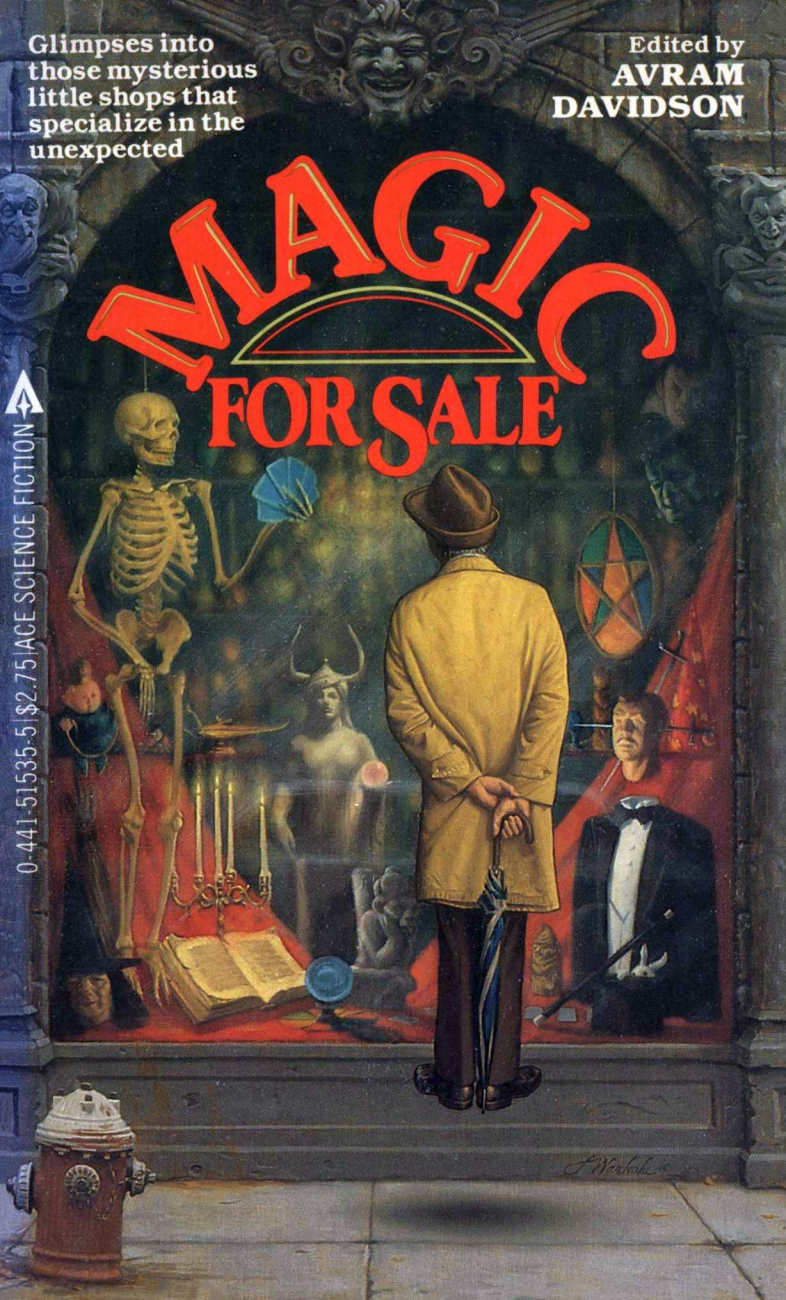


Glimpses into
those mysterious
little shops that
specialize in the
unexpected

Edited by
**AVRAM
DAVIDSON**

MAGIC FOR SALE

0-441-51535-5 \$2.75 ACE SCIENCE FICTION



J. Winkler

Come. We have lingered long enough. How often have we walked this narrow thoroughfare without having noticed that odd little shop or, if noticed, passed it by? Let us just try the door...it opens...a bell tinkles...What an *odd* shop...What can it have for sale?

Shall we go in...?

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Edited by
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MAGIC FOR SALE

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Introduction

The place through which he made his way at leisure was one of these receptacles for *old and curious* things which seem to crouch in odd corners of this town and to hide their musty treasures from the public eye in jealousy and distrust. There were suits of mail standing like monks in armour here and there, fantastic carvings brought from monkish cloisters, rusty weapons of various kinds, distorted figures in china and wood and iron and ivory; tapestry and strange furniture that might have been designed in dreams. . . .

—Charles Dickens
The Old Curiosity Shop

Of depictions of shops in classical antiquity, it may be said that the shops appear to be small and not particularly crowded with merchandise: and this seems to hold true down through the Renaissance. It is perhaps only in later centuries that the general store or shop developed, likely with the decay of the guilds. Many merchants operated in a market hall or market area, and if they had to lock up their goods in their stalls (if they had stalls, and not merely a mat on the ground) after each day's work, their stock of goods would need be limited. A

description of a typical retail shop in Brazil early in the 1800s may well be true of shops elsewhere: The shopkeeper estimated what he was likely to sell in the course of the day, and, early in that day, went and got it from his wholesaler. If anything was left over at closing time, the retail merchant was not pleased, and reproached himself for bad planning. Later on in that century there was a class of wholesale merchants in West Africa and certainly elsewhere, who prided themselves that they never "broke bulk."

That is, if (for example) one of them had received by last ship a hundred cases of—say—unbleached muslin in bolts, he would sell you not less than one case. Only a wholesaler of the second category would buy the case, and, having "broken bulk," would sell the cloth by the bolt. The bolt-buyer would put the bolt on his or her shelf, removing it thence to the counter and there it would be measured and cut and sold by the length. And after that it would be a matter of anything goes. I well remember "lucies," that is loose cigarettes, being sold for a penny each. The whole pack then cost fifteen cents and the retailer's profit was only a penny a pack if the whole pack sold unopened; if, on the other hand, he opened an off-brand—say, Picayunes or Sweet Caporal—it might grow stale and unsalable.

All of this, well, mostly all, would have been for fairly immediate consumption; but there was something else altogether: the second-hand trade, which did not easily lend itself to wholesale, and which existed partly because, prior to industrialization, things were made to last, there were perhaps more poor, and certainly the poor had fewer things. Built-in obsolescence was an idea whose time had not yet come, plastic and synthetic lay undreamed of even by alchemists. A garment, an item of furniture, a piece of armor or even kitchenware, an object of art, each and all might pass through a lifetime of use and still be usable. Well, and suppose that the heirs . . . the estate . . . the creditors, perhaps . . . simply did not desire to go on using them? There were really no charitable thrift shops, so the second-hand dealer came to be, and trade can be as brisk in previously owned shirts and sheets as in brand-new ones: that took care of *that*. But there were things for which no immediate sale, brisk or not, was to be expected; yet there *was*

a new leisure class coming into being which might eventually buy the things that were far too good to throw out. So there developed a class of shopkeepers who—unlike the retailers who went daily to replenish their shelves—invested the cost of their space as well as the cost of their goods. And though some of these goods were not really *very* good, others might be in that long, large limbo between the utile and the decorative, the junk and the antique, the merely curious and the collector's item. Thus and gradually came into existence what Dickens has memorably called *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

You won't find Odde Shoppes in malls. They don't have them in shopping centers. They are not set up by entrepreneurs looking for Anchor Stores. Developers do not develop them. They just grow. Eh? Well . . . they used to . . .

There was an old man, a White, or perhaps merely Grey, Russian. He kept an old books and magazines and stuff store in Saffron Cisco. I found his place amusing but confusing. "This is very complicated," I said, once. Or maybe often. "Not complicated, not," he said. "From this table, you can only buy. From this table you can only trade. On the other table, *here*, you got to buy and also you got to trade-in something. And on the other table, *there*, you got to buy and also you got to trade-in two somethings." It didn't always fit in with my immediate desires. "You have a funny way of doing business," I said. He turned. "I do business my way," he told me. He is gone now, his shop is gone now, in its place is an establishment selling items packaged in cardboard and hard plastic. There is no confusion. You pay *cash*. You don't trade *nothing*. Volodya was a hard-nosed old son of a bitch. I miss him.

One day at the other end of the continent I found an odd shop on Columbus Avenue I hadn't seen before. In the window was a brightly colored picture showing seven encircled examples of conventional Roman Catholic iconography: the Blessed Virgin, St. Patrick, the Sacred Heart, I forget what else. And under each one was a quite different name. Such as Ogun. Yambala. I forget what else. The whole thing was captioned, *Las Siete Potencias Africanas*. The Seven African Powers. Certain to be of interest to my friend Mike, the anthropologist. I went in to buy it for him. "How much is that picture in the window?"

A slender middle-aged man smoking a cigar of the same complexion as his own, tan, said: "Which picture. Ah. The Shango picture, hm, the price." He looked at my beard, beards were rarer then than later, "I will give you a clerical discount," he said. "Fifty cents."

Do you still have it, Mike?

Thus I met Chris Oliva. He sold banjo-strings and he sold hairpins and he sold herbs in jars and he sold colored candles and sec-hand books in several tongues and he sold cooking spices and he sold sweets. In between sales he smoked his cigar and he played his mandolin. On one wall was a lurid lithograph of St. George planting the lance. "There are those who claim the dragon is evidence of some racial memory of giant saurians," I said once. Chris frowned very slightly. "Was no such thing as dragon," he said. "Was symbol of evil." On another wall was a simply immense framed photograph of a woman in turn-de-siècle gown; obviously a queen, tiara and all. "Is that the Queen of Spain, Chris?" Chris smiled indulgently, then tried to hide the smile from pity at my ignorance. "Is my old Queen Willemina. Dutch. I am from Surinam, Dutch Guiana. My people used to own all this," he said, waving his hand in a gesture to include the entirety of old New Amsterdam. Even before I moved away, he was gone, and so was his store. Farewell, Chris Oliva. Like Old New Amsterdam: gone, all gone.

Gone, the small shop where the gentlewomen sold cakes baked at home by gentlewomen for sale to other gentlewomen; gone, the old odorous little place where the small man sat rolling low-cost cigars by hand. Gone the gluey bookbinder and his glue-pots and his presses; the establishment up three steps, cramful of cages and a birdy smell and a grainy-smell and, always, a number of don't-fool-around-with-me-looking men whose fixed and obvious belief was that pigeon-fancying alone separated man from the beast: gone.

Once, to my surprise, I found a hole-in-the-wall shop in a Los Angeles neighborhood where one doesn't expect the walls to have holes; a sign in the window said Shirts. The wonder of it was that at the moment I needed a Shirt; in I went. A very old-looking man broke off from his doze in a chair. "A nice shirt?" he asked. Without having to rise, he half-turned

and brought over to the small wooden counter a cardboard box which had shirts in it. And, of course, tissue paper. Nowadays shirts are not allowed to be sold out of cardboard boxes with tissue paper, they may be sold only when sealed in sleazy plastic sackies, *and they are always the wrong size*. The shop was, as I say, a hole-in-the-wall, but it was a *clean* hole in the wall. "I came out here for my health," said the very old-looking man; "for the weather, I came. At my age I fall asleep a lot, and why should I fall asleep on the park bench? I am all my life used to having my own store, better I should fall asleep here, it makes a change from the furnished room; besides, now and then, someone buys a shirt. This year's fashion it isn't, but it's a good price, it would be your size, *and if it's not, bring it back*." Have you ever tried to bring a shirt back to a department store? Ha Ha. Anyway, it *was* my size. Wore it for years. Envious glances.

—and once, in, of all places, El Paso, Texas, in an old book-and-magazine store of the traditional type, I found a copy of a magazine (an *old* magazine) containing a story with my name on it, but which I did not remember having written. Had I perhaps slipped sidewise in time? No no. By and by I did remember; sometimes does not even Homer doze? Sure gave me an interesting moment or so, let me say. Two weeks later the old small shop, books, magazines, dust, and all, was swept away.

In case you had begun to wonder what else I'm leading up to, besides moaning that They don't make odd little shops like they used to, it is *this*: that *that* is why people write about them and have allowed them to shift from the factual to the fanciful. One great difference between the truth and the consequences is this: in the fantasy one comes to what was yesterday an empty lot, and lo! today an odd shop is there; whereas in the fact one comes to what was yesterday an odd shop and lo! today an empty lot is there.

So why the odd little shop story? What is to explain? It is archetypal and primordial; instead of the little house in the forest we have the little shop in the city; the proprietor or proprietrix is the wise old man or wise old woman, perhaps we can say the shop is the cave or the womb, one desires what is therein but one is at the same time fearful, it is dark, it is

cluttered and close, it contains wonders, it contains perils, it is the way to the quest for the luminous dong, I mean the numinous nose, that is, the—

Well, as Mencken used to say, You may be right.

And, as Demmon used to say, Only maybe not.

But, come. We have lingered long enough. How often have we walked this narrow thoroughfare without having noticed that odd little shop? or, if noticed, passed it by? Let us just try the door . . . it opens . . . a bell tinkles . . . What an *odd* shop. . . . What can it have for sale?

Shall we go in?

—AVRAM DAVIDSON

Junk Shop



John Brosnan

Australia, John Brosnan's native land, is such a large, large country (almost the size of the U.S.A. minus Alaska) as to justify his creating such a short, short story. "I wrote it," he says, "when I was working in a tax office as a filing clerk shortly after I arrived in Britain after an arduous overland journey in a homemade doubledacker bus, and I think I was feeling very depressed at the time. I have lived in London ever since." And now the editor must curb his loquacity, or the introduction may prove longer than the story.

John Brosnan was born in Perth, Western Australia, in 1947, and settled in Britain in 1970. He has written a number of film books, including *Future Tense: The Cinema of Science Fiction*, and two novels, *Skyship*, and *The Midas Deep*, as well as a number of short stories, "mostly of a humorous nature, though opinions vary."

Joe found the shop by accident during one of his lunch-hour wanders. It was tucked between a crumbling factory and an empty warehouse down a small back street. If you ask him just exactly where it was he won't be able to tell you, though he knows it was somewhere near the railway yards. It wasn't what you'd call a proper shop, Joe says; there was no display window or anything, it was really nothing more than a shed.

Anyway, Joe pauses when he comes to it and peers in. He can't see much because the sun is pretty bright that day and it's dark inside, but he does spot a sign on a table near the door that has JUNK written on it. Now Joe, as you know, loves poking around in junk shops and their like, so inside he goes. He still can't see anything, dazzled as he is by the sun, and the place smells bad. The air is hot and musty with a "metallic" taste—ask Joe what he means exactly by that, and he reckons it's a perfect breeding ground for one of his headaches. But he decides he will have a quick look around, and when his eyes have finally adjusted to the dark he begins to sniff about.

The stock, if you can call it that, is laid out on two rows of long narrow tables that stretch all the way to the back of the shop. At first, nothing looks promising to Joe, in fact he can't even recognize any of it; but that doesn't surprise him as he reckons that the most common objects look strange when removed from their usual surroundings. As he's picking up a twisted piece of metal, and wondering whether it had come from the inside of a jet engine or a washing machine, he's suddenly aware that there's someone standing beside him. Startled he turns and sees an old man dressed in dirty overalls.

Presuming him to be the owner of the place, which he was, Joe smiles and says, "Just having a look around. OK to, isn't it?"

"Sure," says the old man, "look as much as you want."

He's an odd-looking coot according to Joe. Yellowish skin, you know, jaundice-like, and eyes a bright orange color. Well, you ask Joe yourself then. Anyway, Joe doesn't like the look of him and hopes that he'll disappear. He reckons that being watched takes all the fun out of browsing.

"I'll be out back," says the old man. "Give a yell if you find something you want," and he moves off. Feeling happier, Joe continues with his poking and a couple of minutes later comes across something that interests him. It's an egg-shaped sphere about nine inches in diameter and made out of clear glass or something. As if by magic, and Joe's got his own ideas on that, the old man is back beside him and looking eager. Joe is so surprised he almost drops the thing.

"Like it?" asks the old man.

"Oh, I dunno," Joe says, "what is it? Not one of your crystal ball things is it?"

"Nah," says the old one. "It's what you might call a novelty item. Look into it hard."

Joe does so. He discovers that it has a patch of glowing mist in the center.

"Watch," says the old man.

Joe watches and finds that the patch of mist is shrinking. It gets smaller and smaller until he can't see it anymore. Then there's a bright flash of light and the spot of mist has reappeared only this time it's getting bigger.

"What is it?" Joe asks again.

"The universe," says the old man.

"Oh," says Joe. He thinks a bit. "Sort of clever really. Like one of those Christmas scenes for the kids, you shake them up and it looks as if it's snowing inside."

"Nah," says the old man, "this is the real thing. What you're holding is your actual universe."

"You're pulling my leg," says Joe, "how could anyone fit the whole universe into a glass egg this size?"

"I dunno," says the old man. "Suppose it's like putting a ship inside a bottle. Used to be a hobby of one of my ancestors. Wouldn't have a clue how he did it."

"But how can we be standing here holding the universe?" asks Joe. "Shouldn't we be inside the egg too?"

"We are, or we will be, or we were, I'm not sure which. Vastly different time scale, as is obvious by the fact that you can actually see the universe pulsate. As we talk, billions of years are passing inside the egg."

"Hmmm," says Joe.

"Well, do you want it? Make a marvelous curiosity piece for your living room. Looks really spectacular if you put the lights out."

"I don't want you to get the wrong idea," says Joe, "but I'm afraid I find it all hard to swallow. Can you prove that this is the real universe?"

The old man sighs. "Sure," he says, "just look into my eyes."

"Well . . ." says Joe, and begins to back away.

"Look," says the old man again. So Joe, just to humor him,

looks into the old geezer's funny orange eyes and suddenly he *knows*, just *knows*, but don't ask him to explain how, that he has been telling him the truth.

"Christ!" says Joe. "Those were some ancestors you had!"

The old guy gives an apologetic smile and shrugs his shoulders, "But as you can see, I myself have fallen upon hard times . . ."

Joe looks at the egg again. "Christ," he mutters, "the actual universe." Then a thought strikes him. "Hey, how much do you want for it?"

The old man pauses. "How about a dollar fifty?" he says.

Joe shakes his head and sadly puts the egg back down on the table.

"Just what I thought," he says, "too much. What else have you got?"

Of Time and Third Avenue



Alfred Bester

Why did there used to be so very many bars on Third Avenue, New York, with names like Reilly's, Kelly's, Teague's, O'Rourke's? The wry question and answer, "Why do the Irish drink? To have something to do while they are getting drunk," was very likely composed by one of them on the principle (observed by Dr. Johnson) that they "are a very fair people [and] never speak well of each other." However, the urbane Mr. Bester avoids such set-pieces, even though setting this tale of time paradox is one of those almost timeless and once so very numerous Irish wry-and-rye bars then as characteristic of Manhattan's Third Avenue as the old red-brick buildings which housed them; and many a ball of malt did I therein enjoy, though I, God knows, not Irish; well, I'll spare you further fond memories. This small story is in effect a very large morality.

Alfred Bester was born in New York City in 1913. While considering and, at different times, preparing for, careers in law, musicology, and molecular biology (among others), his fascination with vital dyes and vital staining in physiology led him into writing his first science fiction story. It sold. So did others, so did radio and television scripts and magazine articles. Alfred Bester eventually became the senior editor of the well-remembered *Holiday* magazine. His stories include the classical "Fondly Fahrenheit," and "The Men Who

Murdered Mohammed." Among his books are *The Demolished Man*; *The Stars My Destination*; *The Computer Connection*; *The Light Fantastic*; *Star Light, Star Bright*; *Golem-100*; *The Deceivers*; and *Starlight: Short Fiction*. Alfred Bester lives in a small town in southeastern Pennsylvania.

What Macy hated about the man was the fact that he squeaked. Macy didn't know if it was the shoes, but he suspected the clothes. In the back room of his tavern, under the poster that asked: WHO FEARS MENTION THE BATTLE OF THE BOYNE? Macy inspected the stranger. He was tall, slender, and very dainty. Although he was young, he was almost bald. There was fuzz on top of his head and over his eyebrows. Then he reached into his jacket for a wallet, and Macy made up his mind. It was the clothes that squeaked.

"MQ, Mr. Macy," the stranger said in a staccato voice. "Very good. For rental of this backroom including exclusive utility for one chronos—"

"One whatos?" Macy asked nervously.

"Chronos. The incorrect word? Oh yes. Excuse me. One hour."

"You're a foreigner," Macy said. "What's your name? I bet it's Russian."

"No. Not foreign," the stranger answered. His frightening eyes whipped around the back room. "Identify me as Boyne."

"Boyne!" Macy echoed incredulously.

"MQ. Boyne." Mr. Boyne opened a wallet shaped like an accordion, ran his fingers through various colored papers and coins, then withdrew a hundred-dollar bill. He jabbed it at Macy and said: "Rental fee for one hour. As agreed. One hundred dollars. Take it and go."

Impelled by the thrust of Boyne's eyes, Macy took the bill and staggered out to the bar. Over his shoulder he quavered: "What'll you drink?"

"Drink? Alcohol? Pfui!" Boyne answered.

He turned and darted to the telephone booth, reached under the pay phone and located the lead-in wire. From a side pocket he withdrew a small glittering box and clipped it to the wire.

He tucked it out of sight, then lifted the receiver.

"Coordinates West 73-58-15," he said rapidly, "North 40-45-20. Disband sigma. You're ghosting..." After a pause, he continued: "Stet. Stet! Transmission clear. I want a fix on Knight. Oliver Wilson Knight. Probability to four significant figures. You have the coordinates....99.9807? MQ. Stand by...."

Boyne poked his head out of the booth and peered toward the tavern door. He waited with steely concentration until a young man and a pretty girl entered. Then he ducked back to the phone. "Probability fulfilled. Oliver Wilson Knight in contact. MQ. Luck my Para." He hung up and was sitting under the poster as the couple wandered toward the back room.

The young man was about twenty-six, of medium height, and inclined to be stocky. His suit was rumpled, his seal-brown hair was rumpled, and his friendly face was crinkled by good-natured creases. The girl had black hair, soft blue eyes, and a small private smile. They walked arm in arm and liked to collide gently when they thought no one was looking. At this moment they collided with Mr. Macy.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Knight," Macy said. "You and the young lady can't sit back there this afternoon. The premises have been rented."

Their faces fell. Boyne called: "Quite all right, Mr. Macy. All correct. Happy to entertain Mr. Knight and friend as guests."

Knight and the girl turned to Boyne uncertainly. Boyne smiled and patted the chair alongside him. "Sit down," he said. "Charmed, I assure you."

The girl said: "We hate to intrude, but this is the only place in town where you can get genuine 'Stone Ginger Beer.'"

"Already aware of the fact, Miss Clinton." To Macy he said: "Bring ginger beer and go. No other guests. These are all I'm expecting."

Knight and the girl stared at Boyne in astonishment as they sat down slowly. Knight placed a wrapped parcel of books on the table. The girl took a breath and said, "You know me... Mr...?"

"Boyne. As in Boyne, Battle of. Yes, of course. You are Miss Jane Clinton. This is Mr. Oliver Wilson Knight. I rented

premises particularly to meet you this afternoon."

"This supposed to be a gag?" Knight asked, a dull flush appearing on his cheeks.

"Ginger beer," answered Boyne gallantly as Macy arrived, deposited the bottles and glasses, and departed in haste.

"You couldn't know we were coming here," Jane said. "We didn't know ourselves . . . until a few minutes ago."

"Sorry to contradict, Miss Clinton," Boyne smiled. "The probability of your arrival at Longitude 73-58-15 Latitude 40-45-20 was 99.9807 per cent. No one can escape four significant figures."

"Listen," Knight began angrily, "if this is your idea of—"

"Kindly drink ginger beer and listen to my idea, Mr. Knight." Boyne leaned across the table with galvanic intensity. "This hour has been arranged with difficulty and much cost. To whom? No matter. You have placed us in an extremely dangerous position. I have been sent to find a solution."

"Solution for what?" Knight asked.

Jane tried to rise. "I . . . I think we'd b-better be go—"

Boyne waved her back, and she sat down like a child. To Knight he said: "This noon you entered premises of J. D. Craig & Co., dealer in printed books. You purchased, through transfer of money, four books. Three do not matter, but the fourth . . ." He tapped the wrapped parcel emphatically. "That is the crux of this encounter."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Knight exclaimed.

"One bound volume consisting of collected facts and statistics."

"The almanac?"

"The almanac."

"What about it?"

"You intended to purchase a 1950 almanac."

"I bought the '50 almanac."

"You did not!" Boyne blazed. "You bought the almanac for 1990."

"What?"

"The World Almanac for 1990," Boyne said clearly, "is in this package. Do not ask how. There was a carelessness that has already been disciplined. Now the error must be adjusted.

That is why I am here. It is why this meeting was arranged. You cognate?"

Knight burst into laughter and reached for the parcel. Boyne leaned across the table and grasped his wrist. "You must not open it, Mr. Knight."

"All right." Knight leaned back in his chair. He grinned at Jane and sipped ginger beer. "What's the payoff on the gag?"

"I must have the book, Mr. Knight. I would like to walk out of this tavern with the almanac under my arm."

"You would, eh?"

"I would."

"The 1990 almanac?"

"Yes."

"If," said Knight, "there was such a thing as a 1990 almanac, and if it was in that package, wild horses couldn't get it away from me."

"Why, Mr. Knight?"

"Don't be an idiot. A look into the future? Stock market reports . . . Horse races . . . Politics. It'd be money from home. I'd be rich."

"Indeed yes." Boyne nodded sharply. "More than rich. Omnipotent. The small mind would use the almanac from the future for small things only. Wagers on the outcome of games and elections. And so on. But the intellect of dimensions . . . *your* intellect . . . would not stop there."

"You tell me," Knight grinned.

"Deduction. Induction. Inference." Boyne ticked the points off on his fingers. "Each fact would tell you an entire history. Real estate investment, for example. What lands to buy and sell. Population shifts and census reports would tell you. Transportation. Lists of marine disasters and railroad wrecks would tell you whether rocket travel has replaced the train and ship."

"Has it?" Knight chuckled.

"Flight records would tell you which company's stock should be bought. Lists of postal receipts would indicate the cities of the future. The Nobel Prize winners would tell you which scientists and what new inventions to watch. Armament budgets would tell you what factories and industries to control. Cost-of-living reports would tell you how best to protect your wealth

against inflation or deflation. Foreign exchange rates, stock exchange reports, bank suspensions and life insurance indexes would provide the clues to protect you against any and all disasters."

"That's the idea," Knight said. "That's for me."

"You really think so?"

"I know so. Money in my pocket. The world in my pocket."

"Excuse me," Boyne said keenly, "but you are only repeating the dreams of childhood. You want wealth. Yes. But only won through endeavor . . . your own endeavor. There is no joy in success as an unearned gift. There is nothing but guilt and unhappiness. You are aware of this already."

"I disagree," Knight said.

"Do you? Then why do you work? Why not steal? Rob? Burgle? Cheat others of their money to fill your own pockets?"

"But I—" Knight began, and then stopped.

"The point is well taken, eh?" Boyne waved his hand impatiently. "No, Mr. Knight. Seek a mature argument. You are too ambitious and healthy to wish to steal success."

"Then I'd just want to know if I would be successful."

"Ah? Stet. You wish to thumb through the pages looking for your name. You want reassurance. Why? Have you no confidence in yourself? You are a promising young attorney. Yes, I know that. It is part of my data. Has not Miss Clinton confidence in you?"

"Yes," Jane said in a loud voice. "He doesn't need reassurance from a book."

"What else, Mr. Knight?"

Knight hesitated, sobering in the face of Boyne's overwhelming intensity. Then he said: "Security."

"There is no such thing. Life is danger. You can only find security in death."

"You know what I mean," Knight muttered. "The knowledge that life is worth planning. There's the atom bomb."

Boyne nodded quickly. "True. It is a crisis. But then, I'm here. The world will continue. I am proof."

"If I believe you."

"And if you do not?" Boyne blazed. "You do not lack security. You lack courage." He nailed the couple with a contemptuous glare. "There is in this country a legend of pioneer

forefathers from whom you are supposed to inherit courage in the face of odds. D. Boone, E. Allen, S. Houston, A. Lincoln. G. Washington and others. Fact?"

"I suppose so," Knight muttered. "That's what we keep telling ourselves."

"And where is the courage in you? Pfui! It is only talk. The unknown terrifies you. Danger does not inspire you to fight, as it did D. Crockett; it makes you whine and reach for the reassurance in this book. Fact?"

"But the atom bomb . . ."

"It is a danger. Yes. One of many. What of that? Do you cheat at solhand?"

"Solhand?"

"Your pardon." Boyne reconsidered, impatiently snapping his fingers at the interruption to the white heat of his argument. "It is a game played singly against chance relationships in an arrangement of cards. I forget your noun. . . ."

"Oh!" Jane's face brightened. "Solitaire."

"Quite right. Solitaire. Thank you, Miss Clinton." Boyne turned his frightening eyes on Knight. "Do you cheat at solitaire?"

"Occasionally."

"Do you enjoy games won by cheating?"

"Not as a rule."

"They are thisney, yes? Boring. They are tiresome. Pointless. Null-coordinated. You wish you had won honestly."

"I suppose so."

"And you will suppose so after you have looked at this bound book. Through all your pointless life you will wish you had played honestly the game of life. You will verdash that look. You will regret. You will totally recall the pronouncement of our great poet-philosopher Trynbyll who summed it up in one lightning, skazon line. '*The Future is Tekon*,' said Trynbyll. Mr. Knight, do not cheat. Let me implore you to give me the almanac."

"Why don't you take it away from me?"

"It must be a gift. We can rob you of nothing. We can give you nothing."

"That's a lie. You paid Macy to rent this backroom."

"Macy was paid, but I gave him nothing. He will think he

was cheated, but you will see to it that he is not. All will be adjusted without dislocation."

"Wait a minute. . . ."

"It has all been carefully planned. I have gambled on you, Mr. Knight. I am depending on your good sense. Let me have the almanac. I will disband . . . reorient . . . and you will never see me again. Vorloss verdash! It will be a bar adventure to narrate for friends. Give me the almanac!"

"Hold the phone," Knight said. "This is a gag. Remember? I—"

"Is it?" Boyne interrupted. "Is it? Look at me."

For almost a minute the young couple stared at the bleached white face with its deadly eyes. The half-smile left Knight's lips, and Jane shuddered involuntarily. There was chill and dismay in the back room.

"My God!" Knight glanced helplessly at Jane. "This can't be happening. He's got me believing. You?"

Jane nodded jerkily.

"What should we do? If everything he says is true we can refuse and live happily ever after."

"No," Jane said in a choked voice. "There may be money and success in that book, but there's divorce and death, too. Give him the almanac."

"Take it," Knight said faintly.

Boyne rose instantly. He picked up the package and went into the phone booth. When he came out he had three books in one hand and a smaller parcel made up of the original wrapping in the other. He placed the books on the table and stood for a moment, holding the parcel and smiling down.

"My gratitude," he said. "You have eased a precarious situation. It is only fair you should receive something in return. We are forbidden to transfer anything that might divert existing phenomena streams, but at least I can give you one token of the future."

He backed away, bowed curiously, and said: "My service to you both." Then he turned and started out of the tavern.

"Hey!" Knight called. "The token?"

"Mr. Macy has it," Boyne answered and was gone.

The couple sat at the table for a few blank moments like

sleepers slowly awakening. Then, as reality began to return, they stared at each other and burst into laughter.

"He really had me scared," Jane said.

"Talk about Third Avenue characters. What an act. What'd he get out of it?"

"Well . . . he got your almanac."

"But it doesn't make sense." Knight began to laugh again. "All that business about paying Macy but not giving him anything. And I'm supposed to see that he isn't cheated. And the mystery token of the future . . ."

The tavern door burst open and Macy shot through the saloon into the back room. "Where is he?" Macy shouted. "Where's the thief? Boyne, he calls himself. More likely his name is Dillinger."

"Why, Mr. Macy!" Jane exclaimed. "What's the matter?"

"Where is he?" Macy pounded on the door of the men's room. "Come out, ye blaggard!"

"He's gone," Knight said. "He left just before you got back."

"And you, Mr. Knight!" Macy pointed a trembling finger at the young lawyer. "You, to be party to thievery and racketeers. Shame on you!"

"What's wrong?" Knight asked.

"He paid me one hundred dollars to rent this back room," Macy cried in anguish. "One hundred dollars. I took the bill over to Bernie the pawnbroker, being cautious-like, and he found out it's a forgery. It's a counterfeit."

"Oh, no," Jane laughed. "That's too much. Counterfeit?"

"Look at this," Mr. Macy shouted, slamming the bill down on the table.

Knight inspected it closely. Suddenly he turned pale and the laughter drained out of his face. He reached into his inside pocket, withdrew a checkbook and began to write with trembling fingers.

"What on earth are you doing?" Jane asked.

"Making sure that Macy isn't cheated," Knight said. "You'll get your hundred dollars, Mr. Macy."

"Oliver! Are you insane? Throwing away a hundred dollars . . ."

"And I won't be losing anything, either," Knight answered.

"All will be adjusted without dislocation! They're diabolical. Diabolical!"

"I don't understand."

"Look at the bill," Knight said in a shaky voice. "Look closely."

It was beautifully engraved and genuine in appearance. Benjamin Franklin's benign features gazed up at them mildly and authentically; but in the lower right-hand corner was printed: Series 1980 D. And underneath that was signed: Oliver Wilson Knight, Secretary of the Treasury.

Bottle Party



John Collier

Read everything by John Collier you can get your hands on. He grazed in many a flowery meadow and sported in many a ferny dell. For years, later on, it was often asked . . . and asked and asked . . . "What has happened to John Collier?" *I wonder what's become of Waring/Since he gave us all the slip?* "Has John Collier *died?*" it was asked, half-fearful of the answer. And then, finally, and finally finally, the news came out. The late John Collier had *not* all that time been dead. He had been in Hollywood. "Bottle Party," written before he gave us all the slip, may well be not only the ultimate story of the sort. It is probably the fundamental one.

John Collier was born in London in 1901. A published poet, Mr. Collier was better known as author of the novels, *Defy the Foul Fiend*, *His Monkey Wife*, *The Poacher*, and the short story collection, *Fancies and Goodnights*. He worked on such screenplays as *The African Queen* (starring Katharine Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart), *Deception* (starring Bette Davis), and *The War Lord* (starring Charlton Heston). John Collier died in California in 1980.

Franklin Fletcher dreamed of luxury in the form of tiger-skins and beautiful women. He was prepared, at a pinch, to forgo the tiger-skins. Unfortunately the beautiful women seemed equally rare and inaccessible. At his office and at his boarding-

house the girls were mere mice, or cattish, or kittenish, or had insufficiently read the advertisements. He met no others. At thirty-five he gave up, and decided he must console himself with a hobby, which is a very miserable second-best.

He prowled about in odd corners of the town, looking in at the windows of antique dealers and junk-shops, wondering what on earth he might collect. He came upon a poor shop, in a poor alley, in whose dusty window stood a single object: it was a full-rigged ship in a bottle. Feeling rather like that himself, he decided to go in and ask the price.

The shop was small and bare. Some shabby racks were ranged about the walls, and these racks bore a large number of bottles, of every shape and size, containing a variety of objects which were interesting only because they were in bottles. While Franklin still looked about, a little door opened, and out shuffled the proprietor, a wizened old man in a smoking-cap, who seemed mildly surprised and mildly pleased to have a customer.

He showed Franklin bouquets, and birds of paradise, and the Battle of Gettysburg, and miniature Japanese gardens, and even a shrunken human head, all stoppered up in bottles. "And what," said Frank, "are those, down there on the bottom shelf?"

"They are not much to look at," said the old man. "A lot of people think they are all nonsense. Personally, I like them."

He lugged out a few specimens from their dusty obscurity. One seemed to have nothing but a little dried-up fly in it, others contained what might have been horse-hairs or straws, or mere wisps of heaven knows what; some appeared to be filled with grey or opalescent smoke. "They are," said the old man, "various sorts of genii, jinns, sibyls, demons, and such things. Some of them, I believe, are much harder, even than a full-rigged ship, to get into a bottle."

"Oh, but come! This is New York," said Frank.

"All the more reason," said the old man, "to expect the most extraordinary jinns in bottles. I'll show you. Wait a moment. The stopper is a little stiff."

"You mean there's one in there?" said Frank. "And you're going to let it out?"

"Why not?" replied the old man, desisting in his efforts,

and holding the bottle up to the light. "This one——Good heavens! *Why not*, indeed! My eyes are getting weak. I very nearly undid the wrong bottle. A very ugly customer, that one! Dear me! It's just as well I didn't get that stopper undone. I'd better put him right back in the rack. I must remember he's in the lower right-hand corner. I'll stick a label on him one of these days. Here's something more harmless."

"What's in that?" said Frank.

"Supposed to be the most beautiful girl in the world," said the old man. "All right, if you like that sort of thing. Myself, I've never troubled to undo her. I'll find something more interesting."

"Well, from a scientific point of view," said Frank, "I——"

"Science isn't everything," said the old man. "Look at this." He held up one which contained a tiny, mummified, insect-looking object, just visible through the grime. "Put your ear to it," he said.

Frank did so. He heard, in a sort of whistling nothing of a voice, the words, "Louisiana Lad, Saratoga, four-fifteen. Louisiana Lad, Saratoga, four-fifteen," repeated over and over again.

"What on earth is that?" said he.

"That," said the old man, "is the original Cumaeen Sibyl. Very interesting. She's taken up racing."

"Very interesting," said Frank. "All the same, I'd just like to see that other. I adore beauty."

"A bit of an artist, eh?" said the old man. "Believe me, what you really want is a good, all-around, serviceable type. Here's one, for example. I recommend this little fellow from personal experience. He's practical. He can fix you anything."

"Well, if that's so," said Frank, "why haven't you got a palace, tiger-skins, and all that?"

"I had all that," said the old man. "And he fixed it. Yes, this was my first bottle. All the rest came from him. First of all I had a palace, pictures, marbles, slaves. And, as you say, tiger-skins. I had him put Cleopatra on one of them."

"What was she like?" cried Frank.

"All right," said old man, "if you like that sort of thing. I got bored with it. I thought to myself, 'What I'd like, really,

is a little shop, with all sorts of things in bottles.' So I had him fix it. He got me the sibyl. He got me the ferocious fellow there. In fact, he got me all of them."

"And now he's in there?" said Frank.

"Yes. He's in there," said the old man. "Listen to him."

