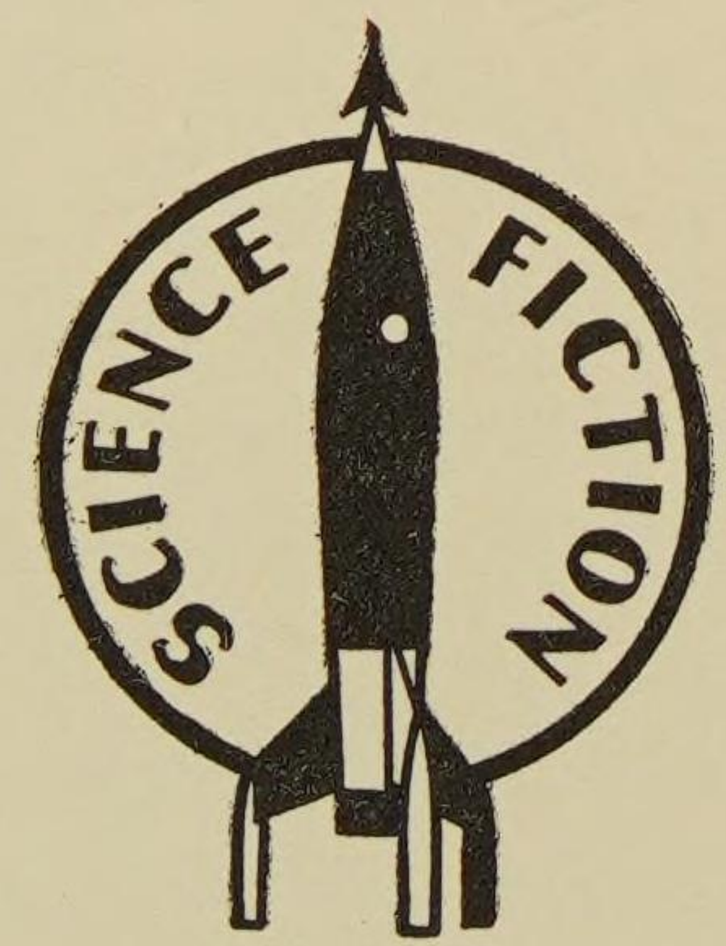
SOLOMON'S STONE

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L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP



AVALON BOOKS

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CHAPTER ONE

When Montague Stark had explained what he was going to do, he added, "You understand, I'm sure this won't work. Otherwise, I wouldn't try it." He looked up from where he squatted on the uncovered floor, drawing circles with a compass improvised from a pushpin, a piece of chalk, and a string. "If it did, we'd probably set the house on fire at the very least. Prosper, what's the trick for inscribing a pentagon in a circle?"

"Let me think," said Prosper Nash. He closed his eyes and mentally thumbed the pages of a plane-geometry text which he had studied ten years previously. At last, he advised, "Lay off two-thirds of the radius along the arc, ten times running. That's not exact, but it ought to do. He's not going to bring a steel tape along to measure your diagrams, is he?"

Stark laughed. "The pentacles in the *grimoires* are mostly pretty irregular, so ours ought to do." He set about ruling off a five-pointed star in the larger of the two circles. He added a number of astronomi-

cal symbols and Hebrew letters to the resulting figure, inscribed an equilateral triangle in the other circle, and put three small circles inside the triangle. "Alice, may I use your coffee table?"

"I'm not sure Mother would like it . . ." said his hostess nervously.

"Now, come on, I won't hurt it!" Without waiting for further objections, Stark placed the low circular table at one end of the room, in line with the two large circles on the floor.

On the table, he put a square of white artist's paperboard on which was drawn another complex symbol: a pentagram with Hebrew letters, planetary symbols, keys, daggers, and other gadgets about it. He set up a small brass tripod on the square of paper, and lit the incense in the little pot that dangled from the apex of the tripod, commenting, "This pentacle's supposed to be drawn on the skin of a ewe lamb sacrificed in the dark of the moon, or something like that. But I figure that a good clean drawing sheet ought to do. The reason those old birds killed their own lambs was to make sure of getting a sheet of genuine virgin parchment."

"Does that mean from a lamb under the age of consent?" asked Nash.

"No, it means a sheet that somebody else hadn't written on and later erased. They used to use pieces of parchment over and over again that way. Prosper, you light the candles. Bob, unwrap Gus and put him

on the floor here. And be careful of him. The museum wants him back."

A rustle of paper heralded the unveiling of Gus—the skull of a Bannock Indian. Prosper Nash and Robert Lanby obeyed meekly. The uninhibited Stark always seemed to have the psychological bulge on them, despite his tubby unimpressiveness.

Prosper Nash often wondered why this should be, knowing that he surpassed Stark in stature and looks, especially now that his glossy black mustache had come to full flower. Of course, he could see why Bob Lanby should let Monty Stark dominate him; Nash had always considered Bob a doormat, especially since the blue-eyed but unresponsive Alice . . .

The candles gleamed as Monty Stark got into his new bathrobe, blue with orange piping for Friday, the day he set aside for experiments. He glanced toward the kitchen door, behind which Bill Averoff supposedly lurked, ready at the proper stage of the proceedings to pop out with a deep "Good evening, everybody!" and scare the daylights out of all but Montague Allen Stark.

At this moment, however, Monty's ally was writing a note:

Dear Mr. Stark, I just looked out the window and seen a fare alongside my hack. I been waiting longer than I expected and I can't afford

to pass up the good fares you get on Haloeen so I got to go. I am sorry. Yours truly,

William Averoff

Being a fundamentally honest man, Averoff placed on the note the dollar bill that Stark had given him for his part in the performance, weighted note and bill with the salt shaker, and stole out the service entrance to Alice Woodson's apartment.

When he arrived at the street level, the prospective fare had vanished. Averoff settled into his taxicab and opened the Western pulp that he kept on the front seat. Bill's hero, Arizona Blake, was just shooting his way out of the fourth gambling hell when another fare arrived.

Bill Averoff cast a regretful glance up toward the windows of Miss Woodson's apartment—good looking, he thought, but snooty—and drove off. He knew and liked the three boys he had brought across town from their Y, and would have been glad to be the one to drive them home later. But you had to live.

Meanwhile, Montague Stark continued his essay into amateur sorcery, unaware that his star actor had departed. He placed the box containing Godiva, the toad, in the center of the circle of evocation. Occasional faint thumps and slight movements of the box implied that Godiva had not yet become reconciled to her close quarters.

By now, the room reeked of the mixture of agal-

loch and storax burning in the censer on the coffee table; the two candles on the periphery of the circle of evocation sent up slow stalactites of gray smoke.

Stark pinned to the front of his bathrobe a diamond pin in the form of a Star of David, borrowed from the daughter of a friend, and hung a copper medal around his neck. He put on his head a homemade diadem of twisted copper wire, and picked up his brother-in-law's little cross-hilted cadet sword.

"Ready?" he asked.

Alice Woodson put out the light.

Stark cocked his head to read the incantation on the typed sheet in his left hand, by the doubtful light of the candles. It started off with a long sentence in Hebrew which nobody, Stark included, understood.

His three hearers leaned forward, tense with the synthetic excitement that is conjured up by spook movies and Halloween stunts. Prosper Nash reflected that probably everybody has suppressed desires to be and do strange things, but that Monty Stark was the only person he knew who went ahead and did something about them.

Monty had wanted to be an archeologist and had ended up as a high-school teacher of history. Still, when he acquired a hobby like this craze for magic, he went into it wholeheartedly, which was no doubt why he had so much fun. He, Prosper Nash, sometimes daydreamed of himself as a dashing cavalier,

instead of a competent but unglamorous C.P.A. with a good memory for detail. But there didn't seem to be much he could do toward realizing *that* fancy, nearsighted as he was . . .

Monty Stark ended the Hebrew section, and started in on Latin, his voice rising a little. The air was unpleasantly thick.

Nash wondered about the suppressed desires of the other two. Little Bob Lanby displayed none except to be a good scout, and a good chess-player. And, as an afterthought, to marry Alice. He wondered what the cool Alice would like to be.

Stark at last got to a passage containing some English words. His voice rose higher and louder: "Hemen-Etan! Hemen-Etan! Hemen-Etan! El Ati Titeip Aozia Hyn Teu Minosel Achadon vai vaa Eie Aaa Eie Exe A El El El A Hi! Hau! Hau! Hau! Hau! Va! Va! Va! Va! Chavajoth! Aie Saraie, aie Saraie, aie Saraie! By Elohim, Archima, Rabur, Batbas over Abrac, flowing down, coming from above Aheor upon Aberer Chavajoth! Chavajoth! Chavajoth! I command thee, Bechard, by the Key of Solomon and the great name Shemhamphoras! By Adonai Elohim, Adonai Jehovam, Adonai Sabaoth, Metraton On Alga Adonai Mathon, the Pythonic Word, the Mystery of the Salamander, the Assembly of Sylphs, the Grotto of Gnomes, the demons of the heaven of Gad, Almousin, Gibor, Jehoshua, Evam, Zariatnatmik:

Come, Bechard! Come, Bechard! Come, Bechard!"

"Good evening!"

Stark, Nash, Lanby, and Alice Woodson all jumped at the words and at the appearance in the "trap"—the circle-and-pentagram figure between the circle of evocation, on which Stark stood, and the coffee-table altar—of a figure. Then they relaxed; Nash and Lanby thought they recognized Bill Averoff's deep tones. Alice thought it was just another of Monty's gags . . .

"Swell, Bill," said Montague Stark; then, voice changing a little toward puzzlement: "But . . . where'd you get the costume?"

"Costume?"

There was an uncomfortable silence with the realization that the voice was not Averoff's after all.

Alice Woodson, who was nearest to the light switch, snapped the ceiling light on. She waited a good twenty seconds before screaming.

The visitor was not only not a New York taxi driver, but was rather evidently not human at all, though its shape and size were those of a man. It cast no shadow and wore no garments, unless what appeared to be its skin was actually a tight, one-piece green rubber cover-all. No zipper, however, could be discerned. The pupils of its eyes, instead of pits of blackness as with people, were apertures through which inner light winked out into the room.

"Well?"

"You're . . . not . . . Bill . . . Averoff," said Stark at last, in a small, still voice.

"No, I regret. Why should I be? I am Bechard. You called me, did you not, sir?"

"I . . . suppose I did."

"Then," said the apparition stiffly, "I am yours to com —no, wait!" It slowly turned its head this way and that, surveying the room and the various props that Stark had set out: the altar, Gus and Godiva, and so forth.

Its regard came to rest on the pentacle on which it stood. As it looked down, it apparently realized its lack of shadow, for a shadow appeared at once. "Regret," Bechard muttered.

Then it glared back at Stark, and said in a new, harsh tone: "Did you not know, sir, that we of the Gothic Sept are not commanded by the pentagram?"

"N-no."

"It is so, I regret. We are not commanded by it, though we must respect it. Demons of the Apollinian Sept are commanded by the pentagram, as those of the Magian Sept are by the hexagram, and those of the Sinic by the diskelion."

Prosper Nash had held his breath as long as he could. He now let it out with a *whoof* and broke in: "What *are* you commanded by, then?"

The thing's rubbery mouth widened into a black slit wherein no teeth were visible. "Ha," it growled

earnestly. "For me to tell you would be funny, would it not, gentlemen? Almost as funny as invoking Bechard the Hail-maker to perform buffooneries for your frivolous amusement. I regret, but we Bechards are demons of intelligence. Let us settle our business before any of you mundane souls conceive more cleverernesses. You, sir, the sorcerer who does not know his pentacles—what are your name and station?"

"What do you want to know that for?" asked Stark quickly, a drop of sweat glistening on his forehead.

"To determine," replied Bechard blandly, "whose mundane body I shall possess."

"You mean we're going to be possessed by devils?"

"*Demons,* not devils. And only one. Come now, gentleman, your profession?"

"Teacher," gulped Stark. "But look here . . ."

"You?" The demon turned to Lanby.

"I . . . I'm a clerk at the Y.M.C.A. . . ."

"Exorcism! You are a regular churchgoer?"

"Well . . . yes . . ."

"I do not want you. Regret the strain of leading your regular life would be too severe. You with the mustache and glasses?"

"Accountant," said Prosper Nash. "Say, don't you think you ought to tell us more? What is it like to be possessed? Do you go mad?"

"Not at all," said Bechard. "What an idea! You must be thinking of the crude old days before we were organized. Today, we demons know how to han-

dle a mundane body so that even its best friends never guess. Very possibly at least one of your friends is possessed without your knowing it. The young lady?"

"I take care of my mother," said Alice.

Bechard was silent, then he said, "I choose the teacher . . ."

"But," cried Nash, "if you take Monty's body, what happens to *him?*"

Bechard smiled his toothless facial gesture. "His mundane soul, displaced from his mundane body, will naturally be forced up to the astral plane, where it will inhabit his astral body."

"His *what?*"

"If you will cease your interruptions, I shall explain. He will learn what the astral plane is when he arrives. On that plane is the Shamir, which will transport both his mundane soul and his astral body back to this plane . . ."

"What the devil is the Shamir?" Nash interrupted again.

"Oh, ignorant generation! The Shamir is the Stone of Sages—the Star of Truth. In plain language, it is a gem once owned by Solomon, son of David, on whom be peace." Bechard stepped toward Stark.

Montague shrank back, crying, "You can't do this to me!"

"Oh yes, I can, my esteemed Monty."

"What's the idea?"

"The idea, sir, is that the demoniac plane is a very dull place. Since we have been organized, those of each Sept are all exactly alike. It is in its way perfect. We consume neither food nor drink. We have no sex."

"So I see," said Prosper Nash.

"What is that? I trust that you are not being humorous. I detest humor. To continue: It follows that when, say, a Bechard or a Baphomet is afforded an opportunity to inhabit a mundane body and experience its joys and sorrows, he seizes the chance with avidity. But I am not selfish. The Shamir will return you, body and soul, to the mundane plane, at which time I shall give you back your mundane body in exchange for the astral one. Now, esteemed sir, close your eyes and relax . . ."

"Begone!" yelled Stark, holding his sword out hilt up to make a cross, and fingering the Star of David. "By Jakin and Boaz, the Wheel of Ezekiel, the Pentacle of Pythagoras . . ."

Bechard glided swiftly toward the terrified sorcerer, but recoiled as Stark defiantly thrust the symbols at him. After three tries, Bechard changed his tactics. "Come, sir," he wheedled, "the astral plane is a very interesting place. And you will be allowed to return as soon as . . ."

"Not on your life!" shrieked Stark.

"Regret that you are so stubborn," said Bechard, raising his voice above Bob Lanby's prayers. "I shall

have to take the young gentlewoman's mundane body, then, though I fear her astral self will prove a less effective means of finding the Shamir than would yours. But . . ."

Prosper Nash did the quickest thinking of which he was capable. He jumped up and skidded across the floor, snatched up the sheet of artist's board, sending the tripod clattering to the floor, and bounded back to where Alice shrank against the wall. He thrust the pentacle into her hands.

"No, you don't!" he told Bechard. "You said yourself you had to respect the pentagram!"

"You are an interfering young gentleman," rasped Bechard. "I regret. If you think *you* will find the Shamir . . ."

"Hey! Wait! Let's talk this over. You can't steal my body just because I protected a girl . . ."

"Can and will. Relax, my good sir, and the process will be less painful. You must return in ten days with Solomon's Stone, or I shall be forced to chastise your delinquency."

"But how am I to find this rock? And how . . ."

"There are those on the astral plane who can tell you more than I. Here we go!"

Nash tensed every muscle and felt frantically in his pockets for something bearing a symbol wherewith to thwart the demon. A star—something with a star—the pentagram appeared on the flags of a dozen

nations, not to mention states of the Union, societies, political parties . . .

Bechard was right in front of him, gliding now without moving his green legs, between Nash and the "trap." Nash remembered the bills in his wallet; they almost certainly bore stars . . .

Too late!

Prosper Nash felt a tremendous shock, as if a destroyer had dropped a depth bomb on him. While his mind strove to keep a grip on his body, he could feel that body being pulled out of his mental clutches . . . going . . . going . . . gone!

He was moving with great speed—or falling; it was like an express-elevator plunge, only more so.

Then he fetched up against something, or into something; he shot home into place with an almost audible clank, like a key into the right lock, or a sword into its scabbard . . .

He was sitting on a bench; at least the body he had clicked into was sitting on a bench of dark wood—a bench worn shiny, without benefit of varnish, by the seats of many pairs of pants.

The bench was in a room; low-ceilinged, dimly lit. Oil lamps shone on rows of bottles. There were others in the room . . .

Keep your head, J. Prosper. Let's take a look at this astral body of ours first.

Astral body? Sounds silly, but that's what the demon said. Maybe demons are silly.

Prosper Nash bent the head of his new body to look at himself. The first things he saw were his hands—bigger than the hands of his mundane body, with a ring in which was set a huge star sapphire.

Beyond the hands he observed with some horror that lace cuffs from a concealed shirt were turned back over the sleeves of his coat. A roll of the eyes showed that a lace collar sprouted out of the collar of his jacket and lay across his shoulders. He was in a black velvet suit with knee-pants.

Little Lord Fauntleroy!

Not quite. The pants disappeared into high boots with wide, floppy tops and a strap across each instep with a gleaming buckle. He bent an ankle to observe that the footgear had high heels like those of a Texan boot.

He tensed the muscles of his right arm, and discreetly pinched the biceps and deltoid with the fingers of his left. Mmm, nice! No wonder Bechard was so willing to take an astral body in exchange for a mundane one!

So far, Nash's astral body appeared to have the usual number of everything, and to be substantially, if somewhat eccentrically, dressed. Maybe the astral plane went in for that sort of thing. The others around him, he saw, were also costumed rather than merely clad.

Nash put his elbow on the table and started to rest his chin on his fist. He got another shock: he had a goatee, a little inverted isosceles triangle of whisker extending from his lower lip to the point of his chin. He ran his hand around his face. The mustache, which in his mundane body had been a close-cut Anthony Eden affair, now ended in a pair of inch-long waxed spikes; and his hair came down to his shoulders.

So he'd wanted to be a dashing cavalier, eh? Well, he was one all right. Did that mean he had to act like a cavalier? How was a cavalier supposed to act?

How, indeed?

CHAPTER TWO

How did a dashing cavalier dash? Prosper Nash couldn't go everywhere at a dead run, especially in those boots. Though d'Artagnan had come pretty close to it, at least in the old Douglas Fairbanks movie, which Nash had seen in his childhood.

Time enough to worry about that later. The room now held Nash's attention.

Nearby sat a solitary person in plate armor, trying to drink beer out of a mug the size of a child's sand bucket. Something was wrong with the catch that should have held up the visor of his armet. The knight carefully pushed up the visor, where it stayed for the nonce. He picked up the mug in both hands—it had no handle—and almost got it to his lips when the visor fell down with a clang. The knight carefully set down the mug and repeated the process. After the fourth try, he just sat there with slow tears coursing down his ruddy cheeks.

At the next table, a man in a matador outfit was talking to a beautiful girl dressed like a movie pro-

ducer's idea of an Egyptian princess. Beyond them was an earnestly conversing group: a samurai in several gorgeous kimonos—the outer one with yard-wide sleeves that stuck out like wings; and two others with long blond hair and bearskin bathing suits.

The astralites were certainly a colorful lot, thought Nash; the men—even the massive bartender—were ruggedly handsome; the women, from the three or four in sight, were inhumanly beautiful. Were they all astral bodies of real people like himself, or was the whole astral plane a product of the imagination of J. Prosper Nash? Well, maybe the so-called real world was too—no, stop it; that was an irrational philosophy called sol—solastice?—solipsism! You ended up in a nice warm cell telling the keepers that they didn't exist.

The customers were, if anything, a little too orderly. They spoke in the consciously subdued tones of people who not only do not want to be overheard, but expect somebody to try to overhear them. The sharp, unsmiling eyes of the monolithic bartender roved from table to table with a "Just start something!" look.

Nash turned his attention back to his new body. A broad leather strap encircled his torso over the right shoulder and under the left. At its lower end, where the strap hung loose against his left hip, there was a leather collar, empty, but the right size for a scabbard.

There should be some mark of identification on him. Nash began to search for pockets. There was none in his breeches, and, for a while it seemed, none in his jacket either. At last he located two items inside the bottom edge in the rear—in what would have been the tails if the coat had had tails. One was a small case of cigarettes, the other a slightly soiled handkerchief with the initial *N*. Did that mean that his astral body was also named Nash?

When he moved, he was aware of a massive belt under his coat. His exploring fingers identified this as a money belt which held up his pants by friction alone, since the latter garment had no belt loops. Investigation of the compartments of the belt located a couple of wads of bills and a fistful of change, but no papers except a little green square of cardboard bearing the numeral *67*.

It was a comfort to know you were well heeled, but it would be still nicer to know who you were. Nash twirled the empty wineglass in his fingers, pondering, until a voice said, "Another of the same, sir?"

The speaker was evidently a waiter, but a very striking waiter for such a mediocre-looking place; a veritable Adolphe Menjou of a waiter.

"Yes," said Nash. As the waiter started to go, with a swish of coattails, Nash added, "Wait. Who do you think I am?" At least that was what he intended to say, but it came out as, "Oo do you senk I om?"

Oh lord, he thought, *now I have a French accent to wrestle with!*

"I wouldn't know, sir." The waiter bowed. "This is the first time you've been here."

As the waiter left, a new customer entered the taproom: a man in a uniform with a scarlet tunic and a stiff-brimmed hat. Nash recognized the uniform as that of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

"Scotch and soda," the new man told the bartender.

The little buzz of conversation died, except for the tail end of a sentence that was being spoken by one of the men in bearskins, with a jerk of his thumb toward the new arrival: ". . . *diejenigen Feiglingen?*"

Then the silence *was* complete. The Mountie turned his head slowly. "What was that?"

The man in the Siegfried getup ostentatiously ignored the question, and spoke to his companions. The redcoat walked slowly over to the table where the three sat. Prosper Nash saw that his holster was empty.

"Hey!" cried the bartender.

"What did you say?"

He of the bearskin glanced up, snapped: *"V'steh' nicht,"* and turned back to his pals.

A twinkle drew Nash's eye; it was the sparkle of empty bottles being lined up on the bar by the bartender.

Fssh!

Nash turned back toward the group at the table in time to see a steinful of beer envelop the Mountie's face. Then the fur-clad ones pushed their table over and climbed across it to get at their enemy. Other tables went over, too.

Nash's right hand made an instinctive grab for his left hip—more of his astral body's habits, he thought. There was no sword there, of course; and anyway, it was not his business to get mixed up in barroom brawls, even if this one might have been deliberately staged to rouse his strongest prejudices . . .

And then he had a glimpse of the samurai drawing a dagger from one of his sleeves, which were big enough to contain a whole arsenal. Since everybody else was disarmed, this was going too far. If he, Nash, weren't nearly blind without his glasses, he'd . . .

Then he realized that his astral body wore no glasses, and saw perfectly well without them. Moreover, this body had, without a direct order from its occupant, risen from the table and stridden halfway across the nucleus of the developing fight. By the time Nash got it under control, it was squaring off in front of one of the furry gentlemen.

Because of his mundane body's myopia, Prosper Nash had not been in a fight since childhood, and he had no wish to get involved in one now. Neither did he want to back down in front of the bearskinned barbarian.

The latter soon made up his mind for him by launching a roundhouse swing. Nash was vaguely aware of a violent shock somewhere about his person, and then of slugging back.

A bottle bounced off the furry gentleman's head with a hollow sound; the blond smiled a kind of sickly smile and sank down to the floor. Nash looked in the direction from which the bottle had come, just in time to duck another. The bartender was loosing them impartially at the heads of the brawlers, who now comprised all the men in the place.

The samurai was still hovering with his dagger. Nash took a step toward him and swung a mighty punch. But something warned the Japanese knight; he spun around and caught Nash's wrist with a smack. The next thing Nash knew, he was poised in mid-air across the fellow's shoulders; then the floor came up and hit him with force enough to stun an elephant.

Nash lay for a second, wondering which bones were broken; then, as the dagger flashed into his vision, he scrambled up, delighted to find that his new body was apparently made of steel springs and rubber bands. Somebody grabbed him from behind. Nash snapped his head back against the man's nose; his captor howled but tightened his grip. The samurai glided forward and drew back his arm for a clean, smooth stab . . .

