane plan, he has three more to go. You, because he associates his failures with your company. Eileen, because she knows of his existence. And me."

"But why didn't he kill you *first?* You're the one he hates most."

"That's exactly why. Because he hates me so much, he wants me to squirm. He wants me to know that there *are* such things as impossible murders. When he's knocked off everybody in some improbable manner—then he'll be ready to take care of me. But first, he has to demonstrate that I was wrong and he was right."

Wharton folded his arms and shivered.

"All right. So we know it's Kirk Evander. But that doesn't bring us any closer to a solution."

"Sure it does," I said. "Because now that we know it's Kirk, we can act accordingly. We can try and *think* the way Kirk Evander thinks."

"How will that help?"

"I don't know yet," I said miserably. "But we've got to find a way."

That night, I sat and stared at my Remington, and I never thought so hard in my life. It was like trying to work Rufe Armlock out of an escapade, only it was much worse. At least I had control of the characters in a Rufe Armlock novel; if I wanted them to do something, I *made* them do it. If only it was that easy!

My only consolation was that Eileen was presumably out of danger.

Then even that was destroyed. Around ten o'clock, the telephone rang and the long-distance operator told me that there was a call from Sauter Beach. Eileen didn't have to say very much before I realized that her invisible masher was still on the trail. My hands went cold on the phone.

"Maybe I'm wrong," she said, her voice trembling. "But yesterday, on the beach, I thought I saw something glinting in the sun . . . I looked up and could have sworn I saw a gun, just hanging in the air . . ."

"Good God," I said, shutting my eyes.

"Jeff, I don't know what to *do*. If he's followed me here . . ."

"Hang on, sweetie, just hang on. We're working this out. We've learned something we didn't know before. We're going to lick this."

"I don't know what to do! Should I come back to the city? Then you'll all be in danger—"

"Never mind about that. Come back as soon as you can. We've got a plan—"

"What kind of plan?"

"Never mind now. But we won't be so helpless any more."

I hung up, hoping she wouldn't realize that I was bluffing.

But an hour later, slumped over the still typewriter, I *did* have a plan. I got so excited about it that I woke Douglas Wharton out of a sound sleep, not realizing that it was already four in the morning.

The item that appeared in every New York newspaper read something like this:

POSTHUMOUS AWARD TO KIRK EVANDER

BANQUET TO BE HELD IN DEAD MYSTERY NOVELIST'S HONOR

July 2, New York. The Wharton Publishing Company announced today that a new Fellowship was to be added to the company's roster, to be named the Kirk Evander Fellowship. It will provide special awards and scholarships to promising authors of the "classic" detective novel. The official innovation of the Kirk Evander Fellowship will take place at a banquet in honor of the deceased novelist on July 8. Among the speakers will be . . .

Eileen's brow was ruffled when she studied the item.

"But what good will it do? Honoring that fiend?"

I chuckled. "Think about it, and you'll see. Can you think of anything that would appeal more to an egomaniac like Evander? How can he resist attending a banquet that's held in his own honor?"

"Then it's a trap?"

"Of course it is. And even if Evander realizes that it's a trap, I don't think he'll be able to resist showing up. He's too convinced of his invincible powers to believe that we

could capture him. Besides, the Fellowship idea is genuine. Evander *was* a heck of a good writer, and Wharton does intend to create the award. The speakers will all be real, and the entire event will be authentic. But there'll be some added features . . ."

"What kind of features?"

"Some preparations. Just in case we have an uninvited guest that night. A special welcome for him."

Eileen's eyes shone.

"Can I come, Jeff?"

"No!"

"Please! After all, he's after me, too. It can't be any more dangerous—"

I scowled like Rufe Armlock and pulled her towards me.

"I said no, baby. And don't give me any argument, or I'll shoot you in your soft, white . . ."

She didn't argue with me.

It was impressive, no doubt about it. The banquet hall, a ninety-foot chamber in the Hotel Colbert, was splendidly decorated for the occasion, with luxurious drapery and burgundy-red carpets and glittering chandeliers. The speaker's table was raised on a dais, and two long guest tables flanked each other on both sides of the hall. The guests began milling around early in the evening, all of them dress-suited and distinguished-looking and seemingly pleased at the prospects of the occasion. The full list of speakers hadn't been announced, but Douglas Wharton was to make the main presentation.