Frank put his ear to the bottle. He heard, uttered in the most plaintive tones, "Let me out. Do let me out. Please let me out. I'll do anything. Let me out. I'm harmless. Please let me out. Just for a little while. Do let me out. I'll do anything. Please——"

Frank looked at the old man. "He's there all right," he said. "He's there."

"Of course he's there," said the old man. "I wouldn't sell you an empty bottle. What do you take me for? In fact, I wouldn't sell this one at all, for sentimental reasons, only I've had the shop a good many years now, and you're my first customer."

Frank put his ear to the bottle again. "Let me out. Let me out. Oh, please let me out. I'll——"

"My God!" said Frank uneasily. "Does he go on like that *all* the time?"

"Very probably," said the old man. "I can't say I listen. I prefer the radio."

"It seems rather tough on him," said Frank sympathetically.

"Maybe," said the old man. "They don't seem to like bottles. Personally, I do. They fascinate me. For example, I——"

"Tell me," said Frank. "Is he really harmless?"

"Oh, yes," said the old man. "Bless you, yes. Some say they're tricky—eastern blood and all that—I never found him so. I used to let him out; he'd do his stuff, then back he'd go again. I must say, he's very efficient."

"He could get me anything?"

"Absolutely anything."

"And how much do you want for him?" said Frank.

"Oh, I don't know," said the old man. "Ten million dollars, perhaps."

"I say! I haven't got that. Still, if he's as good as you say, maybe I could work it off on the hire purchase system."

"Don't worry. We'll say five dollars instead. I've got all I want, really. Shall I wrap him up for you?"

Frank paid over his five dollars, and hurried home with the precious bottle, terrified of breaking it. As soon as he was in his room he pulled out the stopper. Out flowed a prodigious quantity of greasy smoke, which immediately solidified into the figure of a gross and fleshy Oriental, six feet six in height, with rolls of fat, a hook nose, a wicked white to his eye, vast double chins, altogether like a film-producer, only larger. Frank, striving desperately for something to say, ordered shashlik, kebabs, and Turkish delight. These were immediately forthcoming.

Frank, having recovered his balance, noted that these modest offerings were of surpassing quality, and set upon dishes of solid gold, superbly engraved, and polished to a dazzling brightness. It is by little details of this description that one may recognize a really first-rate servant. Frank was delighted, but restrained his enthusiasm. "Gold plates," said he, "are all very well. Let us, however, get down to brass tacks. I should like a palace."

"To hear," said his dusky henchman, "is to obey."

"It should," said Frank, "be of suitable size, suitably situated, suitably furnished, suitable pictures, suitable marbles, hangings, and all that. I should like there to be a large number of tiger-skins. I am very fond of tiger-skins."

"They shall be there," said his slave.

"I am," said Frank, "a bit of an artist, as your late owner remarked. My art, so to speak, demands the presence, upon these tiger-skins, of a number of young women, some blonde, some brunette, some petite, some Junoesque, some languorous, some vivacious, all beautiful, and they need not be over-dressed. I hate over-dressing. It is vulgar. Have you got that?"

"I have," said the jinn.

"Then," said Frank, "let *me* have it."

"Condescend only," said his servant, "to close your eyes for the space of a single minute, and opening them you shall find yourself surrounded by the agreeable objects you have described."

"O.K.," said Frank. "But no tricks, mind!"

He closed his eyes as requested. A low, musical humming, whooshing sound rose and fell about him. At the end of the minute he looked around. There were the arches, pillars, mar-

bles, hangings, etc. of the most exquisite palace imaginable, and wherever he looked he saw a tiger-skin, and on every tiger-skin there reclined a young woman of surpassing beauty who was certainly not vulgarly over-dressed.

Our good Frank was, to put it mildly, in an ecstasy. He darted to and fro like a honey-bee in a florist's shop. He was received everywhere with smiles sweet beyond description, and with glances of an open or a veiled responsiveness. Here were blushes and lowered lids. Here was the flaming face of ardour. Here was a shoulder turned, but by no means a cold shoulder. Here were open arms, and such arms! Here was love dissembled, but vainly dissembled. Here was love triumphant. "I must say," said Frank at a later hour, "I have spent a really delightful afternoon. I have enjoyed it thoroughly."

"Then may I crave," said the jinn, who was at that moment serving him his supper, "may I crave the boon of being allowed to act as your butler, and as general minister to your pleasures, instead of being returned to that abominable bottle?"

"I don't see why not," said Frank. "It certainly seems rather tough that, after having fixed all this up, you should be crammed back into the bottle again. Very well, act as my butler, but understand, whatever the convention may be, I wish you never to enter a room without knocking. And above all—no tricks."

The jinn, with a soapy smile of gratitude, withdrew, and Frank shortly retired to his harem, where he passed the evening as pleasantly as he had passed the afternoon.

Some weeks went by entirely filled with these agreeable pastimes, till Frank, in obedience to law which not even the most efficient jinns can set aside, found himself growing a little over-particular, a little blasé, a little inclined to criticize and find fault.

"These," said he to his jinn, "are very pretty young creatures, if you like that sort of thing, but I imagine they can hardly be first-rate, or I should feel more interest in them. I am, after all, a connoisseur; nothing can please me but the very best. Take them away. Roll up all the tiger-skins but one."

"It shall be done," said the jinn. "Behold, it is accomplished."

"And on that remaining tiger-skin," said Frank, "put me Cleopatra herself."

The next moment, Cleopatra was there, looking, it must be admitted, absolutely superb. "Hullo!" she said. "Here I am, on a tiger-skin again!"

"Again?" cried Frank, suddenly reminded of the old man in the shop. "Here! Take her back. Bring me Helen of Troy."

Next moment, Helen of Troy was there. "Hullo!" she said. "Here I am, on a tiger-skin again!"

"Again?" cried Frank. "Damn that old man! Take her away. Bring me Queen Guinevere."

Guinevere said exactly the same thing; so did Madame la Pompadour, Lady Hamilton, and every other famous beauty that Frank could think of. "No wonder," said he, "that that old man was such an extremely wizened old man! The old fiend! The old devil! He has properly taken the gilt off all the gingerbread. Call me jealous if you like; I will not play second fiddle to that ugly old rascal. Where shall I find a perfect creature, worthy of the embraces of such a connoisseur as I am?"

"If you are deigning to address that question to me," said the jinn, "let me remind you that there was, in that shop, a little bottle which my late master had never unstoppered, because I supplied him with it after he had lost interest in matters of this sort. Nevertheless it has the reputation of containing the most beautiful girl in the whole world."

"You are right," cried Frank. "Get me that bottle without delay."

In a few seconds the bottle lay before him. "You may have the afternoon off," said Frank to the jinn.

"Thank you," said the jinn. "I will go and see my family in Arabia. I have not seen them for a long time." With that he bowed and withdrew. Frank turned his attention to the bottle, which he was not long in unstopping.

Out came the most beautiful girl you can possibly imagine. Cleopatra and all that lot were hags and frumps compared with her. "Where am I?" said she. "What is this beautiful palace? What am I doing on a tiger-skin? Who is this handsome young prince?"

"It's me!" cried Frank, in a rapture. "It's me!"

The afternoon passed like a moment in Paradise. Before Frank knew it the jinn was back, ready to serve up supper.

Frank must sup with his charmer, for this time it was love, the real thing. The jinn, entering with the viands, rolled up his wicked eyes at the sight of so much beauty.

It happened that Frank, all love and restlessness, darted out into the garden between two mouthfuls, to pluck his beloved a rose. The jinn, on the pretence of serving her wine, edged up very closely. "I don't know if you remember me," said he in a whisper. "I used to be in the next bottle to you. I have often admired you through the glass."

"Oh, yes," said she. "I remember you quite well."

At that moment Frank returned. The jinn could say no more, but he stood about the room, inflating his monstrous chest, and showing off his plump and dusky muscles. "You need not be afraid of him," said Frank. "He is only a jinn. Pay no attention to him. Tell me if you really love me."

"Of course I do," said she.

"Well, say so," said he. "Why don't you say so?"

"I have said so," said she. "Of course I do. Isn't that saying so?"

This vague, evasive reply dimmed all Frank's happiness, as if a cloud had come over the sun. Doubt sprang up in his mind, and entirely ruined moments of exquisite bliss.

"What are you thinking of?" he would say.

"I don't know," she would reply.

"Well, you ought to know," he would say, and then a quarrel would begin.

Once or twice he even ordered her back into her bottle. She obeyed with a malicious and secretive smile.

"Why should she give that sort of smile?" said Frank to the jinn, to whom he confided his distress.

"I cannot tell," replied the jinn. "Unless she has a lover concealed in there."

"Is it possible?" cried Frank in consternation.

"It is surprising," said the jinn, "how much room there is in one of these bottles."

"Come out!" cried Frank. "Come out at once!"

His charmer obediently emerged. "Is there anyone else in that bottle?" cried Frank.

"How could there be?" she asked, with a look of rather overdone innocence.

"Give me a straight answer," said he. "Answer me yes or no."

"Yes or no," she replied maddeningly.

"You double-talking, two-timing little bitch!" cried Frank. "I'll go in and find out for myself. If I find anybody, God help him and you!"

With that, and with an intense effort of the will, he flowed himself into the bottle. He looked all around: there was no one. Suddenly he heard a sound above him. He looked up, and there was the stopper being thrust in.

"What are you doing?" cried he.

"We are putting in the stopper," said the jinn.

Frank cursed, begged, prayed, and implored. "Let me out!" he cried. "Let me out. Please let me out. Do let me out. I'll do anything. Let me out, do."

The jinn, however, had other matters to attend to. Frank had the infinite mortification of beholding these other matters through the glassy walls of his prison. Next day he was picked up, whisked through the air, and deposited in the dirty little shop, among the other bottles, from which this one had never been missed.

There he remained for an interminable period, covered all over with dust, and frantic with rage at the thought of what was going on in his exquisite palace, between his jinn and his faithless charmer. In the end some sailors happened to drift into the shop, and, hearing this bottle contained the most beautiful girl in the world, they bought it up by general subscription of the fo'c'sle. When they unstoppered him at sea, and found it was only poor Frank, their disappointment knew no bounds, and they used him with the utmost barbarity.

As Is



Robert Silverberg

It is not everyone with whom one may discuss the different editions of *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, or the *Letter From Prester John*, or the cry of the quagga, as one may with Robert Silverberg. However, while it helps to have some erudition to enjoy "As Is," it does not require quite that much. I shall spare readers more than a single nudge to the ribs about "the long American love affair with the automobile," and shall next advise them, as the alchemists did, *Lege, lege*: Read, read...

Although it is certain that Robert Silverberg has written several hundred books and much more than that number of short stories, he reports merely: "Native New Yorker, moved to Calif. quite some time back. Been writing s-f [We interrupt to say that you will note that almost every writer here writes this differently; what difference does it make?] Been writing s-f for thirty years (!!) and have published quite a lot of it. [Published quite a lot of other things, too.] Best-known books include *Dying Inside*, *Lord Valentine's Castle*, *The Book of Skulls*, and *Nightwings*. Various Hugo and Nebula awards, etc." An award of its own, I'd say, is a line I read in a newspaper, beginning, *American historian Robert Silverberg*...

"As is," the auto dealer said, jamming his thumbs under his belt. "Two hundred fifty bucks and drive it away. I'm not pretending it's perfect, but I got to tell you, you're getting a damned good hunk of car for the price."

"As is," Sam Norton said.

"As is. Strictly as is."

Norton looked a little doubtful. "Maybe she drives well, but with a trunk that doesn't open—"

"So what?" the dealer snorted. "You told me yourself you're renting a U-Haul to get your stuff to California. What do you need a trunk for? Look, when you get out to the Coast and have a little time, take the car to a garage, tell 'em the story, and maybe five minutes with a blowtorch—"

"Why didn't you do that while you had the car in stock?"

The dealer looked evasive. "We don't have time to fool with details like that."

Norton let the point pass. He walked around the car again, giving it a close look from all angles. It was a smallish dark-green four-door sedan, with the finish and trim in good condition, a decent set of tires, and a general glow that comes only when a car has been well cared for. The upholstery was respectable, the radio was in working order, the engine was—as far as he could judge—okay, and a test drive had been smooth and easy. The car seemed to be a reasonably late model, too; it had shoulder-harness safety belts and emergency blinkers.

There was only one small thing wrong with it. The trunk didn't open. It wasn't just a case of a jammed lock, either; somebody had fixed this car so the trunk *couldn't* open. With great care the previous owner had apparently welded the trunk shut; nothing was visible back there except a dim line to mark the place where the lid might once have lifted.

What the hell, though. The car was otherwise in fine shape, and he wasn't in a position to be too picky. Overnight, practically, they had transferred him to the Los Angeles office, which was fine in terms of getting out of New York in the middle of a lousy winter, but not so good as far as his immediate finances went. The company didn't pay moving costs, only transportation; he had been handed four one-way tourist-class

tickets, and that was that. So he had put Ellen and the kids aboard the first jet to L.A., cashing in his own ticket so he could use the money for the moving job. He figured to do it the slow but cheap way: rent a U-Haul trailer, stuff the family belongings into it, and set out via turnpike for California, hoping that Ellen had found an apartment by the time he got there. Only he couldn't trust his present clunker of a car to get him very far west of Parsippany, New Jersey, let alone through the Mojave Desert. So here he was, trying to pick up an honest used job for about five hundred bucks, which was all he could afford to lay out on the spot.

And here was the man at the used-car place offering him this very attractive vehicle—with its single peculiar defect—for only two and a half bills, which would leave him with that much extra cash cushion for the expenses of his transcontinental journey. And he didn't *really* need a trunk, driving alone. He could keep his suitcase on the back seat and stash everything else in the U-Haul. And it shouldn't be all that hard to have some mechanic in L.A. cut the trunk open for him and get it working again. On the other hand, Ellen was likely to chew him out for having bought a car that was sealed up that way; she had let him have it before on other "bargains" of that sort. On the third hand, the mystery of the sealed trunk appealed to him. Who knew what he'd find in there once he opened it up? Maybe the car had belonged to a smuggler who had had to hide a hot cargo fast, and the trunk was full of lovely golden ingots, or diamonds, or ninety-year-old cognac, which the smuggler had planned to reclaim a few weeks later, except that something unexpected had come up. On the fourth hand—

The dealer said, "How'd you like to take her out for another test spin, then?"

Norton shook his head. "Don't think I need to. I've got a good idea of how she rides."

"Well, then, let's step into the office and close the deal."

Sidestepping the maneuver, Norton said, "What year did you say she was?"

"Oh, about a 'sixty-four, 'sixty-five."

"You aren't sure?"

"You can't really tell with these foreign jobs, sometimes.

You know, they don't change the model for five, six, ten years in a row, except in little ways that only an expert would notice. Take Volkswagen, for instance—"

"And I just realized," Norton cut in, "that you never told me what make she is, either."

"Peugeot, maybe, or some kind of Fiat," said the dealer hazily. "One of those kind."

"You don't *know*?"

A shrug. "Well, we checked a lot of the style books going back a few years, but there are so damn many of these foreign cars around, and some of them they import only a few thousand, and—well, so we couldn't quite figure it out."

Norton wondered how he was going to get spare parts for a car of unknown make and uncertain date. Then he realized that he was thinking of the car as his, already, even though the more he considered the deal, the less he liked it. And then he thought of those ingots in the trunk. The rare cognac. The suitcase full of rubies and sapphires.

He said, "Shouldn't the registration say something about the year and make?"

The dealer shifted his weight from foot to foot. "Matter of fact, we don't have the registration. But it's perfectly legitimate. Hey, look, I'd like to get this car out of my lot, so maybe we call it two twenty-five, huh?"

"It all sounds pretty mysterious. Where'd you get the car, anyway?"

"There was this little guy who brought it in, about a year ago, a year last November, I think it was. Give it a valve job, he said. I'll be back in a month—got to take a sudden business trip. Paid in advance for tune-up and a month's storage and everything. Wouldn't you know that was the last we ever saw of him? Well, we stored his damn car here free for ten, eleven months, but that's it, now we got to get it out of the place. The lawyer says we can take possession for the storage charge."

"If I buy it, you give me a paper saying you had the right to sell it?"

"Sure. Sure."

"And what about getting the registration? Shifting the insurance over from my old heap? All the red tape?"

"I'll handle everything," the dealer said. "Just you take the car outa here."

"Two hundred," Norton said. "As is."

The dealer sighed. "It's a deal. As is."

A light snow was falling when Norton began his cross-country hegira three days later. It was an omen, but he was not sure what kind; he decided that the snow was intended as his last view of a dreary winter phenomenon he wouldn't be seeing again, for a while. According to the *Times*, yesterday's temperature range in L.A. had been sixty-six low, seventy-nine high. Not bad for January.

He slouched down behind the wheel, let his foot rest lightly on the accelerator, and sped westward at a sane, sensible forty-five miles per hour. That was about as fast as he dared go with the bulky U-Haul trailing behind. He hadn't had much experience driving with a trailer—he was a computer salesman, and computer salesmen don't carry sample computers—but he got the hang of it pretty fast. You just had to remember that your vehicle was now a segmented organism, and make your turns accordingly. God bless turnpikes, anyhow. Just drive on, straight and straight and straight, heading toward the land of the sunset with only a few gentle curves and half a dozen traffic lights along the way.

The snow thickened some. But the car responded beautifully, hugging the road, and the windshield wipers kept his view clear. He hadn't expected to buy a foreign car for the trip at all; when he had set out, it was to get a good solid Plymouth or Chevvie, something heavy and sturdy to take him through the wide open spaces. But he had no regrets about this smaller car. It had all the power and pickup he needed, and with that trailer bouncing along behind him he wouldn't have much use for all that extra horsepower, anyway.

He was in a cheerful, relaxed mood. The car seemed comforting and protective, a warm enclosing environment that would contain and shelter him through the thousands of miles ahead. He was still close enough to New York to be able to get Mozart on the radio, which was nice. The car's heater worked well. There wasn't much traffic. The snow itself, new and white and

fluffy, was all the more beautiful for the knowledge that he was leaving it behind. He even enjoyed the solitude. It would be restful, in a way, driving on and on through Ohio and Kansas and Colorado or Arizona or whatever states lay between him and Los Angeles. Five or six days of peace and quiet, no need to make small talk, no kids to amuse—

His frame of mind began to darken not long after he got on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. If you have enough time to think, you will eventually think of the things you should have thought of before; and now, as he rolled through the thickening snow on this gray and silent afternoon, certain aspects of a trunkless car occurred to him that in his rush to get on the road he had succeeded in overlooking earlier. What about a tool kit, for instance? If he had a flat, what would he use for a jack and a wrench? That led him to a much more chilling thought: what would he use for a spare tire? A trunk was something more than a cavity back of the rear seat; in most cars it contained highly useful objects.

None of which he had with him.

None of which he had even thought about, until just this minute.

He contemplated the prospects of driving from coast to coast without a spare tire and without tools, and his mood of warm security evaporated abruptly. At the next exit, he decided, he'd hunt for a service station and pick up a tire, fast. There would be room for it on the back seat next to his luggage. And while he was at it, he might as well buy—

The U-Haul, he suddenly observed, was jackknifing around awkwardly in back, as though its wheels had just lost traction. A moment later the car was doing the same, and he found himself moving laterally in a beautiful skid across an unsanded slick patch on the highway. Steer in the direction of the skid, that's what you're supposed to do, he told himself, strangely calm. Somehow he managed to keep his foot off the brake despite all natural inclinations, and watched in quiet horror as car and trailer slid placidly across the empty lane to his right and came to rest, upright and facing forward, in the piled-up snowbank along the shoulder of the road.

He let out his breath slowly, scratched his chin, and gently

fed some gas. The spinning wheels made a high-pitched whining sound against the snow. He went nowhere. He was stuck.

The little man had a ruddy-cheeked face, white hair so long it curled at the ends, and metal-rimmed spectacles. He glanced at the snow covered autos in the used-car lot, scowled, and trudged toward the showroom.

"Came to pick up my car," he announced. "Valve job. Delayed by business in another part of the world."

The dealer looked uncomfortable. "The car's not here."

"So I see. Get it, then."

"We more or less sold it about a week ago."

"*Sold it? Sold my car? My car?*"

"Which you abandoned. Which we stored here for a whole year. This ain't no parking lot here. Look, I talked to my lawyer first, and he said—"

"All right. All right. Who was the purchaser?"

"A guy, he was transferred to California and had to get a car fast to drive out. He—"

"His name?"

"Look, I can't tell you that. He bought the car in good faith. You got no call bothering him now."

The little man said, "If I chose, I could draw the information from you in a number of ways. But never mind. I'll locate the car easily enough. And you'll certainly regret this scandalous breach of custodial duties. You certainly shall."

He went stamping out of the showroom, muttering indignantly.

Several minutes later a flash of lightning blazed across the sky. "Lightning?" the auto dealer wondered. "In January? During a snowstorm?"

When the thunder came rumbling in, every pane of plate glass in every window of the showroom shattered and fell out in the same instant.

Sam Norton sat spinning his wheels for a while in mounting fury. He knew it did no good, but he wasn't sure what else he could do, at this point, except hit the gas and hope for the car to pull itself out of the snow. His only other hope was for the

highway patrol to come along, see his plight, and summon a tow truck. But the highway was all but empty, and those few cars that drove by shot past him without stopping.

When ten minutes had passed, he decided to have a closer look at the situation. He wondered vaguely if he could somehow scuff away enough snow with his foot to allow the wheels to get a little purchase. It didn't sound plausible, but there wasn't much else he could do. He got out and headed to the back of the car.

And noticed for the first time that the trunk was open.

The lid had popped up about a foot, along that neat welded line of demarcation. In astonishment Norton pushed it higher and peered inside.

The interior had a dank, musty smell. He couldn't see much of what might be in there, for the light was dim and the lid would lift no higher. It seemed to him that there were odd lumpy objects scattered about, objects of no particular size or shape, but he felt nothing when he groped around. He had the impression that the things in the trunk were moving away from his hand, vanishing into the darkest corners as he reached for them. But then his fingers encountered something cold and smooth, and he heard a welcome clink of metal on metal. He pulled.

A set of tire chains came forth.

He grinned at his good luck. Just what he needed! Quickly he unwound the chains and crouched by the back wheels of the car to fasten them in place. The lid of the trunk slammed shut as he worked—hinge must be loose, he thought—but that was of no importance. In five minutes he had the chains attached. Getting behind the wheel, he started the car again, fed some gas, delicately let in the clutch, and bit down hard on his lower lip by way of helping the car out of the snowbank. The car eased forward until it was in the clear. He left the chains on until he reached a service area eight miles up the turnpike. There he undid them; and when he stood up, he found that the trunk had popped open again. Norton tossed the chains inside and knelt in another attempt to see what else might be in the trunk; but not even by squinting did he discover anything. When he touched the lid, it snapped shut, and once more the rear of the car presented that puzzling welded-tight look.

Mine not to reason why, he told himself. He headed into the station and asked the attendant to sell him a spare tire and a set of tools. The attendant, frowning a bit, studied the car through the station window and said, "Don't know as we got one to fit. We got standards and we got smalls, but you got an in-between. Never saw a size tire like that, really."

"Maybe you ought to take a closer look," Norton suggested. "Just in case it's really a standard foreign-car size, and—"

"Nope. I can see from here. What you driving, anyway? One of them Japanese jobs?"

"Something like that."

"Look, maybe you can get a tire in Harrisburg. They got a place there, it caters to foreign cars, get yourself a muffler, shocks, anything you need."

"Thanks," Norton said, and went out.

He didn't feel like stopping when the turnoff for Harrisburg came by. It made him a little queasy to be driving without a spare, but somehow he wasn't as worried about it as he'd been before. The trunk had had tire chains when he needed them. There was no telling what else might turn up back there at the right time. He drove on.

Since the little man's own vehicle wasn't available to him, he had to arrange a rental. That was no problem, though. There were agencies in every city that specialized in such things. Very shortly he was in touch with one, not exactly by telephone, and was explaining his dilemma. "The difficulty," the little man said, "is that he's got a head start of several days. I've traced him to a point west of Chicago, and he's moving forward at a pretty steady four hundred fifty miles a day."

"You'd better fly, then."

"That's what I've been thinking, too," said the little man. "What's available fast?"

"Could have given you a nice Persian job, but it's out having its tassels restrung. But you don't care much for carpets anyway, do you? I forgot."

"Don't trust 'em in thermals," said the little man. "I caught an updraft once in Sikkim and I was halfway up the Himalayas before I got things under control. Looked for a while like I'd end up in orbit. What's at the stable?"

"Well, some pretty decent jobs. There's this classy stallion that's been resting up all winter, though actually he's a little cranky—maybe you'd prefer the bay gelding. Why don't you stop around and decide for yourself?"

"Will do," the little man said. "You still take Diner's Club, don't you?"

"All major credit cards, as always. You bet."

Norton was in southern Illinois, an hour out of St. Louis on a foggy, humid morning, when the front right-hand tire blew. He had been expecting it to go for a day and a half, now, ever since he'd stopped in Altoona for gas. The kid at the service station had tapped the tire's treads and showed him the weak spot, and Norton had nodded and asked about his chances of buying a spare, and the kid had shrugged and said, "It's a funny size. Try in Pittsburgh, maybe." He tried in Pittsburgh, killing an hour and a half there, and hearing from several men who probably ought to know that tires just weren't made to that size, nohow. Norton was beginning to wonder how the previous owner of the car had managed to find replacements. Maybe this was still the original set, he figured. But he was morbidly sure of one thing: that weak spot was going to give out, beyond any doubt, before he saw L.A.

When it blew, he was doing about thirty-five, and he realized at once what had happened. He slowed the car to a halt without losing control. The shoulder was wide here, but even so Norton was grateful that the flat was on the right-hand side of the car; he didn't much feature having to change a tire with his rump to the traffic. He was still congratulating himself on that small bit of good luck when he remembered that he had no spare tire.

Somehow he couldn't get very disturbed about it. Spending a dozen hours a day behind the wheel was evidently having a tranquilizing effect on him; at this point nothing worried him much, not even the prospect of being stranded an hour east of St. Louis. He would merely walk to the nearest telephone, wherever that might happen to be, and he would phone the local automobile club and explain his predicament, and they would come out and get him and tow him to civilization. Then he would settle in a motel for a day or two, phoning Ellen at

her sister's place in L.A. to say that he was all right but was going to be a little late. Either he would have the tire patched or the automobile club would find a place in St. Louis that sold odd sizes, and everything would turn out for the best. Why get into a dither?

He stepped out of the car and inspected the flat, which looked very flat indeed. Then, observing that the trunk had popped open again, he went around back. Reaching in experimentally, he expected to find the tire chains at the outer edge of the trunk, where he had left them. They weren't there. Instead his fingers closed on a massive metal bar. Norton tugged it partway out of the trunk and discovered that he had found a jack. Exactly so, he thought. And the spare tire ought to be right in back of it, over here, yes? He looked, but the lid was up only eighteen inches or so, and he couldn't see much. His fingers encountered good rubber, though. Yes, here it is. Nice and plump, brand new, deep treads—very pretty. And next to it, if my luck holds, I ought to find a chest of golden doubloons—

The doubloons weren't there. Maybe next time, he told himself. He hauled out the tire and spent a sweaty half hour putting it on. When he was done, he dumped the jack, the wrench, and the blown tire into the trunk, which immediately shut to the usual hermetic degree of sealing. An hour later, without further incident, he crossed the Mississippi into St. Louis, found a room in a shiny new motel overlooking the Gateway Arch, treated himself to a hot shower and a couple of cold Gibsons, and put in a collect call to Ellen's sister. Ellen had just come back from some unsuccessful apartment hunting, and she sounded tired and discouraged. Children were howling in the background as she said, "You're driving carefully, aren't you?"

"Of course I am."

"And the new car is behaving okay?"

"Its behavior," Norton said, "is beyond reproach."

"My sister wants to know what kind it is. She says a Volvo is a good kind of car, if you want a foreign car. That's a Norwegian car."

"Swedish," he corrected.

He heard Ellen say to her sister, "He bought a Swedish car."

The reply was unintelligible, but a moment later Ellen said, "She says you did a smart thing. Those Swedes, they make good cars too."

The flight ceiling was low, with visibility less than half a mile in thick fog. Airports were socked in all over Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio. The little man flew westward, though, keeping just above the fleecy whiteness spreading to the horizon. He was making good time, and it was a relief not to have to worry about those damned private planes.

The bay gelding had plenty of stamina, too. He was a fuel-guzzler, that was his only trouble. You didn't get a whole lot of miles to the bale with the horses available nowadays, the little man thought sadly. Everything was in a state of decline, and you had to accept the situation.

His original flight plan had called for him to overtake his car somewhere in the Texas Panhandle. But he had stopped off in Chicago on a sudden whim to visit friends, and now he calculated he wouldn't catch up with the car until Arizona. He couldn't wait to get behind the wheel again, after all these months.

The more he thought about the trunk and the tricks it had played, the more bothered by it all Sam Norton was. The chains, the spare tire, the jack—what next? In Amarillo he had offered a mechanic twenty bucks to get the trunk open. The mechanic had run his fingers along that smooth seam in disbelief. "What are you, one of those television fellers?" he asked. "Having some fun with me?"

"Not at all," Norton said. "I just want that trunk opened up."

"Well, I reckon maybe with an acetylene torch—"

But Norton felt an obscure terror at the idea of cutting into the car that way. He didn't know why the thought frightened him so much, but it did, and he drove out of Amarillo with the car whole and the mechanic muttering and spraying his boots with tobacco juice. A hundred miles on, when he was over the New Mexico border and moving through bleak, forlorn, winter-browed country, he decided to put the trunk to a test.

LAST GAS BEFORE ROSWELL, a peeling sign warned. FILL UP NOW!

The gas gauge told him that the tank was nearly empty. Roswell was somewhere far ahead. There wasn't another human being in sight, no town, not even a shack. This, Norton decided, is the right place to run out of gas.

He shot past the gas station at fifty miles an hour.

In a few minutes he was two and a half mountains away from the filling station and beginning to have doubts not merely of the wisdom of his course but even of his sanity. Deliberately letting himself run out of gas was against all reason; it was harder even to do than deliberately letting the telephone go unanswered. A dozen times he ordered himself to swing around and go back to fill his tank, and a dozen times he refused.

The needle crept lower, until it was reading E for Empty, and still he drove ahead. The needle slipped through the red warning zone below the E. He had used up even the extra couple of gallons of gas that the tank didn't register—the safety margin for careless drivers. And any moment now the car would—

—stop.

For the first time in his life Sam Norton had run out of gas. Okay, trunk, let's see what you can do, he thought. He pushed the door open and felt the chilly zip of the mountain breeze. It was quiet here, ominously so; except for the gray ribbon of the road itself, this neighborhood had a darkly prehistoric look, all sagebrush and pinyon pine and not a trace of man's impact. Norton walked around to the rear of his car.

The trunk was open again.

It figures. Now I reach inside and find that a ten-gallon can of gas has mysteriously materialized, and—

He couldn't feel any can of gas in the trunk. He groped a good long while and came up with nothing more useful than a coil of thick rope.

Rope?

What good is rope to a man who's out of gas in the desert?

Norton hefted the rope, seeking answers from it and not getting any. It occurred to him that perhaps this time the trunk hadn't *wanted* to help him. The skid, the blowout—those hadn't been his fault. But he had with malice aforethought let the car

run out of gas, just to see what would happen, and maybe that didn't fall within the scope of the trunk's services.

Why the rope, though?

Some kind of grisly joke? Was the trunk telling him to go string himself up? He couldn't even do that properly here; there wasn't a tree in sight tall enough for a man to hang himself from, not even a telephone pole. Norton felt like kicking himself. Here he was, and here he'd remain for hours, maybe even for days, until another car came along. Of all the dumb stunts!

Angrily he hurled the rope into the air. It uncoiled as he let go of it, and one end rose straight up. The rope hovered about a yard off the ground, rigid, pointing skyward. A faint turquoise cloud formed at the upper end, and a thin, muscular olive-skinned boy in a turban and a loincloth climbed down to confront the gaping Norton.

"Well, what's the trouble?" the boy asked brusquely.

"I'm . . . out . . . of . . . gas."

"There's a filling station twenty miles back. Why didn't you tank up there?"

"I . . . that is . . ."

"What a damned fool," the boy said in disgust. "Why do I get stuck with jobs like this? All right, don't go anywhere and I'll see what I can do."

He went up the rope again and vanished.

When he returned, some three minutes later, he was carrying a tin of gasoline. Glowering at Norton, he slid the gas-tank cover aside and poured in the gas.

"This'll get you to Roswell," he said. "From now on look at your dashboard once in a while. Idiot!"

He scrambled up the rope. When he disappeared, the rope went limp and fell. Norton shakily picked it up and slipped it into the trunk, whose lid shut with an aggressive slam.

Half an hour went by before Norton felt it was safe to get behind the wheel again. He paced around the car something more than a thousand times, not getting a whole lot steadier in the nerves, and ultimately, with night coming on, got in and switched on the ignition. The engine coughed and turned over. He began to drive toward Roswell at a sober and steadfast fifteen miles an hour.

He was willing to believe anything, now.

And so it did not upset him at all when a handsome reddish-brown horse with the wingspread of a DC-3 came soaring through the air, circled above the car a couple of times, and made a neat landing on the highway alongside him. The horse trotted along, keeping pace with him, while the small white-haired man in the saddle yelled, "Open your window wider, young fellow! I've got to talk to you!"

Norton opened the window.

The little man said, "Your name Sam Norton?"

"That's right."

"Well, listen, Sam Norton, you're driving my car!"

Norton saw a dirt turnoff up ahead and pulled into it. As he got out, the pegasus came trotting up and halted to let its rider dismount. It cropped moodily at sagebrush, fluttering its huge wings a couple of times before folding them neatly along its back.

The little man said, "My car, all right. Had her specially made a few years back, when I was on the road a lot. Dropped her off at the garage last winter account of I had a business trip to make abroad, but I never figured they'd sell her out from under me before I got back. It's a decadent age, that's the truth."

"Your . . . car . . ." Norton said.

"My car, yep. Afraid I'll have to take it from you, son. Car like this, you don't want to own it, anyway. Too complicated. Get yourself a decent little standard-make flivver, eh? Well, now, let's unhitch this trailer thing of yours, and then—"

"Wait a second," Norton said. "I bought this car legally. I've got a bill of sale to prove it, and a letter from the dealer's lawyer, explaining that—"

"Don't matter one bit," said the little man. "One crook hires another crook to testify to his character, that's not too impressive. I know you're an innocent party, son, but the fact remains that the car is my property, and I hope I don't have to use special persuasion to get you to relinquish it."

"You just want me to get out and walk, is that it? In the middle of the New Mexico desert at sundown? Dragging the damned U-Haul with my bare hands?"

"Hadn't really considered that problem much," the little man

said. "Wouldn't altogether be fair to you, would it?"

"It sure wouldn't." He thought a moment. "And what about the two hundred bucks I paid for the car?"

The little man laughed. "Shucks, it cost me more than that to rent the pegasus to come chasing you! And the overhead! You know how much hay that critter—"

"That's your problem," Norton said. "Mine is that you want to strand me in the desert and that you want to take away a car that I bought in good faith for two hundred dollars, and even if it's a goddam magic car I—"

"Hush, now," said the little man. "You're gettin' all upset, Sam! We can work this thing out. You're going to L.A., that it?"

"Ye-es."

"So am I. Okay, we travel together. I'll deliver you and your trailer, here, and then the car's mine again, and you forget anything you might have seen these last few days."

"And my two hundred dol—"

"Oh, all right." The little man walked to the back of the car. The trunk opened; he slipped in a hand and pulled forth a sheaf of crisp new bills, a dozen twenties, which he handed to Norton. "Here. With a little something extra, thrown in. And don't look at them so suspiciously, hear? That's good legal tender U.S. money. They even got different serial numbers, every one." He winked and strolled over to the grazing pegasus, which he slapped briskly on the rump. "Git along, now. Head for home. You cost me enough already!"

The horse began to canter along the highway. As it broke into a gallop it spread its superb wings; they beat furiously a moment, and the horse took off, rising in a superb arc until it was no bigger than a hawk against the darkening sky, and then was gone.

The little man slipped into the driver's seat of the car and fondled the wheel in obvious affection. At a nod, Norton took the seat beside him, and off they went.

"I understand you peddle computers," the little man said when he had driven a couple of miles. "Mighty interesting things, computers. I've been considering computerizing our operation too, you know? It's a pretty big outfit, a lot of consulting stuff all over the world, mostly dowsing now, some

thaumaturgy, now and then a little transmutation, things like that, and though we use traditional methods we don't object to the scientific approach. Now, let me tell you a bit about our inventory flow, and maybe you can make a few intelligent suggestions, young fellow, and you might just be landing a nice contract for yourself—"

Norton had the roughs for the system worked out before they hit Arizona. From Phoenix he phoned Ellen and found out that she had rented an apartment just outside Beverly Hills, in what *looked* like a terribly expensive neighborhood but really wasn't, at least, not by comparison with some of the other things she'd seen, and—

"It's okay," he said. "I'm in the process of closing a pretty big sale. I... ah... picked up a hitchhiker, and turns out he's thinking of going computer soon, a fairly large company—"

"Sam, you haven't been drinking, have you?"

"Not a drop."

"A hitchhiker and you sold him a computer. Next you'll tell me about the flying saucer you saw."

"Don't be silly," Norton said. "Flying saucers aren't real."

They drove into L.A. in midmorning, two days later. By then he had written the whole order, and everything was set; the commission, he figured, would be enough to see him through a new car, maybe one of those Swedish jobs Ellen's sister had heard about. The little man seemed to have no difficulty finding the address of the apartment Ellen had taken; he negotiated the maze of the freeways with complete ease and assurance, and pulled up outside the house.

"Been a most pleasant trip, young fellow," the little man said. "I'll be talking to my bankers later today about that wonderful machine of yours. Meanwhile here we part. You'll have to unhitch the trailer, now."

"What am I supposed to tell my wife about the car I drove here in?"

"Oh, just say that you sold it to that hitchhiker at a good profit. I think she'll appreciate that."

They got out. While Norton undid the U-Haul's couplings, the little man took something from the trunk, which had opened a moment before. It was a large rubbery tarpaulin. The little

man began to spread it over the car. "Give us a hand here, will you?" he said. "Spread it nice and neat, so it covers the fenders and everything." He got inside, while Norton, baffled, carefully tucked the tarpaulin into place.