In a last look around for help, Nash saw something that would have been funny if he had been able to appreciate it. The matador was sitting on the chest of the man in plate armor, and pouring the contents of a bottle into the face-opening of his helmet.

"All right, you ring-tailed galoots!" cried a voice from the entrance. "Reach!"

The sounds of battle died, and hands rose, including those of Nash's assailants. Nash, free, looked toward the door, which was filled by a man in cowboy clothes, including the largest hat and the widest *chaparajos* Nash had ever seen. The newcomer covered the room with a pair of revolvers. The face under the sombrero was unmistakably that of William Averoff.

"Bill!" cried Nash.

"Git your hands up, too, mister," replied the cowboy, with no sign of recognition. The pile of men in the middle of the floor disentangled itself, and a much battered Canadian Mounted Policeman crawled out from under. The cowboy asked, "Did they hurt you, partner?"

"Not much," replied the Mountie, flexing his joints experimentally.

The bartender spoke up: "Get out, all of ye! This is neutral territory, and I don't want any customers who can't remember that."

Nash approached the cowboy. "Aren't you Bill Averoff?"

"Yep . . . Arizona Bill Averoff."

"Well, don't you know me? I'm Prosper Nash."

The cowboy looked at him carefully. "No, Frenchy, I don't."

Nash remembered that the body he inhabited was not his own, or at least was not his usual one. "Don't you know a guy named Nash?"

"Never heard of him."

"He's all right," broke in the Mountie. "He was the first one to try to help me."

"Arizona, me lad," said the bartender, "chase 'em out, will ye? I gotta clean up the joint."

The customers shuffled toward the exit. Arizona Bill Averoff put his head through the open section of the checkroom door, and called, "Hey, miss! Reckon you can come up for air."

The checkroom girl made a nervous appearance and began handing the customers their effects. The Mountie got his revolver; the samurai got a two-handed sword, which he stuck through his sash, and a hat shaped like an inverted salad bowl, with a ribbon which he tied under his chin.

The furry gentlemen got broadswords and helmets with wings sprouting from them. One of this pair had a swollen and bloody mouth. Seeing it, Nash became aware of a tingle in his right hand, and found that the knuckles were bruised and cut. He also discovered a tender spot on the side of his jaw. Evidently, he and his opponent had landed one good

one apiece, though he had no clear recollection of the event.

"You got a check, mister?" asked Averoff.

Nash remembered the little square of green cardboard in his money belt. It obtained for him a pair of fancy leather gloves, a rapier, and a wide-brimmed leather hat. The brim was pinned up on the left, Anzac-style, and an ostrich feather stuck aft from between the turned-up part of the brim and the crown.

Outside, the crowd dispersed slowly, some of them, especially the furry gentlemen, lowering back as they departed. Arizona Bill Averoff kept his pistols out until the last rioter had disappeared. Then he holstered them, and he and the redcoat unhitched a pair of horses from a rail at the curb.

"Ain't you goin' home, Frenchy?" Arizona Bill asked in a marked manner.

"Well," said Nash, "you see, I don't know where my home is."

"Lost? Thought you looked kinda doubtful. What part of town are you tryin' to find?"

"I don't know that, either. Is this New York City?"

The cowboy whistled. "Say, didn't you even know what town you were in? Reckon you *are* lost."

"Reckon I am," said Nash with a ghost of a smile. "Is it?"

"Yeah."

"Have you been sick or something?" asked the Mountie.

"Call it lapse of memory," said Nash. "I'd like to . . ." He stopped as a distant but sharp sound broke into his sentence; then another, and a rattle of them. "Who's shooting?"

"Oh," said the Mountie, "I suppose the Voties sent a patrol down into loyal territory and got caught."

"What," asked Nash, "are Voties?"

"Wotan's troopers. Most folks call them 'Voties,' though the highbrows, like those two who jumped me tonight, call them 'Wotanists.' Don't you know anything?"

The cowboy spoke in fatherly fashion: "Reckon you need a good night's sleep, mister. Then tomorrow, if you still don't know where you are, just mosey over to a public library and find out. Come along, Jim."

"But," cried Nash, "if this is New York, and you're Bill Averoff, you ought to know me . . ."

"Shore is too bad, partner, but I don't. So long." Nash's two companions swung into their saddles and clattered off into the dark. Nash stood uncertainly in the street, which was illuminated only by lights from a few of the windows.

Aside from these yellow rectangles hanging suspended in blackness, there was little to be made out.

As Nash's eyes got used to the darkness, they picked out a few more features, such as an irregular and broken line of roofs, and a tree in what appeared to be a front yard. Nash, who was an indefatigable explorer of his mundane self's adopted city, knew that the only place in Manhattan where front yards were to be found was the Chelsea district. It did not necessarily follow that the same restriction applied to the astral plane's New York.

Pop, went the gunfire far away, and *pop-pop-pop.* He guessed, from what the Mountie had said, that there was some local war on. Prosper Nash listened, then strode away from the sounds of combat.

The popping detonations died away. Nash's high, uncushioned heels rang loudly on the pavement; too loudly. He became aware of what was missing—the whirr of motor vehicles, which forms a continuous undertone, day and night, to the sounds of mundane New York. In some neighboring street, hoofs plop-plopped; then this sank to inaudibility.

The lighted windows were fewer now. *If I had more nerve,* thought Nash, *I'd knock on one of these doors and ask for a night's lodging. Why not?* But as he passed each one, he found some excuse for not doing so. This one looked like too small a place; the next had such a shabby appearance, from the little he could make out, that goodness knew what sort of people lived there . . .

And then there were no more houses, and Prosper

Nash almost fell on his face as the pavement ended and the street turned into a dirt path.

The path climbed a little; Nash's boots swished against the weeds that lined it. This was silly; hadn't he better go back? If he didn't like the houses, he could at least ask where a lodging could be had. But no; he arrived at the top of the little vacant hill, and beyond it he could see the dark silhouette of another built-up area.

A slight sound made him prick his ears. It was a sound that might have been made by a rolling pebble, but it was too faint for him to be sure, except that Nash was sure *he* had not made it. He gripped his scabbard in his left hand to keep it from slapping against his legs, and moved with fair silence except for the slight creak of his boots.

He'd be less frightened, he thought, if he could be sure. If somebody was following him, he'd run. That would be the only sensible . . .

More sounds, small but conclusive, made him turn his head. At the sight of a black shape rushing at him, his mundane mind sent his astral body a frantic command—*run!* But the astral body had already taken matters into its own hands, literally. Its right one swooped to his sword hilt and swept the blade out, while it spun on its heel with the ease of long practice. Then, heels together, legs straight, left arm up and right straight out, it received the charge on its point.

Nash tightened his grip against the fierce backward thrust of the hilt. The shadow stopped, impaled, and gave a very human grunt. It slowly sagged and fell.

The body gasped and mumbled something; the next thing Nash knew he was running along the narrow path—anything to get away from there . . .

Slow down, you fool, he thought; *what will the cops think if they catch you running away from the crime with a bloody sword in your hand?*

He stopped, and made himself turn and start back. As he approached the scene of the action, he walked more and more slowly.

Go on, go on; you're not a coward.

Oh yes, I am, and I'm going to keep on being one. I'd like to see you stop me.

But he had to go back there, see if the man was dead, and then telephone the police. They would take away his assailant, and him, too. After a mild grilling, and a lot of waiting around, he would be released; and the *Times* would carry a brief story headed ACCOUNTANT SLAYS FOOTPAD.

That is, on the mundane plane. Maybe the astral plane had no *Times,* no telephones, no cops. He had not seen any.

Nash almost stumbled over the body, silent now. He knelt and touched it, reluctantly. It was that of a man, all right. His fingers identified a handkerchief tied around the head, earrings, and a fist with a knife

in it. He groped for the pulse; it was throbbing faintly.

Then it stopped.

Gosh!

When Nash had digested the enormous idea of having killed a man, it occurred to him that the thing to do with the body was just to leave it, and if anybody asked— Hi! In upending his sword to sheathe it, he felt a drop run across his hand. The blade was wet; he'd better wipe it off on the garments of the corpse . . .

There was no corpse.

Nash felt frantically around, and poked with his rapier. The man's clothes were there, even his earrings. They lay flat, as if the body had simply evaporated out of them.

CHAPTER THREE

Prosper Nash sighed and gave up. He wiped his blade and his hand on the now empty pants-leg, and set out on the path once more. The darkness oppressed him like a massive weight.

The path sloped down; Nash found his high heels awkward for this kind of walking. But it also broadened and hardened, and soon he found himself on a sidewalk of uneven flagstones. He could feel the presence of houses lining the street; mostly small, irregularly set structures. The only sign of artificial light was a couple of blocks ahead. Nash quickened his stride. When he made out the word "hotel" on a sign dimly illuminated by an oil lantern, he almost broke into another run.

The building was not prepossessing from the outside; about four stories, and covered with involuted stone and iron gingerbread of the General Grant era. As he stepped inside, Nash got a shock: the decorations were of the most garish and angular mod-

ernistic style, badly put together, and lighted by the quiet flames of a couple of huge candelabra.

Behind the desk stood a stocky man with a spade beard, a broad red ribbon running diagonally across the bosom of his gleaming boiled shirt. On the desk, beside the register, lay a large revolver on whose butt the bearded man's hand rested familiarly.

White teeth showed through a black beard as the man bowed and said rapidly, "*Bon accueil, m'sieur. Ma petite auberge est à votre service . . .*" He spread his left hand and exuded hospitality, all of him but his right hand, which remained motionless on the pistol butt as if it were not a part of him at all.

"I don't . . ." Nash started to add "understand French," when he realized that he had understood that sentence perfectly. In fact, the appropriate reply, also in French, had already leaped into his mind; but while he tried to grasp this wonder the words faded. When he deliberately tried to compose a French sentence he could not.

"May I have a room?" he said finally.

"With pleasure, my dear sir," replied the man at the desk. "Your baggage . . . ?"

"I haven't any." Nash forestalled a demand for rent in advance by reaching into his money belt. He picked up the pen beside the register and poised it over the paper while he watched the proprietor count out his change. As the money was pushed def-

erentially toward him, he became aware of motion on the part of his right hand.

The hand had written, in an ornate script with curling swash-lines: *"Jean-Prospère, Chv. de Nêche."*

A Chevalier, eh? Whew! Mustn't let Spade-beard see how excited you are . . . If his astral body retained a subconscious memory of its name, maybe it would remember its address, too. But now that Nash wanted it to perform, it failed to do so. After staring blankly at his hand for some seconds, Nash wrote simply *"New York City."*

"Do you serve meals?" he asked.

The ambassadorial innkeeper said he did. Nash asked how much. Spade-beard waved his hands with a gently embarrassed motion, and seemed to have trouble making articulate speech. When Nash repeated the question, the proprietor apparently resigned himself to the fact that his guest did not show the gentlemanly indifference to prices that one expected of a knight, and told him.

When the candles in Nash's rather glum little room had been lit, and the host had bowed himself out, Nash bounded to the mirror.

The face that looked back at him was not quite his own, though there was a strong resemblance. It was an older face, probably in its thirties; perhaps the face that the mundane Nash would wear in ten years. Not quite: the jaw was more massive, and the nose had a higher bridge. Nash chuckled, thinking

that if he had wanted to improve his face, he would have made just about those changes in it.

He shed his hat, coat, boots, and sword, and sat down to the writing table to try some more unconscious writing. But the right hand of the Chevalier de Nêche remained obstinately inert, whether he concentrated a glower on it or whether he ignored it. He must have it cowed.

He gave that enterprise up and counted his money. Then he ruled off some lines on one of the sheets of writing paper, and filled it in thus:

		Dr.	Cr.
Oct. 31	Balance brought forward		157.26
	Room rent	1.25	

Then, with the consciousness of a day well ended, he went to bed.

Staring up into the darkness, he thought that now that he had a roof over his head, perhaps he could figure things out a little further. Bechard's invasion of his mundane body had displaced his soul, personality, or whatever it was, up to this astral plane, which was like, yet unlike, his own—the mundane, the demon had called it—world. It had a New York City, but one that harbored strange specimens like

the Chevalier. The Chevalier must be connected with Prosper Nash, somehow; that name was an obvious Frenchification of John Prosper Nash.

And the cowboy, Arizona Bill Averoff, was undoubtedly the astral body of Nash's friend of the same name. It was strange that Nash's astral body was the kind of person that Nash's mundane self liked to imagine himself as being. Then the same must apply to the two Averoffs, considering those Western pulps the mundane Bill read. Yes, that must be the explanation! An astral body was a sort of projection of the mundane body, the person it fancied itself as . . .

That left a lot of questions unanswered—how astral bodies came into existence, for instance. He had seen how they died; they just evaporated. Still, this theory explained the dramatic diversity of human types; people liked to imagine themselves as something outstanding—either what they openly strove to be, or a secret ideal, totally different from their everyday character. Witness the Egyptian princesses, samurai, and the rest. Nash was willing to bet that the offensively Nordic persons in the winged hats came from the section of the astral New York corresponding to Yorkville.

Another problem raised its head. If a mundane body had a mundane soul, did an astral body have an astral soul? If so, what had become of that of Jean-

Prospère de Nêche? Had it merely been suppressed, or had it been displaced up to still another plane . . .

The sun in his eyes routed him out of slumber before he knew it. As he got out of bed, he discovered a lot of stiff and bruised places, and thought it was too bad he had not imagined an astral self that was invulnerable as well as dashing. The spikes of his mustache had come partly unraveled, and though he could repair the damage somewhat by vigorous twirling, Nash had no pomade to do a really good job. For that matter, he would have to put up with bristling cheeks and furry teeth until he could buy a set of toilet articles or locate his own. They must exist somewhere in the city . . .

The ambassadorial proprietor met him at the door of the dining room with an apron tied over his cutaway, and bowed him to a table already occupied by a young man in bright blue zipper-closed boots, tight blue breeches, and a rubbery-looking blue shirt.

The azure young man smiled pleasantly, and Nash bade him good morning. While they waited for the innkeeper to pass around the eggs, Nash asked, "Does he run the place all by himself?"

"He has a day clerk and a cook, but otherwise he does everything," said the young man. "Poor Aristide has the usual trouble finding anybody to work

for him. The last three clerks he's had have gone off to join the Home Defense. Might even take a crack at it myself."

"Yes?" said Nash. "What's your present line, if I may ask?" The French accent was giving him less trouble.

"Nothing at the moment. I've been trying to revive the Cosmobile project, but no luck."

"What's that?" asked Nash.

"You've never heard of it? My word. You see, I and a lot of others were created to be Interplanetary Patrolmen. But there's no Interplanetary Patrol, for the good reason that there's no Interplanetary traffic. So, as the first step, we formed a company to build a cosmobile. But there was the usual trouble."

"What usual trouble?"

"Oh, everybody wanted to be boss. They're splendid fellows, but they just couldn't realize that the management belonged to me, because of my natural gifts of leadership." The young man shrugged and sighed. "We tried using soulless ones, but they're mostly too stupid to handle a pick and shovel, let alone anything delicate like assembling a space ship. It's too bad. The theoretical knowledge does exist, only nobody could agree on how to apply it. It's like trying to steal the Shamir."

Nash straightened up sharply at this. "Where's the Shamir?"

Eyebrows rose. "My word, I thought everybody knew that. On the desert island, of course. But look here, friend, in strict confidence I'm just about on my uppers. If you could let me have a few dollars—I'll give you a note . . ."

" 'Fraid not," said Nash hastily. "I'm unemployed myself." He pushed his chair back.

"But listen, friend, you wouldn't want a man with my qualifications to get killed in a beastly little Home Defense operation . . ."

Nash fled into the lobby, where the maître d'hôtel glanced up from his ledger, tipped him a wink and murmured, "I see you got away from young Farnsworth. Shall I keep your room?"

"Uh-huh, please," said Nash. He would have liked to ask more questions about the Shamir, but the azure one might come out any minute.

The street outside looked far more cheerful than it had felt the previous night. The indescribable mixture of architectural styles was revealed in all its grotesque glory. Mercifully, the trees hid much of it. As Nash, blinking in the sunshine, looked about him, his eyes picked up the weed-grown hill he had crossed in the dark.

The memory of his encounter came to the surface of his mind with a rush. He walked quickly in the opposite direction. Ahead of him the street ran straight, sloping down slightly to a chink of blue.

The buildings became smaller and more widely

and irregularly spaced. There was a California bungalow, a Cape-Cod cottage, a log cabin, and a box of prefabricated steel sheets. Then the buildings fell away, and Nash was looking across the broad reach of the North River. He must be about opposite Hoboken; Stevens Point was in plain sight. However, the hill, instead of being crowned by the nineteenth-century Stevens mansion, was brooded over by a Norman castle.

Directly in front of him, the shore plunged into the river in a tumble of big rocks, out of which a few piles of a former pier stuck. There were other piers up and down the river: some small piers with ships in them down, and one huge unfinished one up. The ships were smallish vessels, at least half of them sail-powered.

Nash sat down on the top of one of the piles. He meant to think, but the warmth of the sun and the blueness of the water seduced him into simply sitting.

A triangle of white swam past his vision: the sail of a catboat in mid-river. The tide was carrying it down fast. Nash reflected that normally the press of river traffic would have made such a course extremely hazardous, but the astral plane's North River seemed to have neither ferries nor tugs.

Something winked from the hull of the catboat, and two seconds later the sound of a gunshot came to Nash's ears. Nash looked to see what they could be

shooting at on this peaceful river. A vessel the size of a Coast Guard cutter, with smoke billowing from a tall thin stack, was crawling upriver toward the catboat. The white triangle wavered as the latter came about; but having done so, it made no headway against the current, and the steam vessel crept closer. There were flashes from both ships, followed by reports; then the shooting stopped. Nash stood up in a fruitless attempt to see what was happening, but all he could make out was the two little boats meeting, and then drifting down toward Staten Island together.

The astral plane might be a world peopled with ideal beings, but the result was certainly not an ideal world—at least not according to the usual concept of a pacific and prosperous one. People were getting shot and stabbed right and left . . .

A crunch on the gravel made him turn. A man was standing nearby, feet together and hands in the pants pockets of his Brooks Brothers' suit, smoking a cigarette in a long holder, and looking past Nash at the river; in his right eye a monocle was stuck.

"See what happened?" asked this individual out of the side of his mouth.

"Not very well."

"Too far, eh? Patroons tried to run the blockade, no doubt." The well-dressed man sat down on the top of another pile. "Lovely day, what?" He smiled all over.

"Yep," replied Nash. "You look pretty well pleased with the world."

"Am. Just collected my fee for solving the case of the Jacobite Jaw. Re-enactment worked like a charm. Now I can loaf for a year. I say!" The man looked sharply at Nash. "Aren't you the chap who skewered that vagrant on Chelsea Hill last night?"

Prosper Nash began to shake slightly. He pulled himself up and barked with quite unnecessary aggressiveness: "What gave you that idea?"

"Elementary, my dear chap. Only had to examine the holes in his shirt to know he'd been done in by a stop thrust from a seventeenth-century rapier, delivered by a man of your height. Won't bore you with the details."

"Are you going to turn me in?" asked Nash more quietly.

"Oh, my aunt Emmy! To use your own truculent phraseology, what gave you that idea? Not a policeman. Private investigator. They wouldn't be interested either, with Wotanists popping out of their teacups. Served the chap right, no doubt."

Nash drew a long breath. "It did, all right. Say, m'sieur, I recently heard a man say something about a desert island. Do they have such a thing around New York?"

"Certainly. Where the Shamir's kept." The private investigator waved in a northeasterly direction. "Park. Risky to go see, though. Been fighting there."

"There seems to be a gosh-awful lot of fighting," commented Nash.

The private investigator shrugged. "True. It almost makes one believe that legend about our being the idealizations of chaps on another plane. Naturally, chaps would imagine a lot of fierce, quarrelsome idealizations."

"What's that?" cried Nash. A few feet from them, a hazy, flickering outline wavered in the air, gradually thickening and becoming more opaque. Nash repeated his question: "What *is* it?"

"The mystery of creation, my friend," replied the other, puffing unconcernedly.

The presence solidified slowly into a handsome, well-built woman of about Nash's age—or rather, about the age of the Chevalier de Nêche—clad in a severe businesswoman's suit.

The woman stared vacantly for some seconds. She passed her hand across her eyes and took a couple of faltering steps, as if just awakened.

"Sit down, my dear," the investigator addressed her.

She seemed to see them for the first time; an expression of fear and bewilderment appeared.

"Sit down," the man repeated.

She did so, uncertainly, as though she did not quite know how to control her limbs.

"Can I help you?" asked Nash.

She looked at him as though she did not un-

derstand him, then slowly articulated: "I . . . don't . . . know."

"Give her a few minutes to get adjusted, old chap," said the investigator, and addressed the woman: "Have much trouble coming through?"

"Three . . . times. It . . . was . . . very . . . painful."

"I know, old girl. It's that way with most of us. Don't be afraid of us; we're pukka. I'm Reggie Kramer, and this chap . . ."

"Chevalier de Nêche," said Nash, feeling a little silly about the title.

"Righto. Know your name yet?"

The woman closed her eyes, and finally said, "Eleanor Thompson Berry. I lecture."

There was a long silence before she added, "I also write a newspaper column. Are there newspapers?"

"Not many, since the Wotanists burned down the *World*. But the best thing for you would be to toddle over to the City Hall. The Home Defense forces need propagandists."

"Where is that?" asked Miss Berry.

Kramer gestured and poured out directions, at which the woman looked all the more bewildered. "I . . . I don't know my way around yet," she said, and looked appealingly at the two men.

"I'll show you," growled Nash, "though I'm not much better off than you are." He looked scornfully at Kramer.

The private investigator merely laughed. "Good idea, old man. I'd offer to conduct Miss Berry if I weren't so infernally lazy. You might take these with you." He whisked out a couple of cards. Nash took one and read

REGINALD VANCE KRAMER
Discreet Investigations
224 Greene St. N. Y. C.

Nash meant to give Kramer a curt good-bye, but he had swept off his plumed hat in a wide gesture before he knew it. Wherever the Chevalier's soul might be, his body still had a lot of automatic reflexes left over.

Nash and Eleanor Thompson Berry turned away and walked toward the nearest street leading away from the waterfront. Then they halted.

A clatter of hoofs preceded a group of six horsemen in steel caps and long white mantles, who rode straight at the two pedestrians. They had bearded, mahogany-colored faces, and looked enough alike to be sextuplets.

They reined in a few paces from the pair; one cried something in a guttural language, and two of them flung themselves off their horses and ran at the woman, who stepped back in alarm.

"Hey!" cried Nash.

The leader looked down at him dispassionately, and jerked a thumb. He said, "Get hence, you!"

Miss Berry screamed "Help!" as the two dismounted ones seized her arms. The Chevalier's arm had already half drawn its sword. Nash lunged at the nearest kidnapper; the blade bent against a shirt of mail, and then scimitars flashed out all around him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nash parried a cut with a ringing clash, and then one of the riderless horses caught his eye. He bounded toward it with the idea of vaulting into the saddle. But mounting a horse is a task requiring both hands, and Nash was encumbered by his rapier. For a few seconds he clutched the pommel with his left hand and hopped around trying to spear the nigh stirrup with his toe. The horse pranced in a circle, and the dark men yelled and took wild swipes at Nash.

At last Nash thought to put the blade between his teeth, and catch the cantle with his other hand. One heave and he was up; he had not found the stirrups, but the Chevalier's fine riding muscles made them hardly necessary. He put the animal in motion toward the nearest opponent; the man gave ground, and the others closed in on Nash from back and side. The tip of a scimitar swished by, an inch from his nose; another nicked his boot. He felt as a toad must

feel that sees the whirling blades of a lawn mower slicing down on him.

A guttural command opened the press out; the leader of the pack was leveling a pistol. Nash could see that the barrel was squarely in line with his midriff.

A gun crashed. Nash, tensing himself for the hammer blow of the bullet, felt nothing—had he been killed instantly?—and then realized that the man with the pistol had been shot instead of shooting. The pistoler swayed and fell out of his saddle.