After several rounds of drinks, the time for the formal opening of events arrived.

The guests seated themselves, the doors were closed, and Douglas Wharton rapped a gavel.

"Gentlemen, before we satisfy our appetite, I thought it would be appropriate to have a few words concerning the purpose of this occasion. So it gives me great pleasure to present a young man whose rise to fame is best described in that worn but accurate word, 'meteoric.' More important, this young man, perhaps more than any one present this evening, has good reason to know the qualities of the man we have gathered to honor. Gentlemen, Mr. Jeffrey Oswald."

There was a scattering of applause, and I tugged at the collar of my formal shirt and stepped forward to the speaker's rostrum.

I cleared my throat and said:

"Kirk Evander was and is a great man."

I paused to let that sink in.

"I say was, because at the time of his passing, he had left the world a heritage of some thirty-five mystery novels, the like of which may never be seen again. I say is, because Kirk Evander will remain alive as long as someone, somewhere, thrills to the magic words he put on paper."

There was some more applause.

"Kirk Evander was more than merely a great man. The world has had its share of those. But Kirk Evander was also an *unusual* man. A man of courage and of daring, a man willing to face an unpopular trend and do it battle. Kirk Evander made that battle, and the effort was nothing short of magnificent. It was to him that we owe the present upcurve in the popularity of the classic detective story—and all of us want nothing more than to see that popularity maintained."

Again, they applauded.

"As we all know, Kirk Evander's last novel, *Death of a Publisher,* was released to the reviewers yesterday. I can't think of any more fitting tribute than this review, which will be published in tonight's edition of *The New York Blade.*"

I lifted a sheaf of papers from the table and waved it at the crowd. But I didn't read it. Instead, I placed it carefully in front of me, and went on talking. I talked for another five minutes, and never once took my eyes from the papers.

I was almost ready to sit down, when I saw them move.

"He's here!" I shouted.

Everyone went into action as planned. At the doorway, the two dress-suited men who were standing by reached up and pulled the light switches that plunged the hall into immediate darkness. Throughout the room, I heard the swift movements of the guests as they reached beneath the covered tables and removed the masks that had been placed there in readiness. I found my own beneath the speaker's podium, and slipped it quickly over my face. Somewhere below, a lieutenant of police named Davis was preparing to pull the release on the gas bomb which would spread the thick, deadly stuff in violent clouds throughout the room.

"The door! The door!" I heard Wharton cry, and he leaped from the dais to help form the barrier of bodies that would block the invisible killer from making his escape. By this time, the heavy clouds of gas were filling the room, and I could still smell its sickening-sweet odor through the mask, or imagine that I did.

In the midst of the crowd there was a sudden wave of violent motion, as if Kirk Evander was struggling wildly to make his way to an exit. Hands reached out everywhere to

try and pin him down, but he was too clever. At the doorway, Douglas Wharton suddenly cried out and grappled with the air, and then his assailant was gone.

"Don't try and hold him!" I shouted to them. "Let the gas stop him—"

There were frenzied sounds and movements in the darkness, sudden shouts of surprise and fear, unexpected gasps and outbursts. But it was only for the moment; soon there was only stillness.

"The lights!" I said. "Turn on the lights."

They flickered on overhead.

"All right," Douglas Wharton said commandingly. "He's here someplace. Find him."

They backed off against the walls, and started to close in the ring slowly.

From the rear of the hall, Lt. Davis of the police department suddenly shouted:

"Here he is!"

I looked. Davis was lifting something from the floor, something that appeared to be a dead weight.

He carried his burden towards one of the banquet tables, pulling aside the cloth to place it down.

Then he threw the cloth over it, and we saw the outline of a small, plump body. The outline of the unconscious body of Kirk Evander.

Davis bent over it.

"We didn't mean for the gas to kill him," he frowned. "But I'm afraid his heart couldn't take it. Evander's dead."

Eileen and I did go to Niagara on our honeymoon. But as far as we were concerned, the Falls could have been invisible, too.

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INVISIBILITY...

an idea which has enchanted mankind for millenia, ripe ground for horror, vengeance or the acquisition of vast riches: the imagination quivers and reels at the magnificent possibilities for pranksters, peepers; opportunists and fiends. But more than all that, invisibility provides a soul-satisfying sense of power, the more delicious because it is secret.

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