"You want me to cover the windshield too?" he asked.

"Everything," said the little man, and Norton covered the windshield. Now the car was wholly hidden.

There was a hissing sound, as of air being let out of tires. The tarpaulin began to flatten. As it sank toward the ground, there came a cheery voice from underneath, calling, "Good luck, young fellow!"

In moments the tarpaulin was less than three feet high. In a minute more it lay flat against the pavement. There was no sign of the car. It might have evaporated, or vanished into the earth. Slowly, uncomprehendingly, Norton picked up the tarpaulin, folded it until he could fit it under his arm, and walked into the house to tell his wife that he had arrived in Los Angeles.

Sam Norton never met the little man again, but he made the sale, and the commission saw him through a new car with something left over. He still has the tarpaulin, too. He keeps it folded up and carefully locked away in his basement. He's afraid to get rid of it, but he doesn't like to think of what might happen if someone came across it and spread it out.

The Cloak



Robert Bloch

SCENE: A hotel corridor.

OCCASION: A science fiction convention.

ANTHONY BOUCHER: . . . and when she was being admitted to the hospital they asked what her religion was and she said, "None." And they wrote down, "Protestant"!

WALTER BREEN: *Humph!* If they asked me what my religion was, I'd tell them "Druid"!

ROBERT BLOCH: Oh don't do that, they'd send you to a tree-surgeon.

This is all 100% true and I was there and heard it; perhaps it may give you some notion of the Basic Bob Bloch: quick-witted, good-humored, and with a dash of wormwood. Attributed to him (I wasn't there) is a phrase now famous; when it was said that someone else had an unjustly bad name, when, really, after all, you know, "he has the heart of a small boy." Bloch said, "Yes, and he keeps it on his desk in a jar of formaldehyde"—thus settling that.

Born in 1917, Robert Bloch grew up in the wholesome heart of the upper Midwest, and, as for his own small boyhood, we rather assume it must have been over by the time

he was seventeen, at which age he sold his first story to *Weird Tales*. But this is not it. Stories of his have been in four hundred anthologies in a dozen languages. He has written approximately fifty books, and has screen credits on at least ten films. He is the author of *Psycho*. Many awards. A flyer announcing his speaking appearance at the Third Annual Emory [University] Science Fiction and Fantasy Symposium included the significant line, *Tickets for Robert Bloch may be purchased separately*. . . . Robert and Eleanor Bloch live in Los Angeles.

The sun was dying, and its blood spattered the sky as it crept into a sepulcher behind the hills. The keening wind sent the dry, fallen leaves scurrying toward the west, as though hastening them to the funeral of the sun.

"Nuts!" said Henderson to himself, and stopped thinking.

The sun was setting in a dingy red sky, and a dirty raw wind was kicking up the half-rotten leaves in a filthy gutter. Why should he waste time with cheap imagery?

"Nuts!" said Henderson, again.

It was probably a mood evoked by the day, he mused. After all, this was the sunset of Halloween. Tonight was the dreaded All Hallows' Eve, when spirits walked in and skulls cried out from their graves beneath the earth.

Either that, or tonight was just another rotten cold fall day. Henderson sighed. There was a time, he reflected, when the coming of this night meant something. A dark Europe, groaning in superstitious fear, dedicated this Eve to the grinning Unknown. A million doors had once been barred against the evil visitants, a million prayers mumbled, a million candles lit. There was something majestic about the idea, Henderson reflected. Life had been an adventure in those times, and men walked in terror of what the next turn of a midnight road might bring. They had lived in a world of demons and ghouls and elementals who sought their souls—and by Heaven, in those days a man's soul meant something. This new skepticism had taken a profound meaning away from life. Men no longer revered their souls.

"Nuts!" said Henderson again, quite automatically. There was something crude and twentieth-century about the coarse

expression which always checked his introspective flights of fancy.

The voice in his brain that said "nuts" took the place of humanity to Henderson—common humanity which would echo the same sentiment upon hearing his secret thoughts. So now Henderson uttered the word and endeavored to forget problems and purple patches alike.

He was walking down the street at sunset to buy a costume for the masquerade party tonight, and he had much better concentrate on finding the costumer's before it closed than waste his time daydreaming about Halloween.

His eyes searched the darkening shadows of the dingy buildings lining the narrow thoroughfare. Once again he peered at the address he had scribbled down after finding it in the phone book.

Why the devil didn't they light up the shops when it got dark? He couldn't make out numbers. This was a poor, run-down neighborhood, but after all—

Abruptly, Henderson spied the place across the street and started over. He passed the window and glanced in. The last rays of the sun slanted over the top of the building across the way and fell directly on the window and its display. Henderson drew a sharp intake of breath.

He was staring at a costumer's window—not looking through a fissure into hell. Then why was it all red fire, lighting the grinning visages of fiends?

"Sunset," Henderson muttered aloud. Of course it was, and the faces were merely clever masks such as would be displayed in this sort of place. Still, it gave the imaginative man a start. He opened the door and entered.

The place was dark and still. There was a smell of loneliness in the air—the smell that haunts all places long undisturbed; tombs, and graves in deep woods, and caverns in the earth, and—

"Nuts."

What the devil was wrong with him, anyway? Henderson smiled apologetically at the empty darkness. This was the smell of the costumer's shop, and it carried him back to college days of amateur theatricals. Henderson had known this smell of moth balls, decayed furs, grease paint and oils. He had played am-

ateur Hamlet and in his hands he had held a smirking skull that hid all knowledge in its empty eyes—a skull, from the costumer's.

Well, here he was again, and the skull gave him the idea. After all, Halloween night it was. Certainly in this mood of his he didn't want to go as a rajah, or a Turk, or a pirate—they all did that. Why not go as a fiend, or a warlock, or a werewolf? He could see Lindstrom's face when he walked into the elegant penthouse wearing rags of some sort. The fellow would have a fit, with his society crowd wearing their expensive Elsa Maxwell take-offs. Henderson didn't greatly care for Lindstrom's sophisticated friends anyway; a gang of amateur Noel Cowards and horsy women wearing harnesses of jewels. Why not carry out the spirit of Halloween and go as a monster?

Henderson stood there in the dusk, waiting for someone to turn on the lights, come out from the back room and serve him. After a minute or so he grew impatient and rapped sharply on the counter.

"Say in there! Service!"

Silence. And a shuffling noise from the rear, then—an unpleasant noise to hear in the gloom. There was a banging from downstairs and then the heavy clump of footsteps. Suddenly Henderson gasped. A black hulk was rising from the floor!

It was, of course, only the opening of the trapdoor from the basement. A man shuffled behind the counter, carrying a lamp. In that light his eyes blinked drowsily.

The man's yellowish face crinkled into a smile.

"I was sleeping, I'm afraid," said the man softly. "Can I serve you, sir?"

"I was looking for a Halloween costume."

"Oh, yes. And what was it you had in mind?"

The voice was weary, infinitely weary. The eyes continued to blink in the flabby yellow face.

"Nothing usual, I'm afraid. You see, I rather fancied some sort of monster getup for a party—don't suppose you carry anything in that line?"

"I could show you masks."

"No. I meant werewolf outfits, something of the sort. More of the authentic."

"So. The *authentic*."

"Yes." Why did this old dunce stress the word?

"I might—yes. I might have just the thing for you, sir." The eyes blinked, but the thin mouth pursed in a smile. "Just the thing for Halloween."

"What's that?"

"Have you ever considered the possibility of being a vampire?"

"Like Dracula?"

"Ah—yes, I suppose—Dracula."

"Not a bad idea. Do you think I'm the type for that, though?"

The man appraised him with the tight smile. "Vampires are of all types, I understand. You would do nicely."

"Hardly a compliment," Henderson chuckled. "But why not? What's the outfit?"

"Outfit? Merely evening clothes, or what you wear. I will furnish you with the authentic cloak."

"Just a cloak—is that all?"

"Just a cloak. But it is worn like a shroud. It is shroudcloth, you know. Wait, I'll get it for you."

The shuffling feet carried the man into the rear of the shop again. Down the trapdoor entrance he went, and Henderson waited. There was more banging, and presently the old man reappeared carrying the cloak. He was shaking dust from it in the darkness.

"Here it is—the genuine cloak."

"Genuine?"

"Allow me to adjust it for you—it will work wonders, I'm sure."

The cold, heavy cloth hung draped about Henderson's shoulders. The faint odor rose mustily in his nostrils as he stepped back and surveyed himself in the mirror. The lamp was poor, but Henderson saw that the cloak effected a striking transformation in his appearance. His long face seemed thinner, his eyes were accentuated in the facial pallor heightened by the somber cloak he wore. It was a big, black shroud.

"Genuine," murmured the old man. He must have come up suddenly, for Henderson hadn't noticed him in the glass.

"I'll take it," Henderson said. "How much?"

"You'll find it quite entertaining, I'm sure."

"How much?"

"Oh. Shall we say five dollars?"

"Here."

The old man took the money, blinking, and drew the cloak from Henderson's shoulders. When it slid away he felt suddenly warm again. It must be cold in the basement—the cloth was icy.

The old man wrapped the garment, smiling, and handed it over.

"I'll have it back tomorrow," Henderson promised.

"No need. You purchased it. It is yours."

"But—"

"I am leaving business shortly. Keep it. You will find more use for it than I, surely."

"But—"

"A pleasant evening to you."

Henderson made his way to the door in confusion, then turned to salute the blinking old man in the dimness.

Two eyes were burning at him from across the counter—two eyes that did not blink.

"Good night," said Henderson, and closed the door quickly. He wondered if he were going just a trifle mad.

At eight, Henderson nearly called up Lindstrom to tell him he couldn't make it. The cold chills came the minute he put on the damned cloak, and when he looked at himself in the mirror his blurred eyes could scarcely make out the reflection.

But after a few drinks he felt better about it. He hadn't eaten, and the liquor warmed his blood. He paced the floor, attitudinizing with the cloak—sweeping it about him and scowling in what he thought was a ferocious manner. Damn it, he was going to be a vampire all right! He called a cab, went down to the lobby. The driver came in, and Henderson was waiting, black cloak furled.

"I wish you to drive me," he said in a low voice.

The cabman took one look at him in the cloak and turned pale.

"Whazzat?"

"I ordered you to come," said Henderson gutturally, while he quaked with inner mirth. He leered ferociously and swept the cloak back.

"Yeah, yeah. O.K."

The driver almost ran outside. Henderson stalked after him.

"Where to, boss—I mean, sir?"

The frightened face didn't turn as Henderson intoned the address and sat back.

The cab started with a lurch that set Henderson to chuckling deeply, in character. At the sound of laughter the driver got panicky and raced his engine up to the limit set by the governor. Henderson laughed loudly, and the impressionable driver fairly quivered in his seat. It was quite a ride, but Henderson was entirely unprepared to open the door and find it slammed after him as the cabman drove hastily away without collecting a fare.

"I must look the part," he thought complacently, as he took the elevator up to the penthouse apartment.

There were three or four others in the elevator; Henderson had seen them before at other affairs Lindstrom had invited him to attend, but nobody seemed to recognize him. It rather pleased him to think how his wearing of an unfamiliar cloak and an unfamiliar scowl seemed to change his entire personality and appearance. Here the other guests had donned elaborate disguises—one woman wore the costume of a Watteau shepherdess, another was attired as a Spanish ballerina, a tall man dressed as Pagliacci, and his companion had donned a toreador outfit. Yet Henderson recognized them all; knew that their expensive habiliments were not truly disguises at all, but merely elaborations calculated to enhance their appearance. Most people at costume parties gave vent to suppressed desires. The women showed off their figures, the men either accentuated their masculinity as the toreador did, or clowning it. Such things were pitiful; these conventional fools eagerly doffing their dismal business suits and rushing off to a lodge, or amateur theatrical, or mask ball in order to satisfy their starving imaginations. Why didn't they dress in garish colors on the street? Henderson often pondered the question.

Surely, these society folk in the elevator were fine-looking men and women in their outfits—so healthy, so red-faced, and full of vitality. They had such robust throats and necks. Henderson looked at the plump arms of the woman next to him. He stared, without realizing it, for a long moment. And then, he saw that the occupants of the car had drawn away from him.

They were standing in the corner, as though they feared his cloak and scowl, and his eyes fixed on the woman. Their chatter had ceased abruptly. The woman looked at him, as though she were about to speak, when the elevator doors opened and afforded Henderson a welcome respite.

What the devil was wrong? First the cab driver, then the woman. Had he drunk too much?

Well, no chance to consider that. Here was Marcus Lindstrom, and he was thrusting a glass into Henderson's hand.

"What have we here? Ah, a boggy-man!" It needed no second glance to perceive that Lindstrom, as usual at such affairs, was already quite bottle-dizzy. The fat host was positively swimming in alcohol.

"Have a drink, Henderson, my lad! I'll take mine from the bottle. That outfit of yours gave me a shock. Where'd you get the make-up?"

"Make-up? I'm not wearing any make-up."

"Oh. So you're not. How . . . silly of me."

Henderson wondered if he were crazy. Had Lindstrom really drawn back? Were his eyes actually filled with a certain dismay? Oh, the man was obviously intoxicated.

"I'll . . . I'll see you later," babbled Lindstrom, edging away and quickly turning to the other arrivals. Henderson watched the back of Lindstrom's neck. It was fat and white. It bulged over the collar of his costume and there was a vein in it. A vein in Lindstrom's fat neck. Frightened Lindstrom.

Henderson stood alone in the ante-room. From the parlor beyond came the sound of music and laughter; party noises. Henderson hesitated before entering. He drank from the glass in his hand—Bacardi rum, and powerful. On top of his other drinks it almost made the man reel. But he drank, wondering. What was wrong with him and his costume? Why did he frighten people? Was he unconsciously acting his vampire role? That crack of Lindstrom's about make-up now—

Acting on impulse, Henderson stepped over to the long panel mirror in the hall. He lurched a little, then stood in the harsh light before it. He faced the glass, stared into the mirror, and saw nothing.

He looked at himself in the mirror, and there was no one there!

Henderson began to laugh softly, evilly, deep in his throat. And as he gazed into the empty, unreflecting glass, his laughter rose in black glee.

"I'm drunk," he whispered. "I must be drunk. Mirror in my apartment made me blurred. Now I'm so far gone I can't see straight. Sure I'm drunk. Been acting ridiculously, scaring people. Now I'm seeing hallucinations—or not seeing them, rather. Visions. Angels."

His voice lowered. "Sure, angels. Standing right in back of me, now. Hello, angel."

"Hello."

Henderson whirled. There she stood, in the dark cloak, her hair a shimmering halo above her white, proud face, her eyes celestial blue, and her lips infernal red.

"Are you real?" asked Henderson, gently. "Or am I a fool to believe in miracles?"

"This miracle's name is Sheila Darryl, and it would like to powder its nose if you please."

"Kindly use this mirror through the courtesy of Stephen Henderson," replied the cloaked man, with a grin. He stepped back a ways, eyes intent.

The girl turned her head and favored him with a slow, impish smile. "Haven't you ever seen powder used before?" she asked.

"Didn't know angels indulged in cosmetics," Henderson replied. "But then there's a lot I don't know about angels. From now on I shall make them a special study of mine. There's so much I want to find out. So you'll probably find me following you around with a notebook all evening."

"Notebooks for a vampire?"

"Oh, but I'm a very intelligent vampire—not one of those backwoods Transylvanian types. You'll find me charming, I'm sure."

"Yes, you look like the sure type," the girl mocked. "But an angel and a vampire—that's a queer combination."

"We can reform one another," Henderson pointed out. "Besides, I have a suspicion that there's a bit of the devil in you. That dark cloak over your angel costume; dark angel, you know. Instead of heaven you might hail from my home town."

Henderson was flippant, but underneath his banter cyclonic thoughts whirled. He recalled discussions in the past; cynical

observations he had made and believed.

Once, Henderson had declared that there was no such thing as love at first sight, save in books or plays where such a dramatic device served to speed up action. He asserted that people learned about romance from books and plays and accordingly adopted a belief in love at first sight when all one could possibly feel was desire.

And now this Sheila—this blond angel—had to come along and drive out all thoughts of morbidity, all thoughts of drunkenness and foolish gazings into mirrors, from his mind; had to send him madly plunging into dreams of red lips, ethereal blue eyes and slim white arms.

Something of his feeling had swept into his eyes, and as the girl gazed up at him she felt the truth.

"Well," she breathed, "I hope the inspection pleases."

"A miracle of understatement, that. But there was something I wanted to find out particularly about divinity. Do angels dance?"

"Tactful vampire! The next room?"

Arm in arm they entered the parlor. The merry-makers were in full swing. Liquor had already pitched gaiety at its height, but there was no dancing any longer. Boisterous little grouped couples laughed arm in arm about the room. The usual party gagsters were performing their antics in corners. The superficial atmosphere, which Henderson detested, was fully in evidence.

It was reaction which made Henderson draw himself up to full height and sweep the cloak about his shoulders. Reaction brought the scowl to his pale face, caused him to stalk along in brooding silence. Sheila seemed to regard this as a great joke.

"*Pull* a vampire act on them," she giggled, clutching his arm. Henderson accordingly scowled at the couples, sneered horrendously at the woman. And his progress was marked by the turning of heads, the abrupt cessation of chatter. He walked through the long room like Red Death incarnate. Whispers trailed in his wake.

"Who is that man?"

"His eyes—"

"Vampire!"

"Hello, Dracula!" It was Marcus Lindstrom and a sullen-

looking brunette in Cleopatra costume who lurched toward Henderson. Host Lindstrom could scarcely stand, and his companion in cups was equally at a loss. Henderson liked the man when sober at the club, but his behavior at parties had always irritated him. Lindstrom was particularly objectionable in his present condition—it made him boorish.

“M’dear, I want you t’ meet a very dear friend of mine. Yessir, it being Halloween and all, I invited Count Dracula here, t’gether with his daughter. Asked his grandmother, but she’s busy tonight at a Black Sabbath—along with Aunt Jemima. Ha! Count, meet my little playmate.”

The woman leered up at Henderson.

“Oooh Dracula, what big eyes you have! Oooh, what big teeth you have! Oooh—”

“Really, Marcus,” Henderson protested. But the host had turned and shouted to the room.

“Folks, meet the real goods—only genuine living vampire in captivity! Dracula Henderson, only existing vampire with false teeth.”

In any other circumstance Henderson would have given Lindstrom a quick, efficient punch in the jaw. But Sheila was at his side, it was a public gathering; better to humor the man’s clumsy jest. Why not be a vampire?

Smiling quickly at the girl, Henderson drew himself erect, faced the crowd, and frowned. His hands brushed the cloak. Funny, it still felt cold. Looking down he noticed for the first time that it was a little dirty at the edges; muddy or dusty. But the cold silk slid through his fingers as he drew it across his breast with one long hand. The feeling seemed to inspire him. He opened his eyes wide and let them blaze. His mouth opened. A sense of dramatic power filled him. And he looked at Marcus Lindstrom’s soft, fat neck with the vein standing in the whiteness. He looked at the neck, saw the crowd watching him, and then the impulse seized him. He turned, eyes on that creasy neck—that wabbling, creasy neck of the fat man.

Hands darted out. Lindstrom squeaked like a frightened rat. He was a plump, sleek white rat, bursting with blood. Vampires liked blood. Blood from the rat, from the neck of the rat, from the vein in the neck of the rat, from the vein in the neck of the squeaking rat.

"Warm blood."

The deep voice was Henderson's own.

The hands were Henderson's own.

The hands that went around Lindstrom's neck as he spoke, the hands that felt the warmth, that searched out the vein. Henderson's face was bending for the neck, and, as Lindstrom struggled, his grip tightened. Lindstrom's face was turning, turning purple. Blood was rushing to his head. That was good. Blood!

Henderson's mouth opened. He felt the air on his teeth. He bent down toward that fat neck, and then—

"Stop! That's plenty!"

The voice, the cooling voice of Sheila. Her fingers on his arm. Henderson looked up, startled. He released Lindstrom, who sagged with open mouth.

The crowd was staring, and their mouths were all shaped in the instinctive O of amazement.

Sheila whispered, "Bravo! Served him right—but you frightened him!"

Henderson struggled a moment to collect himself. Then he smiled and turned.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I have just given a slight demonstration to prove to you what our host said of me was entirely correct. I *am* a vampire. Now that you have been given fair warning, I am sure you will be in no further danger. If there is a doctor in the house I can, perhaps, arrange for a blood transfusion."

The O's relaxed and laughter came from startled throats. Hysterical laughter, in part then genuine. Henderson had carried it off. Marcus Lindstrom alone still stared with eyes that held utter fear. *He* knew.

And then the moment broke, for one of the gagsters ran into the room from the elevator. He had gone downstairs and borrowed the apron and cap of a newsboy. Now he raced through the crowd with a bundle of papers under his arm.

"Extra! Extra! Read all about it! Big Halloween Horror! Extra!"

Laughing guests purchased papers. A woman approached Sheila, and Henderson watched the girl walk away in a daze.

"See you later," she called, and her glance sent fire through

his veins. Still, he could not forget the terrible feeling that came over him when he had seized Lindstrom. Why?

Automatically, he accepted a paper from the shouting pseudo-newsboy. "Big Halloween Horror," he had shouted. What was that?

Blurred eyes searched the paper.

Then Henderson reeled back. That headline! It was an *Extra* after all. Henderson scanned the columns with mounting dread.

"Fire in costumer's... shortly after 8 p.m. firemen were summoned to the shop of... flames beyond control... completely demolished... damage estimated at... peculiarly enough, name of proprietor unknown... skeleton found in—"

"No!" gasped Henderson aloud.

He read, reread *that* closely. The skeleton had been found in a box of earth in the cellar beneath the shop. The box was a coffin. There had been two other boxes, empty. The skeleton had been wrapped in a cloak, undamaged by the flames—

And in the hastily penned box at the bottom of the column were eye-witness comments, written up under scareheads of heavy black type. Neighbors had feared the place. Hungarian neighborhood, hints of vampirism, of strangers who entered the shop. One man spoke of a cult believed to have held meetings in the place. Superstition about things sold there—love philters, outlandish charms and weird disguises.

Weird disguises—vampires—cloaks—*his eyes!*

"This is an authentic cloak."

"I will not be using this much longer. Keep it."

Memories of these words screamed through Henderson's brain. He plunged out of the room and rushed to the panel mirror.

A moment, then he flung one arm before his face to shield his eyes from the image that was not there—the missing reflection. *Vampires have no reflections.*

No wonder he looked strange. No wonder arms and necks invited him. He had wanted Lindstrom. Good God!

The cloak had done that, the dark cloak with the stains. The stains of earth, grave-earth. The wearing of the cloak, the cold cloak, had given him the feelings of a true vampire. It was a garment accursed, a thing that had lain on the body of one

undead. The rusty stain along one sleeve was blood.

Blood. It would be nice to see blood. To taste its warmth, its red life, flowing.

No. That was insane. He was drunk, crazy.

"Ah. My pale friend, the vampire."

It was Sheila again. And above all horror rose the beating of Henderson's heart. As he looked at her shining eyes, her warm mouth shaped in red invitation, Henderson felt a wave of warmth. He looked at her white throat rising above her dark, shimmering cloak, and another kind of warmth rose. Love, desire, and a—hunger.

She must have seen it in his eyes, but she did not flinch. Instead, her own gaze burned in return.

Sheila loved him, too!

With an impulsive gesture, Henderson ripped the cloak from about his throat. The icy weight lifted. He was free. Somehow, he hadn't wanted to take the cloak off, but he had to. It was a cursed thing, and in another minute he might have taken the girl in his arms, taken her for a kiss and remained to—

But he dared not think of that.

"Tired of masquerading?" she asked. With a similar gesture she, too, removed her cloak and stood revealed in the glory of her angel robe. Her blond, statuesque perfection forced a gasp to Henderson's throat.

"Angel," he whispered.

"Devil," she mocked.

And suddenly they were embracing. Henderson had taken her cloak in his arm with his own. They stood with lips seeking rapture until Lindstrom and a group moved noisily into the anteroom.

At the sight of Henderson the fat host recoiled.

"You—" he whispered. "You are—"

"Just leaving," Henderson smiled. Grasping the girl's arm, he drew her toward the empty elevator. The door shut on Lindstrom's pale, fear-filled face.

"Were we leaving?" Sheila whispered, snuggling against his shoulder.

"We were. But not for earth. We do not go down into my realm, but up—into yours."

"The roof garden?"

"Exactly, my angelic one. I want to talk to you against the background of your own heavens, kiss you amidst the clouds, and—"

Her lips found his as the car rose.

"Angel and devil. What a match!"

"I thought so, too," the girl confessed. "Will our children have halos or horns?"

"Both, I'm sure."

They stepped out onto the deserted rooftop. And once again it was Halloween.

Henderson felt it. Downstairs it was Lindstrom and his society friends, in a drunken costume party. Here it was night, silence, gloom. No light, no music, no drinking, no chatter which made one party identical with another; one night like all the rest. This night was individual here.

The sky was not blue, but black. Clouds hung like the gray beards of hovering giants peering at the round orange globe of the moon. A cold wind blew from the sea, and filled the air with tiny murmurings from afar.

This was the sky that witches flew through to their Sabbath. This was the moon of wizardry, the sable silence of black prayers and whispered invocations. The clouds hid monstrous Presences shambling in summons from afar. It was Halloween.

It was also quite cold.

"Give me my cloak," Sheila whispered. Automatically, Henderson extended the garment, and the girl's body swirled under the dark splendor of the cloth. Her eyes burned up at Henderson with a call he could not resist. He kissed her, trembling.

"You're cold," the girl said. "Put on your cloak."

Yes, Henderson, he thought to himself. Put on your cloak while you stare at her throat. Then, the next time you kiss her you will want her throat and she will give it in love and you will take it in—hunger.

"Put it on, darling—I insist," the girl whispered. Her eyes were impatient, burning with an eagerness to match his own.

Henderson trembled.

Put on the cloak of darkness? The cloak of the grave, the cloak of death, the cloak of the vampire? The evil cloak, filled with a cold life of its own that transformed his face, transformed

his mind, made his soul instinct with awful hunger?

"Here."

The girl's slim arms were about him, pushing the cloak onto his shoulders. Her fingers brushed his neck, caressingly, as she linked the cloak about his throat.

Henderson shivered.

Then he felt it—through him—that icy coldness turning to a more dreadful heat. He felt himself expand, felt the sneer cross his face. This was Power!

And the girl before him, her eyes taunting, inviting. He saw her ivory neck, her warm slim neck, waiting. It was waiting for him, for his lips.

For his teeth.

No—it couldn't be. He loved her. His love must conquer this madness. Yes, wear the cloak, defy its power, and take her in his arms as a man, not as a fiend. He must. It was the test.

"Sheila." Funny how his voice deepened.

"Yes, dear."

"Sheila, I must tell you this."

Her eyes—so alluring. It would be easy!

"Sheila, please. You read the paper tonight."

"Yes."

"I... I got my cloak there. I can't explain it. You saw how I took Lindstrom. I wanted to go through with it. Do you understand me? I meant to... to bite him. Wearing this damnable thing makes me feel like one of those creatures."

Why didn't her stare change? Why didn't she recoil in horror? Such trusting innocence! Didn't she understand? Why didn't she run? Any moment now he might lose control, seize her.

"I love you, Sheila. Believe that. I love you."

"I know." Her eyes gleamed in the moonlight.

"I want to test it. I want to kiss you, wearing this cloak. I want to feel that my love is stronger than this—thing. If I weaken, promise me you'll break away and run, quickly. But don't misunderstand. I must face this feeling and fight it; I want my love for you to be that pure, that secure. Are you afraid?"

"No." Still she stared at him, just as he stared at her throat. If she knew what was in his mind!

"You don't think I'm crazy? I went to this costumer's—he was a horrible little old man—and he gave me the cloak. Actually told me it was a real vampire's. I thought he was joking, but tonight I didn't see myself in the mirror, and I wanted Lindstrom's neck, and I want you. But I must test it."

"You're not crazy. I know. I'm not afraid."

"Then—"

The girl's face mocked. Henderson summoned his strength. He bent forward, his impulses battling. For a moment he stood there under the ghastly orange moon, and his face was twisted in struggle.

And the girl lured.

Her odd, incredibly red lips parted in a silvery, chuckly laugh as her white arms rose from the black cloak she wore to circle his neck gently. "I know—I knew when I looked in the mirror. I knew you had a cloak like mine—got yours where I got mine—"

Queerly, her lips seemed to elude his as he stood frozen for an instant of shock. Then he felt the icy hardness of her sharp little teeth on his throat, a strangely soothing sting, and an engulfing blackness rising over him.

Touchstone



Terry Carr

In an old note I find that I wrote, *Terry Carr was born in Grants Pass, Oregon, and grew up reading The Gumps by whale-oil lamps*, but I don't suppose that can be right; do you? As to how and why I happened to have an old note like that, no, Terry didn't pass it to me in class; I have bought this story (and printed it, of course) twice before: and this is the third time. The Book of Proverbs says that *A three-fold cord is not easily broken*; am I destined to be buying it and printing it indefinitely? I hope so. There are those who may say that the object in this story does not really meet the unabridged dictionary's two definitions of *touchstone*. After reading this tale, though, you will surely confirm that Mr. Carr has provided a third.

Terry Carr was born in Oregon in 1937 and was raised in San Francisco. After ten years as a writer and editor in New York City, he returned to California and now lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with his wife, the writer Carol Carr. Mr. Carr is the author of the science fiction novel *Cirque*, and several dozen short stories, many of which were collected in *The Light at the End of the Universe*. He has edited about sixty science fiction and fantasy anthologies, including such series as *Universe*, *The Best Science Fiction of the Year*, and *Fantasy Annual*.

For thirty-two years, during which he watched with growing perplexity and horror the ways of the world and the dull gropings of people reaching for love and security, Randolph Helgar had told himself that there was a simple answer to all of it—somehow it was possible to get a handhold on life, to hold it close and cherish it without fear. And on a Saturday morning in early March when the clouds had disappeared and the sun had come forth pale in the sky he found what he had been looking for.

The snow had been gone from the streets of Greenwich Village for over a week, leaving behind only the crispness on the sidewalks. Everyone still walked with a tentative step, like sailors on shore leave. Randolph Helgar was out of his apartment by ten, heading west. His straight, sandy hair was ruffled by an easterly wind, giving him the superficial appearance of hurrying, but his quick grey eyes and the faint smile that so often came to his mouth dispelled that. Randolph was busier looking around than walking.

The best thing about the Village, as far as he was concerned, was that you could never chart all of it. As soon as you thought you knew every street, every sandal shop, every hot dog or pizza stand, one day you'd look up and there'd be something new there, where you'd never looked before. A peculiar blindness comes over people who walk through the streets of the Village; they see only where they're going.

The day before, on the bus coming home from work at the travel agency on West 4th, he had looked out the window and seen a bookstore whose dirty windows calmly testified to the length of time it had been there. So of course this morning he was looking for that bookstore. He had written down the address, but there was no need now for him to take the slip of paper from his wallet to look at it; the act of writing had fixed it in his memory.

The store was just opening when he got there. A large, heavy-shouldered man with thick black hair and prominent veins in the backs of his hands was setting out the bargain table in the front of the store. Randolph glanced at the table, filled with the sunfaded spines of anonymous pocketbooks, and nodded at the man. He went inside.

The books were piled high around the walls; here and there

were handlettered signs saying MUSIC, HISTORY, PSYCHOLOGY, but they must have been put there years ago, because the books in those sections bore no relation to the signs. Near the front was an old cupboard, mottled with the light which came through the dirty window; a sign on one of its shelves said \$10. Next to it was a small round table which revolved on its base, but there was no price on this.

The owner had come back into the store now, and he stood just inside the door looking at Randolph. After a moment he said, "You want anything special?"

Randolph shook his head, dislodging the shock of hair which fell over his eyes. He ran his fingers through it, combing it back, and turned to one of the piles of books.

"I think maybe you'd be interested in this section," said the owner, walking heavily over the bending floorboards to stand beside Randolph. He raised a large hand and ran it along one shelf. A sign said MAGIC, WITCHCRAFT.

Randolph glanced at it. "No," he said.

"None of those books are for sale," the man said. "That section is strictly lending-library."

Randolph raised his eyes to meet those of the older man. The man gazed back calmly, waiting.

"Not for sale?" Randolph said.

"No, they're part of my own collection," the man said. "But I lend them out at 10¢ a day, if anybody wants to read them, or..."

"Who takes them out?"

The heavy man shrugged, with the faint touch of a smile about his thick lips. "People. People come in, they see the books and think they might like to read them. They always bring them back."

Randolph glanced at the books on the shelves. The spines were crisp and hard, the lettering on them like new. "Do you think they read them?" he asked.

"Of course. So many of them come back and buy other things."

"Other books?"

The man shrugged again, and turned away. He walked slowly to the back of the store. "I sell other things. It's impossible to make a living selling books in this day and age."

Randolph followed him into the darkness in back. "What other things do you sell?"

"Perhaps you should read some of the books first," the man said, watching him beneath his eyebrows.

"Do you sell . . . love potions? Dried bat's blood? Snake's entrails?"

"No," said the man. "I'm afraid you'd have to search the tobacconist's shops for such things as that. I sell only imperishables."

"Magic charms?" Randolph said.

"Yes," the man said slowly. "Some are real, some are not."

"And I suppose the real ones are more expensive."

"They are all roughly the same price. It's up to you to decide which ones are real."

The man had stooped to reach into a drawer of his desk, and now he brought out a box from which he lifted the lid. He set the open box on the top of his desk and reached up to turn on a naked lightbulb which hung from the shadowed ceiling.

The box contained an assortment of amulets, stones, dried insects encased in glass, carved pieces of wood, and other things. They were all tumbled into the box haphazardly. Randolph stirred the contents with two fingers.

"I don't believe in magic," he said.

The heavy man smiled faintly. "I don't suppose I do either. But some of these things are quite interesting. Some are of authentic South American workmanship, and others are from Europe and the East. They're worth money, all right."

"What's this?" Randolph asked, picking up a black stone which just fit into the palm of his hand. The configurations of the stone twisted around and in upon themselves, like a lump of baker's dough.

"That's a touchstone. Run your fingers over it."

"It's perfectly smooth," Randolph said.

"It's supposed to have magical powers to make people feel contented. Hold it in your hand."

Randolph closed his fingers around the stone. Perhaps it was the power of suggestion, but the stone did feel very good. So smooth, like skin . . .

"The man who gave it to me said it was an ancient Indian

piece. It embodies Yin and Yang, the opposites that complement and give harmony to the world. You can see a little of the symbol in the way the stone looks." He smiled slowly. "It's also supposed to encase a human soul, like an egg."

"More likely a fossil," Randolph said. He wondered what kind of stone it was.

"It will cost five dollars," the man said.

Randolph hefted the stone in his hand. It settled back into his palm comfortably, like a cat going to sleep. "All right," he said.

He took a bill from his wallet, and noticed the paper on which he'd written the store's address the day before. "If I come back here a week from now," he said, "will this store still be here? Or will it have disappeared, like magic shops are supposed to do?"

The man didn't smile. "This isn't that kind of store. I'd go out of business if I kept moving my location."

"Well then," Randolph said, looking at the black stone in his hand. "When I was young I used to pick up stones at the beach and carry them around for weeks, just because I loved them. I suppose this stone has some of that sort of magic, anyway."

"If you decide you don't want it, bring it back," said the man.

When he got back to the apartment Margo was just getting up. Bobby, seven years old, was apparently up and out already. Randolph put yesterday's pot of coffee on the burner to heat and sat at the kitchen table to wait for it. He took the touchstone out of his pocket and ran his fingers over it.

Strange . . . It was just a black rock, worn smooth probably by water and then maybe by the rubbing of fingers over centuries. Despite what the man at the store had said about an Indian symbol, it had no particular shape.

Yet it did have a peculiar calming effect on him. Maybe, he thought, it's just that people have to have something to do with their hands while they think. It's the hands, the opposable thumb, that has made humans what they are, or so the anthropologists say. The hands give people the ability to work with

things around them, to make, to do. And we all have a feeling that we've got to be using our hands all the time or somehow we're not living up to our birthright.

That's why so many people smoke. That's why they fidget and rub their chins and drum their fingers on tables. But the touchstone relaxes the hands.

A simple form of magic.

Margo came into the kitchen, combing her long hair back over her shoulders. She hadn't put on any makeup, and her full mouth seemed as pale as clouds. She set out coffee cups and poured, then sat down across the table.

"Did you get the paint?"

"Paint?"

"You were going to paint the kitchen today. The old paint is cracking and falling off."

Randolph looked up at the walls, rubbing the stone in his fingers. They didn't look bad, he decided. They could go for another six months without being redone. After all, it was no calamity if the plaster showed through above the stove.

"I don't think I'll do it today," he said.

Margo didn't say anything. She picked up a book from the chair beside her and found her place in it.

Randolph fingered the touchstone and thought about the beach when he had been a boy.

There was a party that night at Gene Blake's apartment on the floor below, but for once Randolph didn't feel like going down. Blake was four years younger than him, and suddenly today the difference seemed insuperable; Blake told off-center jokes about integration in the South, talked about writers Randolph knew only by the reviews in the *Sunday Times*, and was given to drinking Scotch and milk. No, not tonight, he told Margo.

After dinner Randolph settled in front of the television set and, as the washing of dishes sounded from the kitchen and Bobby read a comic book in the corner, watched a rerun of the top comedy show of three seasons past. When the second commercial came on he dug the touchstone from his pocket and rubbed it idly with his thumb. All it takes, he told himself, is to ignore the commercials.

"Have you ever seen a frog?" Bobby asked him. He looked up and saw the boy standing next to his chair, breathing quickly as boys do when they have something to say.

"Sure," he said.

"Did you ever see a black one? A dead one?"

Randolph thought a minute. He didn't suppose he had. "No," he said.

"Wait a minute!" Bobby said, and bounded out of the room. Randolph turned back to the television screen, and saw that the wife had a horse in the living-room and was trying to coax it to go upstairs before the husband came home. The horse seemed bored.

"Here!" said Bobby, and dropped the dead frog in his lap.

Randolph looked at it for two seconds before he realized what it was. One leg and part of the frog's side had been crushed, probably by a car's wheel, and the wide mouth was open. It was grey, not black.

Randolph shook it off him onto the floor. "You'd better throw it away," he said. "It's going to smell bad."