There were more shots; the kidnappers yelled, and Nash, finding himself within easy reach of one, carefully ran him through the throat. When he looked around for another to tackle, three were riding off as if the devil were after them; the remaining one, afoot, was being pursued by Eleanor Thompson Berry, who had somehow possessed herself of his scimitar and was swinging it at his steel-capped head with both hands.

The columnist gave up the hopeless chase and walked back, breathing hard. Nash saw a small group of men standing in front of a waterfront shack; they all bore rifles and pistols. He rode over to them, finding them a tough-looking lot, and extremely nautical. One with salt-flecked sideburns said, "Ahoy, mister. Thought you was going to get your thwarts stove for a minute."

"Thanks. I needed help all right."

"Wasn't nothin'. The boys and me didn't figure on letting them sharks take a Christian."

"Thanks again," said Nash. "My name's de Nêche, and if I can ever do anything for you, let me know."

"Aye-aye, Mr. de Nêche. I'm Cap'n Jones—Ahab Dana Jones." He looked at Nash expectantly, which was obviously a hint that a little cash on the barrelhead would be welcome.

"Take this horse," said Nash, dismounting. "If you don't want to keep him, he'll bring a good price."

"Aw now, mister," protested Captain Jones, "I wouldn't want to separate a man from his beast like that. Why, I had a parrot once . . ."

"No, I insist," said Nash, realizing that as far as the sailors knew the animal was his own. After more Alphonse-Gaston parley, the horse was accepted; Nash walked away quickly, leaving the sailors arguing whether the creature should be taken into their house, and, if so, how.

Eleanor Thompson Berry had rounded up the other two riderless horses and was waiting for him; nearby, Reginald Vance Kramer still sat on his post and smoked. The detective said to Nash, as he approached, "For one who thinks there's too much fighting around here, you haven't done half badly in the last twelve hours."

He indicated the two bodies. Nash looked, and

saw that they were really just bundles of clothes from which the contents had vanished. "*You* weren't much help, m'sieur," he said belligerently.

"My dear chap, what could *I* do? I work with the jolly old bean, when I work at all. The snickersnee's more your line."

"Oh, well," said Nash. "Who were those people? Do you know?"

"Probably soulless ones belonging to one of the sheiks or sultans, out shopping for the harem. My guess would be that they were Arslan's."

Seeing by Nash's expression that the cavalier was bursting with more queries, the detective added, "No more questions, please . . . there's a good chap. I want to work on my book on ancient musical instruments." Therewith Kramer got out a notebook and began scribbling furiously.

Nash shrugged and turned away. Now that he had a horse, he could cover ground fast enough to learn what he had to. He mounted. Miss Berry did likewise, though her costume was hardly suitable.

"You don't talk much," commented Eleanor Thompson Berry.

"Oh, don't I?" asked Nash.

"No, not like that other man—Mr. Kramer. Except to ask these people the way, you've hardly said a word."

"Uh-huh."

"But why? Is there a reason? I want to know. I have so much to learn before I can be a lecturer. You are . . . let me think . . . sad. Is that it?"

"Well," said Nash, "I killed . . ." He almost added "two men," but decided not to raise the ghost of last night's marauder. What Miss Berry didn't know wouldn't hurt her, especially if she were going to join the forces of whatever government held out in the City Hall.

"Was that wrong? Should you have let the men in white take me?"

"I don't suppose it was wrong, exactly. I just don't like killing people."

"But then, why . . ."

"Excuse me, but do you mind if we talk about something else?" This suggestion brought a stream of questions about the astral plane, to which Nash did not know the answers. He was glad when they hove in sight of the City Hall. "There's your destination, madame. And now if you'll excuse me . . ."

The woman said, "I wish you'd go in with me, Chevalier. I don't know anyone."

Nash almost weakened, but the thought of being detained while the officials investigated the puncturing of two of their citizens—who might, for all Nash knew, have influential friends—stiffened his spine.

"Sorry," he said, "but I have an errand of my own.

Au 'voir." He waved his hat and trotted off before she could protest further. Now for the Shamir, before he got involved in any more bloodletting!

The wide street that ran north from the City Hall Plaza corresponded to the mundane New York's Broadway; some of the street signs in fact said "Broadway." But others said various things, such as "Christopher Magellan Avenue" or "Shin Fane Boulevard." The stretches bearing these names began and ended without visible plan, as if half the population had tried its hand at putting up street signs with whatever names pleased their fancy. Many stretches were much too narrow to make the name "Broadway" appropriate, and there were twists and jogs that the mundane plane's equivalent lacked. Nash had to detour around a couple of Indian tepees set up in the middle of the street, with Indians sitting cross-legged in front of them.

The buildings were smaller than those of Prosper Nash's New York, and there was not a skyscraper in sight. He did pass a couple of huge excavations, which might have been meant as foundations for skyscrapers. But work on them had long been abandoned; the sides were caving in, in one case taking a good part of the avenue with them.

Nash inferred that the astralites tended toward picturesqueness at the expense of practicality. The Chevalier whose body he inhabited was probably of that sort, too; always getting in fights . . . But if the

Chevalier was something thought up by Prosper Nash, wasn't his idealization's nature Nash's own fault? An unanswerable question.

The park to which Kramer had referred must be the equivalent of Central Parl, though what a desert island would be doing there remained a puzzle. Nash had reached what he judged to be the latitude of the fifties when the faint popping of gunfire reminded him that there was a war on. He hesitated, noticed a restaurant, and was reminded that he had not yet eaten lunch.

As he hung up his hat, he was startled to see that it shared the hatrack with a golden crown. The owner of the crown was evidently the dignified person in the embroidered robe sitting at the counter. A king who was lunching on coffee and doughnuts ought to be as good a source of information as any.

"How's the war going, m'sieur?" he asked, when he had ordered.

"Ah," said the royal dunker. "You may well ask." After an impressive pause, he added, "They've cleared the Wotanists out of the southern half of the park, though the pests still raid down the west side." Another pause. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"You're supposed to say, 'Your sage majesty is most gracious.' "

"Your sage majesty is most gracious."

"Ah. That's better."

The counterman put in: "Heh, he's a good one. You'd think he was really a king still."

"Ah, but I am, my good varlet. 'Not all the water in the rough rude sea can wash the balm off from an annointed king. The breath of worldly men cannot depose the . . . the . . .' How does it go?"

"I don't know how it goes," snapped the counterman, "but if you want to eat here on credit any more, you better not call me 'varlet.' "

"But, my dear—commoner, if you prefer—think of the curiosity trade which my patronage brings . . ."

"Bah! Kings are a dime a dozen."

Nash left them arguing and continued on his way. Pedestrians were fewer. Despite the variation in their costumes, which gave the city the air of a movie lot during lunch hour, there was a certain uniformity about their physical type that struck Prosper Nash. They were nearly all stalwart, handsome men and women between twenty and forty; there were hardly any old people, and no children.

A few blocks farther north, Nash came upon a barricade of cobblestones and furniture, which had once stretched clear across the avenue, but which had since been broken down in the middle to let traffic through. A little later, he passed a group of soldiers uniformed like movie ushers. The statement is not literally accurate, for the "uniforms" were far from uniform,

but they made up in gorgeousness what they lacked in similarity.

Presently, a horseman passed him at an easy canter: a man in a cloth cap and a shabby twentieth-century civilian suit, with a red band tied around his arm and a rifle slung across his back. He gave Nash a suspicious glance as he went by, and Nash saw a small reddish beard, under a pair of sharp, slightly Mongoloid eyes.

There were more soldiers, and the sound of distant shots broke out again briefly. Then Nash sighted greenery ahead; without doubt, this corresponded to Central Park, though its borders were irregular. It was much wilder; the paths were fewer and in an advanced state of disrepair. Moreover, there were dwellings in it: a Colonial cottage here, nearly hidden by vegetation; a log cabin there. The trees were shedding bright autumnal foliage.

A group of soldiers sat under a tulip tree, eating lunch. Nash asked the way to the lake, got a jerk of a thumb from a hussar with his mouth full of sandwich, and continued on.

At the point where the path debouched on the lake shore there was a small boathouse bearing a sign:

CAPT. PERRY DECATUR SHAPIRO
Boats for Rent

Sounds of carpentry came from the boathouse. Nash dismounted and tried to tie his horse to a tree.

But the animal developed fractiousness and tugged Nash toward the lake. The idea finally penetrated his head that the horse was thirsty. He let it drink and tied it so that it could reach plenty of the long grass that grew around.

Captain Perry Decatur Shapiro crawled out from under the boat on which he was working, wiped his hands, and put on a swallow-tailed, brass-buttoned coat and cocked hat. He and Nash exchanged courtly greetings, and the captain asked if a boat was wanted.

"I have but three fit to put out," he explained. "Two have already been taken today. The rest were so riddled in the battle that they'll not be ready for a week."

"What battle, m'sieur?"

"Weren't you in town when it happened? It was during the recent attempt of the Votie scoundrels. They came down the lake on timber rafts, and our saucy boys went out in the boats to stop them. It was hot work for a while, since we couldn't sink the rafts."

"Have the Voties all been driven away from the lake now?"

"Yes, sir. So here I sit, hiring my sound boats out to pay for repairs on the rest. Though being so near the front, and what with old Tukiphat's desert island taking up half the lake, I get little enough custom."

"Who," asked Nash carefully, "is Tukiphat?"

"The genius of the Shamir, of course. Though I

don't know why he chose my lake to set himself and his bauble up in. He leaves room neither for pleasure-boating nor for a proper battle. I wanted to drag the boats over to the river to join Larry Preble Pappas' squadron, but the staff wouldn't hear of it. Those noodles in City Hall are so bemused by the word 'defense' that they'll never put down the Votie vermin, which can be accomplished only by overwhelming attack."

Nash hastily helped launch the rowboat, and rowed out before Captain Shapiro could start another tirade. The captain's rate of a dollar an hour made his wallet nerve wince, but he reasoned that if he secured the Shamir, he would no longer have to worry about the Chevalier's finances.

When he got away from shore he looked around; yes, there was a most patent desert island. It was a bare little knob of sand and rock, crowned by one sorrowful palm tree, the ensemble looking as out of place in the park as a juke-box on a concert stage.

It certainly did not take up half the lake. Nash rowed closer and saw an empty rowboat lying on the sand of the island's minuscule beach. The whole island had a faintly queer, insubstantial look; its perspectives were somehow not quite right. Nash put that effect down to an illusion resulting from its general incongruity. Surrounding it was what looked, at first sight, like a circular ribbon of oil on

the water, several yards wide, smooth, dully blue-gray.

Nash decided not to investigate more closely, because two other rowboats were in sight. He rowed casually toward one of these; it held two gold-braided soldiers, fishing; they warned him off with fingers to their lips. The other looked empty until Nash got close to it. Then he saw that a young woman lay in it, sun-bathing. He rowed off.

While imagining you were a dashing cavalier was all right for daydreaming, Prosper Nash was most interested now in getting back into his own body before the demon, Bechard, did something awful with it, back on Earth. The demon had not given him detailed instructions for using the Shamir; in fact, Bechard had sent him off with a mere assurance that he would learn what was necessary when the time came. Either Bechard had a great and unfounded confidence in Nash, or was not very bright, or knew in some supernatural way that things would, in fact, take care of themselves. The last was the most comforting hypothesis, so Prosper Nash adopted it. He pulled into a little cove near the outlet, where he would be out of sight of the other boats and Captain Shapiro, lay back, pushed his hat over his eyes, and dozed.

He was awakened by cold and a great interior

emptiness. The stars were coming out in quick succession; this city must have a much less smoky atmosphere than its mundane equivalent. The boats were gone from the lake; everything was quiet, save for the faint sounds of the city's primitive means of transportation, and the occasional pop of a gun over to eastward.

Nash's main emotions were impatience to get the job over with, and lonesomeness. He was reminded of how he had felt when he first moved to New York from Hartford, knowing nobody.

If Captain Shapiro came out to demand explanations, Nash would simply tell him he had fallen asleep and then had lost his way in the dark. However, the little boathouse was as dark as the rest, and the incongruous island sat there inviting him to storm it, and beg, borrow, or steal the Shamir from this Tukiphat. Who was Tukiphat? The genius of the Shamir, Shapiro had said. A kind of spirit? He would know soon enough.

It looked too easy; the rowboat still lay on the sand. A genius who used a rowboat sounded like a pretty finite sort of being. Still, Nash would have liked to know what he was up against. The sight of a grim but definite policeman on the rock pile ahead would have been a comfort. Decidedly, Prosper Nash was too easygoing a person for enterprises requiring meticulous planning and desperate nerve.

Not a sound from the shore or the island. Nash pulled with a short stroke to minimize the squeak of the oarlocks. It was too easy . . .

It was.

CHAPTER FIVE

Nash's teeth chattered a little until the exercise warmed him. He took one last look, to assure himself that Tukiphat's island was straight ahead, and bent to the oars again. The water gurgled pleasantly as the blades bit through it—pull—reach—pull—reach—a dozen strokes should bring him to the beach. But a dozen strokes did not, nor yet two dozen. Had he rowed right past it in the dark?

Where was the thing? And for that matter, where was everything else? The stars had vanished, and Nash could no longer make out the silhouette of trees against the sky. In fact, he could no longer make out anything save the water alongside, darkly reflecting like blued steel. It must have clouded over.

He leaned on his oars again, frowning; a prickly sensation began in the hair follicles of his nape, and spread over his scalp. Except for that rippling surface, he might as well be rowing through interstellar space. He stuck a finger into the water to see whether it was what it seemed; it was at least wet, and warmer

than the chill air. A line from a poem ran through his mind:

"The weird ululation of fiends
On the brackish waters of time . . ."

Nash preferred his poetry more concrete and cheerful, but that line seemed appropriate right now. It was no darker than it had been; he just couldn't seem to see anything except two strips of feebly lit water, one stretching away from the bow of the craft and one from the stern. It was somewhat as though he were in his old mundane body without his glasses. Could it be that he *was?* He felt himself quickly, and was satisfied that he still inhabited the Chevalier's big, hawk-nosed, long-haired physique.

But the island, lake, stars, and everything else recognizable had vanished; there was water ahead, and water behind, stretching off to slightly brighter patches on what would be the horizon; everything else was a blur, and a dark one at that.

He rowed some more, then stopped when it occurred to him that he had no idea where he was going.

"Hey!"

Silence.

"Hey!"

Still, no sound.

He rowed with long, hard strokes; the glimmering

water slid past. When he stopped and looked around, the boat still floated on a ribbon of water bordered by nothingness and stretching away to infinity on both sides.

Nash headed the boat straight toward the side of this canal-like body and rowed some more. He moved; the eddies from his strokes swirled away aft into the dark. But his surroundings failed to change accordingly. It was as though the ribbon of water were being unrolled on one side and rolled up on the other, so that no matter what Nash did he remained in the middle.

When even the Chevalier's iron frame began to tire, Prosper Nash gave up and rested again. The direct approach that he had used was evidently all wrong. He should have inquired further. Where had he gotten the idea that he was a sensible fellow smart enough to improvise his way out of trouble? The only comfort was the knowledge that Bechard had been an even bigger fool, to send him off on this adventure so lamentably unprepared . . .

Well, if it was really all Bechard's fault, there was no point in sitting here and reproaching himself. Nash was tired and hungry; if he made himself as comfortable as possible until dawn, he might be able to grasp his predicament then—if there was going to be a dawn, and if he weren't in some sort of hyperspatial tunnel between the mundane and astral planes. He scooped enough water out of the lake to

fill the gnawing void for a while, lay down in the boat, and put his hat over his face.

He slept badly; every time he dropped off, the cold would bring him to, shivering. After what seemed like the hundredth such awakening, his itching eyes picked out the spots of lighter gray toward which the watercourse stretched. They seemed definitely brighter, and the canal itself was lightening in response.

The world brightened, but became no more intelligible. The canal seemed to run through a glass tunnel of indefinite length, the glass fluted so that nothing in the world outside could be made out. At the sides of the canal, the water appeared to merge into the glass, so that the diameter of the tunnel was difficult to estimate. Nash guessed it at thirty to forty feet.

As he stared, a narrow, horizontal red line appeared in the wall of the tunnel at eye-level. The minutes passed, and the red line widened to a band with an apparent width of about two degrees; meanwhile, it brightened to a glowing orange. It got no wider, but rose with gastropodan speed and turned a fierce white.

Sun, thought Nash; the walls of the tunnel must have the optical property of stretching one dimension of the world outside out to infinite length. No wonder nothing was recognizable. He rowed about for a while—toward the walls of the tunnel, and

along its axis, but with no more results than he had achieved during the night.

Before he resigned himself to eating his floppy boots for breakfast, he had better have one more try with lung-power. He yelled, and listened, and yelled again, until his throat was sore.

At last a voice answered: "Ahoy! If it isn't the saucy lubber in the macaroni hat! Belay yourself and return my boat, sir!" The voice was startlingly clear, and unmistakably that of Captain Perry Decatur Shapiro.

"Glad to," Nash yelled back. "But how?"

"Row, you fool! Not that way—head toward the outer wall of the sphere!"

"Which way is that?"

"Little more to starboard—there you are. Now pull, my hearty!"

Nash pulled along the axis of the tube until he puffed. "Keep on!" cried the invisible captain. Nash rowed some more, and craned his neck to see where he was going. Perhaps fifty yards ahead, he could see that the water and sun and streaks along the sides of the tunnel almost converged; around the spot toward which they pointed, objects could be made out. There was a bit of lake shore with a couple of trees, shrunken down as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope. As the boat moved, the picture grew as pieces of the streaks detached themselves and joined it. It seemed to Nash as though he were looking into

a deep, parabolic mirror, except that there was no reflection of himself at the focus.

Suddenly the walls of the tunnel whisked back, and he was out on the familiar lake; or at least most of him was. When he looked at the stern, he saw that the boat ended just beyond his feet, as if it had been crumpled up along its longitudinal axis. Even as he watched, the stern extended itself away from where he sat, until the boat reached its normal dimensions. He had just rowed out of the smooth, dull, curved band that lay on the water, like a wide streak of oil encircling the island.

"Hurray!" "'Rah!" "Vive!" "Bravo!" "Euge!" "Yipee!" "Olé!"

These sounds came from a score of men on the shore of the lake. Among them, Nash made out Captain Shapiro's nautical cap. As he rowed toward them, he discerned that they were laughing. Half of them were soldiers and the rest the usual motley astral assortment. He handed over the boat to its commander with a self-conscious grin.

"Went to sleep," he explained, "and got lost in the dark—"

Captain Shapiro was examining the boat minutely. "It's well for you that it's sound, sir," he said. "We don't mind your trying to reach Tukiphat's island, having tried to do so ourselves without success, but if you'd lost or damaged the boat, the lads here would have haled you before the Private."

Nash asked, "Say, what is that thing around the island? What became of that tunnel I got into?"

"Wasn't any tunnel," said one of the soldiers. "It's a—what you call it—optical effect. How does it work, General Kenyon?"

Another soldier took up: "You see, Frenchy, when Tukiphat set up his island he didn't want visitors, so he put what he calls a zone of refraction around it — How does it work, Colonel? I'm just an ordinary general."

"It's shaped like a hollow ball," explained the colonel, "and it slows down everything moving toward or away from its center, the way glass slows down light, only more so. As a result, it takes you as long to go a foot in a . . . uh . . . radial direction as it would take you to go a mile ordinarily. A man who enters it is flattened out so that, from the outside, he looks like a cardboard cutout. From his own viewpoint, he looks normal, and everything not in the zone is stretched all out of shape."

The first general said, "You can fire a bullet at it, and when the slug hits the zone, you can see it hang in the air and then drop straight down *plunk* into the water. Here, I'll show you . . ."

The general raised his gun. The colonel barked, "Put that down, you fool! Don't you know if you don't hit the zone square on, the bullet'll be refracted back out and maybe hit somebody?"

"Aw, but Colonel . . ."

"Shut up! Who's giving orders here?" The generals meekly subsided. The colonel started to say: "All right, Frenchy, try not to get in any more trouble . . ."

"Jean-Prospère!" cried a man in the crowd, a man who was dressed much like Nash. *"Ami! Òu estois tu caché?"* The man threw himself upon Nash with a swirl of cloak; and before Nash could get his guard up, he had been seized around the shoulders and kissed on both cheeks. The crowd guffawed.

He looked at his toes, vainly hoping the earth would swallow him, while his new friend poured a stream of seventeenth-century French over his embarrassed head. ". . . *beaucoup de paine j'ay eue! J'ay oui dire par des scélérats que peur tu avois. Un cheval tu as! Je croyois que vendue tu l'avois . . .*"

Nash finally worked in: "Had a little lapse of memory. Didn't know where I belonged or anything."

"And now back it all comes? *Bon!* We go, no?"

Nash mounted without protest and let the other guide him out of the park. He learned how difficult is the task of following a man while riding alongside of him, and acting as if one knew where one was going. He rode in silence, gloomy over the night's fiasco, and apprehensive lest his fellow-cavalier get suspicious.

But the fellow-cavalier talked enough for two. Nash picked up the facts that his self-appointed

friend was the Comte de la Tour d'Ivoire. It seemed that both of them were living in a sort of Cavaliers' Club, and he, de Nêche, had formerly held a job that caused him to travel between New York City and an unspecified kingdom, whereof he and the Comte were subjects. But de Nêche was now unemployed. Moreover, he got the impression that there were persons in astral New York who would like nothing better than to carve their initials on his liver.

Behind their backs, a roll of distant gunfire broke out, fading as they trotted south. They rode until Nash guessed that they had reached the twenties, though the irregular layout of astral New York made Prosper Nash's knowledge of its mundane equivalent hardly useful. They halted in front of an elderly brownstone building with big glass doors, and a vacuous-looking fellow took their horses. Nash wondered who would create such a stupid oaf for his astral body. Then he remembered hearing about "soulless ones"; perhaps this was one of them.

"A! M'sieur le Chevalier!" cried the doorman, and there was a stampede of long-haired, sword-girt persons across the lobby to pump Nash's hands and kiss his cheeks. They all yelled questions at him in French, until de la Tour d'Ivoire proved himself a real friend by shouting: *"Plus tard, je vous en prie! Les privations horribles il a soutenu!"*

Nash located the dining room and made straight for it. After wolfing his way through a huge break-

fast, he was presented with a check. He was not quite sure what to do about this, but the waiter had a pencil in his hand, and did not seem disturbed when Nash took it away from him and signed de Nêche's name to the check. They'd have quite a time proving that it was a forgery.

At the desk, they gave him his key and a couple of letters. They also gave him a meaningful cough, and one of them said, "About your bill, m'sieur . . ."

"Later, please." As he turned away, Nash saw one clerk toss a slight shrug and an uplift of the eyebrow at the other, as if he had heard that sort of thing only too often.

The mirror in his room showed Nash a very seedy-looking Chevalier indeed, unshaven and bloodshot. His drink out of the lake the previous night had dissolved all the wax out of the spikes of his mustache, so that they hung down the sides of his mouth like unraveled ends of tarred string.

He hunted up the Chevalier's toilet articles—which included a homicidal-looking straight razor—and freshened his appearance. He considered trimming the mustache down to the dimensions to which his mundane self was accustomed, but decided that it would be a dirty trick to take such a liberty with the body of the Chevalier in the latter's absence. There was a small jar of pomade for rewaxing the ornament.

Then he went through his possessions. These in-

cluded a notebook, a carpetbag, spare clothes, a bill of sale for a bay stallion, and a pawn ticket for a watch.

The pile of correspondence on the table consisted mainly of unpaid bills, some accompanied by unpleasant little notes. When he dutifully entered all his known debts on the sheet of note paper he was using as a ledger, Prosper Nash was horrified to find himself $469.09 in the hole. Heavens! If he'd known anything like this was going to happen, he would have created an astral body with some sense about financial matters!

On the other hand, if he could only get hold of the Shamir, he could leave the prodigal Chevalier to his own dubious monetary destiny.

One letter was personal. In French, it read:

Three Rivers
October 24

My dear Jean-Prospère,

Just a word to inform you that since you recently departed with such magnificent élan, the peace of a tomb has prevailed in the kingdom. Me, I wish you would return. But I cannot, I regret, seriously advise such a course, because His Majesty has issued orders that should his officers apprehend you attempting such a gaff, they shall hang you at once.