"But I paid sixty marbles for him!" Bobby said. "And I only had twenty-five, and you got to get some more."

Randolph sighed, and shifted the touchstone from one hand to the other. "All right," he said. "Monday. Keep him in your room."

He turned back to the screen, where everyone had got behind the horse and was trying to push him up the stairs.

"Don't you like him?" Bobby asked.

Randolph looked blankly at him.

"My frog," Bobby said.

Randolph thought about it for a moment. "I think you'd better throw him away," he said. "He's going to stink."

Bobby's face fell. "Can I ask Mom?"

Randolph didn't answer, and he supposed Bobby went away. There was another commercial on now, and he was toying idly with the thought of a commercial for touchstones. "For two thousand years mankind has searched for the answer to underarm odor, halitosis, regularity. Now at last..."

"Bobby!" said his wife in the kitchen. Randolph looked up, surprised. "Take that out in the hall and put it in the garbage *right now!* Not another word!"

In a moment Bobby came trudging through the room, his chin on his chest. But he looked at Randolph with a trace of hope.

"She's gonna make me throw him away."

Randolph shrugged. "It would smell up the place," he said.

"Well, I thought *you'd* like it anyway," Bobby said. "You always keep telling me how *you* were a boy, and *she* wasn't." He stopped for a moment, waiting for Randolph to answer, and when he didn't the boy abruptly ran out with the grey, crushed frog in his hand.

Margo came into the living-room, drying her hands on a towel. "Ran, why didn't you put your foot down in the first place?"

"What?"

"You know things like that make me sick. I won't be able to eat for two days."

"I was watching the program," he said.

"You've seen that one twice before. What's the matter with you?"

"Take some aspirin if you're upset," he said. He squeezed the stone in the palm of his hand until she shook her head and went away.

A few minutes later a news program came on with a report on some people who had picketed a military base, protesting bombs and fallout. A university professor's face came on the screen and gravely he pointed to a chart. "The Atomic Energy Commission admits—"

Randolph sighed and shut the set off.

He went to bed early that night. When he woke up the next day he went and got a book and brought it back to bed with him. He picked up the touchstone from the chair next to the bed and turned it over in his hand a few times. It was really a very plain kind of stone. Black, smooth, softly curving... What was it about the rock that could make everything seem so unimportant, so commonplace?

Well, of course a rock is one of the most common things in the world, he thought. You find them everywhere—even in the streets of the city, where everything is man-made, you'll find rocks. They're part of the ground underneath the pavement,

part of the world we live on. They're part of home.

He held the touchstone in one hand while he read.

Margo had been up for several hours when he finished the book. When he set it down she came in and stood in the doorway, watching him silently.

After a few minutes she asked, "Do you love me?"

He looked up, faintly surprised. "Yes, of course."

"I wasn't sure."

"Why not? Is anything wrong?"

She came over and sat on the bed next to him in her terrycloth robe. "It's just that you've hardly spoken to me since yesterday. I thought maybe you were angry about something."

Randolph smiled. "No. Why should I be angry?"

"I don't know. It just seemed that . . ." She shrugged.

He reached out and touched her face with his free hand. "Don't worry about it."

She lay down beside him, resting her head on his arm. "And you do love me? Everything's all right?"

He turned the stone over in his right hand. "Of course everything's all right," he said softly.

She pressed against him. "I want to kiss you."

"All right." He turned to her and brushed his lips across her forehead and nose. Then she held him tightly while she kissed his mouth.

When she had finished he lay back against the pillow and looked up at the ceiling. "Is it sunny out today?" he asked. "It's been dark in here all day."

"I want to kiss you some more," she said. "If that's all right with you."

Randolph was noticing the warmth of the touchstone in his hand. Rocks aren't warm, he thought; it's only my hand that gives it warmth. Strange.

"Of course it's all right," he said, and turned to let her kiss him again.

Bobby stayed in his room most of the day; Randolph supposed he was doing something. Margo, after that one time, didn't try to talk to him. Randolph stayed in bed fingering the touchstone and thinking, though whenever he tried to remember what he'd been thinking about he drew a blank.

Around five-thirty his friend Blake appeared at the door. Randolph heard him say something to Margo, and then he came into the bedroom.

"Hey, are you all right? You weren't at the party last night."

Randolph shrugged. "Sure. I just felt like lounging around this weekend."

Blake's weathered face cleared. "Well, that's good. Listen, I've got a problem."

"A problem," Randolph said. He settled down in the bed, looking idly at the stone in his hand.

Blake paused. "You sure everything's all right? Nothing wrong with Margo? She didn't look too good when I came in."

"We're both fine."

"Well, okay. Look, Ran, you know you're the only close friend I've got, don't you? I mean, there's a lot of people in the world, but you're the only one I can really count on when the chips are down. Some people I joke with, but with you I can talk. You listen. You know?"

Randolph nodded. He supposed Blake was right.

"Well... I guess you heard the commotion last night. A couple guys drank too much, and there was a fight."

"I went to bed early."

"I'm surprised you slept through it. It developed into quite a brawl there for awhile; the cops came later on. They broke three windows and somebody pushed over the refrigerator. Smashed everything all to hell. One of the doors is off the hinges."

"No, I didn't hear it."

"Wow. Well, look, Ran... the super is on my neck. He's going to sue me, he's going to kick me out. You know that guy. I've got to get ahold of some money fast, to fix things up."

Randolph didn't say anything. He had found a place on the stone where his right thumb fit perfectly, as though the stone had been molded around it. He switched the stone to his left hand, but it didn't quite fit that thumb.

Blake was nervous. "Look, I know it's short notice. I wouldn't ask you, but I'm stuck. Can you lend me about a hundred?"

"A hundred dollars?"

"I might be able to get by with eighty, but I figured a bribe to the super..."

"All right. It doesn't make any difference."

Blake paused again, looking at him. "You can do it?"

"Sure."

"Which? Eighty or a hundred?"

"A hundred if you want."

"You're sure it won't...bother you, make you short? I mean, I could look around somewhere else..."

"I'll write you a check," Randolph said. He got up slowly and took his checkbook from the dresser. "How do you spell your first name?"

"G-E-N-E." Blake stood nervously, indecisive. "You're sure it's no trouble? I don't want to pressure you."

"No." Randolph signed the check, tore it out and handed it to him.

"You're a friend," Blake said. "A real one."

Randolph shrugged. "What the hell."

Blake stood for a few seconds more, apparently wanting to say something. But then he thanked him again and hurried out. Margo came and stood in the doorway and looked at him silently for a moment, then went away.

"Are you going to get me the marbles tomorrow?" Bobby said that evening over supper.

"Marbles?"

"I told you. I still have to pay that guy for the frog you made me throw away."

"Oh. How many?"

"Thirty-five of them. I owed him sixty, and I only had twenty-five."

Bobby was silent, picking at his corn. He speared three kernels carefully with his fork and slid them off the fork with his teeth.

"I'll bet you forget."

Margo looked up from where she had been silently eating. "Bobby!"

"I'm finished with my dinner," Bobby said quickly, standing up. He threw a quick glance at Randolph. "I'll bet he does forget," he said, and ran out.

After five minutes of silence between them Margo stood up and started clearing away the dishes. Randolph was rubbing the touchstone against the bridge of his nose.

"I'd like to sleep with you tonight," she said.

"Of course," he said, a bit surprised.

She stopped beside him and touched his arm. "I don't mean just sleep. I want to make love."

He nodded. "All right."

But when the time came she turned away and lay silently in the dark. He went to sleep with one arm lying carelessly across her hips.

When the telephone rang he came out of sleep slowly. It was ringing for the fifth time when he answered it.

It was Howard, at the agency. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm all right," Randolph said.

"It's past ten. We thought maybe you were sick and couldn't call."

"Past ten?" For a moment he didn't know what that meant. Then Margo appeared in the doorway from the kitchen, holding the alarm clock in her hand, and he remembered it was Monday.

"I'll be there in an hour or so," he said quickly. "It's all right; Margo wasn't feeling too good, but she's all right now."

Margo, her face expressionless, put the clock down on the chair next to the bed and looked at him for a moment before leaving the room.

"Nothing serious, I hope," said Howard.

"No, it's all right. I'll see you in a while." He hung up.

He sat on the edge of the bed and tried to remember what had happened. The past two days were a blur. He had lost something, hadn't he? Something he'd been holding.

"I tried to wake you up three times," Margo said quietly. She had come back into the room and was standing with her hands folded under her breasts. Her voice was level, controlled. "But you wouldn't pay any attention."

Randolph was slowly remembering. He'd had the touchstone in his hand last night, but it must have slipped out while he was asleep. He began to search among the covers.

"Did you see the stone?" he asked her.

"What?"

"The stone. I've dropped it."

There was a short silence. "I don't know. It is so important right now?"

"I paid five dollars for it," he said, still rummaging through the bed.

"For a rock?"

He stopped suddenly. Yes, five dollars for a rock, he thought. It didn't sound right.

"Ran, what's the matter with you lately? Gene Blake was up here this morning. He gave back your check and said to apologize to you. He was really upset. He said he didn't think you really wanted to loan him the money."

But it wasn't just a rock, Randolph thought. It was a black, smooth touchstone.

"Is something worrying you?" she asked him.

The back of his neck was suddenly cold. *Worrying me?* he thought. *No, nothing's been worrying me. That's just the trouble.*

He looked up. "It may be cold out today. Can you find my gloves?"

She looked at him for a moment and then went to the hall closet. Randolph got up and started dressing. In a few minutes she returned with the gloves. He put them on. "It's a little cold in here right now," he said.

When she had gone back into the kitchen he started looking through the bed again, this time coldly and carefully. He found the touchstone under his pillow, and without looking at it he slipped it into a paper bag. He put the bag into his coat pocket.

When he got to the agency he made his excuses as glibly as possible, but he was sure they all knew that he had simply overslept. Well, it wasn't that important . . . once.

He stopped off at the store on his way home that night. It was just as he remembered it, and the same man was inside. He raised his thick eyebrows when he saw Randolph.

"You came back quickly."

"I want to return the touchstone," Randolph said.

"I'm not surprised. So many people return my magic pieces. Sometimes I think I am only lending them too, like the books."

"Will you buy it back?"

"Not at the full price. I have to stay in business."

"What price?" Randolph asked.

"A dollar only," the man said. "Or you could keep it, if that's not enough."

Randolph thought for a moment. He certainly didn't intend to keep the stone, but a dollar wasn't much. He could throw the stone away . . .

But then someone would probably pick it up.

"Do you have a hammer here?" he asked. "I think it would be better to break the stone."

"Of course I have a hammer," the man said. He reached into one of the lower drawers of his desk and brought one out, old and brown with rust.

He held it out. "The hammer rents for a dollar," he said.

Randolph glanced sharply at the man, and then decided that that wasn't really surprising. He had to stay in business, yes. "All right." He took the hammer. "I wonder if the veins of the rock are as smooth as the outside."

"Perhaps we'll see the fossilized soul," said the man. "I never know about the things I sell."

Randolph knelt and dropped the touchstone from its bag onto the floor. It rolled in a wobbling circle and then lay still.

"I knew quite a bit about rocks when I was young," he said. "I used to pick them up at the beach."

He brought the hammer down on the touchstone and it shattered into three pieces which skittered across the floor and bounced to a stop. The largest one was next to Randolph's foot.

He picked it up and the owner of the store turned on the overhead lightbulb. Together they examined the rock's fragment.

There was a fossil, but Randolph couldn't tell what it was. It was small and not very distinct, but looking at it he felt a chill strike out at him. It was as ugly and unformed as a human foetus, but it was something older, a kind of life that had died in the world's mud before anything like a man had been born.

Dr. Bhumbo Singh



Avram Davidson

The name of *Bhumbo Singh* itself I encountered long ago in, I think, the (very possibly spurious) account of (?) Zephaniah Howell concerning the Black Hole of Calcutta; it went something like this: "*We tried to obtain boats from Bhumbo Singh, but could not do so.*" That was all. Why this name continued to ferment, or should I say, fester, in my mind, I cannot say; but eventually, being (I suppose) somewhere without a tripewriter, I took up a ruled record book and began to write this story. I set it aside unfinished, and indeed forgot about it, until one day again finding myself without the use of the machine, up again I picked the story and did not again set it aside until I had finished it. The scene of its completion was Peter Stein's boat, moored at Gate 6 in Sausalito, in that unique shanty-boat, homemade house-boat, and just plain *boat*, community; now alas in slow process of destruction. Peter, despite the fact that he is blind, builds good boats; and I dedicate this story to him.

Avram Davidson was born in Yonkers, N.Y., in 1923, served in the U.S. Navy and with the U.S. Marines, sold his first story the month after he was mustered out. He edited *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in the early middle 1960s, and has published about fifteen novels (including *The Phoenix and the Mirror*, *Peregrine: Primus* and *Peregrine: Secundus*), three earlier anthologies, several collections of short stories, and one book of nonfiction, *Crimes and Chaos*. Mr. Davidson is probably living in the Pacific Northwest.

Trevelyan Street used to be four blocks long, but now it is only three, and its aft end is blocked by the abutment of an overpass. (Do you find the words *Dead End* to have an ominous ring?) The large building in the 300 block used to be consecrated to worship by the Mesopotamian Methodist Episcopal Church (South) but has since been deconsecrated and is presently a glue warehouse. The small building contains the only Bhu-thanese grocery and deli outside of Asia; its trade is small. And the little (and wooden) building lodges an extremely dark and extremely dirty little studio which sells spells, smells, and shrunken heads. Its trades are even smaller.

The spells are expensive, the smells are exorbitant, and the prices of its shrunken heads—first chop though they be—are simply inordinate.

The studio, however, has a low rent (it has a low ceiling, too), pays no license fee—it is open (when it is open) only between the hours of seven p.m. and seven a.m., during which hours the municipal license department does not function—and lacks not for business enough to keep the proprietor, a native of the Andaman Islands, in the few, the very few things, without which he would find life insupportable: namely curried squid, which he eats—and eats and *eats*—baroque pink pearls, which he collects, and (alone, and during the left phase of the moon) wears; also live tree-shrews. Some say that they are distantly cognate to the primates and, hence, it is supposed, to Man. *Be that as it may*. In their tiny ears he whispers directions of the most unspeakable sort, and then turns them loose, with great grim confidence. And an evil laugh.

The facts whereof I speak, I speak with certainty, for they were related to me by my friend Mr. Underhand; and Mr. Underhand has never been known to lie.

At any rate, at least, not to *me*.

“A good moonless evening to you, Underhand Misterjee,” says the proprietor, at the termination of one lowering, glowering afternoon in Midnovember, “and a bad evening indeed to those who have had the fortune to incur your exceedingly just displeasure.” He scratches a filthy ear-lobe with a filthy finger.

—Midnovember, by the way, is the month which was

banished from the Julian Calendar by Julian the Apostate; it has never appeared in the Gregorian Calendar: a good thing, too—

“And a good evening to *you*, Dr. Bhumbo Singh,” says Mr. Underhand. “As for *them*—Ha Ha!” He folds his thin and lilac-gloved hands over the handle of his stalking-crutch. Even several so-called experts have declared the handle (observed by light far less dim than that in the shop of Bhumbo Singh) to be ivory: they are wrong: it is bone, purely bone. . . . Or perhaps one would better say, impurely bone. . . .

“Ha Ha!” echoes (Dr.) Bhumbo Singh. He has in fact no right at all to this distinguished family name, which he has assumed in dishonor of a certain benevolent Sikh horse-coper who in a rash and malignly constellated hour took the notion to adopt him.

Now to business; “A spell, Underhand Sahib?” he next asks, rubbing his chin. His chin bears a dull-blue tattoo which would strike terror to the hearts and loosen the strings of the bowels of the vilest ruffians in Rangoon, Lahore, Peshawar, Pernambuco, and Wei-hatta-hatta yet unhangd, save, of course, that it is almost always by virtue of dust, the inky goo of curried squid, and a hatred of water akin to hydrophobia, totally invisible. “A spell, a spell? A nice spell? A severed head?”

“Fie upon your trumpery spells,” Mr. Eevelyn (two *es*) Underhand says easily. “They are fit only for witches, warlocks, and Boy Scouts or Girl. As for your severed heads, shrunken or otherwise: Ho Ho.”

He puts the tip of his right index finger alongside of the right naris of his nose. He winks.

Dr. Bhumbo Singh attempts a leer, but his heart is not in it. “They cost uncommon high nowadays, even wholesale,” he whines. And then he drops commercial mummary and simply waits.

“I have come for a smell, Doctor,” Underhand says, flicking away with the tip of his stalking-crutch a cricket scaped from the supply kept to feed the tree-shrews. Dr. Bh. Singh’s red little eyes gleam like those of a rogue ferret in the rutting season.

Underhand gives his head a brisk, crisp nod, and smacks his pursed lips. “A smell, subtle, slow, pervasive. A vile smell. A puzzling smell. A smell of seemingly ubiquitous prove-

naunce, and yet a smell which has no spoor. An evil smell. One which will, eventually, and to infinite relief, diminish . . . diminish . . . all but vanish . . . and then, rising like a phoenix from its bed of fragrant ashes, stalk abroad like a pest—worse, far worse than before . . .

“A smell disgusting beyond disgust . . .”

A slight shiver passes through Dr. (he has neither right nor title to this title, but who would dare deny it him? The AMA? The last platform which they could have occupied together even in combat was also occupied by Albertus Magnus.) passes through Dr. Bhumbo S.’s filthy, maugre frame. His tongue protrudes. (It is true that he can, when moved to do so, touch with it the tip of his rather *retroussé* nose; if it is also true that he can—and does—catch flies with it like a toad or chameleon, Mr. Underhand has not found the matter meet communicating to *me*.) His tongue withdraws. “In short, most-valued customer, what is now requisite is a smell which will drive men mad.”

“‘Men,’ Dr. Bhumbo Singh? ‘*Men*?’ I said nothing of men. The word never issued from my mouth. The concept, in fact, never formed in my mind.” Bhumbo shakes with what may be a malarial spasm, but is probably silent laughter.

“I have just the thing,” he says. “I have the very thing. The price is purely *pro forma*, the price is minimal, the price is 1500 golden gold pieces, of the coinage of Great Golconda. Per ounce.”

Underhand’s brows raise, descend, meet. “‘Of the imprint of Great Golconda’? Why, even the very schoolboys know that Golconda-gold was so exceedingly pure that it might be eaten like jam, which is why so few of its coins now remain. Damme, damme, Dr. Bhumbo Singh, if this is how you treat and charge your most valued customers, it is no wonder that you have so few.” A mass of filth, matted together with cobwebs, slowly floats from the invisible ceiling to the unspeakable floor; is ignored.

The merchant shrugs. “Not even for my own brother, sir, am I willing to prepare the smell for less.” Considering that Bhumbo’s own (and only) brother, Bhimbo, has spent the last seven and one half years laden with chains in the sixth sub-basement of the gaol privily kept by that ugly, obese, and evil

old woman, Fatima, Dowager Begum of Oont, without Bhumbo offering so much as two rupees two pice in ransom, this is quite probably the truth. "However, out of my great regard and respect for you personally and my desire to maintain the connexion, I shall not require you to purchase the full ounce. I shall sell it you by the drachm or scruple."

"Done, Bhumbojee, done!" cries Mr. Underhand. He thumps the stalking-crutch upon the filthy, filthy floor. The tree-shrew utter shrill little yipples of annoyance, and Bhumbo gives them crickets: they subside, aside from making nonverbal, crunching noises.

Nearby on the overpass a truck or lorry rumbles past; in its wake the frail building trembles, causing at least one of the shrunken heads to roll from side to side and grind its teeth. No one pays it mind. "Be pleased to return hither, then, Underhand Effendi, on (or, it may be, a trifle after) the Gules of December," Bhumbo Singh says. Then grows just a trifle uncertain. "'December,' the giaours call the next half-past-a-month 'December,' do they not?"

Eevelyn Underhand (two *es*) rises to go. "They do indeed. They have a high festival therein."

"They do, they do?" cries Bhumbo Singh. "I had not known.—What a thing it is to be wise!" He accompanies his customer to the dirty, dirty door with many bows, obeisances, and genuflections. Customer, having perfunctorily placed his foot once on Bhumbo's nasty neck, is long gone by the time the last of these is finished.

Gone, long gone, and the distant echo of the penny-whistle (on which he is wont to play the grace-notes to the *Lament For Nana Sahib* as he walks his spidery way through such dank ways and dark) long gone as well....

In the next sundry weeks, either Bhumbo Singh or his very simulacrum is seen in a multitude of exceedingly diverse places. Abattoirs know him for brief moments; wool-pulleries and tanneries as well. He is seen to cast handsfull of the Semi-silent Sands of the Hazramawut (or Courts of Death) at the window-panes of Abdulahi al-Ambergrisi (who sells asafoetida as well): and the Abdulahi (an Yezid of the Yezidi-folk) to open, blench, withdraw, thrust out by means of a very long-handled net an

ampula of what-it-may-be. The Bhumbo—and if it be not he, who be it?—is observed out of the corners of eyes to scramble under the wharf at the Old Fish Market (condemned, since, by the Board of Health). He visits, also, the hovels of one or two and never more than three foreign folk who formerly fared at sea in tropic clime and who live now in tumbled sheds on the farther sides of disused dumps and show their ravaged faces only to the faces of the ravaged moons.

And on the nights when the moon is dark, he scrambles through ointment factories, in search of flies.

Now and then he whispers, and, did one dare come close and nigh, one would hear him calculate in somewise as this: “Such-and-such a number of golden gold-pieces! with some I shall buy me *more* baroque pink pearls and with some I shall buy me *more* curried squid and some I shall lay away to gloat upon and others—nay! one lone other!—shall I give to Ig-gulden the Goldbeater to beat me gold-leaf so soft and wide and thin: half of this I shall lay for a strangle-mask upon the face of a certain real-estate ‘developer’ and tother moiety shall She-Who-Makes-Sweetmeats roll round hot comfits and pasties and pastries for me and when this has melted like yellow butter I shall eat of them nor shall I invite even one other to join me and afterwards I shall lick my twelve fingers till they be somewhat clean. . . .”

Then he chuckles . . . a sound like the bubbling of thick hot grease in the foetid try-pots of a cannibal feast.

Meanwhile, and what of Mr. Underhand?

Mr. Underhand meanwhile makes visits, too: but of a more sociable nature: Mr. Underhand pays *calls*.

“Oh. Undy. It’s *you*,” says a woman through the chink in the well-chained door. “Whadda *you* want?”

“Gertrude, I have brought you, this being the first of the month, the sum mulcted of me by the terms of our bill of divorcement,” says he. As always.

He passes money through the crack or slit between door-jamb and door. Rapidly she riffles through it; asks, “Is this all I’m gonna get?” As always.

“No,” sighs he, “I fear me not. It is, however, all that you are going to get in this or any other one month of the year; it

being the extortionate amount wrested from me by compound, I do not say 'collusion,' between your attorneys and the judge upon the bench. Gertrude: good night."

He turns and departs. She makes a sound between her palate and her sinuses which experience has instructed she intends for scorn: then: cluntch-cluntch... thuckle-thuckle... the night-bolts. Cloonk. The door.

Mr. Underhand, an hour later, bathed and bay-rum'd and clothed in his best-of-best. Spats upon his glittering shoes. Hat and gloves and cane in one hand. Flowers in the other.

"Eevelyn," she says, hand to her gleaming, glittering throat. "What a lovely surprise. What quite lovely flowers. Oh, how nice."

"May I come in. My dear."

"Why of course. Need you ask. Now I shan't be lonely. For a while. Eevelyn." They kiss.

A wide glance he swiftly casts round. Then asks, "Do I interrupt your dinner?"

She looks about the apartment. Her expression is one of mild surprise. "'Dinner'? Oh. That. Just a simple bowl of lobster salad on a heart of chilled iceberg lettuce. Chervil. Cress. A few spoons of caviare. Sweet butter, just a dab. A hard-cooked egg, cut fine. *Kümmelbrot*. And the smallest bottle of Brut. All far too much. But you know how Anna spoils one. You will join me."

He looks round, again. Crystal. Tapestry. Petit-point. Watteau. Chippendale. Asks: "You are not expecting—?"

"Oh, no. No. Not now. Shall we have some music. We shall have some music."

They do.

They dance.

They dine.

They drink.

They talk.

They—

They do not.

"Heavens, the time. You must go now Eevelyn."

"Then you are expecting—?"

How her fingers glitter as she raises them to indicate what words alone cannot. "Eevelyn. I do not. Know. I never. Know.

—Go, my sweetest dearest one.”

He picks up hat, gloves, cane. “How is it that I never—”

She places ring-crusted fingers across his livid lips. “Hush. Oh. Hush. The noblest kindest most generous man I know will never grumble. He will be understanding. Patient. A kiss before we part.”

The Andaman Islander peers a moment through gummy eye-slits. Which now widen in recognition. “Underhand Sahib!”

“And whom else did you expect? Fat Fatima, perhaps?”

The islander shakes as with an ague. “Ah, Wisdom-wallah, do not mention her even obliquely! Has she not laid my miserable and I fear by now broken brother in a deep-dark dungeon, merely for having adventitiously broken wind in her outermost courtyard? Malignant she!”

Underhand shrugs. “Well, so be it. Or: so be it *not*. —*Well*, Bhumbo Singh, I have brought certain pieces of gold, contained, according to custom, in—hem, hem!” He coughs. “I need not name it.” And looks up and around, expectantly.

At once the storekeeper begins to prowl and shuffle. “‘To afflict with impotence the Viceroy of Sindh.’ No. ‘To impose the plague of emmerods upon the anti-Pope of—’ No. ‘Lord Lovat’s head, with tam o’ shanter,’ no. No. Ah. Ah.” He lifts up a tiny container, begins simultaneously to read the label (scribbled in a most debased Pracrit) and to open—

“Hold! Hold! For pity’s sake do not unstopple it!”

The dark man dumbly puts down the pottikin, no larger than a thumb or (say) the smallest sized can of Spanish truffles; turns to the next item on the cluttered, webby counter. “‘Will afflict with wens upon the forehead of the favorite of the Grand Bastard of Burgundy,’ ah!”

Underhand is near-exasperated. “Bhumbo. Pause. Pause. Cease to dither. Lay down that spell. Down, I say, sir; down—Now. Pick up the previous item you had in hand. Yes. . . . And for the sake of Kali, *give* those shrews some crickets!”

The Andaman Islander still bumbles around, so Underhand, with a click of impatience, follows both his own instructions. Also gives the fellow a keen glance of reproof, advises him henceforth to use either a better or a worse brand of opium; and places in his hands that which holds the golds. “You have

weighed the preparation, I make no doubt; count therefore the coins, in order that—”

But his supplier declines the need. “It is enough, enough, Underhand Sahib. I feel the weight to be correct. Forgive my dithering: the *ah-peen*, as you say.” The voice and manner are crisp enough now. “I would offer you cups of tea, but my own brutish brews are not fine enough for your exquisite palate, and the Lipton’s I cannot find.”

Underhand sweeps the filthy lair with a glance. (A broom would be better.) “And fresh out of viper’s milk, too, I daresay. Pit-ty.” He looks once, he looks twice around the darkly place, dirty almost beyond endurance, cluttered certainly beyond description. “Ah, the immemorial wisdom of the East. . . . Bhumbo: a good Gules to you.”

The other bows. “Do I not live but to serve you with smells, Sahib?” he enquires. And begins the requisite series of prostrations. Presently he hears the sound of the penny-whistle.

Some time after that.

Anna’s nose is very red; her voice is very thick. “Always mine lady liked nice things,” she says. “Diamonts, chee liked. Poils, chee liked. ‘Kebbiar, I could only itt a morsel, but it moss be the bast,’ chee tal to me.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Underhand agrees. “How true, how true. What a blow to you. To you *and* me.” He wishes that Anna would twist her handkerchief less and apply it more.

“Always mine lady was very particular,” Anna goes on. “‘Anna, how you minn, you couldn’t smal it?’ chee ask. ‘Look maybe onder you choose.’ I lat her see onder mine right chew: nothing. I lat her see onder mine laft chew: nothing. ‘Nye, so, Mrs., how come soddenly mine kitchens not nice and clinn; come luke.’ Chee come, chee luke, luke, luke. Nothing. Sneef, sneef, sneef. ‘Eeyoo, God-my, waht dradful smal,’ chee say. And *say* and *say*—”

“My, my. Yes, yes. Don’t distress yourself, they take very good care of her where she is now—”

Anna (fiercely): “What? Take care mine lady gooder than me? I visit, I bring mine spatial *grumps kentorten*: Chee scrim, only. ‘Mrs., Mrs., you don’t rackocknize Anna? Anna? Mrs. Goitrude, Mrs. Goitrude: is *Anna*!’ But only chee scrim. And

scrim and *scrim*." Anna begins to demonstrate, fists clenched, cords thrusting out from neck, voice a thin shrill grinding; Underhand begs her to desist.

Afterwards, Underhand, with some relief, returns to his own home. Man is, certainly, a social being: but there are times when, the Author of Genesis (Underhand believes), notwithstanding, when it *is* good for man to be alone. Underhand has his roses; he prunes them. Underhand has his Newgate Calendars; he collates them. Underhand has his first editions (Mather, de Sade, von Sacher-Masoch); he reads them. Now and then he looks up. He finds, after a while, that he is looking up rather oftener than he is looking down. Then he looks further down than usual. First he lifts up his right foot and turns it sideways. He puts it down. Then he lifts up his left foot and turns it sideways. He puts it down. Then, room by room and closet by closet, he goes through the house, his nostrils dilating. "It is not what I think," he says, firmly. "It, is, *not* . . . what I *think*."

Some time after *that*.

Underhand is in another place, and one which he doesn't much like. Endlessly he casts horoscopes, no pencils are allowed and so he uses crayons. The effects are certainly colorful but it is very hard to achieve fine detail. By one and by two, people pass by, and, pretending not to look, look. Underhand ignores them. Why he now, suddenly, does look up as someone stops—Look he does. This one, now, frankly gazes without pretense. Smiles.

Underhand stares. Starts. Speaks.

"Oh, my God. 'Oh. Oh. Bhumbo Singh. They told me he—told me *you* were dead. *Showed* me. Stuffed in between my inner and outer walls. *That* was what drove me mad. *That* was what I—*Not* what I had thought. *Not* what I had bought. Mistake. Must tell them: Bhumbo Singh: alive." He starts to rise, is stopped by a dark and gentle hand.

"Oh, no, Underhand Sahib and/or Effendi. Bhumbo *is* dead."

Underhand utters a small squeal, starts to sidle away.

"I am *Bhimbo*, own and only brother and twin to the faithless aforesaid. Who alas and regardless of the uterine ties between us let me languish in the lowermost dungeon of H.H. The

Beebee Fatima, Dowager Begum of Oont, for seven years six months one week and several days, rather than pay ransom for my offense—*most* unintentional, I assure you: never eat legumes before transacting whatsoever even in the outermost courtyard of a descendant of Timur the Terrible. —The sixth sub-basement of her now-illegal gaol, whence I was released by the new and independent government, may Kali bestow blessings upon them with every pair of hands. Thence came I here. Wherefore I caused him, my natal brother Bhumbo, to be bitten to the heart by hungry tree-shrews imprisoned under an iron squid-pot which I held over his faithless heart; *how* he screamed.”

He wags his head contentedly.

A moment Underhand ponders, ignoring whilst he does so the conduct of a neighbor who was now, as often, reciting what he claimed were the complete Songs of Ossian in the original Erse. From memory. Loudly. And at length. “Well, then, I understand why you put your brother to the death. *Naturally*. But why, oh, why, Bhimbo, did you stuff him in between my innermost and outermost walls? —with such dreadful results to myself? And, oh! the black whirlwind!”

A shrug. A look of gentle surprise. “Why? Well, Sahib, one had to stuff him *somewhere*. —I had thought to return to my native Islands, there to start an independence movement which might result, who knows and why not? in my becoming President-for-Life. But in my brother Bhumbo’s uncleanly shop I lingered too long, searching for his baroque pink pearls; whilst I was thus engaged, thither came the men called Inspectors of Buildings and of Healths. ‘This one’s *gotta* be nuts,’ one said. ‘*Lookit* this place!’” He chuckles quietly.

Underhand gapes. Then thinks. Then says, “‘Escape,’ yes. Bhimbo, we must put our wise heads together, cast cantrips, I cannot do it by myself alone; secure our release from—”

Bhimbo’s rufous, jaundered eyes widen. “But, Sahib, I have already *been* released! To one, sir, who has spent seven and one half years, plus, in the lowermost dungeon of the fearful fat Fatima, female tyrant (since deposed), what is this place here but an hotel? Consider, Sahib: Clean clothes. Clean beds. Thrice a day, clean food—dispensed by servitors. Plus *snacks*. How fond of *snacks* I am, Sahib! And also once a week one

of the gurus called *Shrink* talks with me in his sacred office; what honor. To be sure, there is no palm-toddy to be had, but a certain servitor (in return for such simple spells: Women. Gambling.) brings a savory wine called Ripple, concealed in bottles of the Dr. Pepper's medication. Betel-pan, there is not, but there is *toombac*, Sahib; also the talking cinema in the cabinet-boxes. *How* entertaining! *Much* murders! —And also, shower-baths! sports! thrice a week, Therapeutic Handicrafts! *Such* fun!"

He raises his voice, rather, so as to be heard not only over that of the Ossianic bard, but over that of one who, crying the words *Hello Joe!* in staccato bursts, would be good for at least a quarter of an hour. "I know what your people call this place, Sahib. But, do you know what *I* call it? Sahib, *I* call it Paradise."

Mr. Underhand feels again and sees again the approach of the black whirlwind; smells again the ineffable evil smell . . . the one he had bought? The one he had not? What matter. Grasping the table for one moment's more contact with reality, he asks, "But does it in no way bother you to be forever surrounded by madmen?"

Bhimbo looks at him. The reddish-yellowish glance is patient and kind. "Ah, Sahib. Have you not learned the One Great Truth? All men are mad." The immemorial wisdom of the East is in his voice, and in his eyes.

The Cheese Stands Alone



Harlan Ellison

At the age of three, disguised as a Dongalawi dervish, Harlan Ellison helped break the British Square at Omdurman (Omdurman? Schenectady? oh well), something he has regretted ever since. "Don't know what came over me," he has been heard to mutter. "Must have been the old jezail bullet I received in the fatal battle of Maiwand, which has been throbbing in my limb ever since; throb, throb, throb." Since then he has broken the bank at Monte Carlo *one, thousand, times*; made mad passionate love to eleven weeping empresses as well as 987 women of other ranks; repeatedly swum the Hellespont ("Because it is *there*, *that's* why!" he answers, crisply.); published 885 books; and drunk enough milk to cover Australia six feet deep four times over. He is vast, he contains multitudes. . . .

Harlan Ellison was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1934; in the best Old American Tradition, he later ran away and joined a circus—his eyewitness report on *geeks* would make your blood run cold; he says it is why he never drinks alcohol. Mr. E. attended Ohio State U. and served in the Army of the United States. He wrote scripts for such TV series as "Alfred Hitchcock Presents," "Star Trek," "The Outer Limits," others; was editor at *Rogue Magazine* and Regency Books. Scripted for such movies as *Dream Merchants*; *I, Robot*; and his own *A Boy and His Dog*. Hugo, Nebula, Edgar awards; *lots* of others. Newspaper columnist, lecturer, at least thirty-five

books, including *Gentlemen Junkie*, *Memos from Purgatory*, *Rockabilly*, *Ellison Wonderland*; many short stories and articles. Editor of the famous anthology/trilogy *Dangerous Visions*. Everything copiously translated. Describes himself as, "...at best... a gadfly;" and lives in Southern California in a strange, high house on a hill.

Cort lay with his eyes closed, feigning sleep, for exactly one hour after she had begun to snore. Every few minutes he would permit his eyes to open to slits, marking the passage of time on the luminous dial of his watch there on the nightstand. At five a.m. precisely he slipped out of the Olympic pool-sized motel bed, swept up his clothes from the tangled pile on the floor, and dressed quickly in the bathroom. He did not turn on the light.

Because he could not remember her name, he did not leave a note.

Because he did not wish to demean her, he did not leave a twenty on the nightstand.

Because he could not get away fast enough, he pushed the car out of the parking slot in front of the room and let it gather momentum down through the silent lot till it bumped out onto the street. Through the open window he turned the wheel, caught the door before the car began rolling backward, slid inside and only then started the engine.

Route 1 between Big Sur and Monterey was empty. The fog was up. Somewhere to his left, below the cliffs, the Pacific murmured threats like an ancient adversary. The fog billowed across the highway, conjuring ectoplasmic shapes in the foreshortened beams of his headlights. Moisture hung from the great, thick trees like silver memories of times before the coming of Man. The twisting coast road climbed through terrain that reminded him of Brazilian rain forest: mist-drenched and chill, impenetrable and aggressively ominous. Cort drove faster, daring disaster to catch up with him. There had to be more than the threat of the forest.

As there had to be more in his life than endodontics and income properties and guilt-laden late night frottage with sloe-eyed dental assistants. More than pewter frames holding di-

plomas from prestigious universities. More than a wife from a socially prominent family and 2.6 children who might fit a soap manufacturer's perfect advertising vision of all-American youth. More than getting up each morning to a world that held no surprises.

There had to be disaster somewhere. In the forest, in the fog, in the night.

But not on Route 1 at half-past-five. Not for him, not right now.

By six-thirty he reached Monterey and realized he had not eaten since noon of the previous day when he had finished the root canal therapy on Mrs. Udall, had racked the drill, had taken off his smock and donned his jacket, had walked out of the office without a word to Jan or Alicia, had driven out of the underground garage and started up the Coast, fleeing without a thought to destination.

There had been no time for dinner when he'd picked up the cocktail waitress, and no late night pizza parlor open for a snack before she fell asleep. Acid had begun to burn a hole in his stomach lining from too much coffee and too little peace of mind.

He drove into the tourist center of Monterey and had no trouble finding a long stretch of open parking spaces. There was no movement along the shopfronted sidewalks. The sun seemed determined never to come up. The fog was heavy and wet; streaming quicksand flowed around him. For a moment the windows of a shop jammed with driftwood-base lamps destined for Iowa basement rec rooms solidified in the eye of the swirling fog; then they were gone. But in that moment he saw his face in the glass. This night might stretch through the day.

He walked carefully through the streets, looking for an early morning dinette where he might have a Belgian waffle with frozen strawberries slathered in sugary syrup. An egg sunnyside up. *Something* sunny side up in this unending darkness.

Nothing was open. He thought about that. Didn't anyone go to work early in Monterey? Were there no businesses girding themselves for the locust descent of teenagers with rucksacks, corpulent business machine salesmen in crimson Budweiser caps, and Semitic widows with blue hair? Had there been an

eclipse? Was this the shy, pocked, turned-away face of the moon? Where the hell was daylight?

Fog blew past him, parted in streamers for an instant. Down a side street he saw a light. Yellow faded as parchment, wan and timorous. But a light.

He turned down the side street and searched through the quicksilver for the source. It seemed to have vanished. Past closed bakeries and jewelry shops and scuba gear emporia. A wraith in the fog. He realized he moved through not only the empty town and through the swaddling fog, but through a condition of fear. *Gnotobiosis*: an environmental condition in which germfree animals have been inoculated with strains of known microorganisms. Fear.

The light swam up through the silent, silvered shadow sea; and he was right in front of it. Had *he* moved to *it* . . . had *it* moved to *him*?

It was a bookstore. Without a sign. And within, many men and women; browsing.

He stood in the darkness, untouched by the sallow light from the nameless bookshop, staring at the nexus. For such a small shop, so early in the morning, it was thronged. Men and women stood almost elbow to elbow, each absorbed in the book close at hand. *Gnotobiosis*: Cort felt the fear sliding through his veins and arteries like poison.

They were not turning the pages.

Had they not moved their bodies, a scratching at the lip, the blinking of eyes, random shifting of feet, a slouch, a straightening of back, a glance around . . . he would have thought them mannequins. A strange but interesting tableau to induce passersby to come in and also browse. They were alive, but they did not turn the pages of the books that absorbed them. Nor did they return a book to its shelf and take another. Each man, each woman: held fascinated by words where the books had been opened.

He turned to walk away as quickly as he could.

The car. Get on the road. There had to be a truck stop, a diner, a greasy spoon, fast food, anything. I've been here before, and *this isn't Monterey!*

The tapping on the window stopped him.

He turned back. The desperate expression on the tortoiselike

face of the tiny old woman stiffened his back. He found his right hand lifting, as if to put itself between him and the sight of her. He shook his head *no*, definitely not, but he had no idea what he was rejecting.

She made staying motions with her wrinkled little hands and mouthed words through the glass of the shop window. She spoke very precisely and the words were these:

I have it here for you.

Then she motioned for him to come around to the door, to enter, to step inside: *I have it here for you.*

The luminous dial of his watch said 7:00. It was still night. Fog continued to pour down from the Monterey peninsula's forest.

Cort tried to walk away. San Francisco was up the line. The sun had to be blazing over Russian Hill, Candlestick Park, and Coit Tower. The world still held surprises. *You're loose now, you've broken the cycle*, he heard his future whisper. *Don't respond. Go to the sun.*

He saw his hand reach for the doorknob. He entered the bookshop.

They all looked up for a moment, registered nothing, the door closed behind him, they dropped their gazes to the pages. Now he was inside among them.

"I'm certain I have it in hardcover, a very clean copy," the little old turtle woman said. Her smile was toothless. *How could there be fog in here?*

"I'm just browsing," Cort said.

"Yes, of course," she said. "Everyone is just browsing."

She laid her hand on his arm and he shuddered. "Just till a restaurant opens."

"Yes, of course."

He was having trouble breathing. The heartburn. "Is it always . . . does it always stay dark so late into the morning here?"

"Unseasonal," she said. "Look around. I have it here for you. Exactly."

He looked around. "I'm not looking for anything special."

She walked with him, her hand on his arm. "Neither were they." She nodded at the crowd of men and women. "But they found answers here. I have a very fine stock."

No pages were turned.

He looked over the shoulder of a middle-aged woman staring intently at a book with steel engravings on both open pages. The turtle said, "Her curiosity was aroused by the question, 'How was the *first* vampire created?' Fascinating concept, isn't it? If vampires can only be created by a normal human being receiving the bite of a vampire, then how was the first one created? She has found the answer here in my wonderful stock." Cort stared at the book. One of the steel engravings was of Noah's ark.

But wouldn't that mean there had to be *two* on board?

The turtle drew him down the line of stacks. He paused behind a young man in a very tight T-shirt. He looked as if he had been working out. His head was bent so close to the open book in his hands that his straight blond hair fell over his eyes.

"For years he has felt sympathetic pains with an unknown person," the turtle confided. "He would sense danger, elation, lust, despair . . . none of his own making, and none having anything to do with his circumstance at that moment. Finally he began to realize he was linked with another. Like the Corsican Brothers. But his parents assured him he was an only child, there was no twin. He found the answer in this volume." She made shoo'ing motions with her blue-veined hands.

Cort peered around the young man's head and hair. It was a book on African history. There were tears in the young man's eyes; there was a spot of moisture on the verso. Cort looked away quickly; he didn't want to intrude.

Next in line was a very tall, ascetic looking man carefully holding a folio of pages that had obviously been written with a quill. By the flourishes and swirls of the writing, Cort knew the book had to be quite old and very likely valuable. The tortoise woman leaned in close, her head barely reaching Cort's chest, and she said, "Sixteenth century. First Shakespeare folio. This gentleman wandered through most of his adult life, and decades of academic pursuits, tormented by the question of who actually wrote *The Booke of Sir Thomas More*: the Bard or his rival, Anthony Munday. There lies his answer, before his eyes. I have such a superior stock."

"Why doesn't he . . . why don't *any* of these people turn the page?"

"Why bother? They've found the answer they sought."

"And there's nothing more they want to know?"

"Apparently not. Interesting, isn't it?"

Cort found it more chilling than interesting. Then the chill fastened itself permanently to his heart, like a limpet, with the unasked question, *How long have these browsers been here like this?*

"Here's a woman who always wanted to know if pure evil exists anywhere on the face of the earth." The woman wore a *mantilla* over her shoulders, and she stared mesmerized at a book on natural history. "This man hungered for a complete list of the contents of the great Library of Alexandria, the subject matters contained on those half million handwritten papyrus scrolls at the final moment before the Library was torched in the Fifth Century." The man was gray and wizened and his face had been incised with an expression of ancient weariness that reminded Cort of Stonehenge. He pored over two pages set so closely with infinitesimal typefaces that Cort could not make out a single word in the fly-specks. "A woman who lost her memory," said the turtle, indicating with a nod of her tortoise head a beautiful creature festooned with silk scarves of a dozen different colors. "Woke up in a white slave brothel in Marrakech, ran for her life, has spent years wandering around trying to discover who she is." She laughed a low, warm laugh. "She found out here. The whole story's right there in that book."

Cort turned to her, firmly removing her withered claw from his arm.

"And you 'have it here for me,' don't you?"

"Yes; I have it here. In my fine stock."

"What *precisely* do you have that I want? Here. In your fine stock."

He didn't even need her to speak. He knew exactly what she would say. She would say, "Why, I have the answers you seek." And then he would saunter around the bookshop, feeling superior to these poor devils who had been standing here God only knew how long, and finally he'd turn to her and smile and say, "I don't even know the questions," and they would both smile at that one—he like an idiot, because it was the most banal of clichés, she because she'd known he would say something dithering like that—and he would refrain from apol-

ogizing for the passing stupidity; and then he would ask her the question and she would point out a shelf and say, "The book you want is right there," and then she'd suggest he try pages such-and-such for exactly what he wanted to know: that which had driven him up the Coast.

And if, ten thousand years later, the karmic essence of all that's left of Sulayman the Magnificent, blessed be his name, Sulayman of the potent seal, Sultan and Master of all the jinn, of each and every class of *jinni*, *ghūl*, *ifrit*, *si'lā*, *div* and *iblis*; if that transubstantiated essence comes 'round again, like Halley's comet come 'round again; that transmogrified spirit circling back on its limitless hegira through crimson eternity . . . if it comes 'round again it would find him, Cort—Dr. Alexander Cort, D.D.S., a Dental Corporation—still standing here elbow-to-elbow with the other browsers. Coelacanth's outlined in shale, mastodons flash-frozen in ice, wasps imbedded in amber. *Gnotobiosis*: forever.

"Why do I have the feeling all this isn't random?" Cort said to the old turtle woman. He began edging toward the door behind him. "Why do I have the feeling all this has been here waiting for me, just the way it was waiting for all the rest of these poor fucking losers? Why do I get the smell of rotting gardenias off you, old lady?" He was almost at the door.

She stood in a cleared space in the center of the bookshop, staring at him.

"You're no different, Dr. Cort. You need the answers, the same as the rest."

"Maybe a little love potion . . . a powerstone . . . immortality . . . all that good jive. I've seen places like this in television shows. But I don't bite, old lady. I have no need you can fill." And his hand was on the doorknob; and he was turning it; and he yanked; and the door opened to the ominous fog and the unending night and the waiting forest. And the old lady said, "Wouldn't you like to know when you'll have the best moment of your entire life?"

And he closed the door and stood with his back against it.

His smile was unhealthy. "Well, you got me," he whispered.

"When you'll be happiest," she said softly, barely moving her thin lips. "When you'll be strongest, most satisfied, at the peak of your form, most in control, bravest, best-looking, most

highly regarded by the rest of the world; your top moment, your biggest surge, your most golden achievement, that which forms the pattern for the rest of your life; the instant than which you will have no finer, if you live to be a thousand. Here in my fine stock I have a tome that will tell you the day, hour, minute, second of your noblest future. Just ask and it's yours. *I have it here for you.*"

"And what does it cost me?"

She opened her wet mouth and smiled. Her wrinkled little hands fell open palms-up in the air before her. "Why, nothing," she said. "Like these others... you're just browsing, aren't you?" The limpet chill that ossified his spine told him there were worse things that deals with the devil. Just browsing, as an example.

"Well...?" she asked, waiting.

He thought about it, wetting his lips—suddenly gone dry now that the decisive moment was at hand. "What if it comes only a few years from now? What if I've only got a little while to achieve whatever it was I always wanted to achieve? How do I live with the rest of my life after that, knowing I'll never be any better, any happier, any richer or more secure; knowing I'll never top what I did in that moment? What'll the rest of my life be worth?"

The tiny turtle woman shouldered aside two browsers—who moved sluggishly apart as if turning in their sleep—and drew a short, squat book from a shelf at her waist level. Cort blinked quickly. No, she hadn't *drawn* it out of the stacks. It had slid forward and *jumped* into her hand. It looked like an old Big Little Book.

She turned back and offered it to him. "Just browsing," she said, moistly.

He reached for it and stopped, curling his fingers back. She arched her finely-penciled eyebrows and gave him a bemused, quizzical look.

"You're awfully anxious to get me to read that book," he said.

"We are here to serve the public," she said, amiably.

"I have a question to ask you. No, two questions. There are two questions I want you to answer. Then I'll consider browsing through your fine stock."

"If I can't give you the answer—which is, after all, our business here—then I'm sure something in my fine stock has the proper response. But . . . take this book that you need, just hold it, and I'll answer your question. Questions. Two questions. Very important, I'm sure." She held out the squat little book. Cort looked at it. It *was* a Big Little Book, the kind he had had when he was a child; with pages of drawings alternating with pages of type, featuring comic strip heroes like Red Ryder or The Shadow or Skippy. Within reach, the answer to the question everyone wanted to ask: what will be the best moment of my life?

He didn't touch it.

"I'll ask, you'll answer; *then* you got me . . . *then* I'll do some browsing."

She shrugged, as if to say, *as you choose*.

He thought: As you choose, so shall you reap.

He said: "What's the name of this bookshop?"

Her face twitched. Cort had the sudden rush of memory from childhood, when he'd first heard the story of Rumpelstiltskin. The turtle woman's face grew mean. "It doesn't have a name. It just is."

"How do we find you in the Yellow Pages?" Cort said, taunting her. It was obvious he was suddenly in a position of power. Even though he had no idea from what source that power flowed.

"No name! No name at all! We don't need a name; we have a very select clientele! It's never had a name! We don't need any names!" Her voice, which had turtle smooth and soft and chocolate, had become rusted metal scraping rusted metal. "No names, I don't got to tell you no names, I don't got to show you no stinkin' badges!"

She paused to let the bile recede, and in the eye of the silence Cort asked his second question. "What's in this for you? Where's *your* fix? Where's the bottom-line profit on your p&l? What do *you* get out of this, frighty old lady?"

Her mouth went tight. Her blazing eyes seemed both ancient and silvery with youthful ferocity. "Clotho," she said. "Clotho: Rare Books."

He didn't recognize the name, but from the way she said

it, he knew he had pried an important secret from her; had done it, apparently, because he was the first to have asked; had done it as *anyone* might have done it, had they thought of it. And having asked, and having been answered, he knew he was safe from her.

"So tell me, Miss Clotho, of *Ms.* Clotho, or Mrs., or whatever you happen to be: tell me . . . what do *you* get out of this? What coin of the realm do you get paid? You work this weird shop, you trap all these fools in here, and I'll bet when I walk out of here, poof! It all vanishes. Goes back to Never-Never Land. So what kind of a home life do you have? Do you eat three squares a day? Do you have to change your Tampax when you get your period? Do you even *get* the menses? Or has menopause already passed you by? Immortal, maybe? Tell me, weird old turtle lady, if you live forever do you *get* change of life? Do you still want to get laid? Did you *ever* get laid? How's your ka-ka, firm and hard? Do weirdy old fantastic ladies who vanish with their bookstore have to take a shit, or maybe not, huh?"

She screamed at him. "You can't talk that to me! Do you know who I am?"

He screamed right back at her. "Fuck no, I don't know who the hell you are, and what's more to the point, I don't *give* a righteous damn who you are!"

The zombie readers were now looking up. They seemed distressed. As if a long-held trance was being broken. They blinked furiously, moved aimlessly; they resembled . . . groundhogs coming out to check their shadows.

Clotho snarled at him, "Stop yelling! You're making my customers nervous!"

"You mean I'm waking them up? C'mon, everybody, rise and shine! Swing on down! How ya fixed, destiny-wise?"

"Shut up!"

"Yeah? Maybe I will and maybe I won't, old turtle. Maybe you answer my question what you were doing waiting here for me specially, and maybe I let these goofballs go back to their browsing."

She leaned in as close as she could to him, without touching him, and she hissed like a snake. Then she said tightly, "You?"

What makes you think it was *you* we wait for? We wait for *everyone*. This was *your* turn. They *all* get a turn, you'll *all* get your turn in the browsing shop."

"What's this 'we' business? Are you feeling imperial?"

"We. My sisters and I."

"Oh, there's more than one of you, is there? A chain bookstore. Very cute. But then I suppose you have to have branches these days, what with the competition from B. Dalton and Crown and Waldenbooks."

She clenched her teeth; and for the first time Cort could see that the old turtle actually *had* teeth inside those straight, thin lips. "*Take this book or get out of my shop,*" she said in a deadly whisper.

He took the Big Little Book from her quivering hands.

"I've *never* dealt with anyone as vile, as *rude*," she snarled.

"Customer is always right, sweetie," he said. And he opened the book to precisely the right page.

Where he read his finest moment. The knowledge that would make the remainder of his life an afterthought. An also-ran. Marking time. A steady ride on the downhill side.

When would it come? A year hence? Two years? Five, ten, twenty-five, fifty, or at the blessed final moment of life, having climbed, climbed, climbed all the way to the end? He read . . .

That his finest moment had come when he was ten years old. When, during a sandlot baseball game, a pick-up game in which you got to bat only if you put someone out, the best hitter in the neighborhood hit a shattering line drive to deepest center field where he was *always* forced to play, because he was no good at baseball, and he ran back and back and stuck up his bare hand and *miraculously*, as he, little Alex Cort, leaped as high as he could, *miraculously* the pain of the frazzled hardball as it hit his hand and stayed there was sweeter than anything he had ever felt before—or would feel again. The moment replayed in the words on the page of that terrible book. Slowly, slowly he sank to earth, his feet touching and his eyes going to his hand and there, in the red, anguished palm of his hand, without a trapper's mitt, he held the hardest, surest home run line drive ever hit by anyone. He was the killer, the master of the world, the tallest thing on the face of the earth, big and

bold and golden, adept beyond any telling, miraculous; a miracle, a walking miracle. It was the best moment of his life.

At the age of ten.

Nothing else he would do in his life, nothing he had done between the age of ten and thirty-five as he read the Big Little Book, nothing he would do till he died at whatever number of years remained for him...nothing...nothing would match that moment.

He looked up slowly. He was having trouble seeing. He was crying. Clotho was smiling at him nastily. "You're lucky it wasn't one of my sisters. They react much worse to being screwed with."

She started to turn away from him. The sound of his slamming the Big Little Book closed onto the counter of the showcase stopped her. He turned without saying a word and started for the door. Behind him he heard her hurrying after him.

"Where do you think *you're* going?"

"Back to the real world." He had trouble speaking; the tears were making him sob and his words came raggedly.

"You've got to stay! *Everyone* stays."

"Not me, sweetie. The cheese stands alone."

"It's all futile. You'll never know grandeur again. It's all dross, waste, emptiness. There's nothing as good if you live to be a thousand."

He opened the door. The fog was out there. And the night. And the final forest. He stopped and looked down at her. "Maybe if I'm lucky I won't live to be a thousand."

Then he stepped through the door of Clotho: Rare Books and closed it tightly behind him. She watched through the window as he began to walk off into the fog.

He stopped and leaned in to speak as close to the glass as he could. She strained her weird little turtle face forward and heard him say, "What's left may only be the tag-end of a shitty life...but it's *my* shitty life."

"And it's the only game in town, sweetie. The cheese stands alone."

Then he walked off into the fog, crying; but trying to whistle.

The Malaysian Mer



Jane Yolen

Those unknown free-lance taxidermists, who plied their art in a historically obscure commerce between what is now Papua-New Guinea and what was then the Dutch East Indies used to remove the feet from the skins of the gorgeously plumed birds of paradise (cousins of the common crow, so ungorgeous in feather). This gave rise to a once widely held belief that the bird of paradise *had* no feet, and in fact lived its entire life in the air! Had even one single pelt-and-proboscis of a duck-billed platypus then made its way to Europe, would not anyway some savants have cried *Fake!* . . . as anyway some did when this eventually happened, late in the 18th century? And suppose . . . suppose that the Case of the Peculiar Platypus had remained uncertain? unproven? Might there not have been those (there almost always *are*) who, observing a demand, created a supply? and grafted a duck's bill upon (say) a beaver's pelt? In short, our question is: Behind the fakery of the "Jenny Hanniver" (as the mer-fakes were called), might there not have been the reality of . . . "The Malaysian Mer"?

Jane Yolen writes: "... biographi and bibliographi: author of seventy books (most recently *Neptune Rising/Songs and Tales of the Undersea Folk* (Philomel-Putnam) [including *The Malaysian Mer*] and (Schocken) *Tales of Wonder*), mostly for young readers. Christopher Medal for *The Seeing Stick*, Caldecott Honor Book *The Emperor and the Kite*, Society of

Children's Book Writers Golden Kite Award....Also teach children's literature at Smith College. Honorary LLD from College of Our Lady of the Elms. Am married, three children, one dog, one cat, one guinea pig, one red dragon who flies over my writing chair, and I feed the birds." Ms. Yolen's stories have been in F&SF and in *Dragons of Light* and sundry other anthologies. She lives in Massachusetts.

The shops were not noticeable from the main street and almost lost in the back-alley maze as well. But Mrs. Stambley was an expert at antiquing. A new city and a new back alley got up her hunting and gathering instincts, as she liked to tell her group at home. That this city was half a world away from her comfortable Salem, Massachusetts, home did not faze her. In England or America she guessed she knew how to look.

She had dozed in the sun as the boat made its way along the Thames. At her age naps had become important. Her head nodded peacefully under its covering of flowers draped on a wine-colored crown. She never even heard the tour guide's spiel. At Greenwich she had debarked meekly with the rest of the tourists, but she had easily slipped the leash of the guide, who took the rest of the pack up to check out Greenwich Mean Time. Instead, Mrs. Stambley, her large black leather pocketbook clutched in a sturdy gloved grip, had gone exploring on her own.

To the right of the harbor street was a group of shops and, she sensed, a back alley or two. The smell of it—sharp, mysterious, inviting—drew her in.

She ignored the main street and its big-windowed stores. A small cobbled path ran between two buildings and she slipped into it as comfortably as a foot into a well-worn slipper. There were several branchings, and Mrs. Stambley checked out each one with her watery blue eyes. Then she chose one. She knew it would be the right one. As she often said to her group at home, "I have a gift, a power. I am *never* wrong about it."

Here there were several small, dilapidated shops that seemed to edge one into the other. They had a worn look as if they had sat huddled together, the damp wind blowing off the river moldering their bones, while a bright new town had been built

up around them. The windows were dirty, finger-streaked. Only the most intrepid shopper would find the way into them. There were no numbers on the doors.

The first store was full of maps. And if Mrs. Stambley hadn't already spent her paper allowance (she maintained separate monies for paper, gold, and oddities) on a rare chart of the McCodrun ancestry, she might have purchased a map of British waters that was decorated with tritons blowing "their wreathed horns" as the bent-over shopkeeper had quoted. She had been sorely tempted. Mrs. Stambley collected "objects d'mer," as she called them. Sea artifacts and antiquities. Sea magic was her specialty in the group. But the lineage of the Clan McCodrun—the reputed descendants of the selchies—had wiped out her comfortable paper account. And Mrs. Stambley, who was always precise in her reckonings, never spent more than her allotment. As the group's treasurer she had to keep the others in line. She could do no less for herself.

So she oohed and aahed at the map for the storekeeper's benefit and because it *was* quite beautiful and probably 17th century. She even managed to talk him down several pounds on the price, keeping her hand in as it were. But she left smiling her thanks. And he had been so impressed with the American lady's knowledge of the sea and its underwater folk that he smiled back even though she had bought nothing.

The next two shops were total wastes of time. One was full of reproductions and second-hand, badly painted china cups and cracked glassware. Mrs. Stambley sniffed as she left, muttering under her breath "Junk—spelled j-u-n-q-u-e," not even minding that the lady behind the counter heard her. The other store had been worse, a so-called craft shop full of handmade tea cosies and poorly crocheted afghans in simply appalling colors.

As she entered the fourth shop, Mrs. Stambley caught her breath. The smell was there, the smell of deep-sea magic. So deep and dark it might have been called up from the Mariana Trench. In all her years of hunting, she had never had such a find. She put her right hand over her heart and stumbled a bit, scuffing one of her sensible shoes. Then she straightened up and looked around.

The shop was a great deal longer than it was wide, with a staircase running up about halfway along the wall. The rest of the walls were lined with china cupboards in which Victorian and Edwardian cups and saucers were tastefully displayed. One in particular caught her eye because it had a Poseidon on the side. She walked over to look at it, but the magic smell did not come from there.

Books in stacks on the floor blocked her path, and she looked through a few to see what there was. She found an almost complete Britannica, the 1913 edition, missing only the thirteenth volume. There was a first edition of Fort's *Book of the Damned* and a dark grimoire so waterstained she could make out none of the spells. There were three paperback copies of *Folklore of the Sea*, a pleasant volume she had at home. And even the obscure *Melusine, Or the Mistress From the Sea* in both English and French.

She walked carefully around the books and looked for a moment at three glass cases containing fine replicas of early schooners, even down to the carved figureheads. One was of an Indian maiden, one an angel, one an unnamed muse with long, flowing hair. But she already had several such at home, her favorite a supposed replica of the legendary ship of the Flying Dutchman. Looking cost nothing, though, and so she looked for quite a while, giving herself time to become used to the odor of the deep magic.

She almost backed into a fourth case, and when she turned around, she got the shock of her life.

In a glass showcase with brass fittings, resting on two wooden holders, was a Malaysian mer.

She had read about them, of course, in the footnotes of obscure folklore journals and in a grimoire of specialized sea spells, but she had never in her wildest imaginings thought to see one. They were said to have disappeared totally.

They were not really mermen, of course. Rather, they were constructs made by Malaysian natives out of monkeys and fish. The Malaysians killed the monkeys, cut off the top half, from the navel up, and sewed on a fish tail. The mummified remains were then sold to innocent British tars in Victorian times. The natives had called the mummies mermen and the young sailors

believed them, brought the mers home and gave them to loved ones.

And here, resting on its wooden stands, was a particularly horrible example of one, probably rescued from an attic where it had laid all these years, dust-covered, rotting.

It was gray-green, with gray more predominant, and so skeletal that its rib cage reminded Mrs. Stambley of the pictures of starving children in Africa. Its arms were held stiffly in front as if it were doing an out-of-water dog paddle. The grimacing face, big-lipped, big-eared, stared out at her in horror. She could not see the stitches that held the monkey half to the fish.

"I see you like our mer," came a voice from behind her, but Mrs. Stambley did not turn. She simply could not take her eyes from the grotesque mummy in the glass and brass case.

"A Malaysian mer," Mrs. Stambley whispered. One part of her noticed the price sticker on the side of the glass—three hundred pounds. Six hundred American dollars. It was more than she had with her . . . but . . .

"You know what it is, then," the voice went on. "That is too bad. Too bad."

The mer blinked its lashless lids and turned its head. Its eyes were entirely black, without irises. When it rolled its lips back, it showed sharp yellow-gray teeth. It had no tongue.

Mrs. Stambley tried to look away and could not. Instead she felt herself being drawn down, down, down into the black deeps of those eyes.

"That really is *too* bad," came the voice again, but now it was very far away and receding quickly.

Mrs. Stambley tried to open her mouth to scream, but only bubbles came out. All around her it was dark and cold and wet, and still she was pulled downward until she landed, with a jarring thud, on a sandy floor. She stood, brushed her skirts down, and settled her hat back on her head. Then, as she placed her pocketbook firmly under one arm, she felt a grip on her ankle, as if seaweed wanted to root her to that spot. She started to struggle against it when a change in the current against her face forced her to look up.

The mer was swimming toward her, lazily, as if it had all the time in the world to reach her.

She stopped wasting her strength in fighting the seaweed manacle, and instead cautiously fingered open her pocketbook. All the while she watched the mer, which had already halved the distance between them. Its mouth was opening and closing with terrifying snaps. Its bony fingers, with the opaque webbing, seemed to reach out for her. Its monkey face grinned. Behind it was a dark, roiling wake.

The water swirled about Mrs. Stambley, picking at her skirt, flipping the hem to show her slip. Above the swimming mer, high above, she could see the darker shadows of circling sharks waiting for what the mer would leave them. But even they feared to come any closer while he was on the hunt.

And then he was close enough so that she could see the hollow of his mouth, the scissored teeth, the black nails, the angry pulsing beat of the webbings. The sound he made came to her through the filtering of the water. It was like the groans and creaks of a sinking ship.

Her hand was inside the pocketbook now, fingers closing on the wallet and poking into the change purse for the wren feathers she kept there. She grabbed them up and held them before her. They were air magic, stronger than that of the sea, and blessed in church. It was luck against seafolk. Her hand trembled only slightly. She spoke a word of power that was washed from her lips into the troubled water.

For a moment the mer stopped, holding his gray hands before his face.

The seaweed around Mrs. Stambley's ankle slithered away. She kicked her foot out and found she was free.

But above a Great White Shark turned suddenly, sending a wash of new water across Mrs. Stambley's front. The tiny feathers broke and she had to let them go. They floated past the mer and were gone.

He put down his hands, gave the monkey grin at her again, and resumed swimming. But she knew—as he did—that he was not immune to her knowledge. It gave her some slight hope.

Her hand went back into her purse and found the zippered pocket. She unzipped it and drew out seven small bones, taken from a male horseshoe crab found on the Elizabeth Islands off the coast near New Bedford. They were strong sea magic and

she counted heavily on them. She wrapped her fingers around the seven, held them first to her breast, then to her forehead, then flung them at the mer.

The bones sailed between them and in the filtered light seemed to dance and grow and change and cling together at last into a maze.

Mrs. Stambley kicked her feet, sending up a trough of bubbles, and, holding her hat with one hand, her purse with the other, eeled into the bone-maze. She knew that it would hold for only a minute or two at best.

Behind her she could hear the hunting cry of the mer as it searched for a way in. She ignored it and kicked her feet in a steady rhythm, propelling herself into the heart of the maze. Going in was always easier than coming out. Her bubble trail would lead the mer through once he found the entrance. For now she could still hear him knocking against the walls.

Her purse held one last bit of magic. It was a knife that had been given up by the sea, left on a beach on the North Shore, near Rockport. It had a black handle with a guard and she had mounted a silver coin on its haft.

The seawater laid shifting patterns on the blade that looked now like fire, now like air, the calligraphy of power. Mrs. Stambley knew better than to try to read it. Instead she turned toward the passage where the mer would have to appear. The knife in her right hand, her hat askew, the purse locked under her left arm, Mrs. Stambley guessed she did not look like a seasoned fighter. But in magic, as any good witch knew, *seeming* was all important. And she was not about to give up.

"Great Lir," she spoke, and her human tongue added extra urgency to the bubbles which flowered from her mouth. "Bull-roarer Poseidon, spear-thrower Neptune, mighty Njord, shrewish Ran, cleft-tailed Dagon, hold me safe in the green palms of your hands. Bring me safely from the sea. And when I am home, I will gift you and yours."

From somewhere near an animal called, a bull, a horse, a great sea serpent. It was her answer. In moments she would know what it meant. She put her right hand with the knife behind her and waited.

The water in the maze began to churn angrily and the mer came around the final turning. Seeing Mrs. Stambley backed

against the flimsy wall, he laughed. The laugh cascaded out of his mouth in a torrent of bubbles. Their popping made a peculiar punctuation to his mirth. Then he showed his horrible teeth once again, swung his tail to propel himself forward, and moved in for the kill.

Mrs. Stambley kept the knife hidden until the very last moment. And then, as the mer's skeletal arms reached out for her, as the fingers of his hands actually pressed against her neck, and his sharp incisors began to bear down on her throat, she whipped her arms around and slashed at his side. He drew back in pain, and then she knifed him again, as expertly as if she were filleting a fish. He arched his back, opened his mouth in a silent scream of bubbles, and rose slowly toward the white light of the surface.

The maze vanished. Mrs. Stambley stuffed the knife back into her purse, then put her hands over her head, and rose too, leaving a trail of bubbles as dark as blood behind.

"Too bad," the voice was finishing.

Mrs. Stambley turned around and smiled blandly, patting her hat into place. "Yes, I know," she said. "It's too bad it is in such condition. For three hundred pounds, I would want something a bit better cared for."

She stepped aside.

The shopkeeper, a wizened, painted old lady with a webbing between her second and third fingers, breathed in sharply. In the showcase, the mummied mer had tipped over on its back. Along one side was a deep, slashing wound. The chest cavity was hollow. It stank. Under the body were seven small knobby sticks that looked surprisingly like bones.

"Yes," Mrs. Stambley continued, not bothering to apologize for her hasty exit, "rather poor condition. Shocking what some folk will try to palm off on tourists. Luckily I know better." She exited through the front door and was relieved to find that the sun lit the alleyway. She put her hand to her ample bosom and breathed deeply.

"Wait, just wait until I tell the group," she said aloud. Then she threaded her way back to the main street where the other tourists and their guide were coming down the hill. Mrs. Stambley walked briskly toward them, straightening her hat once again and smiling. Not even the thought of the lost triton map

could dampen her spirits. The look of surprise on the face of that old witch of a shopkeeper had been worth the scare. Only what gift could she give to the gods that would be good enough? It was a thought that she could puzzle over happily all the way home.

NOTE: Jane Yolen says of her MALAYSIAN MER: "I actually have a photo of such a creature I took in a small back-alley shop in Greenwich. And it *was* \$600, and luckily marked 'Sold.' In fact it was so hideous, I desired it greatly but my husband and children would have disowned me had I brought it home. They had, after all, given me the trip to England as a Chanukah/Christmas gift and would have felt betrayed by such a monstrosity on the coffee table." They *would*? Tut. Pshaw. Why, where else would you *put* it?

The Bazaar of the Bizarre



Fritz Leiber

If the manufacturers of phonograph records have not transcribed upon their discs, or of cassettes upon their tapes, the bardlike voice of Fritz Leiber speaking Beaumont and Fletcher and Marlowe, then for what purpose have they come upon the earth? and why encumbereth they the ground? Not many people are masters of the written and of the spoken word as well: Fritz Leiber's name leads unchallenged all the rest, and has since Dylan Thomas's restless and tossing spirit departed to haunt the wooded wastelands of Wild Wales. William Blake invited us to

Hear the Voice of the Bard
Who present, past, and future sees,
Whose ears have heard
The holy word
That walked amongst the ancient trees....

and those who would accept the invitation I advise to seek and hearken to Fritz Leiber. His note is however not invariably solemn, as see (and read) his story here. If Conan had had a sense of humor, he might have been Fafhrd.

Fritz Leiber holds the not extraordinarily common degree Bachelor of Philosophy, and is a Phi Beta Kappa—both from the University of Chicago, in which city he was born in 1910. He has been a theological student, actor, college instructor, book-publisher's editor, and was (for twelve years) associate

editor of *Science Digest* magazine. Among the better known of his many books and stories are *Gather, Darkness* and *The Wanderer*, *Our Lady of Darkness*, *The Swords of Lankhmar*, *Conjure Wife*, and *A Specter Is Haunting Texas*. Mr. Leiber acknowledges especial interests in, among others, swords, Shakespeare, cats, chess, backgammon, and spiders—"most elegant and horrifying . . ." He lives in San Francisco.

The strange stars of the World of Nehwon glinted thickly above the black-roofed city of Lankhmar, where swords clink almost as often as coins. For once there was no fog.

In the Plaza of Dark Delights, which lies seven blocks south of the Marsh Gate and extends from the Fountain of Dark Abundance to the Shrine of the Black Virgin, the shop-lights glinted upward no more brightly than the stars glinted down. For there the vendors of drugs and the peddlers of curiosa and the hawkers of assignments light their stalls and crouching places with foxfire, glowworms, and firepots with tiny single windows, and they conduct their business almost as silently as the stars conduct theirs.

There are plenty of raucous spots a-glare with torches in nocturnal Lankhmar, but by immemorial tradition soft whispers and a pleasant dimness are the rule in the Plaza of Dark Delights. Philosophers often go there solely to meditate, students to dream, and fanatic-eyed theologians to spin like spiders abstruse new theories of the Devil and of the other dark forces ruling the universe. And if any of these find a little illicit fun by the way, their theories and dreams and theologies and demonologies are undoubtedly the better for it.

Tonight, however, there was a glaring exception to the darkness rule. From a low doorway with a trefoil arch new-struck through an ancient wall, light spilled into the Plaza. Rising above the horizon of the pavement like some monstrous moon a-shine with the ray of a murderous sun, the new doorway dimmed almost to extinction the stars of the other merchants of mystery.

Eerie and unearthly objects for sale spilled out of the door-

way a little way with the light, while beside the doorway crouched an avid-faced figure clad in garments never before seen on land or sea . . . in the World of Nehwon. He wore a hat like a small red pail, baggy trousers, and outlandish red boots with upturned toes. His eyes were as predatory as a hawk's, but his smile as cynically and lasciviously cajoling as an ancient satyr's.

Now and again he sprang up and pranced about, sweeping and re-sweeping with a rough long broom the flagstones as if to clean path for the entry of some fantastic emperor, and he often paused in his dance to blow low and loutingly, but always with upglancing eyes, to the crowd gathering in the darkness across from the doorway and to swing his hand from them toward the interior of the new shop in a gesture of invitation at once servile and sinister.

No one of the crowd had yet plucked up courage to step forward into the glare and enter the shop, or even inspect the rarities set out so carelessly yet temptingly before it. But the number of fascinated peerers increased momentarily. There were mutterings of censure at the dazzling new method of merchandising—the infraction of the Plaza's custom of darkness—but on the whole the complaints were outweighed by the gasps and murmurings of wonder, admiration and curiosity kindling even hotter.

The Gray Mouser slipped into the Plaza at the Fountain end as silently as if he had come to slit a throat or spy on the spies of the Overlord. His ratskin moccasins were soundless. His sword Scapel in its mouseskin sheath did not swish ever so faintly against either his tunic or cloak, both of gray silk curiously coarse of weave. The glances he shot about him from under his gray silk hood half thrown back were freighted with menace and a freezing sense of superiority.

Inwardly the Mouser was feeling very much like a schoolboy—a schoolboy in dread of rebuke and a crushing assignment of homework. For in the Mouser's pouch of ratskin was a note scrawled in dark brown squid-ink on silvery fish-skin by Sheelba of the Eyeless Face, inviting the Mouser to be at this spot at this time.

Sheelba was the Mouser's supernatural tutor and—when the whim struck Sheelba—guardian, and it never did to ignore his invitations, for Sheelba had eyes to track down the unsociable though he did not carry them between his cheeks and forehead.

But the tasks Sheelba would set the Mouser at times like these were apt to be peculiarly onerous and even noisome—such as procuring nine white cats with never a black hair among them, or stealing five copies of the same book of magic runes from five widely separated sorcerous libraries or obtaining specimens of the dung of four kings living or dead—so the Mouser had come early, to get the bad news as soon as possible, and he had come alone, for he certainly did not want his comrade Fafhrd to stand snickering by while Sheelba delivered his little wizardly homilies to a dutiful Mouser . . . and perchance thought of extra assignments.

Sheelba's note, invisible graven somewhere inside the Mouser's skull, read merely, *When the star Akul bedizens the Spire of Rhan, be you by the Fountain of Dark Abundance*, and the note was signed only with the little featureless oval which is Sheelba's sigil.

The Mouser glided now through the darkness to the Fountain, which was a squat black pillar from the rough rounded top of which a single black drop welled and dripped every twenty elephant's heartbeats.

The Mouser stood beside the Fountain and, extending a bent hand, measured the altitude of the green star Akul. It had still to drop down the sky seven finger widths more before it would touch the needle-point of the slim star-silhouetted distant minaret of Rhan.

The Mouser crouched doubled-up by the black pillar and then vaulted lightly atop it to see if that would make any great difference in Akul's attitude. It did not.

He scanned the nearby darkness for motionless figures . . . especially that of one robed and cowed like a monk—cowed so deeply that one might wonder how he saw to walk. There were no figures at all.

The Mouser's mood changed. If Sheelba chose not to come courteously beforehand, why he could be boorish too! He strode off to investigate the new bright arch-doored shop, of whose

infractious glow he had become inquisitively aware at least a block before he had entered the Plaza of Dark Delights.