To me such a sad event would give a sorrow

of the most formidable. Very well, my old, remain where you are, and try not to make that spot too hot for you also. We know that you never write letters, but we shall think of you nevertheless.

Marie, Constance, and Hélène weep hot tears for you. Célestin swears that she will cut your heart out should opportunity present itself.

With my most affectionate sentiments,

Raoul

Wow! thought Nash. There remained the two unopened letters he had gotten from the desk. Both were in English; the first read:

Tamerlane Express Co.
214 Canal St.
New York, N. Y.
October 30

M. le Chevalier de Nêche
Alexandre Dumas Club
New York City

Dear Sir:

We regret to inform you that we do not at present have an opening for you in our organization as courier.

However, in view of your admirable qualifications, we shall keep your name on file, and shall

inform you whenever such a position becomes available.

Very truly yours,
Kit Fargo Simpson, Pres.

The other was more personal:

12 Rutherford Place
New York City
October 30

Dear Chevalier:

I've just heard that you are staying in New York City again.

I'm giving a small party Saturday night. Remembering how you were the life of my last one, I'd love it if you could manage to drop in this time. Any time after eight.

Cordially,
Alicia Dido Woodson

Nash stared at the signature a long time. That *must* be the astral body of his reserved friend Alice Woodson! Was there some metaphysical affinity between the astral bodies of people who were friends on the mundane plane, that he should keep bumping into the astral equivalents of his acquaintances? Very likely.

Saturday night. Hmm. That was last night, which Nash had spent frozenly rowing about Tuki-

phat's sphere of refraction. Probably he had gone out early Saturday, and so had not received this letter when it arrived, and had not been home since. The thought of the girl's disappointment brought a slight lump to Nash's throat. The least he could do would be to call at once and explain. Also, he admitted, he was itching with curiosity to see what sort of astral personality Alice would have.

Not to mention the possibility that she might know someone who had a job open, or who could give him a line on how to secure the Shamir.

To avoid another refrigeration, he put on the cloak he found hanging in the closet. In half an hour, he had ridden up to 12 Rutherford Place.

This turned out to be a small walk-up apartment house. *A. D. Woodson* was announced over the letter box of apartment 2-C.

No answer to the bell. Maybe this Woodson girl worked for a living, instead of serving as an abused nurse to a cantankerous mother. Apparently people did not have parents on the astral plane; they just flickered into existence when somebody on the mundane plane conceived the idea of them, and then they kept going until an accident took them off.

Or perhaps—not likely, but possible—the bell did not work. Nash did not think much of the standard of technics in this world. Which was only to be expected, if people insisted on conceiving cavaliers and cowboys instead of plumbers, carpenters, and

electricians. He pushed another bell at random, and when the buzzer sounded opened the front door.

The bell at the door of 2-C was silent, though Nash held his ear close to the paneling as he thumbed the button. Nor could he hear any motion from within.

The door, he noticed at last, was not completely shut. Perhaps he shouldn't push it open, take a look in and call for Miss Woodson. But after all, such conduct was only to be expected of the hell-raising Chevalier de Nêche.

"Alicia! *Hein!*"

That there was nobody in the apartment, he soon made sure. But somebody had been. Chairs were upset; the bed was pulled apart, and the large mirror over the dresser was broken. The room gave every evidence of having witnessed a battle as well as a robbery and ransacking.

CHAPTER SIX

"But, my dear old corn-flake!" wailed Reginald Vance Kramer. "I tell you I don't want your kidnapping case! I'm filthy rich from my last adventure, and I want to work on my book!"

"Go on in!" roared Nash, pushing the tweedy astralite through Alicia Dido Woodson's doorway.

"There's the regular police . . ."

"I don't want to get mixed up with them! Anyway," Nash added in a more conciliatory tone, "don't they always have to call you in to solve the hard ones?"

"True," grumbled Kramer. "You've got sound instincts, I'm afraid. Let's see. Hmm." The detective began nosing around the room like a cat who smells a mouse. "Notice the position of that overturned chair. It fits the psychological pattern of a sheik's retainer." More nosing, then: "I say, I hope you can pay for this. My minimum retainer is five hundred . . ."

"Not right away," said Nash. "When I get a job, and in installments."

"Oh now really, look here . . ."

"You just said you were filthy rich," argued Nash. "So you can afford to wait a bit for your fee. You wouldn't let a little delay like that stop you from cracking a first-class case, would you?"

Kramer's curiosity gradually overcame his cupidity. "I'll do it, Chevalier. But this time only, mind you. And don't tell anyone I've given you such easy terms." He scrutinized a hairbrush silently. At last he extracted one hair and held it up to the light.

"Blonde," he said. "Golden-blonde, five-feet-six, weight nine stone seven, fond of sports."

Nash frowned. "The blondeness I can see, but how do you infer the other?"

"Sh! Perfectly obvious, but I'll have to tell you later, when the case has been solved. Oh, I say!" The last was a cry of delight as Kramer scooped up a small vase that lay on its side on the floor. He held up the object, turning it. "From the Bang Dynasty! This is priceless! And look here—what would you call the instrument this wench is playing?"

Nash peered at the picture on the vase. "Some kind of harp, I suppose."

"Ah, there you're wrong! That's a quarter-tone plunk-plunk. They weren't supposed to have been invented as early as the Bang Dynasty. That'll be

good for a whole chapter in my book." Kramer got out his notebook and began scribbling.

"You can have the plunk-plunk. I'll take the girl," said Nash. "Hey, how about the kidnapping?"

"Oh, bother the kidnapping! Now, don't be wroth, old man. I'll get back to it as soon as I finish these notes. Run along, please. You make me nervous, fingering your sword that way. I'll send you a report."

Nash protested, but Kramer insisted that he could not do effective work with the Chevalier looming over him. Although Nash was frantic with curiosity to see how a real super-sleuth operated, for the sake of Alicia Dido Woodson he gave in.

On his way back to the Dumas Club, he reflected that the astral plane surely had libraries and scientists—Farnsworth, the blue-clad would-be Interplanetary Patrolman, had implied as much. And weren't there numerous young men on the mundane plane who imagined themselves as Newton, Darwin, and Einstein rolled into one? He'd stop at the club only long enough to ask for mail, and to inquire where one of the prodigies might reside. This time he would tackle the Shamir problem in the systematic, common-sense fashion that his mundane self would have used in running down an error in a trial balance.

The club doorman said, "Ah, M'sieur le Chev . . ." then broke off, staring woodenly.

"What's . . ." Nash looked around the lobby. The

other cavaliers were looking at him curiously, too —not so much with hostility as with excited expectancy. His surprised gaze flitted from face to face, until it lighted on that of the Comte de la Tour d'Ivoire. The last got up and came over to him, very serious.

"*Mon ami,*" he began, "Athos de Lilly is here."

"Who's that? And why are you all looking at me that way?"

"You don't know Athos de Lilly? My poor friend! Have your wits . . ."

"Perhaps the sight of me will refresh the gentleman's memory," said a tense, vibrant voice from the dining-room doorway, in which stood a tall, pale, thin-faced cavalier. This person advanced catlike over the carpet. When he was quite close, he thrust his head forward and grated, "You, Jean-Prospère de Nêche, are no gentleman!"

Nash simply stared at him. "Well?"

Athos de Lilly jerked his head back. "Perhaps, m'sieur, you did not hear me. I said you were no gentleman."

"Sure, I heard you. So what?"

Athos de Lilly's mouth fell upon; he mastered himself and said thickly, "*Sangdieu,* I did not think it would be necessary for me to call you a coward."

Nash was silent.

"Coward!" cried de Lilly, his voice rising. "Do you hear me? You are a coward!"

"Very well, I'm a coward. I knew that already," replied Nash amiably. "But what's the idea? I don't know you, m'sieu . . ."

"You mock me!" screamed de Lilly. "This for you, *fripon!*" The enraged cavalier pulled off one of his embroidered leather gloves and slapped Nash's face with it.

"Say, m'sieur," growled Nash, taking a step forward and cocking a fist.

Before he could let fly, de la Tour d'Ivoire caught his elbow. "Ah, my God, Jean-Prospère, not that! After all, you are a gentleman . . ."

"*He* doesn't seem to think so, so I guess I can take a poke at him—say, is he trying to challenge me to a duel?"

"But of course, my old! After all, you killed his best friend."

"*I* did? I never . . . I mean, if I did I'm sorry . . ."

"Not here! Not here!" shouted the club manager, running up. "In back, and do not attract the police!"

Prosper Nash found himself caught up in a current of men and swept through doors toward the rear, with the Comte still glued to his elbow. The latter said, "It would do me a great honor to be chosen your second."

"But . . . but . . ." expostulated Nash. Nobody paid any attention; the crowd whooped at the prospect of action. He was pushed and hauled out to the

lawn behind the club. Athos de Lilly awaited him somberly with drawn sword, flexing his knees every few seconds to limber up.

"Look here, Comte," said Nash, "why have I got to fight this fellow? I haven't anything against him."

"Sh, my dear friend, you have made enough eccentricities for one day! No more, I pray you!"

Nash was about to add candidly that he was frightened, but decided that these stouthearted and woodenheaded men of honor would misunderstand. They were all spread around the edges of the lawn now, except for Nash, de Lilly, the Comte, a cavalier who was acting as de Lilly's second, and another cavalier serving as referee. The last was holding a sword out horizontally in front of him. Athos de Lilly extended his blade so that it crossed the referee's sword a few inches from its tip and lay horizontally upon it. They all waited for Nash to do the same.

Damn Bechard; damn Monty Stark; damn Prosper Nash for getting into such a fix! He tried to summon up the strength of character to tell the assembly that their code duello was archaic nonsense, and walk out on them. But he could not, quite; and presently his rapier crossed the referee's blade, too, so that his and de Lilly's swords overlapped by about a foot.

"Allez!" barked the referee, dropping his blade and jumping back. Instantly Athos de Lilly came at him with a hop, skip, and lunge. Nash did not try to control his blade; the Chevalier de Nêche's reflexes

took care of that: *tzing, tzing!* After an instant of parry, riposte, and remise (the blades were heavier and slower than Nash had expected), de Lilly jumped back.

There were voices behind Nash, but if he turned his head, this man would stab him . . . The seconds stepped briskly forward and knocked up the duelists' swords with their own.

"Quickly!" said a voice. *"Posez!"*

Men were shouldering out of the club, not in the crossed surcoats of Cardinal Richelieu's guards, but in the scarlet tunics of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Their revolvers were out.

"We were just witnessing a fencing exhibition . . ." said the referee with a feeble smile.

"Oh, yeah?" growled a policeman. "We saw what we saw. You're under arrest, you two, for dueling. Come along. You, too, Mr. Umpire."

The three prisoners were disarmed and loaded into a horse-drawn paddy-wagon.

Nash made a tentative effort to soften up his recent antagonist: "M'sieu, I'm sorry about your friend, but I've just had a lapse of memory, so you shouldn't hold me responsible . . ."

De Lilly glared scornfully and turned his head away; the rest of the trip was made in morose silence.

When the desk sergeant asked Nash his name, he answered promptly, "Jean-Prospère de Nêche."

"Age?"

"Twenty-five."

"Mm, a man of your type doesn't usually last that long. Where were you created?"

"Created?"

"Yes, created."

"I don't know."

The sergeant was incredulous. Nash repeated his now-wearying yarn about a lapse of memory, which did not seem to make much impression.

"Lock him up," said the sergeant. "Justinian Marshall O'Hara can examine him."

"When?" asked Nash.

"Judging by the length of his docket, in about six months."

"But . . . hey!"

"Will you come quietly," asked a firm redcoat, "or must we— That's better!"

"Avast, Frenchy, what are you in for?" Nash's cellmate heaved himself up on the edge of his bed, made a mark on the greasy wall with his finger, and displayed a snaggle-toothed grin. He was a huge, fierce-mustached man in a striped shirt, with ape-long hairy arms.

"Dueling."

"Dueling, huh? Mighta known. You froggies think you're being he-men, standing up and poking at each other *this* way and *that* way." He made lady-

like motions with his right fist. "If you're going to get killed, why not get killed taking a treasure ship or something worth while?

"Oh, a life on the ocean wave,
A home on the briny—"

"Shut up!" A simultaneous yell arose from adjoining cells and nearby wardens, and cut off the hairy one's bellow.

"That's appreciation for you," grinned the pirate, stretching out on his bunk again. "My only regret is that I'll be hanged before I have a chance at the Shamir."

"How would you go about that?" asked Nash eagerly.

"Oho, so lace panties thinks he'd like a crack at the loot, too? Better leave that to jolly mariners like us, lad.

"Fifteen men on a dead man's chest, yo ho . . ."

"Shut up!"

"I might," said Nash reservedly. "Got any ideas?"

"It would be a joke on the cops at that, wouldn't it? My ghost'd laugh to split its liver."

"If it has one."

"Haw, haw! Well stand by, my bully. The first thing you need is a good magician. That's what we were after when they caught us. Pox take the whole lot of 'em for using steam and repeating rifles against

sail and muzzle-loaders. Even so, we'd have gotten out of the harbor safe if it hadn't been . . ."

"Yes, yes, but what about the magician?"

"Our own man, Aeolus Jackson, referred us to one of the local wizards here in New York, since Aeolus specializes in wind control and didn't think he was up to cracking Tukiphat's crystal ball. So-o-o, we ran in at night, and looked up this wight, one Empedocles MacDonald. But *he* wouldn't help us, no, sir! Before he'd set up his island, Tuky had made the rounds of the Manhattan wizards and put the fear of God into them. He made 'em all go through some hocus-pocus that put them in his power, in case one of them should get grand ideas.

"But Tuky hadn't thought to give the same rope's end to the out-of-town magi, and Empedocles MacDonald gave us the names of a few of these. So we schooned back to our saucy ship and were just breaking out skys'ls when the harbor patrol put a light on us, and then the ball began.

"As I went down to the rolling sea,
I saw three witches watching me . . ."

"Shut up!"

Nash persisted: "Who were these out-of-town magicians?"

"Lord love you, lad, how should I know? We had the names wrote down, but the paper got lost in

the garboil. Let me think— It seems there was a Jerome Cardan Dahlberg, of Poughkeepsie, and a Merlin Apollonius Stark of Staten Island, and an Aleister Klingsor van Buren of Yonkers . . ."

"Wait a minute! Did you say Merlin Apollonius Stark?"

"Aye—of Staten Island, too, though I cannot give you the exact addresses, which were on the paper. Why? Do you know this Stark knave?"

"Yes . . . uh . . . in a kind of way." Ten to one, Merlin Apollonius Stark was the astral body of Montague Allen Stark.

"Why then, your problem's solved! Set your helm for this magus and persuade, bribe, or threaten him into telling you how to overcome Tukiphat's barrier."

"How about the forces of law and order?"

"They won't stop you, having no love for Tuky, since he put up his island in their pond without a by-your-leave. Though if they board you after you've taken the bauble, they may find some law to confiscate it. Of course," the pirate added, "I won't warrant what Tuky himself will do. Empedocles MacDonald seemed fearful afraid of him."

"Then why did they nab you?"

The pirate grinned ferociously. "That was for something else. Were we out on the main I'd tell you a tale of gore and perfidy as should make you blanch. But first, I must see how I do with Justinian

Marshall O'Hara tomorrow. Of all the judges in New York, I have to come before him—and he's sworn to try, condemn, and hang me within the hour, so they say."

But the pirate's irrepressible garrulity kept his tongue going all afternoon and evening. He gave Nash innumerable tales of gore and perfidy, merely declining to name himself as a participant, introducing his yarns with: "I once heard a tale . . ." or "They tell me that when the bark *Antigonus* was becalmed off Montauk . . ."

When their supper plates were being removed, a warden sauntered by. "De Nêche!"

"Yes, m'sieur?"

"Thought you'd like to know. Judge O'Hara's going to give you your preliminary hearing first thing tomorrow. Seems you've got a friend among the higher-ups."

"Who?"

"A propagandist, Eleanor Thompson Berry. You Frenchies sure got what it takes with the gals. Mm-mm." The guard rolled his eyes and departed.

That started the pirate off again; it was some hours before the buccaneer announced that he intended to make his last night's sleep a good one, and fell silent.

Nash awakened later, half-consciously uneasy. The prison was quiet except for the footfalls of guards, and there was a suggestion of predawn grayness.

Then he became aware of an apish figure bending over him. Even as he tensed the muscles of his neck to raise his head, great horny hands clamped his throat; thumbs dug agonizingly in. Prosper Nash, still half-asleep, kicked, swung, and clawed; but the fingers dug deeper, and he could not reach to the other end of those terrible arms.

He tried to increase his efforts, but they were weaker. He seemed to be falling into a bottomless, black roaring hole, and the throttling grip did not hurt any more . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

When Prosper Nash come to, he was first surprised at being alive at all, and next curious as to what plane he was on.

When he pried sticky eyelids apart he saw that he was in the same old cell. And his neck was one vast ache.

"De Nêche?" said a voice over the hum in his ears.

"Here," answered another voice, not his. He tried to lift his head to see over the edge of his upper berth, but could not move his neck. He finally raised a hand and pushed his head a few inches to where he could see, just as a key clicked in the lock.

A man was standing inside the door, with his back to Nash; and in the light from the small barred window it was to be seen that he wore Nash's black velvet suit and floppy boots.

For one wild second Nash wondered if the other really were he, or if his psyche had changed bodies . . . But the hairy wrists that protruded from de Nêche's sleeves were not Nash's; they were those of

the pirate. At that instant, the door squeaked open and the pirate stepped out.

Nash tried to call out, but could not even whisper. Desperately, he tumbled over the edge of the bunk; he hit the floor painfully, and staggered to the door which had just closed.

He banged the bars. The keeper looked at him calmly, then away. Nash capered and pounded, and forced a faint wheezy squeak out of his tortured larynx. He was aware by this time that he wore the pirate's clothes. The pirate gave him a brief, uninterested glance, and Nash was startled to see that, in his garments, the pirate really looked quite a lot like him.

"Hey, George!" called the receding warden. "See what's wrong with Roaring Stede."

As the other guard's steps approached, Nash staggered to the bed and wrote with his finger on the wall: "I AM NÊCHE."

The other guard frowned at this, then at Nash, and vanished. Nash heard words, then the pirate's bellow: "God's bones, massurr, don't you think I know whether I'm me?"

"Better check up on it." Presently Nash found himself lined up beside the corsair.

The first guard shook his head. "They do look kind of alike, but that one"—pointing to Nash—"is Stede Morgan Retke. I'd know him anywhere."

Nash went through more antics, pointing to his

swollen throat. He managed to whisper, "Water!"

The guards were annoyed by this time, and fetched water in a manner that boded no good for the man who was proved a liar. After a swallow, Nash could manage a faint croak. "Get Miss Berry!"

In ten minutes, Eleanor Thompson Berry appeared. She immediately pointed out Stede Morgan Retke as the true de Nêche.

The pirate began to move off with a smug smile.

"Hat!" croaked Nash.

He had to repeat it. After another delay, his wide-brimmed hat was brought. He clapped it on.

"Oh!" cried Eleanor Thompson Berry. "*He's* the one! I could have sworn— Stop that man!"

Doors clanged and keepers pounced on the fleeing pirate, who, after knocking a couple cold for good measure, surrendered tamely. As he passed Nash on his way back to the cell, he grinned. "Next time, Frenchy, I'll twist your head clear off, to make sure you're dead!" He added some personal observations.

"Such language in front of a lady visitor!" shouted an outraged guard. "Get along, scum, or we'll . . . we'll . . ."

"Hang me? I thought you were going to do that anyway!" Roaring Stede delivered a final epithet and retired into his cell.

"I'm *so* sorry, Chevalier!" cried Miss Berry. "I don't know how I could have made such a stupid mistake!"

"It's nothing, ma'm'selle."

"I owe you a lot . . . they greeted me like a long-lost sister. Look, Chevalier, why don't you join us? We need every able-bodied man we can get to put down the Wotanists."

"Well . . . my draft board turned me down on account of . . ." Nash was about to say "my eyes" when he remembered which plane he inhabited now.

"Yes?"

"Nothing, ma'm'selle. I was just thinking that I have an important job of my own to tend to first."

"But, Chevalier, nothing is more important than . . ."

"Excuse me, Miss Berry," interrupted a guard, "but he's got to change into his own clothes. If you don't mind . . ."

Judge O'Hara had a gray beard parted in the middle and brushed out sideways, and a pince-nez attached to his lapel by a black ribbon. These glasses were apparently carried for Justinian Marshall O'Hara to make gestures with, for he was never known to look through them.

As Nash and his escorts entered the courtroom, O'Hara and a prisoner in exaggerated cowboy costume were eyeing each other with hostile determination. Nash recognized the lanky form of Arizona Bill Averoff.

The sergeant at arms whispered to one of Nash's

guards: "The old man got impatient waiting for this fellow, and took up this other hearing first."

The judge said, "I've gone over these figures three times, Averoff, and I can see nothing wrong with them. The duty is still twelve dollars and sixty-four cents. The Bar-Z can pay up, or I'll have to hold you for grand jury."

"If you think we're gonna pay live duty on dead critters, you . . . Excuse me, Your Honor, but I been over our figures *thirty* times."

"We're not asking for live duty on dead steers. I told you . . ."

"I know you did. But what's wrong with the way our man figured it?"

"I don't know. I'm not an accountant. You said yourself you couldn't see what was wrong with the Port Authority's calculations, and that's official, so I have to accept it. Now will you . . ."

"I'll go to jail first, Your Honor."

"Very well, then. I'm sorry, Averoff . . . What's that? What do *you* want? You're in contempt . . ."

"Please," wheezed Nash, who had been snapping the fingers of his upraised hand. "If it's an accounting matter, maybe I can help you."

"Who are you?"

"Chevalier de Nêche."

"The duelist? You expect me to believe that a man of your reputation can do bookkeeping? And where were you when your case came up half an hour ago?"

"There was an attempted escape, Your Honor," explained one of Nash's guards.

"Oh, you tried to escape, did you? Just for that . . ."

"No, no, Your Honor," expostulated the guard, and gave a brief account.

Nash added, "I really can account, Judge. There aren't many who can in this world, are there?"

"Of course not," snapped the judge. "Everybody knows that."

"I thought so. Not many people on the other plane imagine themselves as . . . but I really can."

"Not many people on *what?*"

"Nothing, Your Honor—slip of the tongue. Give me a try."

Grumbling, the judge did. Nash took a look at the huge sheets of confused scribbles that passed for tariff calculations. "*Whew!* May I have some clean paper?"

"The thing is," O'Hara said, "that the Bar-Z Ranch of Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania, loaded twenty-nine steers on the lighter at Communipaw, and three of them died on the way over to New York. Now Averoff, who is the New York agent for Bar-Z, wants to . . ."

"I'm jest claiming the credit we're allowed on account of them steers was for the army," interrupted Arizona Bill.

"But you're claiming it on the dead steers . . ."

"I am *not,* Your Honor . . ."

"Yes, you are!"

"Don't you call me no liar!"

"Don't you shout at me!"

"I ain't shouting!"

"You're in contempt!"

"Okay, and you're a ring-tailed . . ."

"Just a minute," croaked Nash. "You're both wrong. Look here. The Port Authority *was* trying to collect duty on the dead steers as if they were alive, but not allowing credit on them. While the Bar-Z . . ." He went through the figures quickly. Judge and prisoner subsided.

"Dog my cats," said Arizona Bill finally. "I don't see how he makes it all so clear."

Judge O'Hara added, "Every time I look at those figures, I feel like a fly in a spiderweb. I trust we can agree now, Mr. Averoff?"

"Sure, Judge. Say, Mr. de Nêche, ain't you the one who pitched in to help my pal Jim Cameron coupla nights ago? When he got in a fight with Voties? This here catawampus is okay, Judge." Averoff paid his tariff to the court clerk and sauntered out.

The clerk now handed a folder up to the judge, who called the name of de Nêche, and perused the documents in the folder while Nash was taking his seat in front. The judge then listened to the evidence of one of the redcoated police who had

made the raid, but with a benign expression that told Nash he had nothing much to fear. As the officer finished, a soldier tiptoed into the courtroom and whispered to the judge, whose expression became foxy.