Fafhrd the Northerner opened one wine-heavy eye and without moving his head scanned half the small firelit room in which he slept naked. He shut that eye, opened the other, and scanned the other half.

There was no sign of the Mouser anywhere. So far so good! If his luck held, he would be able to get through tonight's embarrassing business without being jeered at by the small gray rogue.

He drew from under his stubbly cheek a square of violet serpent-hide pocked with tiny pores so that when he held it between his eyes and the dancing fire it made stars. Studied for a time, these stars spelled out obscurely the message: *When Rhan-dagger stabs the darkness in Akul-heart, seek you the Source of the Black Drops.*

Drawn boldly across the prickholes in an orange-brown like dried blood—in fact spanning the violet square—was a seven-armed swastika, which is one of the sigils of Ningauble of the Seven Eyes.

Fafhrd had no difficulty in interpreting the Source of the Black Drops as the Fountain of Dark Abundance. He had become wearily familiar with such cryptic poetic language during his boyhood as a scholar of the singing skalds.

Ningauble stood to Fafhrd very much as Sheelba stood to the Mouser except that the Seven-Eyed One was a somewhat more pretentious archimage, whose taste in the thaumaturgical tasks he set Fafhrd ran in larger directions, such as the slaying of dragons, the sinking of four-masted magic ships, and the kidnapping of ogre-guarded enchanted queens.

Also, Ningauble was given to quiet realistic boasting, especially about the grandeur of his vast cavern-home, whose stony serpent-twisting back corridors led, he often averred, to all spots in space and time—provided Ningauble instructed one beforehand exactly how to step those rocky crooked low-ceilinged passageways.

Fafhrd was driven by no great desire to learn Ningauble's formulas and enchantments, as the Mouser was driven to learn Sheelba's, but the Septinocular One had enough holds on the

Northerner, based on the latter's weaknesses and past misdeeds, so that Fafhrd had always to listen patiently to Ningauble's wizardly admonishments and vaunting sorcerous chit-chat—but *not*, if humanly or inhumanly possible, while the Gray Mouser was present to snigger and grin.

Meanwhile, Fafhrd standing before the fire, had been whipping, slapping, and belting various garments and weapons and ornaments onto his huge brawny body with its generous stretches of thick short curling red-gold hairs. When he opened the outer door and, also booted and helmeted now, glanced down the darkling alleyway preparatory to leaving and noted only the hunch-backed chestnut vendor a-squat by his brazier at the next corner, one would have sworn that when he did stride forth toward the Plaza of Dark Delights it would be with the clankings and thunderous tread of a siege-tower approaching a thick-walled city.

Instead the lynx-eared old chestnut vendor, who was also a spy of the Overlord, had to swallow down his heart when it came sliding crookedly up his throat as Fafhrd rushed past him, tall as a pine tree, swift as the wind, and silent as a ghost.

The Mouser elbowed aside two gawkers with shrewd taps on the floating rib and strode across the dark flagstones toward the garishly bright shop with its doorway like an upended heart. It occurred to him they must have had masons working like fiends to have cut and plastered that archway so swiftly. He had been past here this afternoon and noted nothing but blank wall.

The outlandish porter with the red cylinder hat and twisty red shoe-toes came frisking out to the Mouser with his broom and then went curtsying back as he reswept a path for this first customer with many an obsequious bow and smirk.

But the Mouser's visage was set in an expression of grim and all-skeptical disdain. He paused at the heaping of objects in front of the door and scanned it with disapproval. He drew Scalpel from its thin gray sheath and with the tip of the long blade flipped back the cover on the topmost of a pile of musty books. Without going any closer he briefly scanned the first page, shook his head, rapidly turned a half dozen more pages with Scalpel's tip, using the sword as if it were a teacher's

wand to point out words here and there—because they were ill-chosen, to judge from his expression—and then abruptly closed the book with another sword-flip.

Next he used Scalpel's tip to lift a red cloth hanging from a table behind the books and peer under it suspiciously, to rap contemptuously a glass jar with a human head floating in it, to touch disparagingly several other objects and to waggle reprovingly at a foot-chained owl which hooted at him solemnly from its high perch.

He sheathed Scalpel and turned toward the porter with a sour, lifted-eyebrow look which said—nay, shouted—plainly, "Is *this* all you have to offer? Is this garbage your excuse for defiling the Dark Plaza with glare?"

Actually the Mouser was mightily interested by every least item which he had glimpsed. The book, incidentally, had been in a script which he not only did not understand, but did not even recognize.

Three things were very clear to the Mouser: first, that this stuff offered here for sale did not come from anywhere in the World of Nehwon, no, not even from Nehwon's farthest out-back; second, that all this stuff was, in some way which he could not yet define, extremely dangerous; third, that all this stuff was monstrously fascinating and that he, the Mouser, did not intend to stir from this place until he had personally scanned, studied, and if need be tested, every last intriguing item and scrap.

At the Mouser's sour grimace, the porter went into a convulsion of wheedling and fawning caperings, seemingly torn between a desire to kiss the Mouser's foot and to point out with flamboyant caressing gestures every object in his shop.

He ended by bowing so low that his chin brushed the pavement, sweeping an ape-long arm toward the interior of the shop, and gibbering in atrocious Lankhmarese, "Every object to pleasure the flesh and senses and imagination of man. Wonders undreamed. Very cheap, very cheap! Yours for a penny! The Bazaar of the Bizarre. Please to inspect, oh king!"

The Mouser yawned a very long yawn with the back of his hand to his mouth, next he looked around him again with the weary, patient, worldly smile of a duke who knows he must put up with many boredoms to encourage business in his de-

mesne, finally he shrugged faintly and entered the shop.

Behind him the porter went into a jiggling delirium of glee and began to re-sweep the flagstones like a man maddened with delight.

Inside, the first thing the Mouser saw was a stack of slim books bound in gold-lined fine-grained red and violet leather.

The second was a rack of gleaming lenses and slim brass tubes calling to be peered through.

The third was a slim dark-haired girl smiling at him mysteriously from a gold-barred cage that swung from the ceiling.

Beyond that cage hung others with bars of silver and strange green, ruby, orange, ultramarine, and purple metals.

Fafhrd saw the Mouser vanish into the shop just as his left hand touched the rough chill pate of the Fountain of Dark Abundance and as Akul pointed precisely on Rhan-top as if it were that needle-spire's green-lensed pinnacle-lantern.

He might have followed the Mouser, he might have done no such thing, he certainly would have pondered the briefly glimpsed event, but just then there came from behind him a long low "Hsssst!"

Fafhrd turned like a giant dancer and his longsword Graywand came out of its sheath swiftly and rather more silently than a snake emerges from its hole.

Ten arm lengths behind him, in the mouth of an alleyway darker than the Dark Plaza would have been without its new commercial moon, Fafhrd dimly made out two robed and deeply cowed figures poised side by side.

One cowl held darkness absolute. Even the face of a Negro of Klesh might have been expected to shoot ghostly bronze gleams. But here there were none.

In the other cowl there nested seven very faint pale greenish glows. They moved about restlessly, sometimes circling each other, swinging mazily. Sometimes one of the seven horizontally oval gleams would grow a little brighter, seemingly as it moved forward toward the mouth of the cowl—or a little darker, as it drew back.

Fafhrd sheathed Graywand and advanced toward the figures. Still facing him, they retreated slowly and silently down the alley.

Fafhrd followed as they receded. He felt a stirring of in-

terest . . . and of other feelings. To meet his own supernatural mentor alone might be only a bore and a mild nervous strain; but it would be hard for anyone entirely to repress a shiver of awe at encountering at one and the same time both Ningauble of the Seven Eyes and Sheelba of the Eyeless Face.

Moreover, that those two bitter wizardly rivals would have joined forces, that they should apparently be operating together in amity. . . . Something of great note must be afoot! There was no doubting that.

The Mouser meantime was experiencing the smuggest, most mind-teasing, most exotic enjoyments imaginable. The sleekly leather-bound gold-stamped books turned out to contain scripts stranger far than that in the book whose pages he had flipped outside—scripts that looked like skeletal beasts, cloud swirls, and twisty-branched bushes and trees—but for a wonder he could read them all without the least difficulty.

The books dealt in the fullest detail with such matters as the private life of devils, the secret histories of murderous cults, and—these were illustrated—the proper dueling techniques to employ against sword-armed demons and the erotic tricks of lamias, succubi, bacchantes, and hamadryads.

The lenses and brass tubes, some of the latter of which were as fantastically crooked as if they were periscopes for seeing over the walls and through the barred windows of other universes, showed at first only delightful jeweled patterns, but after a bit the Mouser was able to see through them into all sorts of interesting places: the treasure-room of dead kings, the bedchambers of living queens, council-crypts of rebel angels, and the closets in which the gods hid plans for worlds too frighteningly fantastic to risk creating.

As for the quaintly clad slim girls in their playfully widely-barred cages, well, they were pleasant pillows on which to rest eyes momentarily fatigued by book-scanning and tube-peering.

Ever and anon one of the girls would whistle softly at the Mouser and then point cajolingly or imploringly or with languorous hintings at a jeweled crank set in the wall whereby her cage, suspended on a gleaming chain running through gleaming pulleys, could be lowered to the floor.

At these invitations the Mouser would smile with a bland

amorousness and nod and softly wave a hand from the fingerhinge as if to whisper, "Later . . . later. Be patient."

After all, girls had a way of blotting out all lesser, but not thereby despicable, delights. Girls were for dessert.

Ningauble and Sheelba receded down the dark alleyway with Fafhrd following them until the latter lost patience and, somewhat conquering his unwilling awe, called out nervously, "Well, are you going to keep on fleeing me backward until we all pitch into the Great Salt Marsh? What do you want of me? What's it all about?"

But the two-cowled figures had already stopped, as he could perceive by the starlight and the glow of a few high windows, and now it seemed to Fafhrd that they had stopped a moment before he had called out. A typical sorcerers' trick for making one feel awkward! He gnawed his lip in the darkness. It was ever thus!

"Oh My Gentle Son . . ." Ningauble began in his most sugary-priestly tones, the dim puffs of his seven eyes now hanging in his cowl as steadily and glowing as mildly as the Pleiades seen late on a summer night through a greenish mist rising from a lake freighted with blue vitriol and corrosive gas of salt.

"I asked what it's all about!" Fafhrd interrupted harshly. Already convicted of impatience, he might as well go the whole hog.

"Let me put it as a hypothetical case," Ningauble replied imperturbably. "Let us suppose, My Gentle Son, that there is a man in a universe and that a most evil force comes to this universe from another universe, or perhaps from a congeries of universes, and that this man is a brave man who wants to defend his universe and who counts his life as a trifle and that moreover he has to counsel him a very wise and prudent and public-spirited uncle who knows all about these matters which I have been hypothecating—"

"The Devourers menace Lankhmar!" Sheelba rapped out in a voice as harsh as a tree cracking and so suddenly that Fafhrd almost started—and for all we know, Ningauble too.

Fafhrd waited a moment to avoid giving false impressions and then switched his gaze to Sheelba. His eyes had been growing accustomed to the darkness and he saw much more

now than he had seen at the alley's mouth, yet he still saw not one jot more than absolute blackness inside Sheelba's cowl.

"Who are the Devourers?" he asked.

It was Ningauble, however, who replied, "The Devourers are the most accomplished merchants in all the many universes—so accomplished, indeed, that they sell only trash. There is a deep necessity in this, for the Devourers must occupy all their cunning in perfecting their methods of selling and so have not an instant to spare in considering the worth of what they sell. Indeed, they dare not concern themselves with such matters for a moment, for fear of losing their golden touch—and yet such are their skills that their wares are utterly irresistible, indeed the finest wares in all the many universes—if you follow me?"

Fafhrd looked hopefully toward Sheelba, but since the latter did not this time interrupt with some pithy summation, he nodded to Ningauble.

Ningauble continued, his seven eyes beginning to weave a bit, judging from the movements of the seven green glows, "As you might readily deduce, the Devourers possess all the mightiest magics garnered from the many universes, whilst their assault groups are led by the most aggressive wizards imaginable, supremely skilled in all methods of battling, whether it be with the wits, or the feelings, or with the beweaponed body.

"The method of the Devourers is to set up shop in a new world and first entice the bravest and the most adventuresome and the supplest-minded of its people—who have so much imagination that with just a touch of suggestion they themselves do most of the work of selling themselves.

"When these are safely ensnared, the Devourers proceed to deal with the remainder of the population: meaning simply that they sell and sell and sell!—sell trash and take good money and even finer things in exchange."

Ningauble sighed windily and a shade piously. "All this is very bad, My Gentle Son," he continued, his eye-glows weaving hypnotically in his cowl, "but natural enough in universes administered by such gods as we have—natural enough and perhaps endurable. However"—he paused—"there is worse to come! The Devourers want not only the patronage of all beings

in all universes, but—doubtless because they are afraid someone will some day raise the ever-unpleasant question, of the true worth of things—they want all their customers reduced to a state of slavish and submissive suggestibility, so that they are fit for nothing whatever but to gawk at and buy the trash the Devourers offer for sale. This means of course that eventually the Devourers' customers will have nothing wherewith to pay the Devourers for their trash, but the Devourers do not seem to be concerned with this eventuality. Perhaps they feel that there is always a new universe to exploit. And perhaps there is!"

"Monstrous!" Fafhrd commented. "But what do the Devourers gain from all these furious commercial sorties, all this mad merchandising? What do they really want?"

Ningauble replied, "The Devourers want only to amass cash and to raise little ones like themselves to amass more cash and they want to compete with each other at cash-amassing. (Is that coincidentally a city, do you think, Fafhrd? Cashamash?) And the Devourers want to brood about their great service to the many universes—it is their claim that servile customers make the most obedient subjects for the gods—and to complain about how the work of amassing cash tortures their minds and upsets their digestions. Beyond this, each of the Devourers also secretly collects and hides away forever, to delight no eyes but his own, all the finest objects and thoughts created by true men and women (and true wizards and true demons) and bought by the Devourers at bankruptcy prices and paid for with trash or—this is their ultimate preference—with nothing at all."

"Monstrous indeed!" Fafhrd repeated. "Merchants are ever an evil mystery and these sound the worst. But what has all this to do with me?"

"Oh My Gentle Son," Ningauble responded, the piety in his voice now tinged with a certain clement disappointment, "you force me once again to resort to hypothecating. Let us return to the supposition of this brave man whose whole universe is direly menaced and who counts his life a trifle and to the related supposition of this brave man's wise uncle, whose advice the brave man invariably follows—"

"The Devourers have set up shop in the Plaza of Dark Delights!" Sheelba interjected so abruptly in such iron-harsh

syllables that this time Fafhrd actually did start. "You must obliterate this outpost tonight!"

Fafhrd considered that for a bit, then said, in a tentative sort of voice, "You will both accompany me, I presume, to aid me with your wizardly sendings and castings in what I can see must be a most perilous operation, to serve me as a sort of sorcerous artillery and archery corps while I play assault battalion—"

"Oh My Gentle Son . . ." Ningauble interrupted in tones of deepest disappointment, shaking his head so that his eye-glows jogged in his cowl.

"You must do it alone!" Sheelba rasped.

"Without any help at all?" Fafhrd demanded. "No! Get someone else. Get this doltish brave man who always follows his scheming uncle's advice as slavishly as you tell me the Devourers' customers respond to their merchandising. Get *him*! But as for me—No, I say!"

"Then leave us, coward!" Sheelba decreed dourly, but Ningauble only sighed and said quite apologetically, "It was intended that you have a comrade in this quest, a fellow soldier against noisome evil—to wit, the Gray Mouser. But unfortunately he came early to his appointment with my colleague here and was enticed into the shop of the Devourers and is doubtless now deep in their snares, if not already extinct. So you can see that we do take thought for your welfare and have no wish to overburden you with solo quests. However, My Gentle Son, if it still be your firm resolve . . ."

Fafhrd let out a sigh more profound than Ningauble's. "Very well," he said in gruff tones admitting defeat, "I'll do it for you. Someone will have to pull that poor little gray fool out of the pretty-pretty fire—or the twinkly-twinkly water!—that tempted him. But how do I go about it?" He shook a big finger at Ningauble. "And no more Gentle-Sonning!"

Ningauble paused. Then he said only, "Use your own judgment."

Sheelba said, "Beware the Black Wall!"

Ningauble said to Fafhrd, "Hold, I have a gift for you," and held out to him a ragged ribbon a yard long, pinched between the cloth of the wizard's long sleeve so that it was impossible to see the manner of hand that pinched. Fafhrd took the tatter

with a snort, crumpled it into a ball, and thrust it into his pouch.

"Have a greater care with it," Ningauble warned. "It is the Cloak of Invisibility, somewhat worn by many magic usings. Do not put it on until you near the Bazaar of the Devourers. It has two minor weaknesses: it will not make you altogether invisible to a master sorcerer if he senses your presence and takes certain steps. Also, see to it that you do not bleed during this exploit, for the cloak will not hide blood."

"I've a gift too!" Sheelba said, drawing from out of his black cowl-hole—with sleeve-masked hand, as Ningauble had done—something that shimmered faintly in the dark like...

Like a spiderweb.

Sheelba shook it, as if to dislodge a spider, or perhaps two.

"The Blindfold of True Seeing," he said as he reached it toward Fafhrd. "It shows all things as they really are! Do not lay it across your eyes until you enter the Bazaar. On no account, as you value your life or your sanity, wear it now!"

Fafhrd took it from him most gingerly, the flesh of his fingers crawling. He was inclined to obey the taciturn wizard's instructions. At this moment he truly did not much care to see the true visage of Sheelba of the Eyeless Face.

The Gray Mouser was reading the most interesting book of them all, a great compendium of secret knowledge written in a script of astrologic and geomantic signs, the meanings of which fairly leaped off the page into his mind.

To rest his eyes from that—or rather to keep from gobbling the book too fast—he peered through a nine-elbowed brass tube at a scene that could only be the blue heaven-pinnacle of the universe where angels flew shimmeringly like dragonflies and where a few choice heroes rested from their great mountain-climb and spied down critically on the antlike labors of the gods many levels below.

To rest his eye from *that*, he looked up between the scarlet (bloodmetal?) bars of the inmost cage at the most winsome, slim, fair, jet-eyed girl of them all. She knelt, sitting on her heels, with her upper body leaned back a little. She wore a red velvet tunic and had a mop of golden hair so thick and pliant that she could sweep it in a neat curtain over her upper face, down almost to her pouting lips. With the slim fingers of one

hand she would slightly part these silky golden drapes to peer at the Mouser playfully, while with those of the other she rattled golden castanets in a most languorously slow rhythm, though with occasional swift staccato bursts.

The Mouser was considering whether it might not be as well to try a turn or two on the ruby-crusted golden crank next to his elbow, when he spied for the first time the glimmering wall at the back of the shop. What could its material be? he asked himself. Tiny diamonds countless as the sand set in smoky glass? Black opal? Black pearl? Black moonshine?

Whatever it was, it was wholly fascinating, for the Mouser quickly set down his book, using the nine-crooked spy-tube to mark his place—a most engrossing pair of pages on dueling where were revealed the Universal Parry and its five false variants and also the three true forms of the Secret Thrust—and with only a finger-wave to the ensorceling blonde in red velvet he walked quickly toward the back of the shop.

As he approached the Black Wall he thought for an instant that he glimpsed a silver wraith, or perhaps a silver skeleton, walking toward him out of it, but then he saw that it was only his own darkly handsome reflection, pleasantly flattered by the lustrous material. What had momentarily suggested silver ribs was the reflection of the silver lacings on his tunic.

He smirked at his image and reached out a finger to touch *its* lustrous finger when—Lo, a wonder!—his hand went into the wall with never a sensation at all save a faint tingling coolth promising comfort like the sheets of a fresh-made bed.

He looked at his hand inside the wall and—Lo, another wonder—it was all a beautiful silver faintly patterned with tiny scales. And though his own hand indubitably, as he could tell by clenching it, it was scarless now and a mite slimmer and longer fingered—altogether a more handsome hand than it had been a moment ago.

He wriggled his fingers and it was like watching small silver fish dart about—fingerlings!

What a droll conceit, he thought, to have a dark fishpond or rather swimming pool set on its side indoors, so that one could walk into the fracious erect fluid quietly and gracefully, instead of all the noisy, bouncingly athletic business of diving!

And how charming that the pool should be filled not with

wet soppy cold water, but with a sort of moon-dark essence of sleep! An essence with beautifying cosmetic properties too—a sort of mudbath without the mud. The Mouser decided he must have a swim in this wonder pool at once, but just then his gaze lit on a long high black couch toward the other end of the dark liquid wall, and beyond the couch a small high table set with viands and a crystal pitcher and goblet.

He walked along the wall to inspect these, his handsome reflection taking step for step with him.

He trailed his hand in the wall for a space and then withdrew it, the scales instantly vanishing and the familiar old scars returning.

The couch turned out to be a narrow high-sided black coffin lined with quilted black satin and piled at one end with little black satin pillows. It looked most invitingly comfortable and restful—not quite as inviting as the Black Wall, but very attractive just the same; there was even a rack of tiny black books nested in the black satin for the occupant's diversion and also a black candle, unlit.

The collation on the little ebony table beyond the coffin consisted entirely of black foods. By sight and then by nibbling and sipping the Mouser discovered their nature: thin slices of a very dark rye bread crusted with poppy seeds and dripped with black butter; slivers of charcoal-seared steak; similarly broiled tiny thin slices of calf's liver sprinkled with dark spices and liberally pricked with capers; the darkest grape jellies; truffles cut paper thin and mushrooms fried black; pickled chestnuts; and of course, ripe olives and black fish eggs—caviar. The black drink, which foamed when he poured it, turned out to be stout laced with the bubbly wine of Ilthmar.

He decided to refresh the inner Mouser—the Mouser who lived a sort of blind soft greedy undulating surface-life between his lips and his belly—before taking a dip in the Black Wall.

Fafhrd re-entered the Plaza of Dark Delights walking warily and with the long tatter that was the Cloak of Invisibility trailing from between left forefinger and thumb and with the glimmering cobweb that was the Blindfold of True Seeing pinched even more delicately by its edge between the same digits of

his right hand. He was not yet altogether certain that the trailing gossamer hexagon was completely free of spiders.

Across the Plaza he spotted the bright-mouthed shop—the shop he had been told was an outpost of the deadly Devourers—through a ragged gather of folk moving about restlessly and commenting and speculating to one another in harsh excited undertones.

The only feature of the shop Fafhrd could make out at all clearly at this distance was the red-capped red-footed baggy-trouserer porter, not capering now but leaning on his long broom beside the trefoil-arched doorway.

With a looping swing of his left arm Fafhrd hung the Cloak of Invisibility around his neck. The ragged ribband hung to either side down his chest in its wolfskin jerkin only halfway to his wide belt which supported longsword and short-axe. It did not vanish his body to the slightest degree that he could see and he doubted it worked at all. Like many another thaumaturge, Ningauble never hesitated to give one useless charms, not for any treacherous reason, necessarily, but simply to improve one's morals. Fafhrd strode boldly toward the shop.

The Northerner was a tall, broad-shouldered, formidable-looking man—doubly formidable by his barbaric dress and weaponing in supercivilized Lankhmar—and so he took it for granted that the ordinary run of city folk stepped out of his way; indeed it had never occurred to him that they should not.

He got a shock. All the clerks, seedy bravos, scullery folk, students, slaves, second-rate merchants and second-class courtesans who would automatically have moved aside for him (though the last with a saucy swing of the hips) now came straight at him, so that he had to dodge and twist and stop and even sometimes dart back to avoid being toe-tramped and bumped. Indeed one fat pushy proud-stomached fellow almost carried away his cobweb, which he could see now by the light of the shop was free of spiders—or if there were any spiders still on it, they must be very small.

He had so much to do dodging Fafhrd-blind Lankhmarians that he could not spare one more glance for the shop until he was almost at the door. And then before he took his first close look, he found that he was tilting his head so that his left ear

touched the shoulder below it and that he was laying Sheelba's spiderweb across his eyes.

The touch of it was simply like the touch of any cobweb when one runs face into it walking between close-set bushes at dawn. Everything shimmered a bit as if seen through a fine crystal grating. Then the least shimmering vanished, and with it the delicate clinging sensation, and Fafhrd's vision returned to normal—as far as he could tell.

It turned out that the doorway to the Devourers' shop was piled with garbage—garbage of a particularly offensive sort: old bones, dead fish, butcher's offal, moldering gracecloths folded in uneven squares like badly bound uncut books, broken glass and potsherds, splintered boxes, large stinking dead leaves orange-spotted with blight, bloody rags, tattered discarded loin-cloths, large worms nosing about, centipedes a-scuttle, cockroaches a-stagger, maggots a-crawl—and less agreeable things.

Atop all perched a vulture which had lost most of its feathers and seemed to have expired of some avian eczema. At least Fafhrd took it for dead, but then it opened one white-filmed eye.

The only conceivably salable object outside the shop—but it was a most notable exception—was the tall black iron statue, somewhat larger than life-size, of a lean swordsman of dire yet melancholy visage. Standing on its square pedestal beside the door, the statue leaned forward just a little on its long two-handed sword and regarded the Plaza dolefully.

The statue almost teased awake a recollection in Fafhrd's mind—a recent recollection, he fancied—but then there was a blank in his thoughts and he instantly dropped the puzzle. On raids like this one, relentlessly swift action was paramount. He loosened his axe in its loop, noiselessly whipped out Graywand and, shrinking away from the piled and crawling garbage just a little, entered the Bazaar of the Bizarre.

The Mouser, pleasantly replete with tasty black food and heady black drink, drifted to the Black Wall and thrust in his right arm to the shoulder. He waved it about, luxuriating in the softly flowing coolth and balm—admiring its fine silver scales and more than human handsomeness. He did the same

with his right leg, swinging it like a dancer exercising at the bar. Then he took a gently deep breath and drifted farther in.

Fafhrd on entering the Bazaar saw the same piles of gloriously bound books and racks of gleaming brass spy-tubes and crystal lenses as had the Mouser—a circumstance which seemed to upset Ningauble's theory that the Devourers sold only trash.

He also saw the eight beautiful cages of jewel-gleaming metals and the gleaming chains that hung them from the ceiling and went to the jeweled wall cranks.

Each cage held a gleaming, gloriously hued, black- or light-haired spider big as a rather small person and occasionally waving a long jointed claw-handed leg, or softly opening a little and then closing a pair of fanged down-swinging mandibles, while staring steadily at Fafhrd with eight watchful eyes set in two jewel-like rows of four.

Set a spider to catch a spider, Fafhrd thought, thinking of his cobweb, and then wondered what the thought meant.

He quickly switched to more practical questions then, but he had barely asked himself whether before proceeding further he should kill the very expensive-looking spiders, fit to be the coursing beasts of some jungle empress—another count against Ning's trash-theory!—when he heard a faint splashing from the back of the shop. It reminded him of the Mouser taking a bath—the Mouser loved baths, slow luxurious ones in hot soapy scented oil-dripped water, the small gray sybarite!—and so Fafhrd hurried off in that direction with many a swift upward over-shoulder glance.

He was detouring the last cage, a scarlet-metaled one holding the handsomest spider yet, when he noted a book set down with a crooked spy-tube in it—exactly as the Mouser would keep his place in a book by closing it on a dagger.

Fafhrd paused to open the book. Its lustrous white pages were blank. He put his impalpably cobwebbed eye to the spy-tube. He glimpsed a scene that could only be the smoky red hell-nadir of the universe, where dark devils scuttled about like centipedes and where chained folk gazing yearningly upward and the damned writhed in the grip of black serpents whose

eyes shone and whose fangs dripped and whose nostrils breathed fire.

As he dropped tube and book, he heard the faint sonorous quick dull report of bubbles being expelled from a fluid at its surface. Staring instantly toward the dim back of the shop, he saw at last the pearl-shimmering Black Wall and a silver skeleton eyed with great diamonds receding into it. However, this costly bone-man—once more Ning's trash-theory disproved!—still had one arm sticking partway out of the wall and this arm was not bone, whether silver, white, brownish or pink, but live-looking flesh covered with proper skin.

As the arm sank into the wall, Fafhrd sprang forward as fast as he ever had in his life and grabbed the hand just before it vanished. He knew then he had hold of his friend, for he would recognize anywhere the Mouser's grip, no matter how enfeebled. He tugged, but it was as if the Mouser were mired in black quicksand. He laid Graywand down and grasped the Mouser by the wrist too and braced his feet against the rough black flags and gave a tremendous heave.

The silver skeleton came out of the wall with a black splash, metamorphosing as it did into a vacant-eyed Gray Mouser who without a look at his friend and rescuer went staggering off in a curve and pitched head over heels into the black coffin.

But before Fafhrd could hoist his comrade from this new gloomy predicament, there was a swift clash of footsteps and there came racing into the shop, somewhat to Fafhrd's surprise, the tall black iron statue. It had forgotten or simply stepped off its pedestal, but it had remembered its two-handed sword, which it brandished about most fiercely while shooting searching black glances like iron darts at every shadow and corner and nook.

The black gaze passed Fafhrd without pausing, but halted at Graywand lying on the floor. At the sight of that longsword the statue started visibly, snarled its iron lips, narrowed its black eyes. It shot glances more ironly stabbing than before, and it began to move about the shop in sudden zigzag rushes, sweeping its darkly flashing sword in low scythe-strokes.

At that moment the Mouser peeped moon-eyed over the edge of the coffin, lifted a limp hand and waved it at the statue,

and in a soft sly foolish voice cried, "Yoo-hoo!"

The statue paused in its searchings and scythings to glare at the Mouser in mixed contempt and puzzlement.

The Mouser rose to his feet in the black coffin, swaying drunkenly, and dug in his pouch.

"Ho, slave!" he cried to the statue with maudlin gaiety, "your wares are passing passable. I'll take the girl in red velvet." He pulled a coin from his pouch, goggled at it closely, then pitched it at the statue. "That's one penny. And the nine-crooked spy-tube. That's another penny." He pitched it. "And *Gron's Grand Compendium of Exotic Lore*—another penny for you! Yes, and here's one more for supper—very tasty, 'twas. Oh and I almost forgot—here's for tonight's lodging!" He pitched a fifth large copper coin at the demonic black statue and, smiling blissfully, flopped back out of sight. The black quilted satin could be heard to sigh as he sank in it.

Four-fifths of the way through the Mouser's penny-pitching Fafhrd decided it was useless to try to unriddle his comrade's nonsensical behavior and that it would be far more to the point to make use of this diversion to snatch up Graywand. He did so on the instant, but by that time the black statue was fully alert again, if it had ever been otherwise. Its gaze switched to Graywand the instant Fafhrd touched the longsword and it stamped its foot, which rang against the stone, and cried a harsh metallic "Ha!"

Apparently the sword became invisible as Fafhrd grasped it, for the black statue did not follow him with its iron eyes as he shifted position across the room. Instead it swiftly laid down its own mighty blade and caught up a long narrow silver trumpet and set it to its lips.

Fafhrd thought it wise to attack before the statue summoned reinforcements. He rushed straight at the thing, swinging back Graywand for a great stroke at the neck—and steeling himself for an arm-numbing impact.

The statue blew and instead of the alarm blare Fafhrd had expected, there silently puffed out straight at him a great cloud of white powder that momentarily blotted out everything, as if it were the thickest of fogs from Hlal the River.

Fafhrd retreated, choking and coughing. The demon-blown

fog cleared quickly, the white powder falling to the stony floor with unnatural swiftness, and he could see again to attack, but now the statue apparently could see him too, for it squinted straight at him and cried its metallic "Ha!" again and whirled its sword around its iron head preparatory to the charge—rather as if winding itself up.

Fafhrd saw that his own hands and arms were thickly filmed with the white powder, which apparently clung to him everywhere except his eyes, doubtless protected by Sheelba's cobweb.

The iron statue came thrusting and slashing in. Fafhrd took the great sword on his, chopped back, and was parried in return. And now the combat assumed the noisy deadly aspects of a conventional longsword duel, except that Graywand was notched whenever it caught the chief force of a stroke, while the statue's somewhat longer weapon remained unmarked. Also, whenever Fafhrd got through the other's guard with a thrust—it was almost impossible to reach him with a slash—it turned out that the other had slipped his lean body or head aside with unbelievably swift and infallible anticipations.

It seemed to Fafhrd—at least at the time—the most fell, frustrating, and certainly the most wearisome combat in which he had ever engaged, so he suffered some feelings of hurt and irritation when the Mouser reeled up in his coffin again and leaned an elbow on the black-satin-quilted side and rested chin on fist and grinned hugely at the battlers and from time to time laughed wildly and shouted such enraging nonsense as, "Use Secret Thrust Two-and-a-Half, Fafhrd—it's all in the book!" or "Jump in the oven!—there'd be a master stroke of strategy!" or—this to the statue—"Remember to sweep under his feet, you rogue!"

Backing away from one of Fafhrd's sudden attacks, the statue bumped the table holding the remains of the Mouser's repast—evidently its anticipatory abilities did not extend to its rear—and scraps of black food and white potsherds and jags of crystal scattered across the floor.

The Mouser leaned out of his coffin and waved a finger waggishly. "You'll have to sweep that up!" he cried and went off into a gale of laughter.

Backing away again, the statue bumped the black coffin. The Mouser only clapped the demonic figure comradely on the shoulder and called, "Set to it again, clown! Brush him down! Dust him off!"

But the worst was perhaps when, during a brief pause while the combatants gasped and eyed each other dizzily, the Mouser waved coyly to the nearest giant spider and called his inane "Yoo-hoo!" again, following it with, "I'll see you, dear, after the circus."

Fafhrd, parrying with weary desperation a fifteenth or a fiftieth cut at his head, thought bitterly, *This comes of trying to rescue small heartless madmen who would howl at their grandmothers hugged by bears. Sheelba's cobweb has shown me the Gray One in his true idiot nature.*

The Mouser had first been furious when the sword-skirling clashed him awake from his black satin dreams, but as soon as he saw what was going on he became enchanted at the wildly comic scene.

For, lacking Sheelba's cobweb, what the Mouser saw was only the zany red-capped porter prancing about in his ridiculous tip-curved red shoes and aiming at Fafhrd, who looked exactly as if he had climbed a moment ago out of a barrel of meal. The only part of the Northerner not whitely dusted was a shadowy dark masklike stretch across his eyes.

What made the whole thing fantastically droll was that miller-white Fafhrd was going through all the motions—and emotions!—of a genuine combat with excruciating precision, parrying the broom as if it were some great jolting scimitar or two-handed broadsword even. The broom would go sweeping up and Fafhrd would gawk at it, giving a marvelous interpretation of apprehensive goggling despite his strangely shadowed eyes. Then the broom would come sweeping down and Fafhrd would brace himself and seem to catch it on his sword only with the most prodigious effort—and then pretend to be jolted back by it!

The Mouser had never suspected Fafhrd had such a perfected theatric talent, even if it were acting of a rather mechanical sort, lacking the broad sweeps of true dramatic genius, and he whooped with laughter.

Then the broom brushed Fafhrd's shoulder and blood sprang out.

Fafhrd, wounded at last and thereby knowing himself unlikely to outendure the black statue—although the latter's iron chest was working now like a bellows—decided on swifter measures. He loosened his hand-axe again in its loop and at the next pause in the fight, both battlers having outguessed each other by retreating simultaneously, whipped it up and hurled it at his adversary's face.

Instead of seeking to dodge or ward off the missile, the black statue lowered its sword and merely wove its head in a tiny circle.

The axe closely circled the lean black head, like a silver wood-tailed comet whipping around a black sun, and came back straight at Fafhrd like a boomerang—and rather more swiftly than Fafhrd had sent it.

But time slowed for Fafhrd then and he half ducked and caught it left-handed as it went whizzing past his cheek.

His thoughts too went for a moment fast as his actions. He thought of how his adversary, able to dodge every frontal attack, had not avoided the table or the coffin behind him. He thought of how the Mouser had not laughed now for a dozen clashes and he looked at him and saw him, though still dazed-seeming, strangely pale and sober-faced, appearing to stare with horror at the blood running down Fafhrd's arm.

So crying as heartily and merrily as he could, "Amuse yourself! Join in the fun, clown!—here's your slap-stick," Fafhrd tossed the axe toward the Mouser.

Without waiting to see the result of that toss—perhaps not daring to—he summoned up his last reserves of speed and rushed at the black statue in a circling advance that drove it back toward the coffin.

Without shifting his stupid horrified gaze, the Mouser stuck out a hand at the last possible moment and caught the axe by the handle as it spun lazily down.

As the black statue retreated near the coffin and poised for what promised to be a stupendous counterattack, the Mouser leaned out and, now grinning foolishly again, sharply rapped its black pate with the axe.

The iron head split like a coconut, but did not come apart. Fafhrd's hand-axe, wedged in it deeply, seemed to turn all at once to iron like the statue and its black haft was wrenched out of the Mouser's hand as the statue stiffened up straight and tall.

The Mouser stared at the split head woefully, like a child who hadn't known knives cut.

The statue brought its great sword flat against its chest, like a staff on which it might lean but did not, and it fell rigidly forward and hit the floor with a ponderous clank.

At that stony-metallic thundering, white wildfire ran across the Black Wall, lightening the whole shop like a distant levin-bolt, and iron-basalt thundering echoed from deep within it.

Fafhrd sheathed Graywand, dragged the Mouser out of the black coffin—the fight hadn't left him the strength to lift even his small friend—and shouted in his ear, "Come on! Run!"

The Mouser ran for the Black Wall.

Fafhrd snagged his wrist as he went by and plunged toward the arched door, dragging the Mouser after him.

The thunder faded out and there came a low whistle, cajolingly sweet.

Wildfire raced again across the Black Wall behind them—much more brightly this time, as if a lightning storm were racing toward them.

The white glare striking ahead imprinted one vision indelibly on Fafhrd's brain: the giant spider in the inmost cage pressed against the bloodred bars to gaze down at them. It had pale legs and a velvet red body and a mask of sleek thick golden hair from which eight jet eyes peered, while its fanged jaws hanging down in the manner of the wide blades of a pair of golden scissors rattled together in a wild staccato rhythm like castanets.

That moment the cajoling whistle was repeated. It too seemed to be coming from the red and golden spider.

But strangest of all to Fafhrd was to hear the Mouser, dragged unwillingly along behind him, cry out in answer to the whistling, "Yes, darling, I'm coming. Let me go, Fafhrd! Let me climb to her! Just one kiss! Sweetheart!"

"Stop it, Mouser," Fafhrd growled, his flesh crawling in

mid-plunge. "It's a giant spider!"

"Wipe the cobwebs out of your eyes, Fafhrd," the Mouser retorted pleadingly and most unwittingly to the point. "It's a gorgeous girl! I'll never see her ticklesome like—and I've paid for her! *Sweetheart!*"

Then the booming thunder drowned his voice and any more whistling there might have been, and the wildfire came again, brighter than day, and another great thunderclap right on its heels, and the floor shuddered and the whole shop shook, and Fafhrd dragged the Mouser through the trefoil-arched doorway, and there was another great flash and clap.

The flash showed a semicircle of Lankhmarians peering ashen-faced overshoulder as they retreated across the Plaza of Dark Delights from the remarkable indoor thunderstorm that threatened to come out after them.

Fafhrd spun around. The archway had turned to blank wall.

The Bazaar of the Bizarre was gone from the World of Nehwon.

The Mouser, sitting on the dank flags where Fafhrd had dragged him, babbled wailfully, "The secrets of time and space! The lore of the gods! The mysteries of Hell! Black nirvana! Red and gold Heaven! Five pennies gone forever!"

Fafhrd set his teeth. A mighty resolve, rising from his many recent angers and bewilderments, crystallized in him.

Thus far he had used Sheelba's cobweb—and Ningauble's tatter too—only to serve others. Now he would use them for himself! He would peer at the Mouser more closely and at every person he knew. He would study even his own reflection! But most of all, he would stare Sheelba and Ning to their wizardly cores!

There came from overhead a low "Hsstt!"

As he glanced up he felt something snatched from around his neck and, with the faintest tingling sensation, from off his eyes.

For a moment there was a shimmer traveling upward and through it he seemed to glimpse distortedly, as through thick glass, a black face with a cobwebby skin that entirely covered mouth and nostrils and eyes.

Then that dubious flash was gone and there were only two

cowled heads peering down at him from over the wall top. There was chuckling laughter.

Then both cowled heads drew back out of sight and there was only the edge of the roof and the sky and the stars and the blank wall.

Drink Entire: Against the Madness of Crowds



Ray Bradbury

Few have taken the measure of murderously sweltering summer as has Ray Bradbury in this present piece. Mr. Bradbury was, like Mr. Bloch, raised in the Midwest, whose winters are not for roses, and whose summers not for polar bears: and where does Mr. Bradbury live now? He, like Mr. Bloch, lives in Los Angeles, where summer has heat but not humidity, where winter has no legal recognition, and where "the poisonous wind that copulated with the East River on an oil-slick, garbidge-infested midnight" bloweth not. When first I met Ray Bradbury he lived in that dogeless Venice just south of Santa Monica, then reachable, if you did not drive, and neither of us did, by those huge red street-cars now as extinct as though they had roamed the Pleistocene; and perhaps they had. I still dream of them sometimes, they glide along on high embankments through the green-reed-flecked blue waters of those estuaries where the rivers of memory flow into the seas of time. Melissa Toad would know them well.

Ray Bradbury was born in Waukegan, Illinois, in 1920. "Ray Bradbury published his first story on his twenty-first birthday in 1941. Since then he has published more than four hundred short stories, seventeen novels and collections of stories and poetry; his books include *The Martian Chron-*

icles, *The Golden Apples of the Sun*, and *Long After Midnight*. He has written screenplays for *The Picasso Summer*, *I Sing the Body Electric*, *Moby Dick*, and [very recently] *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. In 1953 he formed his own theater group to produce his plays *The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit*, *The World of Ray Bradbury*, and *Any Friend of Nicholas Nickleby Is a Friend of Mine*. Since then he has written plays based on his *The Martian Chronicles*, *Fahrenheit 451* and *Dandelion Wine*. Ray Bradbury is currently finishing a murder-suspense novel, *Death Is a Lonely Business*; working on a screenplay, *Omenemo*; and writing an opera, *Leviathan 99*." Ray Bradbury and his wife, Maggie, live in Los Angeles.

It was one of those nights that are so damned hot you lie flat out lost until 2:00 A.M., then sway upright, baste yourself with your own sour brine, and stagger down into the great bake-oven subway where the lost trains shriek in.

"Hell," whispered Will Morgan.

And hell it was, with a lost army of beast people wandering the night from the Bronx on out to Coney and back, hour on hour, searching for sudden inhalations of salt ocean wind that might make you gasp with Thanksgiving.

Somewhere, God, somewhere in Manhattan or beyond was a cool wind. By dawn, it *must* be found. . . .

"Damn!"

Stunned, he saw maniac tides of advertisements squirt by with toothpaste smiles, his own advertising ideas pursuing him the whole length of the hot night island.

The train groaned and stopped.

Another train stood on the opposite track.

Incredible. There in the open train window across the way sat Old Ned Amminger. Old? They were the same age, forty, but . . .

Will Morgan threw his window up.

"Ned, you son of a bitch!"

"Will, you bastard. You ride late like this often?"

"Every damn hot night since 1946!"

"Me, too! Glad to see you!"

"Liar!"

Each vanished in a shriek of steel.

God, thought Will Morgan, two men who hate each other, who work not ten feet apart grinding their teeth over the next step up the ladder, knock together in Dante's Inferno here under a melting city at 3:00 A.M. Hear our voices echo, fading:

"Liar . . . !"

Half an hour later, in Washington Square, a cool wind touched his brow. He followed it into an alley where . . .

The temperature dropped ten degrees.

"Hold on," he whispered.

The wind smelled of the Ice House when he was a boy and stole cold crystals to rub on his cheeks and stab inside his shirt with shrieks to kill the heat.

The cool wind led him down the alley to a small shop where a sign read:

MELISSA TOAD, WITCH

LAUNDRY SERVICE:

**CHECK YOUR PROBLEMS HERE BY NINE A.M.
PICK THEM UP, FRESH-CLEANED, AT DUSK**

There was a smaller sign:

**SPELLS, PHILTRES AGAINST DREAD CLIMATES, HOT OR COLD.
POTIONS TO INSPIRE EMPLOYERS AND ASSURE PROMOTIONS.
SALVES, UNGUENTS & MUMMY-DUSTS RENDERED DOWN FROM
ANCIENT CORPORATION HEADS. REMEDIES FOR NOISE.
EMOLLIENTS FOR GASEOUS OR POLLUTED AIRS. LOTIONS
FOR PARANOID TRUCK DRIVERS. MEDICINES TO BE TAKEN
BEFORE TRYING TO SWIM OFF THE NEW YORK DOCKS.**

A few bottles were strewn in the display window, labeled:

PERFECT MEMORY.

BREATH OF SWEET APRIL WIND.

SILENCE AND THE TREMOR OF FINE BIRDSONG.

He laughed and stopped.

For the wind blew cool and creaked a door. And again there was the memory of frost from the white Ice House grottoes of

childhood, a world cut from winter dreams and saved on into August.

"Come in," a voice whispered.

The door glided back.

Inside, a cold funeral awaited him.

A six-foot-long block of clear dripping ice rested like a giant February remembrance upon three sawhorses.

"Yes," he murmured. In his hometown-hardware-store window, a magician's wife, MISS I. SICKLE, had been stashed in an immense rectangle of ice melted to fit her calligraphy. There she slept the nights away, a Princess of Snow. Midnights, he and other boys snuck out to see her smile in her cold crystal sleep. They stood half the summer nights staring, four or five fiery-furnace boys of some fourteen years, hoping their red-hot gaze might melt the ice. . . .

The ice had never melted.

"Wait," he whispered. "Look . . ."

He took one more step within this dark night shop.

Lord, yes. There, in *this* ice! Weren't those the outlines where, only moments ago, a woman of snow napped away in cool night dreams? Yes. The ice was hollow and curved and lovely. But . . . the woman was gone. Where?

"Here," whispered the voice.

Beyond the bright cold funeral, shadows moved in a far corner.

"Welcome. Shut the door."

He sensed that she stood not far away in shadows. Her flesh, if you could touch it, would be cool, still fresh from her time within the dripping tomb of snow. If he just reached out his hand—

"What are you doing here?" her voice asked, gently.

"Hot night. Walking. Riding. Looking for a cool wind. I think I need help."

"You've come to the right place."

"But this is *mad!* I don't believe in psychiatrists. My friends hate me because I say Tinkerbelle *and* Freud died twenty years back, with the circus. I don't believe in astrologers, numerologists, or palmistry quacks—"

"I don't read palms. But . . . give me your hand."

He put his hand out into the soft darkness.

Her fingers tapped his. It felt like the hand of a small girl who had just rummaged an icebox. He said:

"Your sign reads MELISSA TOAD, WITCH. What would a Witch be doing in New York in the summer of 1974?"

"You ever know a city needed a Witch more than New York does this year?"

"Yes. We've gone mad. But, *you?*"

"A Witch is born out of the true hungers of her time," she said. "I was born out of New York. The things that are most wrong here summoned me. Now you come, not knowing, to find me. Give me your other hand."

Though her face was only a ghost of cool flesh in the shadows, he felt her eyes move over his trembling palm.

"Oh, why did you wait so *long?*" she mourned. "It's almost too late."

"Too late for what?"

"To be saved. To take the gift that I can give."

His heart pounded. "*What* can you give me?"

"Peace," she said. "Serenity. Quietness in the midst of bedlam. I am a child of the poisonous wind that copulated with the East River on an oil-slick, garbage-infested midnight. I turn about on my own parentage. I inoculate against those very biles that brought me to light. I am a serum born of venoms. I am the antibody of all Time. I am the Cure. You die of the City, do you not? Manhattan is your punisher. Let me be your shield."

"How?"

"You would be my pupil. My protection could encircle you, like an invisible pack of hounds. The subway train would never violate your ear. Smog would never blight your lung or nostril or fever your vision. I could teach your tongue, at lunch, to taste the rich fields of Eden in the merest cut-rate too-ripe frankfurter. Water, sipped from your office cooler, would be a rare wine of a fine family. Cops, when you called, would answer. Taxis, off-duty rushing nowhere, would stop if you so much as blinked one eye. Theater tickets would appear if you stepped to a theater window. Traffic signals would change, at high noon, mind you! if you dared to drive your car from fifty-eighth down to the Square, and not one light red. Green all the way, if you go with me.

"If you go with me, our apartment will be a shadowed jungle

glade full of bird cries and love calls from the first hot sour day of June till the last hour after Labor Day when the living dead, heat-beat, go mad on stopped trains coming back from the sea. Our rooms will be filled with crystal chimes. Our kitchen an Eskimo hut in July where we might share out a provender of Popsicles made of Mumm's and Château Lafite Rothschild. Our larder?—fresh apricots in August or February. Fresh orange juice each morning, cold milk at breakfast, cool kisses at four in the afternoon, my mouth always the flavor of chilled peaches, my body the taste of rimed plums. The flavor begins at the elbow, as Edith Wharton said.

"Any time you want to come home from the office the middle of a dreadful day, I will call your boss and it will be so. Soon after, you will be the boss and come home, anyway, for cold chicken, fruit wine punch, and me. Summer in the Virgin Isles. Autumns so ripe with promise you will indeed go lunatic in the right way. Winters, of course, will be the reverse. I will be your hearth. Sweet dog, lie there. I will fall upon you like snowflakes.

"In sum, everything will be given you. I ask little in return. Only your soul."

He stiffened and almost let go of her hand.

"Well, isn't that what you *expected* me to demand?" She laughed. "But souls can't be sold. They can only be lost and never found again. Shall I tell you what I really want from you?"

"Tell."

"Marry me," she said.

Sell me your soul, he thought, and did not say it.

But she read his eyes. "Oh, dear," she said. "Is that *so* much to ask? For all I give?"

"I've got to think it over!"

Without noticing, he had moved back one step.

Her voice was very sad. "If you have to think a thing over, it will never be. When you finish a book you know if you like it, yes? At the end of a play you are awake or asleep, yes? Well, a beautiful woman is a beautiful woman, isn't she, and a good life a good life?"

"Why won't you come out in the light? How do I know you're beautiful?"

"You can't know unless you step into the dark. Can't you tell by my voice? No? Poor man. If you don't trust me now, you can't have me, ever."

"I need time to think. I'll come back tomorrow night! What can twenty-four hours mean?"

"To someone your age, everything."

"I'm only forty!"

"I speak of your soul, and *that* is late."

"Give me one more night!"

"You'll take it, anyway, at your own risk."

"Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God, God," he said, shutting his eyes.

"I wish He could help you right now. You'd better go. You're an ancient child. Pity. Pity. Is your mother alive?"

"Dead ten years."

"No, alive," she said.

He backed off toward the door and stopped, trying to still his confused heart, trying to move his leaden tongue:

"How long have you been in this place?"

She laughed, with the faintest touch of bitterness.

"Three summers now. And, in those three years, only six men have come into my shop. Two ran immediately. Two stayed awhile but left. One came back a second time, and vanished. The sixth man finally had to admit, after three visits, he didn't Believe. You see, no one Believes a really all-encompassing and protective love when they see it clear. A farm-boy might have stayed forever, in his simplicity, which is rain and wind and seed. A New Yorker? Suspects everything.

"Whoever, whatever, you are, O good sir, stay and milk the cow and put the fresh milk in the dim cooling shed under the shade of the oak tree which grows in my attic. Stay and pick the watercress to clean your teeth. Stay in the North Pantry with the scent of persimmons and kumquats and grapes. Stay and stop my tongue so I can cease talking this way. Stay and stop my mouth so I can't breathe. Stay, for I am weary of speech and must need love. Stay. Stay."

So ardent was her voice, so tremulous, so gentle, so sweet, that he knew he was lost if he did not run.

"Tomorrow night!" he cried.

His shoe struck something. There on the floor lay a sharp

icicle fallen from the long block of ice.

He bent, seized the icicle, and ran.

The door *slammed*. The lights blinked out. Rushing, he could not see the sign: MELISSA TOAD, WITCH.

Ugly, he thought, running. A beast, he thought, she *must* be a beast and ugly. Yes, that's it! Lies! All of it, lies! She—

He collided with someone.

In the midst of the street, they gripped, they held, they stared.

Ned Amminger! My God, it was Old Ned!

It was four in the morning, the air still white-hot. And here was Ned Amminger sleepwalking after cool winds, his clothes scrolled on his hot flesh in rosettes, his face dripping sweat, his eyes dead, his feet creaking in their hot baked leather shoes.

They swayed in the moment of collision.

A spasm of malice shook Will Morgan. He seized Old Ned Amminger, spun him about, and pointed him into the dark alley. Far off deep in there, had that shop-window light blinked *on* again? Yes!

"Ned! *That* way! Go *there*!"

Heat-blinded, dead-weary Old Ned Amminger stumbled off down the alley.

"Wait!" cried Will Morgan, regretting his malice.

But Amminger was gone.

In the subway, Will Morgan tasted the icicle.

It was Love. It was Delight. It was Woman.

By the time his train roared in, his hands were empty, his body rusted with perspiration. And the sweet taste in his mouth? Dust.

Seven A.M. and no sleep.

Somewhere a huge blast furnace opened its door and burned New York to ruins.

Get up, thought Will Morgan. Quick! Run to the Village! For he remembered that sign:

LAUNDRY SERVICE: CHECK YOUR PROBLEMS

HERE BY NINE A.M.

PICK THEM UP, FRESH-CLEANED, AT NIGHT.

He did not go to the Village. He rose, showered, and went off into the furnace to lose his job forever.

He knew this as he rode up in the raving-hot elevator with Mr. Binns, the sunburned and furious personnel manager. Binns's eyebrows were jumping, his mouth worked over his teeth with unspoken curses. Beneath his suit, you could feel porcupines of boiled hair needling to the surface. By the time they reached the fortieth floor, Binns was anthropoid.

Around them, employees wandered like an Italian army coming to attend a lost war.

"Where's Old Amminger?" asked Will Morgan, staring at an empty desk.

"Called in sick. Heat prostration. Be here at noon," someone said.

Long before noon the water cooler was empty, and the air-conditioning system?—committed suicide at 11:32. Two hundred people became raw beasts chained to desks by windows which had been invented not to open.

At one minute to twelve, Mr. Binns, over the intercom, told them to line up by their desks. They lined up. They waited, swaying. The temperature stood at ninety-seven. Slowly, Binns began to stalk down the long line. A white-hot sizzle of invisible flies hung about him.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen," he said. "You all know there is a recession, no matter how happily the President of the United States put it. I would rather knife you in the stomach than stab you in the back. Now, as I move down the line, I will nod and whisper, 'You.' To those of you who hear this single word, turn, clean out your desks, and be gone. Four weeks' severance pay awaits you on the way out. Hold on! Someone's missing!"

"Old Ned Amminger," said Will Morgan, and bit his tongue.

"*Old Ned?*" said Mr. Binns, glaring. "*Old? Old?*"

Mr. Binns and Ned Amminger were exactly the same age.

Mr. Binns waited, ticking.

"Ned," said Will Morgan, strangling on self-curses, "should be here—"

"Now," said a voice.

They all turned.

At the far end of the line, in the door, stood Old Ned or Ned Amminger. He looked at the assembly of lost souls, read destruction in Binns's face, flinched, but then slunk into line next to Will Morgan.

"All right," said Binns. "Here goes."

He began to move, whisper, move, whisper, move, whisper. Two people, four, then six turned to clean out their desks.

Will Morgan took a deep breath, held it, waited.

Binns came to a full stop in front of him.

Don't say it? thought Morgan. Don't!

"You," whispered Binns.

Morgan spun about and caught hold of his heaving desk. *You*, the word cracked in his head, *you!*

Binns stepped to confront Ned Amminger.

"Well, *old Ned*," he said.

Morgan, eyes shut, thought: Say it, say it to him, you're fired, Ned, *fired!*

"Old Ned," said Binns, lovingly.

Morgan shrank at the strange, the friendly, the sweet sound of Binns's voice.

An idle South Seas wind passed softly on the air. Morgan blinked and stood up, sniffing. The sun-blasted room was filled with scent of surf and cool white sand.

"Ned, why dear old Ned," said Mr. Binns, gently.

Stunned, Will Morgan waited. I am mad, he thought.

"Ned," said Mr. Binns, gently. "Stay with us. Stay on."

Then, swiftly: "That's all, everyone. Lunch!"

And Binns was gone and the wounded and dying were leaving the field. And Will Morgan turned at last to look full at Old Ned Amminger, thinking, Why, God, *why?*

And got his answer . . .

Ned Amminger stood there, not old, not young, but somehow in-between. And he was not the Ned Amminger who had leaned crazily out a hot train window last midnight or shambled in Washington Square at four in the morning.

This Ned Amminger stood quietly, as if hearing far green country sounds, wind and leaves and an amiable time which wandered in a fresh lake breeze.

The perspiration had dried on his fresh pink face. His eyes were not bloodshot but steady, blue, and quiet. He was an

island oasis in this dead and unmoving sea of desks and typewriters which might start up and scream like electric insects. He stood watching the walking-dead depart. And he cared not. He was kept in a splendid and beautiful isolation within his own calm cool beautiful skin.

"No!" cried Will Morgan, and fled.

He didn't know where he was going until he found himself in the men's room frantically digging in the wastebasket.

He found what he knew he would find, a small bottle with the label:

DRINK ENTIRE: AGAINST THE MADNESS OF CROWDS.

Trembling, he uncorked it. There was the merest cold blue drop left inside. Swaying by the shut hot window, he tapped it to his tongue.

In the instant, his body felt as if he had leaped into a tidal wave of coolness. His breath gusted out in a fount of crushed and savored clover.

He gripped the bottle so hard it broke. He gasped, watching the blood.

The door opened. Ned Amminger stood there, looking in. He stayed only a moment, then turned and went out. The door shut.

A few moments later, Morgan, with the junk from his desk rattling in his briefcase, went down in the elevator.

Stepping out, he turned to thank the operator.

His breath must have touched the operator's face.

The operator smiled.

A wild, an incomprehensible, a loving, a *beautiful* smile!

The lights were out at midnight in the little alley, in the little shop. There was no sign in the window which said MELISSA TOAD, WITCH. There were no bottles.

He beat on the door for a full five minutes, to no answer. He kicked the door for another two minutes.

And at last, with a sigh, not wanting to, the door opened.

A very tired voice said: "Come in."

Inside he found the air only slightly cool. The huge ice slab, in which he had seen the phantom shape of a lovely woman,

had dwindled, had lost a good half of its weight, and now was dripping steadily to ruin.

Somewhere in the darkness, the woman waited for him. But he sensed that she was clothed now, dressed and packed, ready to leave. He opened his mouth to cry out, to reach, but her voice stopped him:

"I warned you. You're too late."

"It's never too late!" he said.

"Last night it wouldn't have been. But in the last twenty hours, the last little thread snapped in you. I feel. I know. I tell. It's gone, gone, gone."

"What's gone, God damn it?"

"Why, your soul, of course. Gone. Eaten up. Digested. Vanished. You're empty. Nothing there."

He saw her hand reach out of darkness. It touched at his chest. Perhaps he imagined that her fingers passed through his ribs to probe about his lights, his lungs, his beating and pitiful heart.

"Oh, yes, gone," she mourned. "How sad. The city unwrapped you like a candy bar and ate you all up. You're nothing but a dusty milk bottle left on a tenement porch, a spider building a nest across the top. Traffic din pounded your marrow to dust. Subway sucked your breath like a cat sucks the soul of a babe. Vacuum cleaners got your brain. Alcohol dissolved the rest. Typewriters and computers took your final dregs in and out their tripes, printed you on paper, punched you in confettis, threw you down a sewer vent. TV scribbled you in nervous tics on old ghost screens. Your final bones will be carried off by a big angry bulldog crosstown bus holding you munched in its big rubber-lipped mouth door."

"No!" he cried. "I've changed my mind! Marry me! Marry—"

His voice cracked the ice tomb. It shattered on the floor behind him. The shape of the beautiful woman melted into the floor. Spinning about, he plunged into darkness.

He fell against the wall just as a panel slammed shut and locked.

It was no use screaming. He was alone.

At dusk in July, a year later, in the subway, he saw Ned Amminger for the first time in 365 days.

In all the grind and ricochet and pour of fiery lava as trains banged through, taking a billion souls to hell, Amminger stood as cool as mint leaves in green rain. Around him wax people melted. He waded in his own private trout stream.

"Ned!" cried Will Morgan, running up to seize his hand and pump it. "Ned, Ned! The best friend I ever had!"

"Yes, that's true, isn't it?" said young Ned, smiling.

And oh God, how true it was! Dear Ned, fine Ned, friend of a lifetime! Breathe upon me, Ned! Give me your life's breath!

"You're president of the company, Ned! I heard!"

"Yes. Come along home for a drink?"

In the raging heat, a vapor of iced lemonade rose from his creamy fresh suit as they looked for a cab. In all the curses, yells, horns, Ned raised his hand.

A cab pulled up. They drove in serenity.

At the apartment house, in the dusk, a man with a gun stepped from the shadows.

"Give me everything," he said.

"Later," said Ned, smiling, breathing a scent of fresh summer apples upon the man.

"Later." The man stepped back to let them pass. "Later."

On the way up in the elevator, Ned said, "Did you know I'm married? Almost a year. Fine wife."

"Is she," said Will Morgan, and stopped, "... beautiful?"

"Oh, yes. You'll love her. You'll love the apartment."

Yes, thought Morgan; a green glade, crystal chimes, cool grass for a carpet. I know, I know.

They stepped out into an apartment that was indeed a tropic isle. Young Ned poured huge goblets of iced champagne.

"What shall we drink to?"

"To you, Ned. To your wife. To me. To midnight, tonight."

"Why midnight?"

"When I go back down to that man who is waiting downstairs with his gun. That man you said 'later' to. And he agreed 'later.' I'll be there alone with him. Funny, ridiculous, funny. And *my* breath just ordinary breath, not smelling of melons or pears. And him waiting all those long hours with his sweaty gun, irritable with heat. What a grand joke. Well... a toast?"

"A toast!"

They drank.

At which moment, the wife entered. She heard each of them laughing in a different way, and joined in their laughter.

But her eyes, when she looked at Will Morgan, suddenly filled with tears.

And he knew whom she was weeping for.

Elephas Frumenti



L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt

Omar the Tentmaker often wondered what the vintners bought, one half so precious as the stuff they sold; Kipling's elephant boy's elephant, aged and vigorous, received a daily ration of arrack, a sort of Asian aguardiente. . . . Is there a connection? If so, in de Camp and Pratt you see the men to make it. It was after all L. (for Lyon) Sprague de Camp who, in *An Elephant for Aristotle*, took us in fiction along the route tradition implies Alexander the Great sent an Indian jumbo to his old tutor—a route meticulously followed in fact by de Camp himself, to *Get It Right*. Of the classically hospitable Fletcher Pratt, an old friend writes: "In his huge, rambling steamboat gothic mansion there were shelves laden with every potable under the sun, and there is no liqueur, extant as of 1955, that I have not sipped at there." This story is one of (at least) twenty-nine *Tales From Gavagan's Bar*, and represents the only scientific explanation which will hold water as to why any elephant would be pink.

L. Sprague de Camp, M.S. in Engineering and Economics, was born in New York City in 1907. A WWII officer in the USNR, for "most of the last forty years he has pursued the career of a free-lance writer"—over 475 stories, scripts, and articles, much translated; as well as ninety-five books: among them *The Ancient Engineers*, *Great Cities of the Ancient World*, *H.P. Lovecraft: A Biography*, *Science-Fiction Handbook* (all nonfiction): *The Dragon of the Ishtar Gate*, *The*

Bronze God of Rhodes, *Lest Darkness Fall* (all novels); and *Heroes and Hobgoblins* (poetry). He has edited anthologies, such as *Warlocks and Warriors*, and such symposia as *The Conan Swordbook*. Among his collaborators: the late Fletcher Pratt, the late Willy Ley, Lin Carter, and Catherine Crook de Camp, his wife. The de Camps live in Pennsylvania.

Fletcher Pratt was born on an Indian reservation in New York State in 1897. Librarian, pro boxer, newspaper reporter, writer and translator of science fiction, cryptographer, scholar, historian, war correspondent, gourmet cook, Baker Street Irregular, breeder of marmosets, fabulous host: Fletcher Pratt. F.P. was author, by himself, of *Secret and Urgent*; *The Heroic Years*; *Hail, Caesar!*; *Ordeal by Fire*; *The Well of the Unicorn*; *The Blue Star*; and others. With L. Sprague de Camp he wrote *The Incomplete Enchanter*, *Wall of Serpents*, *The Land of Unreason*, *The Carnelian Cube*, and *Tales from Gavagan's Bar*. Fletcher Pratt died in 1956.

The thin, balding man in tweeds almost tipped over his glass as he set it down with a care that showed care had become necessary. "Think of dogs," he said. "Really, my dear, there is no practical limit to what can be accomplished by selective breeding."

"Except that where I come from, we sometimes think of other things," said the brass-blond, emphasizing the ancient *New Yorker* joke with a torso-wiggle that was pure *Police Gazette*.

Mr. Witherwax lifted his nose from the second Martini. "Do you know them, Mr. Cohan?" he asked.

Mr. Cohan turned in profile to swab a glass. "That would be Professor Thott, and a very educated gentleman, too. I don't rightly know the name of the lady, though I think he has been calling her Ellie, or something like that. Would you like to be meeting them, now?"

"Sure. I was reading in a book about this selective breeding, but I don't understand it so good, and maybe he could tell me something about it."

Mr. Cohan made his way to the end of the bar and led ponderously toward the table. "Pleased to meet you, Professor Thott," said Witherwax.

"Sir, the pleasure is all mine, all mine. Mrs. Jonas, may I present an old friend of mine, yclept Witherwax? Old in the sense that he is aged in the admirable liquids produced by Gavagan's, while the liquids themselves are aged in wood, ha—ha—a third-premise aging. Sit down, Mr. Witherwax. I call your attention to the remarkable qualities of alcohol, among which *peripeteia* is not the least."

"Yeah, that's right," said Mr. Witherwax, his expression taking on a resemblance to that of the stuffed owl over the bar. "What I was going to ask—"

"Sir, I perceive that I have employed a pedantry more suitable to the classroom, with the result that communication has not been established. *Peripeteia* is the reversal of rôles. While in a state of saintly sobriety, I pursue Mrs. Jonas; I entice her to alcoholic diversions. But after the third Presidente, she pursues me, in accordance with the ancient biological rule that alcohol increases feminine desire while decreasing masculine potency."

From the bar, Mr. Cohan appeared to have caught only a part of this speech. "Rolls we ain't got," he said. "But you can have some pretzel sticks." He reached under the bar for the bowl. "All gone; and I just laid out a new box this morning. That's where Gavagan's profits go. In the old days it was the free lunch, and now it's pretzel sticks."

"What I was going to ask—" said Witherwax.

Professor Thott stood up and bowed, a bow which ended in his sitting down again rather suddenly. "Ah, the mystery of the universe and music of the spheres, as Prospero might have phrased it! Who pursues? Who flies? The wicked. One preserves philosophy by remaining at the Platonian mean, the knife edge between pursuit and flight, wickedness and virtue. Mr. Cohan, a round of Presidentes please, including one for my aged friend."

"Let me buy this one," said Witherwax firmly. "What I was going to ask was about this selective breeding."

The professor shook himself, blinked twice, leaned back in his chair, and placed one hand on the table. "You wish me to be academic? Very well; but I have witnesses that it was at your own request."

Mrs. Jonas said: "Now look what you've done. You've got

him started and he won't run down until he falls asleep."

"What I want to know—" began Witherwax, but Thott beamingly cut across: "I shall present only the briefest and most non-technical of outlines," he said. "Let us suppose that, of sixteen mice, you took the two largest and bred them together. Their children would in turn be mated with those of the largest pair from another group of sixteen. And so on. Given time and material enough, and making it advantageous to the species to produce larger members, it would be easy to produce mice the size of lions."

"Ugh!" said Mrs. Jonas. "You ought to give up drinking. Your imagination gets gruesome."

"I see," said Witherwax, "like a book I read once where they had rats so big they ate horses and wasps the size of dogs."

"I recall the volume," said Thott, sipping his Presidente. "It was *The Food of the Gods*, by H. G. Wells. I fear, however, that the method he describes was not that of genetics and therefore had no scientific validity."

"But could you make things like that by selective breeding?" asked Witherwax.

"Certainly. You could produce houseflies the size of tigers. It is merely a matter of—"

Mrs. Jonas raised a hand. "Alvin, what an awful thought. I hope you don't ever try it."

"There need be no cause for apprehension, my dear. The square-cube law will forever protect us from such a visitation."

"Huh?" said Witherwax.

"The square-cube law. If you double the dimensions, you quadruple the area and octuple the masses. The result is—well, in a practical non-technical sense, a tiger-sized housefly would have legs too thin and wings too small to support his weight."

Mrs. Jonas said: "Alvin, that's impractical. How could it move?"

The Professor essayed another bow, which was even less successful than the first, since it was made from a sitting position. "Madame, the purpose of such an experiment would not be practical but demonstrative. A tiger-sized fly would be a mass of jelly that would have to be fed from a spoon." He raised a hand. "There is no reason why anyone should produce

such a monster; and since nature has no advantages to offer insects of large size, it will decline to produce them. I agree that the thought is repulsive; myself, I should prefer the alternative project of producing elephants the size of flies—or swallows."

Witherwax beckoned to Mr. Cohan. "These are good. Do it again. But wouldn't your square-cube law get you in Dutch there, too?"

"By no means, sir. In the case of size reduction, it works in your favor. The mass is divided by eight, but the muscles remain proportionately the same, capable of supporting a vastly greater weight. The legs and wings of a tiny elephant would not only support him, but give him the agility of a hummingbird. Consider the dwarf elephant of Sicily during the Plish—"

"Alvin," said Mrs. Jonas, "you're drunk. Otherwise you'd remember how to pronounce Pleistocene, and you wouldn't be talking about elephants' wings."

"Not at all, my dear. I should confidently expect such a species to develop flight by means of enlarged ears, like the Dumbo of the movies."

Mrs. Jonas giggled. "Still, I wouldn't want one the size of a housefly. It would be too small for a pet and would get into things. Let's make it the size of a kitten, like this." She held out her index fingers about five inches apart.

"Very well, my dear," said the Professor. "As soon as I can obtain a grant from the Carnegie Foundation, the project will be undertaken."

"Yes, but," said Witherwax, "how would you feed an elephant like that? And could they be housebroke?"

"If you can housebreak a man, an elephant ought to be easy," said Mrs. Jonas. "And you could feed them oats or hay. Much cleaner than keeping cans of dog food around."

The Professor rubbed his chin. "Hmm," he said. "The rate of absorption of nourishment would vary directly as the intestinal area—which would vary as the square of the dimensions—I'm not sure of the results, but I'm afraid we'd have to provide more concentrated and less conventional food. I presume that we could feed our *Elephas micros*, as I propose to call him, on lump sugar. No, not *Elephas micros*, *Elephas*

microtatus, the 'utmost littlest, tiniest elephant.'"

Mr. Cohan, who had been neglecting his only other customer to lean on the bar in their direction, spoke up: "Mr. Considine, that's the salesman, was telling me that the most concentrated food you can get is good malt whiskey."

"That's it!" The Professor slapped the table. "Not *Elephas microtatus* but *Elephas frumenti*, the whiskey elephant, from what he lives on. We'll breed them for a diet of alcohol. High energy content."

"Oh, but that won't do," protested Mrs. Jonas. "Nobody would want a house pet that had to be fed on whiskey all the time. Especially with children around."

Said Witherwax: "Look, if you really want these animals, why don't you keep them some place where children aren't around and whiskey is—bars, for instance."

"Profound observation," said Professor Thott. "And speaking of rounds, Mr. Cohan, let us have another. We have horses as outdoor pets, cats as house pets, canaries as cage pets. Why not an animal especially designed and developed to be a bar pet? Speaking of which—that stuffed owl you keep for a pet, Mr. Cohan, is getting decidedly mangy."

"They would steal things like that," said Mrs. Jonas dreamily. "They would take things like owls' feathers and pretzel sticks and beer mats to build their nests with, up in the dark corners somewhere near the ceiling. They would come out at night—"

The Professor bent a benignant gaze on her as Mr. Cohan set out the drinks. "My dear," he said, "either this discussion of the future *Elephas frumenti* or the actual *spiritus frumenti* is going to your head. When you become poetical—"

The brass-blond had leaned back and was looking upward. "I'm not poetical. That thing right up there on top of the pillar is the nest of one of your bar elephants."

"What thing up there?" said Thott.

"That thing up there, where it's so dark."

"I don't see nothing," said Mr. Cohan, "and if you don't mind my saying so, this is a clean bar, not a rat in the place."

"They wouldn't be quite tame, ever," said Mrs. Jonas, still looking upward, "and if they didn't feel they were fed enough,

they'd come and take for themselves when the bartender wasn't looking."

"That does look funny," said Thott, pushing his chair back and beginning to climb on it.

"Don't, Alvin," said Mrs. Jonas. "You'll break your neck. . . . Think of it, they'd feed their children—"

"Stand by me, then, and let me put my hand on your shoulder."

"Hey!" said Witherwax suddenly. "Who drank my drink?"

Mrs. Jonas lowered her eyes. "Didn't you?"

"I didn't even touch it. Mr. Cohan just put it down, didn't you?"

"I did that. But that would be a couple of minutes back, and maybe you could—"

"I could not. I definitely, positively did not drink—hey, you people, look at the table!"

"If I had my other glasses. . . ." said Thott, swaying somewhat uncertainly as he peered upward into the shadows.

"Look at the table," repeated Witherwax, pointing.

The glass that had held his drink was empty. Thott's still held about half a cocktail. Mrs. Jonas' glass lay on its side, and from its lip about a thimbleful of Presidente cocktail had flowed pinkly into an irregular patch the size of a child's hand.

As the other two followed Witherwax's finger, they saw that, from this patch, a line of little damp footprints led across the table to the far edge, where they suddenly ceased. They were circular, each about the size of a dime, with a small scalloped front edge, as if made by . . .

Shottle Bop



Theodore Sturgeon

To many, Theodore Sturgeon's *Shottle Bop* is the Source of all odde shoppe stories . . . and surely it must be of many. It seems impossible to utter an anthology of them and not include it; letting it speak for itself (and for those magic days of the magic magazine, *Unknown*, later, *Unknown Worlds*), I shall acknowledge that my own favorite Sturgeon story is "The Other Celia," and that my personal wonder is that "The Other Celia" is not merely not better known but universally better known. As for *Theodore Sturgeon* himself, he is one of the Magic People; wherever this woodwose has been will be the smoke of burning juniper and of wild apples the taste and scent. He is of the magic people, it is he who weaves the circle.

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 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 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 text Neusday!"

"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 telling people 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? Nup. 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-gratification, 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 unlap. I used to love to unlap. 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 felt only 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 come 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 shoul'da 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 Barrel-head 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 disbelieved 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 remember 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-dime 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 on 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. And when I got to Twenty-first Street, I stopped and stared. Facing me was a blank wall. The whole side of the block was void of people. There was no sign of a shop.

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. I wound up 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 bumped 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 for 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 ferry boat?"

"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 can 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 see you back, I imagine. Come on; let's get going!"

I gave him a shove in the direction of the subways and strolled along 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 the 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 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 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 authority 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 the 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 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've 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 big-time. 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. It wasn't enough that I'd prove Audrey wrong when she said I'd never

amount to anything. And I wasn't happy when I thought about the gang. 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. 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-manuever, and out-smart anyone on earth. I was really quite a fellow. 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 six-thousand-dollar roadster!" and "To think I used to waste my time and tears on a dope 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 everything 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?

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 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 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 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 too 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."

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 credit him with. He had to be scared. He couldn't—or wouldn't—scare himself.