"Jean-Prospère de Nêche," said O'Hara, "the Private has just sent me word that he needs your services for the defense of our municipality. How say you?"

"Well, Your Honor, I did have a pretty important job of my own . . ."

"This is more important, and we need every man. Here I am, hearing all kinds of cases fourteen hours a day because of a shortage of jurists. You shouldn't complain."

"But I'm not a citizen . . ."

The judge waved an impatient hand. "That's taken care of automatically by your oath of allegiance. And you are not a citizen of your former country, either, its king having revoked your citizenship. Now, will you agree to take service under the Private, or shall I order you interned as a stateless alien?"

Nash shrugged and agreed; if they interned him, he could not hunt the Shamir any better than if he were a soldier.

The Private was a lean dark man in a very plain uniform. The musical-comedy colonel who ushered

Nash into the office saluted the sardonic figure behind the desk, and Nash followed the example.

"General de Nêche," said the Private, "I am given to understand that you have had civilian experience as a courier, and are at present seeking employment in that line of work. Is that correct?"

"Yes. Uh . . . yes, sir. Excuse me, but are you the commander-in-chief?"

"Naturally, since I'm the only Private in the municipal forces."

"Excuse me again, but just how do the ranks run?"

"Why, generals, being the most numerous, are the lowest. Next come the lieutenant-generals and major-generals, who are noncommissioned officers. The lowest commissioned rank is that of brigadier-general . . . What are you laughing at?"

"Nothing, sir . . . I get it now."

"Umph. As I was saying, we are desperately in need of couriers, so many having been killed lately. On the other hand, I learn that you have accounting ability. We have no competent accountants whatever, the last good one in New York having gone south to work for the Oligarchy of Charleston, and our payrolls are in a mess."

"I don't think I'd make a good courier, sir," said Nash. "I had a lapse of memory, and I don't know the city any more . . ."

While he was still finishing his explanation, a soldier rushed in and held a muttered consultation

with the Private. Nash caught fragments: "The Blanquis . . . sometime this . . . surround them quickly . . . Sergeant Berl's brigade . . ."

When the messenger had left, the Private said, "This is most serious. I was going to assign you to accounting, but a matter has come up that calls for the carrying of a message immediately." He began to write, talking at the same time: "You will take this to Sergeant Berl at once. His brigade headquarters is at Harvard Street and Uranus Avenue . . ."

"But . . . Private!" exclaimed Nash. "I told you I don't know my way around New York any more . . . I'll get lost sure!" He suspected Eleanor Berry of having had a hand in this.

"We'll take a chance on that. Don't wait to change into a uniform. There'll be a horse outside for you. Silence! That's an order!"

Nash unhappily left the commander with the message tucked into one of his gauntlets. On the City Hall steps he almost bumped into a tweedy person with a monocle.

"I say, Chevalier!" cried Reginald Vance Kramer. "I've been looking all over for you! Here's my report."

Nash distractedly took the paper and shoved it into his other gauntlet. "I'll read it later," he said, starting for the horse that was being held for him.

"Better look it over now, old thing," said the detective.

Nash hesitated, then ripped the envelope open. One glance was enough to make him pore through the whole thing:

I have ascertained that Miss Alicia Dido Woodson was abducted between 3:15 and 3:20 A.M., the morning of Sunday, November 2, by a band of three soulless retainers supporting the sultan Arslan Bey.

Miss Woodson is at present (11:35 P.M., Monday, November 3) in the harem of the said Arslan Bey, in his palace at 124 Liberty Street, New York. As far as could be learned, Miss Woodson was and is a most unwilling guest of the sultan. She expressed particular consternation and aversion on being informed that she had been assigned the number 301, and expressed the desire that some stalwart friend would rescue her.

Further reports will follow in due course.

Reginald Vance Kramer

Nash asked, "What's the significance of that number three hundred and one?"

"My word, don't you know? Arslan has accommodations for three hundred and sixty-five wives, and he tries to keep his harem at just that number,

replacing losses by escape, murder, and other hazards of the harem business as they occur. Miss Woodson is now wife number three hundred and one and today is November third."

"But can't you do something? Rescue her?"

Kramer laughed shortly. "Not I. Didn't I tell you that wasn't my line? I get you the information. What you do with it is your own concern."

Just as Nash was sure he was going to explode with anxiety and frustration, a pseudo-Western drawl asked, "What's the matter, partner? You look as if rustlers had lifted your prize stock." It was Arizona Bill Averoff, teetering forward on his Western heels and rolling a cigarette.

Nash explained his troubles. Averoff lighted up and said, "Reckon I can deliver the message to that there Sergeant, while you go rescue your gal."

"Do you know the way?"

"Sure, fella, like the palm of my hand."

"That's more than I do. But . . ." Nash hesitated. True, the cowboy probably would have a better chance of finding Sergeant Berl; true, he himself had been more or less forced into the army of a government with which he sympathized but to which he owed only the most doubtful allegiance. Still, there were his oath and his orders.

"I owe you a good turn, anyway," Averoff said.

"He's right, old man," put in Kramer.

Nash gave in, and Averoff departed at a gallop, whooping.

"Hey!" cried Nash to Kramer. "Don't go yet! Got any ideas how I can get Alicia out?"

"Hmm. . . . have you any friends?"

"There are the cavaliers of the Dumas Club."

"Ha—hadn't you heard? O'Hara ordered the club padlocked for ten days because of the duel. So your long-haired pals will be scattered all over town looking up temporary accommodations."

"How about the municipal police? If they can arrest folks for dueling, I should think an abduction . . ."

"Arslan's an independent sovereign, old thing, so it would be an extradition job. And the city's hoping to wangle a loan from him, so . . ." Kramer ended with a shrug.

"What then?"

"I don't know—try it singlehanded, I suppose. Use some pretext to get in—say that City Hall sent you to negotiate the loan. Risky, of course, but what are you chaps good for if not taking risks? And now I'm off, unless you want more reports. Must get back to my book. I'm starting on the ancestry of the zither. Cheerio!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Nash stopped for a snack on his way to the sultan's, without much success. His throat was still too sore for him to enjoy solid food; and between the nippings of his conscience in the matter of the message, and uneasiness over his coming battle of wits with Arslan, he did not have much appetite. Common sense told him that he would need physical fortification, and he doggedly forced down a pint of milk.

The sultan's demesne was impossible to miss: it occupied a whole block, around which ran a moat and a formidable wall. Flags bearing a black crescent on a yellow field flapped at the corners. Over the wall could be seen the top of a great cluster of pastel-shaded domes and spikes, like a colossal piece of costume jewelry. The drawbridge was down and guarded by a couple of Moorish-looking individuals like the sextet Prosper Nash had fought on his first day on the astral plane.

His act would have to be good, thought Nash. To

be convincing he should combine the arrogance of a cavalier with the leisurely assurance of a high-ranking bureaucrat. When he got to know Arslan, he could gradually drop this uncongenial role and be his amiable self.

With a final twirl to the spikes of his mustache, Nash clattered over the drawbridge and dismounted —just as the guards began to lower their pikes. He tossed the reins to one, not even bothering to see whether they were caught, and told the other in a coldly impersonal tone: "Inform the sultan that de Nêche of the Comptroller's Office is here, please."

It worked. In five minutes he was being conducted into an Oriental fairy tale of a palace whose contours stirred memories; he could not quite locate the source . . .

"You wish to see the wazir, Effendi?" asked a gold-spangled flunkey. "If you will graciously condescend to wait . . ."

"Not the wazir—the sultan," Nash corrected.

"But the wazir handles all financial transactions."

"The sultan, Arslan Bey," repeated Nash firmly.

"His Magnificence is at lunch," said gold-leaf. "If you will accompany me, I will inform him of your desire." The person led Nash to a gorgeous but chairless anteroom and left him standing there.

Nash walked slowly about the room, hands behind his back, plotting. A guard in the doorway stared

woodenly at an invisible point directly in front of his eyes.

Nash's feet began to complain; he must have been pacing for an hour. These fellows probably sat cross-legged on pillows, and it would be doubtful etiquette to demand a chair . . .

There was the sound of motion, and the guard moved aside. Instead of the sultan, there entered a bejeweled eunuch and a pair of slaves, carrying an open chest slung from a pair of poles. The chest was full of gems that flashed until they swam before the eyes.

The fat eunuch bowed to Nash and squeaked, "Ah, M. de Nêche, but a short while and His Magnificence will grant you audience, as a most gracious condescension on his part. These," he waved a deprecating hand at the chest, "are a few of our lord's jewels which have become soiled through wear. He has ordered them thrown away, and I am on my way outside to scatter them where the poor can find them. Allah be with you, sir." And out went the procession.

When Nash recovered from his astonishment, it occurred to him that this was nothing but a transparent jest to impress him. What if he had cried, "Hey, how about giving me some . . ." But no, that would have spoiled the impression that he in his turn was trying to build up.

This business of making him stand and wait by

the hour was probably cut from the same cloth. Well, the answer was: "I wish a chair, you!"

The guard withdrew in his turn. Instead of a chair, he brought back the spangled usher. This glittering being said, "Will you accompany me to the audience chamber, sir? His Magnificence will join you as soon as he finishes his siesta."

At one side of the chamber was a raised section of flooring on which stood a large sofa. On the rest of the floor several hassocks were scattered. The idea, thought Nash, was that even though the ruler sprawled in Oriental indolence on the sofa, he would still be higher than his interviewers. In the West you stood up—or used to—in a ruler's presence; in the East you sat or groveled. Both were methods of putting a feeling of inferiority into the *hoi polloi;* the Eastern, being aimed at the psyche rather than at the feet, was subtler . . .

Nash became uncomfortably aware of the fixed regard of this room's guard.

As he returned the stare with a puzzled frown, the guard strode toward him and burst out: "I know you, dog of a Frank! You are the one who slew two of us on the waterfront yesterday!" The guard's arm flashed up and back, and hurled his pike straight at Prosper Nash's throat.

Nash had just enough warning to twist sideways and down. The pike whizzed over his shoulder, struck the onyx wall behind him, and clattered to

the floor. The guard's scimitar had just cleared its scabbard when Nash's rapier ran him through the body.

Nash held his breath, listening. Wasn't there any way to get along on this plane without killing people? What would he do with the body? Yes, there were footsteps, growing louder . . .

His horrified glance returned to the corpse—or at least to its recent site. The body itself had disappeared, leaving a pile of white garments and a steel helmet with fine chain mail attached to its brim. The footsteps came closer.

Nash wiped and sheathed his blade, scooped up the late guard's costume, and stuffed it down behind the royal settee. He tiptoed over to the pike, leaned it in a corner, and was strolling about with an innocent expression when His Magnificence, Sultan Arslan Bey, arrived amidst a group of eunuchs.

The sultan answered Nash's cavalier bow with a minute nod. When Nash straightened up and got a good look at the tyrant, he almost fell over.

Despite his more powerful build—that was to be expected—and the little black beard, shaped like the head of a battle-ax with its edge down, there was no doubt that Arslan Bey was the astral body of Nash's mundane friend Robert S. Lanby, Y.M.C.A. clerk.

As the full implications struck him, Nash forgot about his latest homicide in the necessity of keeping

a straight face at the thought of mousy little Bob Lanby really imagining himself a ripsnorting, infidel despot!

The sultan settled himself on the sofa; a dark boy took up a place beside the sofa and waved a long-handled fan, though the room was cool.

"We greet you, M. de Nêche," said Arslan. "Do we infer correctly that you come to see about—ha!" The sultan eyed Nash's rapier, then switched to the gold-speckled usher, who turned from mahogany to walnut.

"This," said the sultan heavily, "is the second time yon Nasr has admitted a guest without doing him the courtesy of relieving him of his weapon."

"I . . . I forgot, Your Magnificence . . ."

"Off with his head!" thundered the sultan. The eunuchs opened out, and a pair of huge, bare-chested blacks pounced on the usher. One spread a small dark-red rug and forced the victim to kneel on it; the other hefted a two-handed curved sword.

"Wait!" said the sultan. "We do not wish to offend the sensibilities of our guest. The screen!"

A screen was brought and set up between Nash and the sultan on one hand and the cast of the execution on the other.

"Now," said Arslan cheerfully, "we can proceed with more agreeable matters—if you will hand your sword to Salah here, who replaces Nasr as usher. Be seated, m'sieur. Fetch coffee, knaves!"

Nash avoided a shudder. When the screen was removed, the body of Nasr was already gone, leaving his glittering robe behind.

"Is that the usual penalty for that sort of thing?" asked Nash.

"Of course. Why?"

"It seems a little drastic, Your Magnificence, that's all."

Arslan snorted. "He was but a soulless one, so what is the difference? He was created when we were, and forthwith acknowledged himself our slave."

Nash said thoughtfully, "I once read a book by Savinien Cyrano de Bergerac in which one of his characters argued that it was a much worse crime to kill a cabbage than to kill a man."

"How so?"

"Well, the character argued, if a man has an immortal soul, when you kill him, you don't put an end to him; you just change his form. On the other hand, when you kill a cabbage, which has no soul, you end its poor little life for good."

"A silly theory," snorted Arslan. "If we ever catch your man Bergerac, we will give him to Kulu to play with."

"He was just being satirical," said Nash hastily, for the sultan had a dangerous look in his eye.

"That does not excuse it. Some of our soulless ones might take it seriously, and then where would we be? Are you much of a reader?"

"Not as much as I'd like to be," said Nash. "I read de Bergerac when I was in college."

"It is the same with us," said the sultan gravely. "We pride ourselves that our little state here is the perfect democracy, but it does take all our free time."

"Excuse me, *what* did you call your state?"

"The perfect democracy. Any one of our subjects can have audience with us at any time, even the humblest. Of how many of the governors and presidents of your so-called republics can that be said? Eh?"

"Well . . ."

"Of course," Arslan added, "we do have to execute a few of the more importunate petitioners now and then, or we should have no peace at all. But the principle remains the same, does it not?"

"Well . . ."

"Of course it does. Ah, the coffee!"

This was a syrupy-sweet liquid served in one-jigger cups. Nash inferred that he was expected to sip slowly and talk persiflage for half an hour, before getting down to business. That was all right with him, since his object was to stall along until he had a chance to carry out his mission. With luck, he might be able to wangle an invitation to stay overnight. If he could somehow get the dead guard's clothes on Alicia . . .

The sultan shooed most of his attendants out, and said, "Very well, M. de Nêche, let us talk business —" He broke off abruptly. "Yes?" This was directed

at a long-whiskered man robed in splendor exceeded only by that of the sultan. Arslan said brusquely, "M. de Nêche, our wazir. Wazir, M. de Nêche. What is it, Kerbogha?"

"Your Splendor," said the wazir, "I tremble to report that the royal counterfeiting machine has broken down, and the royal mechanic avers that he is unable to repair it."

"Give him twelve hours. After that . . ." Arslan drew a finger across his throat. "And now . . . let me see. With these interruptions, we have lost the thread of our discourse. Fetch more coffee!"

The whole procedure was begun again. When the conversation once more settled on business, Nash heard another person approach through the door behind him. Thinking it undignified to squirm around on the hassock with every interruption, Nash kept his eyes front until the rattle of a light chain was followed by something's sniffing at his back, and not through human nostrils.

The sniff, he quickly learned, came from an immense, tawny cat with a short tail like a lynx and a pair of six-inch saber-shaped upper canines that extended down on each side of its lower jaw.

Don't flinch, Prosper Nash told himself, and, like the Roman Fabricius when Pyrrhus suddenly confronted him with an elephant, he managed to reguard the monster with an expression of mild interest accompanied by a suggestion of a sneer.

"What ails our little Smiley?" asked Arslan.

The man who was leading the sabertooth on a chain explained: "Your Magnificence, he has not been taking his nourishment as is his wont. Today he has drunk but two quarts of his proper six."

"Write a stiff note to the slaughterhouse," commanded Arslan. "But methinks the real trouble is that he needs another kill. We should have saved that rascal Nasr for Smiley. If we could only catch the villain who slew a brace of our guards . . ." (*Wish he wouldn't look at me like that,* thought Nash.) "However, mayhap the royal mechanic will serve the purpose. Here, what is this?"

The sabertooth dragged its keeper forward to the royal sofa, and began sniffing loudly around the edges thereof. The sultan pulled himself back among the cushions in frank alarm. "By Allah," said he, "one would think that our royal couch harbored the evidence of recent bloodletting!"

"Maybe Nasr's execution . . ." suggested Nash.

"That could be, m'sieur. Take him away. And now —but ere we discuss business, we must have some coffee!"

Nash remembered now the scene of which Sultan Arslan's stronghold was a paraphrase: the Caliph's palace in the old silent movie, *The Thief of Bagdad,* starring Douglas Fairbanks, which, from what he remembered of it, Nash preferred to its showier but less coherent remake with sound and color. In the

original "Thief" the Caliph's gardens had been guarded by a tiger and an ape; Bob Lanby had already gone United Artists one better.

". . . so you see," explained Nash, "the city will issue you this block of stock . . ."

"But," complained Arslan, "we do not want stock! Nothing less than a first mortgage on the City Hall will satisfy us!"

"Well, Your Magnificence, the stock will be convertible into debentures . . ."

"Debentures, hm? That might be managed—if the city would give me three members of the Board of Estimate as security."

"Would you settle for a couple of Tammany councilmen?"

Arslan laughed deeply. "You are a financial spider, M. de Nêche. For an hour you have been spinning the most subtle snares for us. What would you say if we offered you Kerbogha's post as wazir? We could use a man of your talents."

"I'd have to think it over."

The haggling went on. Whenever the sultan showed signs of giving in, Nash was careful to bring in some new political or financial condition, thus keeping agreement dangling just out of Arslan's reach.

"To Jahannum with your quibbling!" roared Arslan Bey at last. "Hither, Peroz! Prepare to draft

an agreement between us as sultan and M. de Nêche as representative of the City of New York! We accept his proposals as they stand. Quickly, now, ere he thinks up another clause!"

Nash gasped a little; he felt like a trout fisherman who has hooked a whale. He had won an agreement that ought to square him with City Hall, in case they were looking for him as a deserter, but he had lost his main excuse for hanging around the palace.

Peroz the scribe finished transcribing the agreement, handed Nash one copy, and proceeded to read the other aloud. Any discrepancies Nash would have overlooked, as he was really thinking up the next act of his performance.

Sultan Arslan thrust out a large paw. "Congratulations, M. de Nêche, and bear in mind our offer! We have a curious feeling that we have known you for a long time. We will see you out . . ."

"Your Splendor," said Nash on a sudden inspiration, "isn't it true that you're a keen chess-player?"

"Why yes, that is so. Though I find few who can give me a stiff game. Why, would you care to try me?"

"Yes, if you'd like."

Arslan settled back on his cushions and bellowed for a chessboard, and more coffee. He took white as a matter of course, opened with queen's pawn, and followed through with a headlong attack that pinned Nash behind his pawns. The Bob Lanby method was

to stick to his favorite routine, Petroff's defense, and to aim at staving off inevitable defeat as long as possible. Hence the sultan's assault took Prosper by surprise. Nash, however, put up a good defense, and deliberately dawdled over each move. The lamps had been lit when he was finally checkmated.

Arslan sighed gustily. "We suppose you have a dinner engagement, monsieur?"

"No, sir."

"Good." The sultan clapped his hands and roared his order. The meal consisted of a gigantic lamb stew, which was eaten with the fingers.

Arslan commented, "That was a good game, de Nêche. More and more we see that you are just the man for our service. It is hard to find a player who is neither so weak as to bore us nor so strong as to humiliate us. You no doubt heard what befell Thomas Alekhin Saito, who was so tactless as to mate us in seven moves? Ts, ts, a sorry thing. But he brought it on himself by insulting us to boot."

"What did he do?" asked Nash, wondering how to learn the location of and access to the harem.

"Asked after the health of our womenfolk," said Arslan, licking his fingers. "We expect our guests to refrain even from thinking about such things, let alone coming right out and mentioning them. We hope you like our yoghurt."

This was a junketlike pudding. Nash did not like it at all, but choked it down with a glassy smile.

Afterwards, he pulled on the spare mouthpiece of the sultan's nargileh. He learned that this contraption had to be smoked with deep diaphragmatic gasps; the first one drew smoke into sections of his lungs heretofore unsullied, and sent him into a coughing spasm. The sultan laughed, pounded him on the back, and took a draft from the nargileh that made the apparatus quiver with the violence of its bubbling.

"More chess? Good!" This time, Nash knew better what to expect; but Arslan likewise adapted his attack to Nash's defense. The game lasted till nine, with much the same result as before.

Sultan Arslan Bey yawned, rose, and kicked aside the taboret on which the board rested, knocking half the pieces to the floor. "That," he said, "is that. We will assign a couple of stout fellows to ride home with you."

Nash was panicky; if he was kicked out now, he would have no chance to rescue Alicia. Moreover, another of the guards might recognize him as Eleanor Berry's protector.

"Your Magnificence, I don't need . . ."

"Nonsense. We insist. Some thief of a *giaur* might steal your copy of our agreement else."

"To tell the truth," explained Nash, "I haven't any home right now." And he told of Judge O'Hara's closing of the Dumas Club.

Arslan's heart, if he had one, was not melted by

this pathetic tale. He merely said, "Pick your own hostelry, then," and whistled for his new usher.

Nash swore mentally, and contemplated hare-brained schemes for killing Arslan the minute his rapier was handed to him. For the sultan was quite evidently determined to send him packing before retiring to the quarters of wife No. 301; and Arslan's palace was so overrun with servitors and retainers that Nash despaired of ever getting an unsupervised minute. Right now, the room contained two guards and two slaves, all alert and ready to pounce if he made a false move.

After the usher came a boy with Nash's hat, cloak, and sword. The youth stopped at such a distance from the sultan that Nash had to move well away from the despot to take his things; the guards quietly closed in to flank their lord. It was all done very smoothly. Nash reflected that his host was a pretty shrewd rascal, as well as a hearty one.

In a minute, now, he'd be out in the cold. The loan agreement in his money belt would be all very nice, but it was no recompense for . . .

Wham! The report of a rifle swept into the audience room; then another, and another, and swift crackle of reports.

"Allah!" shouted Arslan. "What is this?"

As if in answer, a guard hurled himself into the chamber. "Master! We are being attacked by Romans and Voties!"

CHAPTER NINE

Arslan Bey's immediate reaction was to curse himself purple in English, French, Osmanli, and Persian. "Infidel swine!" he screamed. "We keep strict neutrality. We even lend the dogs money—but hold, this is not forwarding our defense. Come with me, de Nêche!"

For the next half hour, Prosper Nash clumped about the palace in the wake of the bellowing sultan. The sound of gunfire beat in on them, now strong, now faint. Once Nash heard women's voices and knew they were passing an entrance to the harem. But fearing that, in his present fury, the sultan would as soon take off his guest's head as not, Nash kept his eyes averted.

At length they came out on the top of a tower, cluttered with a bronze armillary sphere, an astrolabe, an equatorial, and a six-foot telescope. The domes and spikes of the palace rose around them, and skirting these was the wall, now fully manned and spitting bullets through the embrasures. An-

swering shots came from neighboring houses and vacant lots. The wall hid those of the enemy who were close to it, but in the streets that stretched away into the darkness Nash caught glimpses of moving soldiery.

On another tower, an oil-burning searchlight sputtered into flame. Its crew swept the beam across the neighboring houses, and halted as it caught a group of figures on a roof. There were a couple of furry Wotanists in horned casques, and several men in kilts and legionary cuirasses and helmets, incongruously hefting rifles; a man in an ornate gilded breastplate; a man in a spiked helmet, dark-blue frock coat, Hessian boots, and an enormous cavalry saber. Nash could just make out his great handlebar mustache. Arslan, eye to the telescope, muttered, "Gaio Germanico Ricci, and Roon Bismarck von Schmidt! They must mean business." He raised his voice to a shout: "Over there! Pick them off!"

The group scattered and disappeared. The searchlight moved no more, either its crew or its mechanism having been put out of action. A bullet clanged against one of the astronomical instruments and screeched away; Nash ducked, and Arslan laughed.