I crouched down against the walls 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 anymore 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 you may 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 is—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—the 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 the 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 Crystal Egg



H. G. Wells

There was a time when it seemed that H. G. Wells knew everything, and certainly H. G. Wells seemed to agree. Even now, when the old battles seem half-won and somehow not so stirring anymore, and when the old adjectives have dimmed, and all that...even now it is certainly certain that H. G. Wells knew the lot and life of the small shopkeeper, who, barely able to keep his own books (if that), still struggled on to maintain not alone life but a certain pathetic claim to social status. Wells's father was one, and this personal (and painful) knowledge appears again and again in his short stories and in such novels as *Kipps*. Bonaparte said that "the English are a nation of shopkeepers" and Khrushchev said that "all shopkeepers are thieves": neither had ever kept a shop. Wells knew not only the smaller ends of trade and commerce in the late nineteenth century, he knew as well the smaller aspects of its science; he had studied and taught in the schools of science, before there were yet really any universities for it. As for his brilliant gifts as a storyteller before those gifts flattened out into wearied political polemic (It was certainly not weariedly that he concluded a note to George Orwell with the words, "Read my early works, you shit"!), I have said elsewhere, twenty years ago, that Wells, "like a giant dressed in jewels, towers and glitters high over all the rest of us." And I say so, still, today.

H(erbert) G(eorge) Wells was born in 1866 in Bromley,

Kent. His career as a writer began brilliantly with publication of *The Time Machine* in 1895. This was followed by *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *The Invisible Man*, *The War of the Worlds*, *The First Men in the Moon*, *Kipps*, *The War in the Air*, *The History of Mr. Polly*, and many more, including *Outline of History* in 1920 and *The Shape of Things to Come* in 1933. Wells was an influential member of the Fabian [Socialist] Society, 1903–1908, and “coined the hopeful phrase ‘the war that will end war’ in 1914.” He had predicted a Communist takeover of Britain and his own death as a result, but died in 1946 in London, still cantankerous and free.

There was, until a year ago, a little and very grimy-looking shop near Seven Dials, over which, in weather-worn yellow lettering, the name of “C. Cave, Naturalist and Dealer in Antiquities,” was inscribed. The contents of its window were curiously varied. They comprised some elephant tusks and an imperfect set of chessmen, beads and weapons, a box of eyes, two skulls of tigers and one human, several moth-eaten stuffed monkeys (one holding a lamp), an old-fashioned cabinet, a fly-blown ostrich egg or so, some fishing-tackle, and an extraordinarily dirty, empty glass fish-tank. There was also, at the moment the story begins, a mass of crystal, worked into the shape of an egg and brilliantly polished. And at that two people, who stood outside the window, were looking, one of them a tall, thin clergyman, the other a black-bearded young man of dusky complexion and unobtrusive costume. The dusky young man spoke with eager gesticulation, and seemed anxious for his companion to purchase the article.

While they were there, Mr. Cave came into his shop, his beard still wagging with the bread and butter of his tea. When he saw these men and the object of their regard, his countenance fell. He glanced guiltily over his shoulder, and softly shut the door. He was a little old man, with pale face and peculiar watery blue eyes; his hair was a dirty grey, and he wore a shabby blue frock-coat, an ancient silk hat, and carpet slippers very much down at heel. He remained watching the two men as they talked. The clergyman went deep into his trouser pocket, examined a handful of money, and showed his teeth in an

agreeable smile. Mr. Cave seemed still more depressed when they came into the shop.

The clergyman, without any ceremony, asked the price of the crystal egg. Mr. Cave glanced nervously towards the door leading into the parlour, and said five pounds. The clergyman protested that the price was high, to his companion as well as to Mr. Cave—it was, indeed, very much more than Mr. Cave had intended to ask, when he had stocked the article—and an attempt at bargaining ensued. Mr. Cave stepped to the shop-door, and held it open. "Five pounds is my price," he said, as though he wished to save himself the trouble of unprofitable discussion. As he did so, the upper portion of a woman's face appeared above the blind in the glass upper panel of the door leading into the parlour, and stared curiously at the two customers. "Five pounds is my price," said Mr. Cave, with a quiver in his voice.

The swarthy young man had so far remained a spectator, watching Cave keenly. Now he spoke. "Give him five pounds," he said. The clergyman glanced at him to see if he were in earnest, and, when he looked at Mr. Cave again, he saw that the latter's face was white. "It's a lot of money," said the clergyman, and, diving into his pocket, began counting his resources. He had little more than thirty shillings, and he appealed to his companion, with whom he seemed to be on terms of considerable intimacy. This gave Mr. Cave an opportunity of collecting his thoughts, and he began to explain in an agitated manner that the crystal was not, as a matter of fact, entirely free for sale. His two customers were naturally surprised at this, and inquired why he had not thought of that before he began to bargain. Mr. Cave became confused, but he stuck to his story, that the crystal was not in the market that afternoon, that a probable purchaser of it had already appeared. The two, treating this as an attempt to raise the price still further, made as if they would leave the shop. But at this point the parlour door opened, and the owner of the dark fringe and the little eyes appeared.

She was a coarse-featured, corpulent woman, younger and very much larger than Mr. Cave; she walked heavily, and her face was flushed. "That crystal *is* for sale," she said. "And

five pounds is a good enough price for it. I can't think what you're about, Cave, not to take the gentleman's offer!"

Mr. Cave, greatly perturbed by the irruption, looked angrily at her over the rims of his spectacles, and, without excessive assurance, asserted his right to manage his business in his own way. An altercation began. The two customers watched the scene with interest and some amusement, occasionally assisting Mrs. Cave with suggestions. Mr. Cave, hard driven, persisted in a confused and impossible story of an enquiry for the crystal that morning, and his agitation became painful. But he stuck to his point with extraordinary persistence. It was the young Oriental who ended this curious controversy. He proposed that they should call again in the course of two days—so as to give the alleged enquirer a fair chance. "And then we must insist," said the clergyman. "Five pounds." Mrs. Cave took it on herself to apologise for her husband, explaining that he was sometimes "a little odd," and as the two customers left, the couple prepared for a free discussion of the incident in all its bearings.

Mrs. Cave talked to her husband with singular directness. The poor little man, quivering with emotion, muddled himself between his stories, maintaining on the one hand that he had another customer in view, and on the other asserting that the crystal was honestly worth ten guineas. "Why did you ask five pounds?" said his wife. "*Do* let me manage my business my own way!" said Mr. Cave.

Mr. Cave had living with him a step-daughter and a step-son, and at supper that night the transaction was rediscussed. None of them had a high opinion of Mr. Cave's business methods, and this action seemed a culminating folly.

"It's my opinion he's refused that crystal before," said the step-son, a loose-limbed lout of eighteen.

"*But Five Pounds!*" said the step-daughter, an argumentative young woman of six-and-twenty.

Mr. Cave's answers were wretched; he could only mumble weak assertions that he knew his own business best. They drove him from his half-eaten supper into the shop, to close it for the night, his ears aflame and tears of vexation behind his spectacles. "Why had he left the crystal in the window so long? The folly of it!" That was the trouble closest in his mind. For a time he could see no way of evading sale.

After supper his step-daughter and step-son smartened themselves up and went out and his wife retired upstairs to reflect upon the business aspects of the crystal, over a little sugar and lemon and so forth in hot water. Mr. Cave went into the shop, and stayed there until late, ostensibly to make ornamental rockeries for gold-fish cases but really for a private purpose that will be better explained later. The next day Mrs. Cave found that the crystal had been removed from the window, and was lying behind some second-hand books on angling. She replaced it in a conspicuous position. But she did not argue further about it, as a nervous headache disinclined her from debate. Mr. Cave was always disinclined. The day passed disagreeably. Mr. Cave was, if anything, more absent-minded than usual, and uncommonly irritable withal. In the afternoon, when his wife was taking her customary sleep, he removed the crystal from the window again.

The next day Mr. Cave had to deliver a consignment of dog-fish at one of the hospital schools, where they were needed for dissection. In his absence Mrs. Cave's mind reverted to the topic of the crystal, and the methods of expenditure suitable to a windfall of five pounds. She had already devised some very agreeable expedients, among others a dress of green silk for herself and a trip to Richmond, when a jangling of the front door bell summoned her into the shop. The customer was an examination coach who came to complain of the non-delivery of certain frogs asked for the previous day. Mrs. Cave did not approve of this particular branch of Mr. Cave's business, and the gentleman, who had called in a somewhat aggressive mood, retired after a brief exchange of words—entirely civil so far as he was concerned. Mrs. Cave's eye then naturally turned to the window; for the sight of the crystal was an assurance of the five pounds and of her dreams. What was her surprise to find it gone!

She went to the place behind the locker on the counter, where she had discovered it the day before. It was not there; and she immediately began an eager search about the shop.

When Mr. Cave returned from his business with the dog-fish, about a quarter to two in the afternoon, he found the shop in some confusion, and his wife, extremely exasperated and on her knees behind the counter, routing among his taxidermic

material. Her face came up hot and angry over the counter, as the jangling bell announced his return, and she forthwith accused him of "hiding it."

"Hid *what*?" asked Mr. Cave.

"The crystal!"

At that Mr. Cave, apparently much surprised, rushed to the window. "Isn't it here?" he said. "Great Heavens! what has become of it?"

Just then, Mr. Cave's step-son re-entered the shop from the inner room—he had come home a minute or so before Mr. Cave—and he was blaspheming freely. He was apprenticed to a second-hand furniture dealer down the road, but he had his meals at home, and he was naturally annoyed to find no dinner ready.

But, when he heard of the loss of the crystal, he forgot his meal, and his anger was diverted from his mother to his step-father. Their first idea, of course, was that he had hidden it. But Mr. Cave stoutly denied all knowledge of its fate—freely offering his bedabbled affidavit in the matter—and at last was worked up to the point of accusing, first, his wife and then his step-son of having taken it with a view to a private sale. So began an exceedingly acrimonious and emotional discussion, which ended for Mrs. Cave in a peculiar nervous condition midway between hysterics and amuck, and caused the step-son to be half-an-hour late at the furniture establishment in the afternoon. Mr. Cave took refuge from his wife's emotions in the shop.

In the evening the matter was resumed, with less passion and in a judicial spirit, under the presidency of the step-daughter. The supper passed unhappily and culminated in a painful scene. Mr. Cave gave way at last to extreme exasperation, and went out banging the front door violently. The rest of the family, having discussed him with the freedom his absence warranted, hunted the house from garret to cellar, hoping to light upon the crystal.

The next day the two customers called again. They were received by Mrs. Cave almost in tears. It transpired that no one *could* imagine all that she had stood from Cave at various times in her married pilgrimage. . . . She also gave a garbled account of the disappearance. The clergyman and the Oriental

laughed silently at one another, and said it was very extraordinary. As Mrs. Cave seemed disposed to give them the complete history of his life they made to leave the shop. Thereupon Mrs. Cave, still clinging to hope, asked for the clergyman's address, so that, if she could get anything out of Cave, she might communicate it. The address was duly given, but apparently was afterwards mislaid. Mrs. Cave can remember nothing about it.

In the evening of that day, the Caves seem to have exhausted their emotions, and Mr. Cave, who had been out in the afternoon, supped in a gloomy isolation that contrasted pleasantly with the impassioned controversy of the previous days. For some time matters were very badly strained in the Cave household, but neither crystal nor customer reappeared.

Now, without mincing the matter, we must admit that Mr. Cave was a liar. He knew perfectly well where the crystal was. It was in the rooms of Mr. Jacoby Wace, Assistant Demonstrator at St. Catherine's Hospital, Westbourne Street. It stood on the sideboard partially covered by a black velvet cloth, and beside a decanter of American whisky. It is from Mr. Wace, indeed, that the particulars upon which this narrative is based were derived. Cave had taken off the thing to the hospital hidden in the dog-fish sack, and there had pressed the young investigator to keep it for him. Mr. Wace was a little dubious at first. His relationship to Cave was peculiar. He had a taste for singular characters, and he had more than once invited the old man to smoke and drink in his rooms, and to unfold his rather amusing views of life in general and of his wife in particular. Mr. Wace had encountered Mrs. Cave, too, on occasions when Mr. Cave was not at home to attend to him. He knew the constant interference to which Cave was subjected, and having weighed the story judicially, he decided to give the crystal a refuge. Mr. Cave promised to explain the reasons for his remarkable affection for the crystal more fully on a later occasion, but he spoke distinctly of seeing visions therein. He called on Mr. Wace the same evening.

He told a complicated story. The crystal he said had come into his possession with other oddments at the forced sale of another curiosity dealer's effects, and not knowing what its value might be, he had ticketed it at ten shillings. It had hung

upon his hands at that price for some months, and he was thinking of "reducing the figure," when he made a singular discovery.

At that time his health was very bad—and it must be borne in mind that, throughout all this experience, his physical condition was one of ebb—and he was in considerable distress by reason of the negligence, the positive ill-treatment even, he received from his wife and step-children. His wife was vain, extravagant, unfeeling, and had a growing taste for private drinking; his step-daughter was mean and over-reaching; and his step-son had conceived a violent dislike for him, and lost no chance of showing it. The requirements of his business pressed heavily upon him, and Mr. Wace does not think that he was altogether free from occasional intemperance. He had begun life in a comfortable position, he was a man of fair education, and he suffered, for weeks at a stretch, from melancholia and insomnia. Afraid to disturb his family, he would slip quietly from his wife's side, when his thoughts became intolerable, and wander about the house. And about three o'clock one morning, late in August, chance directed him into the shop.

The dirty little place was impenetrably black except in one spot, where he perceived an unusual glow of light. Approaching this, he discovered it to be the crystal egg, which was standing on the corner of the counter towards the window. A thin ray smote through a crack in the shutters, impinged upon the object, and seemed as it were to fill its entire interior.

It occurred to Mr. Cave that this was not in accordance with the laws of optics as he had known them in his younger days. He could understand the rays being refracted by the crystal and coming to a focus in its interior, but this diffusion jarred with his physical conceptions. He approached the crystal nearly, peering into it and round it, with a transient revival of the scientific curiosity that in his youth had determined his choice of a calling. He was surprised to find the light not steady, but writhing within the substance of the egg, as though that object was a hollow sphere of some luminous vapour. In moving about to get different points of view, he suddenly found that he had come between it and the ray, and that the crystal none the less remained luminous. Greatly astonished, he lifted it out of the light ray and carried it to the darkest part of the shop. It re-

mained bright for some four or five minutes, when it slowly faded and went out. He placed it in the thin streak of daylight, and its luminousness was almost immediately restored.

So far, at least, Mr. Wace was able to verify the remarkable story of Mr. Cave. He has himself repeatedly held this crystal in a ray of light (which had to be of a less diameter than one millimetre). And in a perfect darkness, such as could be produced by velvet wrapping, the crystal did undoubtedly appear very faintly phosphorescent. It would seem, however, that the luminousness was of some exceptional sort, and not equally visible to all eyes; for Mr. Harbinger—whose name will be familiar to the scientific reader in connection with the Pasteur Institute—was quite unable to see any light whatever. And Mr. Wace's own capacity for its appreciation was out of comparison inferior to that of Mr. Cave's. Even with Mr. Cave the power varied very considerably: his vision was most vivid during states of extreme weakness and fatigue.

Now from the outset this light in the crystal exercised an irresistible fascination upon Mr. Cave. And it says more for his loneliness of soul than a volume of pathetic writing could do, that he told no human being of his curious observations. He seems to have been living in such an atmosphere of petty spite that to admit the existence of a pleasure would have been to risk the loss of it. He found that as the dawn advanced, and the amount of diffused light increased, the crystal became to all appearance non-luminous. And for some time he was unable to see anything in it, except at night-time, in dark corners of the shop.

But the use of an old velvet cloth, which he used as a background for a collection of minerals, occurred to him, and by doubling this, and putting it over his head and hands, he was able to get a sight of the luminous movement within the crystal even in the day-time. He was very cautious lest he should be thus discovered by his wife, and he practised this occupation only in the afternoons, while she was asleep upstairs, and then circumspectly in a hollow under the counter. And one day, turning the crystal about in his hands, he saw something. It came and went like a flash, but it gave him the impression that the object had for a moment opened to him the view of a wide and spacious and strange country; and, turning

it about, he did, just as the light faded, see the same vision again.

Now, it would be tedious and unnecessary to state all the phases of Mr. Cave's discovery from this point. Suffice that the effect was this: the crystal, being peered into at an angle of about 137 degrees from the direction of the illuminating ray, gave a clear and consistent picture of a wide and peculiar country-side. It was not dream-like at all; it produced a definite impression of reality, and the better the light the more real and solid it seemed. It was a moving picture: that is to say, certain objects moved in it, but slowly in an orderly manner like real things, and, according as the direction of the lighting and vision changed, the picture changed also. It must, indeed, have been like looking through an oval glass at a view, and turning the glass about to get at different aspects.

Mr. Cave's statements, Mr. Wace assures me, were extremely circumstantial, and entirely free from any of that emotional quality that taints hallucinatory impressions. But it must be remembered that all the efforts of Mr. Wace to see any similar clarity in the faint opalescence of the crystal were wholly unsuccessful, try as he would. The difference in intensity of the impressions received by the two men was very great, and it is quite conceivable that what was a view to Mr. Cave was a mere blurred nebulosity to Mr. Wace.

The view, as Mr. Cave described it, was invariably of an extensive plain, and he seemed always to be looking at it from a considerable height, as if from a tower or a mast. To the east and to the west the plain was bounded at a remote distance by vast reddish cliffs, which reminded him of those he had seen in some picture; but what the picture was Mr. Wace was unable to ascertain. These cliffs passed north and south—he could tell the points of the compass by the stars that were visible of a night—receding in an almost illimitable perspective and fading into the mists of the distance before they met. He was nearer the eastern set of cliffs, on the occasion of his first vision the sun was rising over them, and black against the sunlight and pale against their shadow appeared a multitude of soaring forms that Mr. Cave regarded as birds. A vast range of buildings spread below him; he seemed to be looking down upon them; and, as they approached the blurred and refracted edge of the

picture, they became indistinct. There were also trees curious in shape, and in colouring, a deep mossy green and an exquisite grey, beside a wide and shining canal. And something great and brilliantly coloured flew across the picture. But the first time Mr. Cave saw these pictures he saw only in flashes, his hands shook, his head moved, the vision came and went, and grew foggy and indistinct. And at first he had the greatest difficulty in finding the picture again once the direction of it was lost.

His next clear vision, which came about a week after the first, the interval having yielded nothing but tantalising glimpses and some useful experience, showed him the view down the length of the valley. The view was different, but he had a curious persuasion, which his subsequent observations abundantly confirmed, that he was regarding this strange world from exactly the same spot, although he was looking in a different direction. The long façade of the great building, whose roof he had looked down upon before, was now receding in perspective. He recognised the roof. In the front of the façade was a terrace of massive proportions and extraordinary length, and down the middle of the terrace, at certain intervals, stood huge but very graceful masts, bearing small shiny objects which reflected the setting sun. The import of these small objects did not occur to Mr. Cave until some time after, as he was describing the scene to Mr. Wace. The terrace overhung a thicket of the most luxuriant and graceful vegetation, and beyond this was a wide grassy lawn on which certain broad creatures, in form like beetles but enormously larger, reposed. Beyond this again was a richly decorated causeway of pinkish stone; and beyond that, and lined with dense *red* weeds, and passing up the valley exactly parallel with the distant cliffs, was a broad and mirror-like expanse of water. The air seemed full of squadrons of great birds, maneuvering in stately curves; and across the river was a multitude of splendid buildings, richly coloured and glittering with metallic tracery and facets, among a forest of moss-like and lichenous trees. And suddenly something flapped repeatedly across the vision, like the fluttering of a jewelled fan or the beating of a wing, and a face, or rather the upper part of a face with very large eyes, came as it were close to his own and as if on the other side of the crystal. Mr. Cave

was so startled and so impressed by the absolute reality of these eyes, that he drew his head back from the crystal to look behind it. He had become so absorbed in watching that he was quite surprised to find himself in the cool darkness of his little shop, with its familiar odour of methyl, mustiness, and decay. And, as he blinked about him, the glowing crystal faded, and went out.

Such were the first general impressions of Mr. Cave. The story is curiously direct and circumstantial. From the outset, when the valley first flashed momentarily on his senses, his imagination was strangely affected, and, as he began to appreciate the details of the scene he saw, his wonder rose to the point of a passion. He went about his business listless and distraught, thinking only of the time when he should be able to return to his watching. And then a few weeks after his first sight of the valley came the two customers, the stress and excitement of their offer, and the narrow escape of the crystal from sale, as I have already told.

Now while the thing was Mr. Cave's secret, it remained a mere wonder, a thing to creep to covertly and peep at, as a child might peep upon a forbidden garden. But Mr. Wace has, for a young scientific investigator, a particularly lucid and consecutive habit of mind. Directly the crystal and its story came to him, and he had satisfied himself, by seeing the phosphorescence with his own eyes, that there really was a certain evidence for Mr. Cave's statements, he proceeded to develop the matter systematically. Mr. Cave was only too eager to come and feast his eyes on this wonderland he saw, and he came every night from half-past eight until half-past ten, and sometimes, in Mr. Wace's absence, during the day. On Sunday afternoons, also, he came. From the outset Mr. Wace made copious notes, and it was due to his scientific method that the relation between the direction from which the initiating ray entered the crystal and the orientation of the picture was proved. And, by covering the crystal in a box perforated only with a small aperture to admit the exciting ray, and by substituting black holland for his buff blinds, he greatly improved the conditions of the observations; so that in a little while they were able to survey the valley in any direction they desired.

So having cleared the way, we may give a brief account of

this visionary world within the crystal. The things were in all cases seen by Mr. Cave, and the method of working was invariably for him to watch the crystal and report what he saw, while Mr. Wace (who as a science student had learnt the trick of writing in the dark) wrote a brief note of his report. When the crystal faded, it was put into its box in the proper position and the electric light turned on. Mr. Wace asked questions, and suggested observations to clear up difficult points. Nothing, indeed, could have been less visionary and more matter-of-fact.

The attention of Mr. Cave had been speedily directed to the bird-like creatures he had seen so abundantly present in each of his earlier visions. His first impression was soon corrected, and he considered for a time that they might represent a diurnal species of bat. Then he thought, grotesquely enough, that they might be cherubs. Their heads were round, and curiously human, and it was the eyes of one of them that had so startled him on his second observation. They had broad, silvery wings, not feathered, but glistening almost as brilliantly as new-killed fish and with the same subtle play of colour, and these wings were not built on the plan of bird-wing, or bat, Mr. Wace learned, but supported by curved ribs radiating from the body. (A sort of butterfly wing with curved ribs seems best to express their appearance.) The body was small, but fitted with two bunches of prehensile organs, like long tentacles, immediately under the mouth. Incredible as it appeared to Mr. Wace, the persuasion at last became irresistible, that it was these creatures which owned the great quasi-human buildings and the magnificent garden that made the broad valley so splendid. And Mr. Cave perceived that the buildings, with other peculiarities, had no doors, but that the great circular windows, which opened freely, gave the creatures egress, and entrance. They would alight upon their tentacles, fold their wings to a smallness almost rod-like, and hop into the interior. But among them was a multitude of smaller-winged creatures, like great dragon-flies and moths and flying beetles, and across the greensward brilliantly-coloured gigantic ground-beetles crawled lazily to and fro. Moreover, on the causeways and terraces, large-headed creatures similar to the greater winged flies, but wingless, were visible, hopping busily upon their hand-like tangle of tentacles.

Allusion has already been made to the glittering objects upon masts that stood upon the terrace of the nearer building. It dawned upon Mr. Cave, after regarding one of these masts very fixedly on one particularly vivid day, that the glittering object there was a crystal exactly like that into which he peered. And a still more careful scrutiny convinced him that each one in a vista of nearly twenty carried a similar object.

Occasionally one of the large flying creatures would flutter up to one, and, folding its wings and coiling a number of its tentacles about the mast, would regard the crystal fixedly for a space—sometimes for as long as fifteen minutes. And a series of observations, made at the suggestion of Mr. Wace, convinced both watchers that, so far as this visionary world was concerned, the crystal into which they peered actually stood at the summit of the end-most mast on the terrace, and that on one occasion at least one of these inhabitants of this other world had looked into Mr. Cave's face while he was making these observations.

So much for the essential facts of this very singular story. Unless we dismiss it all as the ingenious fabrication of Mr. Wace, we have to believe one of two things: either that Mr. Cave's crystal was in two worlds at once, and that, while it was carried about in one, it remained stationary in the other, which seems altogether absurd; or else that it had some peculiar relation of sympathy with another and exactly similar crystal in this other world, so that what was seen in the interior of the one in this world was, under suitable conditions, visible to an observer in the corresponding crystal in the other world; and *vice versa*. At present, indeed, we do not know of any way in which two crystals could so come *en rapport*, but nowadays we know enough to understand that the thing is not altogether impossible. This view of the crystals as *en rapport* was the supposition that occurred to Mr. Wace, and to me at least it seems extremely plausible. . . .

And where was this other world? On this, also, the alert intelligence of Mr. Wace speedily threw light. After sunset, the sky darkened rapidly—there was a very brief twilight interval indeed—and the stars shone out. They were recognisably the same as those we see, arranged in the same constellations. Mr. Cave recognised the Bear, the Pleiades, Aldebaran, and

Sirius: so that the other world must be somewhere in the solar system, and, at the utmost, only a few hundreds of millions of miles from our own. Following up this clue, Mr. Wace learned that the midnight sky was a darker blue even than our midwinter sky, and that the sun seemed a little smaller. *And there were two small moons!* "like our moon but smaller, and quite differently marked" one of which moved so rapidly that its motion was clearly visible as one regarded it. These moons were never high in the sky, but vanished as they rose: that is, every time they revolved they were eclipsed because they were so near their primary planet. And all this answers quite completely, although Mr. Cave did not know it, to what must be the condition of things on Mars.

Indeed, it seems an exceedingly plausible conclusion that peering into this crystal Mr. Cave did actually see the planet Mars and its inhabitants. And, if that be the case, then the evening star that shone so brilliantly in the sky of that distant vision, was neither more nor less than our own familiar earth.

For a time the Martians—if they were Martians—do not seem to have known of Mr. Cave's inspection. Once or twice one would come to peer, and go away very shortly to some other mast, as though the vision was unsatisfactory. During this time Mr. Cave was able to watch the proceedings of these winged people without being disturbed by their attentions, and, although his report is necessarily vague and fragmentary, it is nevertheless very suggestive. Imagine the impression of humanity a Martian observer would get who, after a difficult process of preparation and with considerable fatigue to the eyes, was able to peer at London from the steeple of St. Martin's Church for stretches, at longest, of four minutes at a time. Mr. Cave was unable to ascertain if the winged Martians were the same as the Martians who hopped about the causeways and terraces, and if the latter could put on wings at will. He several times saw certain clumsy bipeds, dimly suggestive of apes, white and partially translucent, feeding among certain of the lichenous trees, and once some of these fled before one of the hopping, round-headed Martians. The latter caught one in its tentacles, and then the picture faded suddenly and left Mr. Cave most tantalisingly in the dark. On another occasion a vast thing, that Mr. Cave thought at first was some gigantic insect,

appeared advancing along the causeway beside the canal with extraordinary rapidity. As this drew nearer Mr. Cave perceived that it was a mechanism of shiny metals and of extraordinary complexity. And then, when he looked again, it had passed out of sight.

After a time Mr. Wace aspired to attract the attention of the Martians, and the next time that the strange eyes of one of them appeared close to the crystal Mr. Cave cried out and sprang away, and they immediately turned on the light and began to gesticulate in a manner suggestive of signalling. But when at last Mr. Cave examined the crystal again the Martian had departed.

Thus far these observations had progressed in early November, and then Mr. Cave, feeling that the suspicions of his family about the crystal were allayed, began to take it to and fro with him in order that, as occasion arose in the daytime or night, he might comfort himself with what was fast becoming the most real thing in his existence.

In December Mr. Wace's work in connection with a forthcoming examination became heavy, the sittings were reluctantly suspended for a week, and for ten or eleven days—he is not quite sure which—he saw nothing of Cave. He then grew anxious to resume these investigations, and, the stress of his seasonal labours being abated, he went down to Seven Dials. At the corner he noticed a shutter before a bird fancier's window, and then another at a cobbler's. Mr. Cave's shop was closed.

He rapped and the door was opened by the step-son in black. He at once called Mrs. Cave, who was, Mr. Wace could not but observe, in cheap but ample widow's weeds of the most imposing pattern. Without any great surprise Mr. Wace learnt that Cave was dead and already buried. She was in tears, and her voice was a little thick. She had just returned from Highgate. Her mind seemed occupied with her own prospects and the honourable details of the obsequies, but Mr. Wace was at last able to learn the particulars of Cave's death. He had been found dead in his shop in the early morning, the day after his last visit to Mr. Wace, and the crystal had been clasped in his stone-cold hands. His face was smiling, said Mrs. Cave, and the velvet cloth from the minerals lay on the floor at his feet.

He must have been dead five or six hours when he was found.

This came as a great shock to Wace, and he began to reproach himself bitterly for having neglected the plain symptoms of the old man's ill-health. But his chief thought was of the crystal. He approached that topic in a gingerly manner, because he knew Mrs. Cave's peculiarities. He was dumbfounded to learn that it was sold.

Mrs. Cave's first impulse, directly Cave's body had been taken upstairs, had been to write to the mad clergyman who had offered five pounds for the crystal, informing him of its recovery; but after a violent hunt in which her daughter joined her, they were convinced of the loss of his address. As they were without the means required to mourn and bury Cave in the elaborate style the dignity of an old Seven Dials inhabitant demands, they had appealed to a friendly fellow-tradesman in Great Portland Street. He had very kindly taken over a portion of the stock at a valuation. The valuation was his own and the crystal egg was included in one of the lots. Mr. Wace, after a few suitable consolatory observations, a little off-handedly proffered perhaps, hurried at once to Great Portland Street. But there he learned that the crystal egg had already been sold to a tall, dark man in grey. And there the material facts in this curious, and to me at least very suggestive story come abruptly to an end. The Great Portland Street dealer did not know who the tall dark man in grey was, nor had he observed him with sufficient attention to describe him minutely. He did not even know which way this person had gone after leaving the shop. For a time Mr. Wace remained in the shop, trying the dealer's patience with hopeless questions, venting his own exasperation. And at last, realising abruptly that the whole thing had passed out of his hands, had vanished like a vision of the night, he returned to his own rooms, a little astonished to find the notes he had made still tangible and visible upon his untidy table.

His annoyance and disappointment were naturally very great. He made a second call (equally ineffectual) upon the Great Portland Street dealer, and he resorted to advertisements in such periodicals as were likely to come into the hands of a bric-a-brac collector. He also wrote letters to *The Daily Chronicle* and *Nature*, but both those periodicals, suspecting a hoax, asked him to reconsider his action before they printed, and he

was advised that such a strange story, unfortunately so bare of supporting evidence, might imperil his reputation as an investigator. Moreover, the calls of his proper work were urgent. So that after a month or so, save for an occasional reminder to certain dealers, he had reluctantly to abandon the quest for the crystal egg, and from that day to this it remains undiscovered. Occasionally however, he tells me, and I can quite believe him, he has bursts of zeal in which he abandons his more urgent occupation and resumes the search.

Whether or not it will remain lost for ever, with the material and origin of it, are things equally speculative at the present time. If the present purchaser is a collector, one would have expected the enquiries of Mr. Wace to have reached him through the dealers. He has been able to discover Mr. Cave's clergyman and "Oriental"—no other than the Rev. James Parker and the young Prince of Bosso-Kuni in Java. I am obliged to them for certain particulars. The object of the Prince was simply curiosity—and extravagance. He was so eager to buy, because Cave was so oddly reluctant to sell. It is just as possible that the buyer in the second instance was simply a casual purchaser and not a collector at all, and the crystal egg, for all I know, may at the present moment be within a mile of me, decorating a drawing-room or serving as a paper-weight—its remarkable functions all unknown. Indeed, it is partly with the idea of such a possibility that I have thrown this narrative into a form that will give it a chance of being read by the ordinary consumer of fiction.

My own ideas in the matter are practically identical with those of Mr. Wace. I believe the crystal on the mast in Mars and the crystal egg of Mr. Cave's to be in some physical, but at present quite inexplicable, way *en rapport*, and we both believe further that the terrestrial crystal must have been—possibly at some remote date—sent hither from that planet, in order to give the Martians a near view of our affairs. Possibly the fellows to the crystals in the other masts are also on our globe. No theory of hallucination suffices for the facts.

Woman in the Designer Genes



Daniel Gilbert

Asked for "some bio stuff," Daniel Gilbert gamely replied: "Began writing sf in 1978ish when I stumbled upon *Ubik*. Had never heard of sf before that. Thereabouts Phil Dick began providing much undeserved encouragement. A very fine man indeed. I write very slowly and infrequently because my first love is experimental psychology. Thus my work appears spottily and god-knows-when. I'm a psychologist who dabbles in sf, Erik Satie, and Emerson. Currently a PhD candidate in the Department of Psychology at Princeton University. Am a National Science Foundation Fellow who expects to be ejaculated into the desolation of the academic marketplace in 1985. My work in experimental social psychology (not—godforbid—clinical psychology) is categorized within the confines of attribution theory and social cognition..." At this point there echoed in my ears the cheerful voice of Isaac Asimov once explaining something else to me; "Even a scientific illiterate like you ought to understand this," said the Good Doctor. Perhaps some vibration of it had reached Mr. Gilbert, for he went on to write, "I'm very bad at this bio stuff so you may make up something you find more intriguing." Well okay. *At seventeen Daniel Gilbert was the youngest Factor in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company, before he fled Fort Ungava with a beautiful Eskimo girl, and But* perhaps we'd better get on with the story.

Daniel Gilbert writes: I was born in 1958 and am married

to a lady computer-scientist smarter than myself (Windy), have one claim to inclusive fitness, a seven-yearling named Arlo. Bibliography: some sf stories in *Questar*, *Amazing Stories*, Alan Ryan's *Perpetual Light* (Warner, 1982), Fred and Joan Saberhagen's *Pawn to Infinity* (Ace, 1982), Marta Randall's *New Dimensions 13* (Pocket Books, scheduled for publication soon). I am also co-author (with C. G. Lord) of "The 'same person' heuristic: an attributional procedure based on an assumption about personal similarity," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, in press; and (with C. G. Lord), "Expectations of variability and attributions for behavioral discrepancies," paper presented at the Eastern Psychological Association, Philadelphia, PA, April, 1983; and others.

I had been trying to raise Miss Hartley for twenty minutes on the intercom (a feat akin to the resurrection of Lazarus, though somewhat more complicated by the fact that Miss Hartley is stupid rather than dead) when finally I decided to step into the parlor and discover what had become of her.

The fellow was unimposing, and in violation of my innermost conviction—the acquisition of lucrative business—I nearly failed to see him sitting on the divan, leafing through a copy of *Genetic Engineering Weekly*, which we of course keep bound in gold-stamped leatherette portfolios. Our clientele is keen on such things.

"Ah, good day to you, sir," I said. Miss Hartley would most definitely be reprimanded for deserting her reception post and allowing a customer to go unattended. I noticed a large fly buzzing annoyingly about the parlor, and neatly extended my tongue and picked it off.

Most distracting insects.

"Allow me to apologize for the inexcusable rude treatment you've suffered," I said, "and let me assure you that this is *not* policy at Neomorphic Design. Perhaps I might offer you some sherry?"

"Sure." He barely glanced up from the magazine.

I hopped to the sherry-caddy in one leap.

Always show the best you have to offer, show it unmistakably, and in a manner which deemphasizes the braggart within us all. It was not through the ignorance of such maxims that I

became the First Executive Veep of Neomorphic Design House. I noticed that the fellow had indeed witnessed my majestic hop, and I turned casually, handing him a platinum orb of sherry.

"Have you been shown our current line?" I inquired.

"Uh huh."

My perceptual skills are honed like a scimitar, and immediately I recognized that *Chic* was not his native tongue. I promptly switched to the less-fluid *English*, which lacks a certain ability to reflect the nuance of fashion, but which is decidedly useful with the Plebeians. I am fluent in seventy-three natural and six artificial languages, and the phrase "Check, cash, or charge?" is equally delightful in all seventy-nine.

"Basic amphibian," I said, turning to afford him a view of my air-sacs. "A conservative choice for the discriminating gentleman. I've been wearing it since '23 and have yet to fall outside the circle of fashion. However, our summer line *does* offer a somewhat more dramatic flair, if you are so inclined."

"I see," said the gentleman, uninterestedly.

I must admit I was taken aback with this perfunctory reply. Had I lost that touch of grace? Indeed not! I'd begun in this business as a doorknocker selling non-functional wing implants for a discount house, and I'd not come this far to be so easily dissuaded.

Besides, it would do my two sales managers, Simson and Seeforth, good to see the Old Man turn out from his office like an ambulating antique and make a sale. No, don't argue. I know what they say about me.

I ran my eyes over the fellow like a white glove. I am neither the Delphic Oracle of the fashion world, nor do I wish to seem didactic. Some prefer a total morphological change, some a tasteful implant.

This man had neither.

He wore the same tacky *homo sapiens* body with which he had undoubtedly been born. What, then, was he doing sipping sherry in the parlor of the most prestigious genetic design house in New Bonbon?

"It appears," I said, treading dangerously close to his potential ire, "that you prefer mammalian." A good salesman must calculate his risks, and the man seemed unperturbed. "And in splendid taste," I added. "Did you have in mind a complete

morphological change or a stylish implant? We can accommodate either request, of course, and though in *my* day a gill here or a webbed foot there was the pinnacle of charm, times do indeed change, and I'd like to suggest to you that a *complete* morph change, perhaps simian or something in the *Rodentia* line, will place you in a position to be an absolute trend-setter among the *chic-de-la-chic*."

"Mr...uh..." He stared up at me, uncomfortably.

"Starnsworth, forgive me. But do call me Harvard."

"Mr. Harvard, I'm not here for myself. Frankly, I don't really go for this kind of stuff."

Stuff?

Had this unaltered *homo*—sipping *my* sherry, incidentally—actually said...*stuff*? I took several deep breaths as my analyst has advised on occasion, and quelched my pique.

"Good sir, genetic engineering is hardly a mere dictate of fashion, some silly social whim. Nevertheless, I shall readily be of service if you will pray instruct me how."

"Well, it's my wife," he offered. He scratched his chin in a most uncouth display. "She wants a change again."

"A subsequent alteration?"

"Yeah, you got it."

How the vulgate doth offend the ear. However, I managed to maintain a proprietary calm.

"All neomorphic engineering can be reversed or improved to suit one's taste, and I'm certain your charming wife will applaud your decision to allow Neomorphic Design House to render these modifications...but...where *is* your wife, sir?"

The gentleman glanced upward toward the ceiling, his eyes flitting about the parlor. "I don't know," he said. "She was buzzing around here someplace."

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