"You're as bad as the Romans!" he said. "Who would have thought they would have dragged themselves away from their baths long enough to help their so-called allies? There has been bad feelings since— *Ouch!*"

The sultan jumped, staggered, and cursed. When Nash offered to see what was wrong, Arslan waved him away. "A mere bullet burn. We'll burn those blasphemous *bischos!*" He shook a fist. "It is all the fault of those cowardly west-side assembly districts, thinking they could avoid the war by milk-toast declarations of neutrality. Any fool could see . . . Yes, Kerbogha? How goes it?"

"By your leave, not well, my lord," said the wazir, who had just dragged himself up the spiral staircase. "We have lost four guardsmen, and the enemy are piling fardels into the moat at three points."

"Well, shoot them down, fool!"

"We do, Master, but they keep coming. I doubt that we can hold the wall till morn."

Arslan pulled his little beard agitatedly. "We could escape by way of Minetta Brook," he growled, "but without our treasure we should be but the leader of a band of poor freebooters. And we could not fight a rear-guard action encumbered by our harem and chattels . . ."

"Hey," said Nash, "is Minetta Brook that underground river that wanders around lower Manhattan?"

"Yes. Do not pester us with questions at a time—"

"Well, suppose I try to convoy your stuff on ahead?"

"The very thing! We do not know why we trust you, monsieur. It must be that curious feeling we

have of having known you elsewhere . . . But come, there is no time to be lost!"

Down they went, down dank stone steps to the landing stage. The astral Minetta Brook was bigger than its mundane counterpart; almost a real river, sliding out of darkness into torchlight and back into darkness under a rough rock roof. Slaves were hauling up to the dock three of six boats tied to its downstream end: low-beamed barges built for canal-crawling rather than for fast or open-water sailing. Each had oars and poles piled on its deck.

Slaves carried a score of chests onto one barge and stowed them below, until it seemed to Nash's apprehensive eyes that water was being kept from flowing over the gunwales by surface tension only. Then came three hundred and sixty-five dark figures bundled up to the eyes in enough shawls and veils to stock a dry-goods store: the harem. The two remaining boats did not look as if they could possibly hold such a crowd, but aboard they went, and one by one squeezed into the little deckhouses and proceeded below.

Nash protested, "The poor things'll be terribly crowded, Sultan. Couldn't you let 'em stay on deck?"

"And have some pirate or Wotanist craft sight them? Or have them get some silly female notion of escaping? Ha!"

"Hey!" cried Nash, as Smiley the sabertooth

padded down the steps towing his keeper, and after him a huge red-pelted ape, like a gorilla but taller and straighter. "Are they going, too?"

"Certainly. Three guards are all we can spare you. The rest must remain to hold the walls till we make our bolt."

"I'd just as lief not have any guards. Those two animals ought to scare off . . ."

"Do not be a fool, de Nêche! You would not get a mile with that cargo unguarded. Head straight across the river to the Jersey shore, where we will join you."

"What if . . ." But Arslan was already bounding up the steps, followed by a swirl of soldiery. Prosper Nash was left with his barges, menagerie, three guards, and eight miscellaneous slaves.

He shrugged, stepped aboard the first barge, and cast off. The three boats, tied nose to tail like circus elephants, picked up way as the current took hold of them. Nash secured a barge pole from the deck and stood on the bow of the lead boat.

"Keep 'em straight!" he called back over his shoulder.

The landing stage and the stone stair shrank away aft, and then there was nothing but black water and rough tunnel, feebly lit by the one torch on each boat, and sometimes so low that they had to flatten themselves to the decks.

They ran into trouble on the first real bend: Nash did not push off from the jagged sides soon enough.

His barge came to a scraping halt against the rock, and the other crowded up behind it, bumping its stern. The train folded up and got wedged in the turn.

"Damn it!" yelled Nash. "Push off there, you!" The slave began pushing on the wrong wall. "The other!" screamed Nash, and at length made the slave understand. The latter then got down and began bumping his forehead on the deck boards.

"Pardon, Effendi! I did not understand."

"Get up! Get up! Get to work!"

The ape grunted and the sabertooth whined with alarm; a female chirping from the holds of the middle and after boats made itself heard under the echoing shouts of the men. With more shouting and shoving, they got the boats around.

Nash faced aft. "Look here, you fellows! The next one we come to, I want a pair of men on the stern of each barge to plant their poles against the sides of the tunnel, to ease the boat around . . ."

By repeating everything three times, he apparently made the soulless ones understand. His scheme worked fairly well on the next turn, though one of the guards nearly ruined it by urging his barge forward, instead of holding back with his pole. They got around the third quirk with no trouble. After that, Nash could relax; the tunnel was wider and the current slower thenceforth.

Forming slowly in his mind was a plan to take his

convoy, not straight across the North River, but south to Staten Island. Then those of Arslan's wives who did not like the harem could go. Alicia Dido Woodson, veiled and squeezed into the hold of one of the following boats, would grab the opportunity. At least he hoped she would; you never could be sure what strange traits an astral body would turn out to have.

Then Nash could look up Merlin Apollonius Stark. Then the Shamir and home!

What about Arslan's gang? They would hardly be so stupid as not to know New Jersey from Staten Island, soulless though they might be. If they got wind . . .

In a way he disliked double-crossing the sultan, who had trusted him. But, Nash told himself, Arslan had undoubtedly accumulated his treasure and harem by force and fraud, and did not deserve much consideration.

That still left the guards and slaves. He did not worry much about the latter, who were unarmed. For the former—he really ought to kill them. Their swords were sheathed; if he drew and rushed them suddenly in the semidarkness . . .

But no, he just could not do it. The mere idea of deliberate assassination almost made him ill. If one of them attacked him, he could give a stout and reasonably brave account of himself. The Chevalier could, no doubt, murder all three without a second thought; but Prosper Nash was not the Chevalier,

except in body. No, he wouldn't feel inferior; he was as good a man in his own way as Jean-Prospère was in his.

But he still regretted the inhibitions inculcated by a peaceful, law-abiding accountant's life.

The lapping of water grew louder, and the roof of the tunnel slid back. Nash looked up for stars, but instead got a sprinkle of water in the face. A speckle of damp spots appeared on the deck, growing rapidly denser.

"Effendi!" called one of the guards. "It rains!"

"I know it." Smiley moaned dismally on the second barge; and on the third, Kulu the ape wrapped his forearms over his head to shed the water.

"But what shall we do?" persisted the guard.

"Take the oars and put them in the oarlocks. One man to each oar."

"Do you mean we shall stay out in the *wet?*"

"Of course. You won't dissolve."

"Without stars, how shall we find our way?"

"Leave that to me," ordered Nash. There was nothing like having a few tough-looking armed men asking for instructions to put confidence in one!

Each barge had four rowlocks. The oars were great sweeps, designed to be worked standing up. Since there were just as many men as oarlocks, Nash perforce took an oar instead of standing in the bow, inscrutably wrapped in his cloak. He made them douse the torches, and could then make out a few feeble

yellow gleams from the Jersey shore through the drizzle.

Behind him, the soulless ones bumped oars and cursed each other, caught crabs, and one missed the water altogether and fell on his face. He would never, thought Nash, win the Poughkeepsie regatta with this crew!

He called to them to keep time with him, whereat they protested that they could not see him. Very well then, each of them should watch the man in front of him. That did not work so well, either; Nash was forced to count aloud to keep them in some sort of unison.

When they were fairly well away from the Manhattan shore, Nash, who had the foremost starboard oar, covertly increased the length and force of his stroke. Slowly, slowly, the train of barges swung around until the lights of Jersey were on the starboard beam. Nash's heart was in his mouth as he waited for one of the men to comment on this state of affairs; he wondered what excuse to give them.

But no objections came; the men, grunting at the squeaking oars, were too busy watching their footing on the wet decks. Nash's confidence rose again. Perhaps they knew so little local geography that he could land them at Staten Island without their being any the wiser!

Nash guessed that they had been pulling a good hour, and noted that the lights did not seem to have

moved at all. An adverse tide, probably; that would change to favorable in due course. The distance was something like five or six miles; at an average rate of a mile an hour, they should arrive within an hour or two of dawn.

Long before that, Nash had almost fallen asleep standing up, and barely missed walking overboard. The others must be getting tired, too, for their strokes were getting ragged again. Nash decided on a system of reliefs. He ordered the crew of the tail boat forward to take the oars of the lead boat while the relieved quartet took a nap, leaving the tail boat to be towed. The least stupid-acting of the guards was appointed pilot; he was told to keep one of the Jersey lights on the starboard beam, and to wake Nash and the other three nappers after five hundred oarstrokes. At an estimated ten strokes a minute that should give them a rest of a little under an hour.

When the wet sky paled to dirty-pearl, Bay Ridge lay to port, the long spit of Bayonne to starboard, and the low hills of New Brighton a half-mile ahead. A small boat appeared here and there in the upper bay, plowing along on its own business. A choppy little swell had begun to smack against the blunt nose of the leading barge, throwing haphazard drops of spray on the rowers; but they were all too soaked to mind. Nash peered toward the site of St. George; yes, there were docks there, as on the mundane plane.

A subtle change in the music of the oars caused

him to turn his head. The rowers of the second barge had stopped; the slaves leaned listlessly on their sweeps, and in the center of the deck the three guards had their heads together.

"Hey, you!" called Nash.

The guards looked up; then began to advance forward in line abreast, with careful, catlike tread. Nash walked boldly toward them until he and they were separated only by the yard of water between the first and second barges.

"Well?"

The center guard touched his forehead with thin humility. "Perhaps we are stupid, Effendi, but it don't look to us as if you had gone directly across the river to New Jersey."

"That's all right."

"Humble apologies, but it is not all right. We heard our lord tell you to cross the river directly."

"Don't worry, I know what I'm doing."

"That may be. But how shall our lord find his treasure and his wives if you do not go whither he directed you?"

"Oh, he knows where I'm going. I told him just before we left."

"No," said the guard, "I was watching."

Another guard put in: "It looks to us, Effendi, as if you sought to deceive our Protector of the Poor."

"Listen," snapped Nash, "I'm running this show, and as long as . . ."

"Not any more!" cried the third guard. "Give the perfidious infidel the sword!"

"Allah!" shouted the others. "Smite the unbeliever!" "Slay the traitor!"

All three backed up, drew their scimitars, and made a running broad jump from their boat to Nash's.

Nash grabbed for his sword; then he realized that he had taken it off, because it hampered him in rowing, and leaned it against the lee side of the deckhouse. He sprinted forward and grabbed the hilt, letting the scabbard clatter to the deck, the three guards after him whirling their thin steel crescents.

As soon as he could turn, he started to uncork a lunge at the nearest, but had to interrupt it to parry a slash from another. For the next ten seconds he fought as he never had exerted himself in his mundane life. Perhaps a movie hero could fight three foes at once, but only if the foes merely diddled around with their weapons instead of boring in like these fellows. No time for fancy fencing; nothing but a crude right-left slashing to knock the curved blades aside as they swung.

He felt the stempost of the barge behind him. They had backed him into the bow; he knew definitely that no matter how hard he tried, they would have him in a matter of seconds.

CHAPTER TEN

One scimitar hit Nash in the flank, but was stopped by his money belt, and then a new front was opened up.

Figures popped out of the deckhouse of the second barge: women in baggy Turkish trousers and short bangled vests. They ran forward and leaped to the first barge. The leader, a splendid-looking blonde, snatched up a barge pole. While the others were doing likewise, she swung the pole with both hands against the ribs of one of the guards.

The guard went *oof,* teetered on the gunwale, and grabbed his nearest fellow. Both tumbled overboard. The girl swung again, the muscles of her white arms standing out. *Clank!* The remaining guard's spiked helmet leaped from his head and spun into New York Bay, and the warrior followed it.

A shaven head appeared alongside the barge, and a swarthy arm reached for the gunwale. Another girl chopped down on the arm with her pole.

The thump and splash were followed by a cur-

dling shriek. The swimmer brought his legs up under him and pushed off from the boat with his feet. He swam out of reach, though a couple of the women took swipes at him. His partners joined him, wriggling out of their jelabs and coats and getting ducked with every wave.

The guard who had had his arm thumped shook a fist. "Allah curse your . . . *blub* . . . house, you . . . *pfft* . . . Frank! For this you shall be . . . *gulp* . . . most cruelly . . . *gurgle*."

All three turned away and struck out for Bayonne, swimming breast-stroke like three large brown frogs.

"Well!" said Nash.

"Jean-Prospère!" exclaimed the blonde. "Don't you know me?"

Even as Nash realized that this was unmistakably the astral body of Alice Woodson, she threw her arms around his neck and pressed on him a long kiss that turned his knee joints to water. She whispered in his ear: "Don't you *remember?*"

"Ahem . . . uh . . . sure," said Nash, turning pink. "How did you . . ."

"I thought I recognized you last night, and I hoped you'd manage something like this. How did you . . ."

"Went around to explain why I hadn't been to your party," replied Nash. "I got a detective when I saw the mess, and he put me on Arslan Bey's track. But just a minute—we'll have to decide about these

fellows." He confronted the nearest of the slaves, who stood doubtfully at his oar.

The soulless one doubled himself up and touched his forehead. He mumbled: "There was talk of treachery, Effendi. Who is the traitor, you or the guards? We must serve our lord, the Sultan . . ."

"The guards were the traitors, of course!" barked Nash. "You don't suppose Allah would have let the fight come out this way otherwise?"

That explanation seemed to satisfy the slaves, who set their oars docilely in motion. The other three hundred and sixty-four wives had meantime emerged from the holds. They gave the animals a wide berth and crowded forward.

"Alicia," said Nash, "I want to talk to you about those . . ."

"Jean-Prospère, what's become of that cute French accent of yours?"

"Been going to a speech-improvement class. In fact, I'd as lief be called plain Prosper."

"All right, Prospère . . ."

"Prosper."

"I'm cold," complained another of Arslan's wives.

"I don't wonder," said Nash. "Hadn't you better get your . . ."

Alicia leaned overside and stuck a finger in the bay. "It's much warmer in the water than out of it! I know what we need! Come on, girls!"

Before Nash could make up his mind to protest,

the blonde had dived overboard. She came up spouting and laughing. "It's wonderful! Won't somebody else come in? . . . Hey, Prosper!" With two strokes she reached the barge and made a pass at Nash's ankle. Nash skipped back out of reach. "Come on."

Nash grinned, and shook his head. "I can't swim now."

"Why not?"

"Takes all the starch out of my whiskers."

She splashed water at him, dived again, and swam about. "I know," she said. "You cavaliers and Restoration bucks and such never do bathe. Think it's indecent to get wet all over."

"When you're ready, Alicia . . ."

"Oh, all right." She put her hands over the gunwale, hoisted herself out, turned, and sat on the edge splashing with her feet.

"Ahem," said Nash. "Will you shoo the others away for a while?"

"All right, shoo, girls! The mastermind wants to conspire."

Nash sighed. "I hope nobody in St. George has a telescope. Who lives there, do you know?"

"It's called the *condottieri* town," explained Alicia. "All Renaissance Italians. The other big Italian settlement, in upper Manhattan, is all Romans: baths, togas, and oratory. They're allied with the Voties, I suppose you know, but these aren't. Now tell me what this is all about."

Nash told briefly the story of his visit to the sultan's palace, and added that, when they landed, the harem could do as it individually or collectively pleased.

"Swell!" cried Alicia.

"I . . . uh . . . don't suppose you'll want to return to Arslan."

"Good Lord, no! Me be satisfied with one three hundred and sixty-fifth of a husband? . . . What'll we do with his money?"

"I've been wondering. I ought to get some sort of salvage fee out of it. Thought I could let him know where he could pick up the rest. That is . . ."

"Salvage fee! Prosper, don't you know that Arslan'll be out for your blood now, whether you let him recover his loot or not? Why not be sensible and keep it all?"

"That would be stealing."

"He stole it in the first place, didn't he?"

"I suppose so, but I won't steal it in the second. Maybe I'm dumb, but that's how it is."

"Well, if you don't want it, I guess we girls can use it. I doubt if there's over half a million there anyway, counting the jewels. That won't look so big when it's split three hundred-odd ways."

Nash whistled. "I can just imagine parading through a town full of tough Renaissance braves with half a million bucks and three hundred and sixty-five harem beauties. How far do you think we'll get?"

"Mmmm. Tell you what. Arslan undoubtedly loaded his full-dress arms and armor aboard. Some of us girls used to be pretty athletic before Arslan caught us, and there ought to be enough gold-hilted swords and diamond-studded helmets to outfit a squad."

"Wouldn't it be better to arm the slaves?"

She lowered her voice. "I wouldn't. They'll catch on to what we're up to eventually, and then there's no telling."

"Anyway," said Nash, "we'd better keep together for a while, don't you think? Those girls probably have homes all over, and between the *condottieri* here and the war in Manhattan, they might have trouble reaching them alone."

"Right. It wouldn't do to pay them off at the dock and say, 'Run along, girls.' "

"Here's your Amazon army, Prosper," said Alicia, as he turned at the sound of giggles.

The sultan had packed enough military equipment to outfit fourteen of them, and they had eked out his helmets and mail shirts with some of his gaudier pieces of civilian attire. The glittering result might have stepped off the stage of a Rimsky-Korsakov opera.

Alicia explained: "Only six of the girls want to go back to Arslan. A few more thought they did, but changed their minds when I told them we were go-

ing to divide up his money. Most of the others have real husbands and sweethearts to return to."

"Will those six make any trouble?"

"I persuaded them not to." She looked thoughtfully at a barked knuckle.

"How much stuff will we have to carry?"

"There are about twenty chests. We emptied a couple getting up these outfits, and I think if we throw out the junk—silks and feminine doodads—we can cut the number down to seven or eight."

Nash went below to investigate. The load of coin and plate made the chests too heavy for any one man to carry. Two of them were emptied of coin by distributing their contents among some of the women to carry on their persons. Nash insisted on entering the names of the two hundred-odd girls in his notebook, with the amount given each to carry. There remained six chests of jewelry, art objects, and gold and silverware.

"We need some wheelbarrows," he said. "Also we want to know where to go when we land. Do any of you girls know of a place that would hold you all?"

"Louise would know," volunteered one of the girls. "She used to live on Staten Island."

Louise was sought out. Yes, there were several places, if they were not at present occupied: a Renaissance *palazzo* in the middle of St. George, a somewhat ruined castle in New Brighton, a Georgian mansion in Richmond . . .

"I think the castle is our best bet," said Nash.

"But how on earth will you find out whether we can occupy it?" queried Alicia.

"They probably have real-estate agents on the island, Renaissance or no Renaissance. Hey, what's that?"

"That" was a small bejeweled hunting horn. Nash said, "That'll be useful. I'm figuring out a procession that'll set the Staten Islanders back on their heels so far they won't think of bothering us. When we dock, everybody goes below except the girls with the swords and guns, while I go ashore and make arrangements."

Nash tossed the painter to a loafer on the dock, a man wearing a little round cap and hose-tights with one red leg and one blue.

" 'Morning, m'sieur," said Nash, as he scrambled up. "Could you tell me where I can buy some wheelbarrows?"

The loafer directed him to a shop a couple of blocks from the dock. Several other men stopped to stare at the barge flotilla, but none ventured close. Kulu was shuffling about the deck as far as his chain would let him, and Smiley was grumbling a bit with hunger.

Nash bought his wheelbarrows, ordered them delivered to the dock at once, and was referred further

to the office of a realty agent named Benvenuto Lorenzo Franchetti.

The address turned out to be that of a medium-sized baroque palace, full of mice and corkscrew-shaped pillars, and occupied by several firms. After Nash had wandered about its dusty corridors, his ear caught a familiar ring of steel.

In the center of a big hall two men were fighting with rapiers and oversized daggers, one in each hand. One already had a cut on his cheek.

Nash did not feel called upon to interfere, but as he cautiously skirted the hall the combatants jumped apart and lowered their weapons. The unwounded one called out to Nash in Italian.

"Excuse me," said Nash, "but I'm looking for Franchetti's office."

"That's me," replied the duelist. "You want to see me on business?"

"Yeah, if you're not too busy."

The fighter addressed his opponent: "Excuse me, Giacomo; I got business. I come back and kill you after, *si?*"

"*Si,*" said the other darkly. "I kill you any time you say."

Benvenuto Franchetti led Nash through a small forest of statues to a desk in the corner. Nash explained his errand.

"Ah," cried Franchetti. "You are just the man! I could kiss you!"

"Please don't. I'll rent this castle for a couple of weeks, if I like it."

"A month," said Franchetti, getting out a map. "See, here, it is on the highest point in New Bright', next to the monastery. Beautiful view of the harb' . . ."

"Two weeks," insisted Nash. "And what's this about a monastery?"

"Just a monastery. The owner says a month, must be a month." Franchetti wagged his head. "He is offering it at a great sacrifice . . ."

"How much?"

"Three hundred dollar."

"Give you fifty a week, for two weeks."

"Look, my friend, is no use trying to beat me down. I am one-price Benvenuto. I offer you the lowest price the first time. I never make exception. For you, yes, I make one little exception. I split my commission. I impoverish myself. I give you this beautiful castle for one month for two hundred seventy-five dollar."

Nash finally got the castle for one month, $250. He paid, and Franchetti dug out a pair of bronze keys big enough to choke a horse.

"Fine," said Franchetti, wringing Nash's hand. "And now excuse me, please. This gentleman is wait' for me to kill him." He bowed Nash out, and behind him Prosper could hear the clang of blades resume where it had left off.

Back at the dock, Nash found quite a crowd, still keeping a respectful distance from the barges. He called the harem up on deck and marshaled them. "We'll march three abreast. Line 'em up, Alicia. You and I and Hamid will lead. He'll tow the cat and toot the horn when the crowd gets in the way. Put your veils back on, girls. Yes, you'll need 'em, all right. Ready? Let's go!"

Hamid, the slave who was Smiley's keeper, blew a blat on the horn. Nash drew his sword and started. "Out of the way, please! One side there, everybody!"

The crowd of loafers hastily made room for the padding sabertooth, behind whom came the triple file of Arslan's wives. The column was broken in six places; in each break, a slave trundled a wheelbarrow flanked by a pair of Alicia's Amazons. The ape and its keeper brought up the rear.

The singular procession crawled up the narrow streets of St. George toward the New Brighton hills, about a mile off. The natives dropped whatever they were doing to watch. There were no hostile moves; a blast from Hamid's horn, or a sniff from Smiley's nostrils, was enough to open a lane.

But there were plenty of comments: "Such beautiful soldiers! Are they men or wom'?" "I wonder what they got in those box? Bricks?" "Ha ha looka the monk' at the end! Hey, monk', you want some mon'? *Oh!*"

The last was from a sword-girt gentleman in trunk-

hose and a round, flat-crowned hat. Kulu shot out a long rust-colored arm and snatched the hat, which he calmly took apart with his teeth.

"Signor," said an insinuating voice at Nash's elbow, "coulda you spare me one littla dime? I am so poor and you are so rich . . ."

The vagrant, a handsome, humorous-eyed fellow, looked far from starving. But Nash, who was a sucker for such appeals, handed over the requested alms. In one minute flat there were twenty beggars trotting alongside, all shouting at once.

Nash stood it as long as he could, then, in his best attempt at a burr, cried, "Get oot, all o' ye, before I whup ye wi' ma claymore!"

The mendicants looked at one another, shrugged, and went their ways.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"It looks," remarked Alicia, "as though it ought to be haunted."

Nash agreed. The place he had rented was not a real castle, but a square two-storey brick mansion with small windows, towers at the corners, and crumbling battlements to give it a period look. Nash started to get out the keys Franchetti had given him, then observed that the front door sagged half off its hinges.

"I wonder who that is?" asked Alicia.

Nash looked. "Probably the haunt." The person in question was an ominous-looking figure in a robe and hood; he stood at a little distance silently watching them.

A nearby bell went *bongggg, bongggg,* and the cowled figure turned and walked swiftly toward a group of low gray buildings.

"I remember now," said Nash. "Franchetti mentioned a monastery, and I guess that's it. Hamid, help me with this door."

Nash wondered who among mundane persons would imagine a monastic astral body for himself. The astral bodies he had met so far seemed to run to the proud, the fierce, the rapacious, and the uninhibited—hardly the sort of people who would make good monks.

Franchetti, he decided, had robbed him, after he observed the warped floor boards, the sagging stairways, the shattered windows, and the scanty and broken furniture. Not that an extra fifty or hundred out of the sultan's hoard would make much difference; it was the principle of the thing.

Still, the place had a huge stove and an equally impressive icebox, and a broom closet holding half a dozen brooms in various stages of decrepitude. Alicia Woodson whooped when she saw these, and pressed them into the unenthusiastic hands of six of her co-wives. "Get to work!" she shouted.

"Now," said Nash, "what do we need to live here for a week or two?"

Suggestions were poured over him by all the harem talking at once. He rounded up the slaves, doled out money, and sent them off, one to buy food, another firewood, another ice, another some hardware—beginning with a hammer and nails—and so on. Before the first slave returned, Smiley began to roar loudly with hunger, and when a slave did appear, he was immediately sent off to buy the necessary nourishment.

Nash frantically tried to keep track of everything in his notebook, and the continuous gabble of three hundred and some women nearly drove him crazy. Then he was forced out of the house altogether by the choking clouds of dust raised by the brooms. Alicia rushed about like a cross between Brünhilda and Simon Legree, finding jobs for all the women and pouring loud contumely on those who flagged.

By late afternoon, Nash had repaired the door, pasted paper over the broken windowpanes, nailed down the loose floor boards, glued legs on chairs, and caulked the well bucket. Alicia found him sprawled supine among the weeds of what passed for the lawn.

"Prosper," she said, "I . . . Are you tired?"

"No. I'm dead."

"All right, corpse, before you fade out, I've got a job for you."

"Go 'way."

"No, really. There's no bedding in the place to speak of. Louise said that the monastery takes in a lot of paying guests and would have some. So I sent Cleo over to borrow mattresses and blankets, but do you know, when she knocked on the door a monk opened it and took one look at her and slammed it in her face! I'll bet they aren't real monks at all, but a gang of Satanists or something."

"More likely he feared for his immortal soul," groaned Nash, rising. "Okay, I'll go."

A monk with his hood thrown back answered

Nash's knock, looked carefully at Nash, and said, "You are he who is installing his . . . uh . . . seraglio at our very doorstep! What have we to do with such a one?"

"Not at all!" cried Nash. "They're perfectly good girls whom I rescued from a paynim's captivity." He added details.

"Oh," said the monk in a changed tone, "that is different. Come in, my son, and I'll see what we can do. I am Brother Benedict."

When Nash got a better view of Brother Benedict's face, he was sure he had seen it somewhere else—perhaps in a newspaper. He knew that if he dug through his mental files . . .

"Brother Benedict," he asked after a moment, "is your last name Wilcox?"

"It was."

Nash chuckled. Brother Benedict's mundane counterpart was Harry Van Rensselaer Wilcox, an ornament of café society who had been divorced six times, sued for breach of promise four, and thrown out of half the night clubs in New York.

Half an hour later he had his bedding. It would go around, if the girls tripled up. At that, Nash feared that the loan would leave some of the monks sleeping on cold stone. But once he had enlisted their sympathy, they would not take no for an answer.

Back in the castle Nash found smoke bringing a stench of burning food from the kitchen.

"One of the girls got careless with her beans," explained Alicia. "I told off thirty of them to cook."

"Can they?"

"Some can't. But if I started asking, they'd all say they couldn't."

Dinner was in three shifts and eaten from gold plates on the floor. Afterwards, Alicia said, "You look pretty cheerful for a man who was half dead a couple of hours ago. What's your plan?"

"Gosh, I'm too tired to work this evening. I'm going to have fun."

"Oh, good! What?"

"See that ledger I had the boys get? Well, I'm going to count our money, and open a complete set of books for the estate of Arslan Bey, with every nickel's worth of expenditures and receipts in the right account!"

Nash lugged the account book and money up to the smallest bedroom, which he had chosen for himself.

He had to sit on the floor and work by candlelight. He missed his pipe; the chatter of the women wafted up through the boards; once the bong of the monastery bells startled him. But those distractions were minor . . . Clink, clink, clink, $140, $160, $180, $200, $220 . . . $16,360 in double eagles . . .

$412,905.45, checked and rechecked, and not counting a small pile of foreign coins and the gold plate.

How much should he keep for himself? That, to Prosper Nash, was a ticklish question whose contemplation made him a little uneasy. Arslan's own title to the money might be bad; Arslan might be a scoundrel; still, Nash wished he could forget how unreservedly the scoundrel had trusted him. He admitted, a little grudgingly, that the rescue of these poor girls took precedence over Arslan's getting every cent returned or accounted for. It was still an impossibly tangled legal and moral question, especially if Arslan Bey's little robber-state had been extinguished by the Wotanist armies . . .

Well, he'd take ten per cent, give the rest to the girls, and forget about it. If he failed to get the Shamir on his next try, he would pay off his debts, salt the rest away in a safe place—if the astral plane had such a thing—and keep very quiet about his nest egg. Not for him the lavishness of a gentleman performing the social duty of conspicuous waste. "Friends" would swarm around begging a little loan, and Nash would be caught between his softheartedness and his financial meticulousness, with compliance and refusal both distressing.

He chuckled a little at himself: he should have imagined himself, instead of a dashing cavalier, as one of those thrifty Puritans to whom financial gain was the outward visible sign of inward spiritual grace.

Now for the books: Capital Acc.; Interest & Discount; Profit & Loss; Surplus & Deficit . . .

Until his door creaked open, he did not realize that he had fallen asleep in an approximation of the lotus posture of Yoga. He shook the sleep out of his eyes. One of the candles had burned out; the light of the other showed one of the girls in the doorway, big-eyed and wrapped in a monk's blanket.

"Prosper! There's a man in the house!"

"Huh?"

"A man! Burglar! On the back stairs."

Nash jumped up and went hunting with his sword. His quarry obligingly gave himself away by tripping over his own feet. Nash chased him downstairs, through the main halls, and out a window, scaring the wits out of the girls sleeping on the ground floor. He got close enough to see that the intruder was no ragged burglar, but another bejeweled late-Medieval dandy.

Two hours later he was aroused again; this time a Casanova was climbing the ivy. Nash stole up to the roof, and as the man's head came over the wall Prosper whacked it with the flat of his blade. The man dropped twenty feet with a crash, picked himself out of the shrubbery, and limped off shrilling maledictions.

There were no more disturbances that night; but next morning after breakfast Nash set out for the monastery with one of Arslan's gold dinner plates under his coat.

In the yard, he passed Alicia bending over a wash-

tub. The girl was scrubbing vigorously with a blanket tied around her against the cold, and was smoking a corncob pipe.

At his muttered "Good lord," she looked up.

" 'Morning, Prosper. 'Smatter? 'Fraid I'll shock our monastic friends? I've got to. My only clothes are in the wash."

"No; you're okay. That pipe just made me wonder if you were b—created in the Kentucky mountains."

"Nope. I smoke a pipe when I happen to feel like smoking a pipe."

At Nash's request, Brother Benedict took him to see the abbot. Nash began by presenting the plate; the abbot was duly grateful, and said it would be a great thing for the poor of Staten Island.

Then Nash explained his troubles with amorous natives. He asked, "Don't you boys do a lot of walking around at night, by way of penance or something?"

"That is true."

"Well, I was wondering if you couldn't assign a couple of penancers each night to patrol around my castle with good, thick clubs."

"Why . . . that is a very startling idea. But . . . now that I think of it, there is something to be said for it. Of course your ladies must not make any—ahem . . . must comport themselves in a seemly manner."

"They'll behave all right, if I have to tan . . . if

I have to apply corporal chastisement. Now maybe you could give me some advice on how to get them home safe. I don't want the local *banditti* to cut their throats as soon as they leave."

The abbot showed a flash of unmonkish local pride: "It is nothing like as bad as that, M. de Nêche. Of course there are wicked men everywhere, but Staten Island has been reasonably safe since Duke Alessandro took hold. Jersey City is another matter, but I suppose your ladies can avoid it. Why not have them write their husbands and friends to come and get them? The mails run, except in the Manhattan war zone."

"Most of 'em come from Manhattan," objected Nash.

"Still, many of those would have friends in other parts."

"I'll try it. Now could you recommend a jeweler?"

The abbot gave him the name of Arnold Earnshaw Nathan, in St. George. Nash thought of asking for the whereabouts of Merlin Apollonius Stark, but decided that the good monks would probably suspect him of dealings with the Devil.

Nash set the girls to writing letters, and went down to St. George. Arnold Earnshaw Nathan was a plainly dressed man, older than most astralites, who lived in a shop full of elaborate clocks all ticking like mad. Nathan agreed to come up to the castle that afternoon to weigh and assay the odds and ends of the

sultan's hoard. As he was agreeing, the clocks all struck eleven with a fearful jangle, and in the fancier ones all sorts of wonderful acts took place. Besides the usual cuckoos, there were clocks in which tiny figures appeared and went through acrobatic stunts, a house-shaped clock that appeared to catch fire until a set of toy firemen whirred into action and put the fire out, and so on.

On his way back, Nash passed a shop displaying weapons of all sorts: guns, swords, daggers. He went in and asked to see the most modern pistols in stock. These turned out to be a line of double-action revolvers, in .32, .38, and .44 calibers.

"You wouldn't have a Colt .45 automatic, service model?" asked Nash. "If I ever have to shoot somebody, I don't want to just irritate him."

"Automatics? No. Nobody uses them."

"That's funny. You know what an automatic pistol is?"

"Sure, sure. No good. They jam all the time."

"Where I come from they don't. Why is that?"

"You try to make one, you see. Too many little sliding parts and springs. Can't file them accurately enough."

"You mean your guns are all handmade?"

"Naturally. Make lots of them myself."

Nash ordered the merchant's whole stock of .32's and .38's for the girls, and a .44 for himself. The merchant beamed, and asked to see Nash's license. It

was then that Nash learned Staten Island had a Sullivan law.

He sighed and set out for the county courthouse to get his licenses. All went well until the license clerk asked his reason for wanting the arsenal.

"Well," explained Nash, "my protegées recently came into some money, and they'll want some protection on their . . ."

"Money? Money? Ah, signor, the Collect' of Revenue, he wants to see you! Come with me!" The clerk bounced up and dragged Nash into the Collector's office.

When Nash told the Assistant Collector of Revenue that he had just arrived in Staten Island, and intended to leave in a few days, the official pursed his lips and said, "Then you will be liable for only a few taxes, my friend. Import tax, export tax, residence tax, transit tax, personal property tax, income tax. That's all. Here are your forms."

Nash's face fell more and more. The official said, "Cheer up, signor. They will not take more than eighty per cent of this estate."

"At least," said Nash in a choked voice, "I want the text of all your tax laws."

"Certainly, signor!" The Assistant Collector fished out a pile of pamphlets. "In view of the size of the estate, we will, if you like, send an expert to help you . . ."

"No, thanks. I can fill out tax returns all right."

"Fine! You will be back in a few days? You and your ladies mus' not leave Staten Island until the taxes are paid, you know."

Early and bright the next morning, Prosper Nash showed up at the revenue office. He cheerfully laid the six forms down on the Assistant Collector's desk, and then began to shell money out of his belt.

The official smiled broadly. As he looked at the forms, his smile faded. His eyes popped. "Thirteen dollars and ninety-four cents on an estate of five hundred thousand! *Dio mio,* it is impossible!"

Nash grinned. "It's possible all right. Just look at all those deductions! Check it over all you want."

The Assistant Collector jumped up and bounced into the office of the Collector; the two reappeared and held a muttered consultation in Italian over the returns. Finally the Collector spoke to Nash: "Look, signor, what is this deduction? You try to get away with something, *si?*"

"Let's see . . . Oh, that! That's authorized by the amendment to the personal property tax, dated 1893. Hasn't been repealed, as far as I can see."

The Collector sputtered. "All those old deductions —this man is a magician!"

"No, though I sometimes wish I were. If you can't find anything wrong with my returns, I'd like my receipt, please."

"Ah, signor," said the Collector, "there is no

hurry! Why not stay around our beautiful Staten Island a few daysa longer?"

Nash shook his head, not caring to hang around until Duke Alessandro had a chance to issue some retroactive decree plugging all the loopholes that Nash had so laboriously discovered.

The officials urged him some more, until their importunities took on a tone of veiled menace.

Then Nash said, "Of course I might settle here. I could find out who your biggest taxpayers are and make a living as a tax expert."

"Oh, no . . . in that case—if you mus' go, you mus' go! We would not *theenk* of detaining you!"

Nash got his receipts; but when he tried to get his gun licenses, the clerk, who had been tipped off, refused on the ground that an estate taxable only to the extent of $13.94 could not need much protection.

Nash returned to his castle just as a couple of men arrived: one of them on a homemade and extremely noisy motorcycle; the other, in top hat and cutaway, in a buggy. There were embraces with the girls they had come to fetch, and a gala departure with much waving and feminine tears. More departures followed; Alicia handled the breaking up of the harem in her usual competent manner.

Nash rounded up the eight slaves and asked them, "How would you boys like your freedom?"

"Freedom?" replied one. "But, *Effendi,* we belong to Arslan Bey!"

"I'm afraid he's dead, or he'd have joined us by now. I repeat: how would you like to be your own masters?"

They exchanged dazed glances. One said, "Oh, *Effendi,* not belong to anyone? That would be terrible! We'd die!"

Nash tried to sell them the beauties of liberty, but the only result was that they got down on their knees, wept, and prayed that he would not do such a thing to them.

Nash gave up and went in to lunch. Afterwards he hiked down to Tompkinsville to find the headquarters of Merlin Apollonius Stark, whose address he had gotten from Nathan the jeweler.

The address was 160 St. Paul's Avenue, a street of small one- and two-storey houses of the suburban residence type. He soon found 158; the lot south of it was vacant, and on the other side of the open space was 162.

He walked back to 158 to make sure.

Had he forgotten the correct number? No, Prosper Nash never forgot things like that. Had Nathan misinformed him, or had Merlin Apollonius magicked his house down to portable size and gone off with it?

"Come on," crackled a voice from the empty air in the middle of the vacant lot. "Don't stand there. Walk up the path and ring the doorbell!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

Nash walked slowly up the path. His fifth step brought him to the last flagstone. The lawn also ended at this point, and the waste of hard-packed brown earth and green weeds that comprised the rest of the lot was sharp in the bright, cool sun. A small breeze stirred Nash's cloak and drove a couple of dead leaves tumbling across his vision.

"Come on! Up the steps with you!"

Nash frowned. Merlin Stark must be having fun with him. Well, two could play. Nash drew his sword and used it like a blind man's cane. He located two steps leading up from the end of the path; the scrape made by the point sounded like stone or concrete. As he ascended, he discovered a door, invisible like the steps, and began poking it.

"Hey! Stop scratching my door up!"

"Well, fix your doorbell so I can see it!" retorted Nash.

"Oh, come on in and stop fooling around." A large dark rectangle the size of a door opened in

the empty space in front of Nash, who found himself looking down a hall with an old-fashioned hall-tree in the foreground.

"In here, M. de Nêche!" The voice was now obviously much like that of Monty Stark. Nash hung his cloak and plumed hat on one of the antlers of the hall-tree, took a look at himself in the mirror, and entered.

Nash expected to see an improved version of Montague Allen Stark. But what he saw was more arresting: apparently Monty Stark himself, with a long white false beard attached to his chin.

"Mont . . . uh, hello, Mr. Stark!" Nash covered his confusion with a formal seventeenth-century bow. He advanced to shake the hand that the astral Stark, half rising, extended across his desk.

Now that Nash had a closer look, he was fairly sure that the beard was real. The only trouble was that it did not go with the crisp brown hair, partly covered by a skullcap, and the plump young face. It was just like Monty, in imagining himself a magician, simply to slap a snowy beard on his face without bothering to alter the rest of his physique to match.

The astral Stark wore a dark blue judicial robe embroidered with astronomical symbols. On Nash's left was a lower desk, bearing a typewriter, behind which sat a young woman in an exceedingly gauzy dress. The girl was small and slim, with fair skin,

enormous blue eyes, and a fragile, unearthly beauty. Another navy-blue robe lay across her lap, and on this she was embroidering an additional symbol: a thing combining the upper half of P with the lower half of L.

"Pluto," explained Stark. "She thinks I ought to bring my paraphernalia up to date. I hope they don't discover any more planets for a while. You know, M. de Nêche, I had a feeling somebody like you was looking for me."

Of course, thought Nash, *a genuine magician would know his client's name without being told.* He said, "Quite a trick, making your house invisible."

Stark handed Nash a cigar and lit one himself. "I thought those dead leaves were pretty cute. You have to time their apparent motion so it coincides with a puff of real wind."

"What's the idea? To keep away the *hoi polloi?*"

The wizard chuckled. With the cigar sticking up out of one corner of his grin, he was, except for the phony-looking beard, the same cocky Montague that Nash had known in his own plane. "Why do lawyers use Latin? If a professional man doesn't mix a little hokum with his art, he doesn't get any clients. Now, what can I do for you?"

Nash said carefully, "I want to borrow the Shamir from Tukiphat."

Stark's eyebrows shot up. "Why, in Thoth's name?

Haven't enough folks come to grief trying to snatch that cursed hunk of glass?"

"I need it in my business."

"Come on, come on! No secrets from your magus!"

Nash hesitated. "Do you know about the mundane plane?"

"Uh . . . yes and no. Hmm. There's something about you . . . Wait, don't tell me . . . You don't quite fit . . ." Stark took a deep drag, then let the smoke drift up out of his open mouth so that it almost veiled his face

Nash leaned back in his swivel chair and looked about the room. It reminded him of the office of a country lawyer, except that the corners were cluttered with brass tripods and lamps, wands, and swords. Everything else was filing cabinets and bookcases, from the top of which two skulls and one stuffed rooster looked down.

"Got it!" cried Stark. "You're a mundane soul in an astral body! Right?"

"Right."

"By the Great Tetragrammaton, this is going to be interesting! I don't suppose you'd care to let me take your soul out for examination?"

"No sir! I want to get back to my own plane."

"Oh, what's the hurry? You obviously created an adventurous type for yourself. Haven't you had adventure?"

"Sure," said Nash. "I've killed three men. Where I come from, one homicide per lifetime is considered plenty. I want to get back before I kill any more."

"Hmm. I could fix you up with a ring that would make it unnecessary to kill anybody, except perhaps Wotanists . . . You can give me a lot of valuable information about your plane. The magi and philosophers in this one have the damndest lot of contradictory theories about it."

"Sorry, but I've got to return before Bechard does something drastic with my mundane body. He gave me ten days."

"Bechard? Who's that?"

Nash told him about the demon.

"Hmm," said Stark. "I see your point. An astral body whose mundane congener has abandoned it, or died, is more liable to dissolution than one that is constantly maintained by its creator's imagination."

"Well," said Nash, "can you fix me up? And if so, what would the charge be?"

"Don't know; I'd have to think . . . Paraldine, would you get the volumes of Duban Farsi's Encyclopedia with the articles on 'Shamir' and 'Tukiphat'?"

The girl put down her sewing and left the room, followed by Nash's appreciative glance.

"Not looking for a secretary, are you?" asked Stark.

"Nope. Are you trying to get rid of her?"

"Umm . . . yes and no. She's a good worker, but you know how sylphs are. Of course it's nice to know you're conferring immortality, but I can't stand the gaff . . . Say, de Nêche, do you know I have a peculiar feeling . . . as if I'd known you somewhere?"

Nash grinned. "In a way you have." And he told the other about Montague Allen Stark.

"By Adonai Elohim, no wonder you came to me!" cried Stark. "This is . . . Ah, thank you, my dear," he said as the sylph dumped two huge volumes on his desk. "Now let's see. Shaddai . . . Shamgar . . . Shamir. Hmm." The magus read silently and puffed. "*'Lahu man ham ala al Shamir, al sama' wa jahannam hom ghuraf ji seraiah wahed.'* Literally, 'To him who holds the Shamir, Heaven and Hell are but rooms in the same building.' What he means is that with this glorified rock you can translate both body and soul from one plane to another. Gives the method of using it, too. You insufflate it three times . . ."

"You what?"

"Blow on it, to you. Then you describe the right pentagram if you're going to a higher plane, the left if to a lower. You'd use the left. Meanwhile you say: 'By the great Adonai, Elohim, Ariel, and Jehovam, *conjuro, petrus veritatis, te cito mihi obedire;* I conjure thee to obey me forthwith.' If the stone doesn't begin to coruscate at this point, that means

it's pretending it doesn't understand English and Latin, so you have to repeat in Hebrew or Arabic.

"I hope you don't, because to pronounce Arabic properly you need an oversized glottis and a case of asthma. 'By the holy names Albrot, On, Shaddai . . .' I'll have Paraldine type it out for you on virgin typewriter paper. Now let's see about Tuky."

Merlin Apollonius Stark opened the other volume and frowned over it for a long time. He murmured, "Don't know . . . These genii are tough customers, Tukiphat particularly. I wouldn't tangle with him myself for a bushel of azoth. But that's your funeral . . ."

He read on somberly, the slope of his shoulders indicating dim prospects. Then he began to perk up. "Hey! De Nêche! I think I've got a method of getting through the refractory zone!"

The wizard jumped up and began to pace, nervously pulling his beard, cracking his knuckle joints, and hitting his palm with his fist. "It's a natural! Paraldine, take a letter to Arnold Nathan."

The girl put down her sewing and took up her shorthand pad. Stark said, "On self-immolating paper, in a red-bordered envelope. Don't want to burn old Nathan's fingers. . . . 'Dear Mr. Nathan: Could you do a little rush job for one of my clients? Take a watch with a sweep-second hand and a stop button. Transpose the hour hand and the second hand, so that the former hour hand will be control-

lable by the stud, and when activated will make one complete revolution per minute. The favor of Jod He Vau He be with you if you can do the job in twenty-four hours. Very sincerely yours.'

"All right, de Nêche, you come around day after tomorrow, early. I'll have a spell for binding Tukiphat and getting through his sphere worked out. I warn you that the first may require a triad."

"A whattad?"

"Three people to work it. So you'd better start thinking of whom you want to take along."

"Umm," said Nash. "I suppose I could use a couple of Arslan's slaves . . ."

"Soulless ones? Too stupid."

"That was my impression. Say, you know I tried to give them their freedom this morning, and they wouldn't take it! Damndest thing I ever saw."

"Not at all," said Stark. "They were created as slaves, so they can't imagine any other existence."

"On my plane, we consider slavery an abomination," said Nash. "And we don't believe in natural-born slaves any more."

"Yes, but this isn't your plane, fellow!"

"Well, what are those 'soulless ones,' then?"

"Oh. When one of you mundane souls creates an astral person, he sometimes throws in a flock of servants to do the dirty work for his hero. These auxilliary astral bodies, as it were, are what we call soulless ones, because they have very little personal-

ity of their own. They're useful, though. Most of the unskilled labor on our plane is done by them, because there are so few first-grade astralites who will go in for it."

He smiled wryly. "Most unjust, according to your lights. The only way I can see to fix it is to persuade you mundane folks to create more honest toilers and fewer leaders and geniuses. If you find us kind of backward compared to you, that's what's wrong; everybody wants to be boss."

"Okay," said Nash. "But what'll I do with these fellows? They give me the creeps."

Stark shrugged. "Give 'em to the members of the harem. By the way, when you come around Saturday, you'd better bring some money with you."

"How much?"

Stark exchanged a knowing glance with the sylph, put his fingertips together, and rolled his eyes piously upward. "Ahem . . . I don't like to fix a fee so far in advance . . . you never know what complications you're going to run into . . . but shall we say ten thousand dollars, including the watch and all the other props?"

"Ow!" yelped Nash. "Who do you think I am, a guy named Morgan Vanderbilt Rockefeller?"

Stark looked surprised and a bit hurt. "After all, this astral money won't be any good on the mundane plane, even if you take it along!"

"It's the principle of the thing. You wouldn't

rob your mundane body's best friend, would you?"

Stark sighed. "Oh, all right; suppose we make it five thousand."

Nash screwed his face into a knot at the thought of handing over five thousand dollars.

"Look, de Nêche," said Stark, "you come in early tomorrow morning prepared to spend the whole day answering questions about the mundane plane, and I'll give you your spells and props and all for twenty-five hundred. At that, the Guild would probably kick me out if they heard."

It still hurt, but Nash did not feel he could ask for much more of a reduction.

As he put on his cloak and hat, and stepped out of the invisible door, he heard Merlin Apollonius Stark saying, "Take a spell, Paraldine. 'I do hereby conjure and abjure thee . . .'"

Back at the castle, Nash found that a large fraction of the harem had already left. Their places had been taken by numbers of husbands and friends who had come to fetch them, but who planned to spend that night at the castle.

"It looks as if all of them would be out of here by tomorrow night," Alicia told him. "Five of them are going to marry natives."

"Say, that's fast work," said Nash. "When have any of them had a chance to get that well acquainted with the local boys?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"What are you going to do?"

She puffed at her corncob. "Don't know that, either. What are your plans, Prosper?"

"Let's walk over toward the monastery," he said. When they were out of earshot of the castle, with a cold wind whipping their cloaks, he told her: "I'm going to . . . uh . . . borrow the Shamir from Tukiphat."

"Borrow? Does Tuky know about it?"

"No ma'am, and I don't want him to, either. So don't spread it, please . . ."

She burst out laughing. "So you're the man who was so persnickety about stealing Arslan's loot!"

"This is different."

"Oh, yeah? That's what they all say. How different?"

"It's a matter of saving my . . ."

"Yes, yes, go on!"

"It's a long story, and you may not believe it."

She blew smoke in his face. "You poor dope, of course I believe you! Tell Alicia."

He told her about his usurped mundane body.

"I see," she said in a more serious tone than usual. "I thought you'd changed from the Chevalier I knew. For one thing, he never knew or cared where his next dollar was coming from."

"Uh-huh. I'm sorry to steal your gallant friend and give you a glorified bookkeeper in his place."

She shot out a hand and tweaked his aristocratic beak. "Not a bit of it! I like you better this way. You're kind and foresighted and conscientious . . ."

"Oh, sure. I have all the dull virtues."

"But that's not so, Prosper! They may be dull on your plane, but here they're something extraordinary! We have all the arrogant, rapacious gallants we need. Of course," she added sardonically, "you *are* planning a robbery. It's stealing and you know it."

"Well," he said uncomfortably, "I don't like it, but Bechard has me on the spot . . ."

"Don't be silly! Of course you'll go through with it. As far as I know, the gem hasn't been put to practical use since King Solomon dressed the stones of his temple by touching them with it. Just how are you going to work it?"

"I've got to find a couple of assistants."

"Oh, wonderful! I'll be one of them."

"*What?* But you're a woman."

"You bet I am. So what? Don't you think I could help?"

"Sure, but this is likely to be dangerous."

"What of it? Of course I'm going along! No use trying to go back to my old job while the Voties . . ."

"But I can't expose you . . ."

"Stuff and nonsense! You'll take me, or I'll do some exposing!" She glided close and smiled ma-

liciously up at him. "Of course *I* know Prosper Nash wouldn't think of such a thing, but anybody else hearing my story would take one look at the Chevalier and draw the obvious conclusions."

Clinging to Nash, she drew him inside the castle. She fastened her lips on his . . .

When the skyrockets in Nash's head stopped exploding, he heard a roar from the company assembled for the first call to dinner. Nash reeled, pushed his hat back, and sat down on the floor. "Where am I?" he gasped.

The company applauded the act.

A couple of stalwarts, one in fringed buckskin and the other in Wall Street spats and carnation, hauled him up. Somebody pressed a snort of brandy on him, and the dinner got off to a rare convivial start. An astonishing lot of liquids had arrived with the girls' protectors. As Nash responded to toast after toast from these, he was forced to admit that he was grateful for at least one of his astral body's characteristics. Jean-Prospère de Nêche, it transpired, had a really phenomenal liver.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Later, Prosper Nash and Alicia sat side by side on the floor of his room before a small wood fire. They did not talk much, but now and then they kissed.

She said, looking into the flames, "Are you still set on going back to your own plane, Prosper?"

"I dare *not* go."

"I suppose so. But I wish now I hadn't urged you to go ahead with your plan."

The kisses got longer and longer. She was, Nash thought, waiting for some sort of declaration.

Well—what could he say? Anything would be wrong. He'd soon be taking both his soul and the Chevalier's body away, probably for good. No doubt Bechard would give him back his mundane body in exchange for the astral one.

But this couldn't go on all night. His pulse was racing now. He took a long look to fix her in his mind. Then he kissed her once more, briefly and gently, and rose. "I'm going out," he said. At her

look of pain, he added, "I think it's the right thing, dear."

"Always trying to do the right thing . . . but I suppose if you weren't, I wouldn't . . ." She broke off, staring into the fire.

Out in the cold November dark, Nash jumped a foot at being confronted by a hooded, menacing figure.

"Hey! Easy with the club, m'sieur! I'm de Nêche!"

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I thought you were one of the local swains."

Nash laughed. "It's Benedict, isn't it?"

"Yes. Did you decide your watchdogs needed reinforcements?"

"Couldn't sleep. Mind if I walk with you?"

"Not in the least. By the way, the abbot asked me to tell you . . . if you're through with our bedding, we could use it."

"Sure, you can have it all tomorrow. We're pulling out."

"We would not inconvenience you, least of all for our own advantage. But we're taking in a bunch of refugees from Manhattan."

"What's been happening there?" asked Nash.

"Heh, a worldly man . . . beg pardon . . . like you asking for news from a monk! Haven't you read the papers?"

"Haven't seen one in days. No time."

"Well, last Monday, the city's Blanqui regiment —anarchists, you know—mutinied. They left their place in the line, marched down to City Hall, and seized it. They shot all the members of the administration and staff they caught, the rest having escaped just before the mutineers arrived."

"Gosh! What happened then?"

"The Blanquis issued proclamations to the rest of the troops, saying that Historical Necessity had taken charge of the city, which was now a workers' and peasants' republic. They proclaimed that the loyal troops should obey the Blanquis and fight like fiends against the Wotanists . . . But you know the style."

"Think I do," agreed Nash. "Go on."

"Of course the loyal troops did nothing of the kind. The Wotanists and Romans got wind of treachery among the city's forces and attacked the loyal troops. The Home Guardists stood them off for some hours. Then they gradually learned that their own command had been destroyed by their so-called comrades, became discouraged and fled the field. The Wotanists, meeting no further resistance, marched down and attacked the Blanquis around City Hall. The Blanquis fought fiercely, and the last I heard they were still sending out manifestoes calling on the masses to rise. They blame the disaster on the Private and corporals and the civilian

officers of the city, saying they were secretly in league with the Wotanists, and so on. As if the people could do anything, now that the Wotanists control all Manhattan."

"From what I gather," said Nash, "there really aren't any masses in this world; just a minority of soulless ones and a majority of rampant individualists."

"I know," said Brother Benedict. "But try to tell that to a Blanqui! I've argued with them. For my part, I hold that a villain is no less a villain because he can excuse his crimes by fine words about Class Loyalty, Bourgeois Morality, and Dialectical Materialism."

"What happened to the loyal part of the army?" asked Nash.

"Many of them escaped to Brooklyn, where they are reorganizing to carry on the fight. Every boat in lower Manhattan was seized that afternoon by fleeing soldiers and civilians."

"They sent a mess . . ." Nash broke off as the horrible suspicion that his conscious mind had been trying to suppress at last broke through. He remembered the soldier who had burst in on the Private while Nash was speaking with him. This man had said something about "Blanquis." Arizona Bill Averoff must somehow have failed to deliver the message . . .

Keep a stiff upper lip, he thought. *If it does turn out that the disaster was your fault, it'll be time enough then to do something dramatic.*

"Where did the Voties—Wotanists—come from?" he asked.

"These pagan savages began appearing in Yorkville a couple of decades ago," Benedict told him. "The New York City government temporized with them until they were numerous enough to revolt. They somehow got an alliance with the Romans, who up to then had been fairly good citizens most of the time.

"You can neither argue with, nor evangelize, nor intimidate a Wotanist. The only thing that does any permanent good is to kill him, God forgive me. And it strikes me, Chevalier, that you would be better occupied . . ."

"I know," said Nash. "We've had fellows like that at home."

Merlin Apollonius Stark grinned like a bearded cherub. "Good morning, de Nêche; bright and early, I see. I've got good news; the watch . . . say, what's the matter with you? Look like you'd been dragged through a knothole."

"Didn't sleep well," growled Nash.

"I guessed that—but there's something else. Come, tell papa Merlin. You're in love, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh. If you're so smart, maybe you can tell

me what to do about it. What would happen if I stayed here?"

Stark shrugged. "That's up to Bechard. When a mundane body abandons an astral congener to create another, the first astral body goes on living unchanged until some accident causes its dissolution. But sometimes a mundane body, instead of abandoning its creation outright, will slowly change it. They do pretty horrible things to us sometimes."

"Would Bechard know about that?"

"He would unless he's even more stupid than most demons."

"But if I go back with the Shamir, I'll take this body with me, so she'll be left with nothing at all. Could you . . . uh . . . exorcise me, so she'd . . ."

"Altruistic devil, aren't you? They get that way sometimes. Wouldn't do any good. Your soul couldn't take the Shamir back by itself, and without it, Bechard wouldn't let you back into your own body. So you'd bounce right back up."

Nash twisted his strong fingers together. "Could you send her back with me?"

"Sorry, but the Shamir's a one-man vehicle."

"What then? There must be some way out for us."

"You'll get over it."

"But I don't *want* to!"

"Oh for Och's sake! I'm a magician, not a love-lorn column editor! I was trying to tell you that your

watch will be ready this afternoon. If you can locate your two assistants, you could leave this evening and raid Tukiphat's Island before dawn. I'd strongly advise it, if possible. Have you any helpers yet?"

"My girl friend, Alicia Woodson."

"How about the third?"

"Haven't anybody. I don't suppose you'd consider . . . uh . . ."

"Good Uriel, no! I wouldn't say 'boo' to Tukiphat, and anyway, I have my practice to look after."

"Well, there are one or two pretty good fellows I knew in New York, but I don't know where they are here . . . if they are here at all."

"In any case, it'd take too long to locate them, by natural means or otherwise," said Stark. "I do know a local *condottiere*—that is, he was a *condottiere* until Alessandro got the better of all his fellow-cutthroats and became a champion of law and order. This man, Muzio Sforza D'Amelio, has done one or two jobs for me, and I haven't had cause for complaint."

"Would you advise me to trust him?" asked Nash worriedly.

"I advise you to trust nobody, but you have to make use of people now and then. As I say, D'Amelio has been honest enough in his dealings with me, and before that he had a fairly good reputation as mercenary soldiers go."

"Well, are you specifically recommending him?"

"No, I'm not. I'm merely calling him to your attention. Another advantage is that he speaks Italian, so he might be able to talk you out of trouble if the Romans or Wotanists stopped you."

"If I could interview him first . . ."

"Can do. Paraldine, take a telepathic message." The wizard and his secretary both shut their eyes and concentrated for some minutes. Then Stark opened his.

"Okay, he'll be in sometime this afternoon. Guess we'd better do the same for your Alicia. Paraldine, a copy to the Chevalier's friend, Miss Alicia Woodson. And now, my friend, you're going to tell me all about the mundane plane. Oh, before we begin, we might . . . uh . . . ahem . . ."

"Settle the vulgar financial details?" grinned Nash. "Here you are."

Stark smiled broadly as he counted the money. "Put it in the safe, Paraldine, and get your shorthand pad ready."

All morning Nash talked. He gave an hour to his own humdrum biography, and in response to Stark's questions went off into the science, religion, social customs, and other facets of his civilization.

Paraldine brought a couple of light lunches and put them on the wizard's desk. Nash looked at his and said, "Thanks, but I don't think I could eat any lunch."

Stark shook a commiserating head. "You certainly

have got a bad case. Try some of this sherry. It's a good antidote for lovesickness."

Nash tried, and eventually was able to choke down his food. The doorbell rang. The sylph went out and returned with a small package, which proved to contain the watch from Nathan.

"It'll do," said Stark, after a critical examination. "Go on with your talk. I want to hear more about that nice kind Inquisition."

By three o'clock Nash's throat was sore. Stark held up a hand. "I think that'll do. You've answered all the crucial questions you could. And I see your lady fair approaching."

When Alicia was admitted, she reported to Nash: "The girls are all on their way, and the blankets are all returned, and the slaves are all auctioned off."

"How did they like it?"

"The girls?"

"No, the slaves."

"They were delighted. But I couldn't get rid of the menagerie. Nobody would take them even as a gift."

Nash sighed. "I can see why. What'll we do with them? Give them to Duke Alessandro?"

"What's this?" Stark broke in. Nash told him about the sultan's ape and sabertooth.

Alicia added, "We have food enough to keep 'em happy for a couple of days, and I got their formulas

and commands from their keepers. You say *accumbe* when you want them to lie down, and *carpe* when you want them to tear somebody to pieces. That's about all."

Stark suggested: "Why not take them along with you? They seem to be fairly docile as long as they're fed, and they'd give you prestige with the Wotanists. Not many would try to stop you if you were leading those animals on leashes."

"Wouldn't they attract attention?" asked Nash.

"Maybe, but you can expect some attention from the Aryans anyway. The only way to deal with a Wotanist is to step on his toes until *he* apologizes." Stark looked at his own watch, and set the altered stop watch by it. "D'Amelio ought to be here. Suppose you people help me enchant the props. It'll save time.

"Paraldine, take a spell. Three copies, marked for cues. Quote: 'I do hereby adjure thee, Watch, by Uriel, Seraph, Ablati, and Agla, that when thou dost enter any enchanted zone wherein the time rate is slowed, the time rate of him who carries thee shall be accelerated even as thy hour hand shall be accelerated. I command thee in the names of Cronus, Tempus, and Wyrd, that the same acceleration shall apply to the clothes and effects of him who carries thee, and his companions and conveyance. Be faithful to thy trust in the name of Jod, Metraton, by

the virtue of the heavens, the stars, the angels, the planets, and the stones; Adon, Schadai, Zeboth; Eloi, Ha, Jo Theos . . ."

It went on like this for a whole page. Stark rapidly dictated four more spells. One was to immobilize Tukiphat, and one each on a rope, a seal, and a stick of sealing wax wherewith to bind him.

The bell rang, announcing Muzio Sforza D'Amelio, who turned out to be a burly fellow in colorful fifteenth-century costume and a ready smile. Stark showed them into a small private room and left them to confer.

When he had heard Nash's proposal, D'Amelio said, "Sounds like a fine job! I don't know if a poor little fella like me would be much help, but I like to try!"

He had charm. When Nash offered him five hundred down, and five hundred when the job was finished, he jumped at it so quickly that Nash mentally kicked himself for not making a lower offer. Prosper Nash was not altogether satisfied with such an impromptu arrangement, but the ten days allowed him by Bechard was running short.

Paraldine had meanwhile typed all the spells in triplicate. Stark took his three visitors into the spell room, which was simply a big, dark, rather bare room with magical devices stacked here and there.

Instead of drawing pentacles on the floor, Stark

went over to a pile of circular pieces of linoleum, three to four feet in diameter, on which the magical diagrams were already drawn. He tossed four of these on the floor, and put Nash and Alicia in the centers of two of them.

The magus lit a fire in a tripod, passed the watch quickly through the flame, blew on it, and sprinkled it with a pinch of earth and a few drops of water. Then he wiped it and put it in the middle of the center pentacle. He took his position on the remaining one and began reading the spell. Nash and Alicia, according to instructions, chimed in with choruses at certain points, meanwhile turning round and round like dervishes. Nash became dizzy and almost reeled out of his circle before a snap of Stark's fingers warned him to control his body.

There were similar performances for the other articles. "Now," said Stark, "we'll have a little rehearsal of the binding of Tukiphat. Miss Woodson will read the initial fixation. Muzio, being the biggest, will handle the rope, and de Nêche the seal. You'll have to work fast, because that initial fixation won't hold Tuky much more than a minute."

They went to work. With the fixation-spell the magician's limbs became rigid. D'Amelio looped the rope around him as he had been instructed. Nash lit one of the oversized matches he had been given, melted a gob of wax onto the crossing of the rope ends, and gave it a poke with the seal, which

had a hexagram with the Greek letters alpha and omega and the Hebrew letters jod, vau, and two he's.

"Fine!" said Stark. "Now if you'll just break this seal, de Nêche . . ."

"Can't you?"

"No, damn it! It worked on me, too! That's how I know you did it right."

"I theenk it would be fun to leave him there, eh, Chevalier?" grinned D'Amelio.

"Hi!" cried Stark in alarm. "You can't treat a professional man that way!"

Nash took his time about breaking the seal, commenting: "Seems to me, Merlin old mage, that we put as much work into this preparation as you did, and we don't get paid for it."

"True. But you paid me, not for what I did, but for knowing how to do it! Thanks. Now you three run along, collect your beasties, and lead them down to Pier Nine. You'll find a boat there to take you to Manhattan. Paraldine's already contacted the skipper—name of Jones. No extra charge, de Nêche, if that's what you're looking worried about."

The little steam-launch lay moored to Pier Nine; a man in a brass-buttoned coat and sideburns leaned against the stack chewing tobacco. He took in the party and said:

"Ahoy, be you the passengers for Manhattan?

Cap'n Jones. Hi, you ain't gonna take those animules aboard?"

"Oh, signor captain!" said D'Amelio. "Those little creatures, they would not hurt a fly!"

"Mebbe not, but I ain't no fly! Oh, well, belay 'em to the quarterdeck. Say, Mr. de Nêche, ain't I seen you somewheres?"

"Might," said Nash. "Is your name . . . uh . . . Ahab Dana Jones?"

"Sure thing! I remember now! You was the man we horned in on when he was fighting the Saracens. Remember the hoss you gave me? That furnished the down payment on this little ship. Cast off, Walter."

The launch wheezed northward in the deepening gloom of an overcast November evening. Smiley and Kulu huddled together, as far from the water as they could get.

The skipper spat tobacco juice with carefully calculated trajectory, and said, "Don't get many passengers for Manhattan. Everybody that can wants to get away. Say, Mr. de Nêche, seems to me I heard your name somewheres else. Ain't you the one the Manhattan Government in Exile is lookin' for to hang for desertion?"

Nash swallowed before he answered. "I didn't know they'd gone that far. What happened?"

"You and that fella— Average?"

"Averoff?" suggested Nash.

"Yeah. Heh, heh, I heard the whole yarn. They say you gave this here cowboy a message to a Sergeant Berl you was supposed to take yourself, and then you vamoosed. Is that right?"

"More or less. I had good reasons, though."

"Ain't sayin' you didn't. All I know is what I heard."

"What else did you hear?" Nash felt a peculiar tightness around his throat as if the noose were already tightening. He must have hung up a record for making enemies during his short stay.

"Well, it was a queer thing. This cowboy, Averoff, talks with a New York accent, and don't see no difference between 'Berl' and 'Boyle.' He calls 'em both 'Buh-eel.' So when he found a Sergeant Boyle, he thought he had Sergeant Berl, and gave him the message, which was an order to disarm the Blanqui Regiment. But Sergeant Boyle's brigade was on the wrong end of the front, and before he could do anything the Blanquis had mutinied. I just heard today the Voties finally took City Hall and shot all the Blanquis. Serves 'em right, heh, heh."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Halt! Wer da?" The command rang out in a peculiarly tense, high bark, as if the speaker had screwed himself up to such a nervous pitch that he was on the verge of exploding. But this was, as Nash came to learn, merely the ordinary tone used by Wotanists on military duty. This particular Votie, a cross-gartered barbarian with his hair in long yellow braids, was covering them with a rifle aimed from the hip.

Nash responded "Just us," and did some quick thinking. When they had been stopped by a squad of Roman legionaries, Muzio Sforza D'Amelio had talked them loose with a swift hand-waving patter of Italian. That might not work so well with this pseudo-Alaric.

As they advanced into the small circle of light around the sentry, the latter snapped, "Speak Aryan, sub-man!"

"I only know about ten words . . ." apologized Nash.

"You know the regulation. All sub-men must learn Aryan in one veek or be executed. *Wotan,* vot are these! Who gave you permission to lead dangerous animals around the streets?"

D'Amelio's hands began to flutter in a way that Nash had learned to interpret as a warming up for articulate speech. The *condottiere* said, "Theesa poor little pussy-cat and a monk', your high command order' for their blood. We take them."

"Blood? Explain, or you vill be executed."

"Yes, blood. You know the Wotanists have such a wonderful blood, better than other people? They are going to give you transfusions from theesa little animals, to make you strong like them."

"O-o-oh! Vy didn't you say so? Vot are you vaiting around for? On your vay! Hurry! And don't let those animals loose, or you vill be executed!"

They walked on through the cemeterial streets for a couple more silent blocks before being challenged again. This time there were three Wotanists: a commander in the chain mail and white black-crossed surcoat of a Teutonic knight, flanked by a pair of horned Siegfrieds.

D'Amelio went through his spiel about the high command's plan for improving the blood of the super-race. The result was different.

"Hmm," said the knight, "let me see." He leaned forward to scrutinize the beasts. The sabertooth may have taken a dislike to the Wotanist smell, for

Smiley laid his ears back and snarled with a sound like the crackle of a high-voltage arc.

The knight retreated a hasty step. "You had better keep them under control, sub-men!" barked the paladin. "If I had been so much as scratched, you would have been executed! Now I see that one is a mythical African ape, a kulukamba, and the other an extinct American carnivore, *Smilodon californicus*. You cannot fool the Wotanist culture! These are not Aryan animals. Seize them!"

"Who, us?" said the Siegfrieds, in rather small voices.

"Ja! Sie!"

Nash did not want to turn his beasts on the warriors at this stage if it could be avoided. While the subordinates tensed themselves to spring, and D'Amelio's free hand stole to his hilt, Alicia's clear voice blasted the night: "You swine, if you touch us, I'll Aryanize you all right! I'll . . ."

"Madame!" cried the knight, angry but somehow less truculent. "You must not! Such language is forbidden by the regulations!"

Then Nash remembered: "Step on their toes until *they* apologize!"

"Ha-ha!" he shouted in a nasty, mirthless laugh. "Talk of executing *me!* Expect me to commit suicide?"

"What do you mean?" gasped the knight.

"I," announced Nash in the tense, pharyngeal

tones of an aroused Wotanist, "am Ritter Johann Glück von Nasch, the new executioner!"

"Guk," said the knight. "But . . . but where is your ax?"

"What do you think these are?" Nash pointed to his beasts.

"O-o-oh! *Ich verstehe! Aber, warum sprechen Sie Englisch?*"

Nash's heart skipped a beat before he got the answer to that one, too: "Because that's the only language these animals understand. Now will you go about your proper duties, or must I report you?"

The Teutonic knight at this point exhibited a marked lack of enthusiasm for Nash's company. He murmured apologies, bowed from the hips, saluted, and clanked off. When the darkness had swallowed him and his cohorts Nash and his assistants heard the Wotanist trio break into a run.

D'Amelio laughed. "You are good, Chevalier. Those poor little supermen, I am sorry for them!"

"Give the credit to Miss Woodson's lack of inhibitions," said Nash, quickening his pace. "In a while, it'll occur to them to go around to headquarters to ask if there really is a new executioner, and then Manhattan'll be too hot for us."

"It's not what you'd call frigid now," added Alicia.

Central Park was so dark under the starless sky

that it took them half an hour of bush-beating to find the lake.

"More Voties," whispered D'Amelio.

Nash peered out from behind a tree, and made out men scattered along the shore. "Seems to be a cordon of 'em clear around the lake," he murmured. "Guess we'd better go around to where Shapiro's boathouse is."

They wended their slow way. The beasts became difficult: Kulu wanted to climb trees, and Smiley sniffed and tugged at the scent of squirrels and other small game. Once the latter got his chain tangled in a bush, and while Nash was unsnarling it, the big cat slipped away on his belly.

Nash called, "*Ab . . . ac . . .* lie down, Smiley! Alicia, what do you . . ."

"*Accumbe!*" cried the girl. After some hunting, they found Smiley crouched under the shrubbery. He whined with displeasure when Nash hauled on his chain, but came.

They found the path leading to the boathouse and walked boldly down it. At the first challenge, Nash barked that he was von Nasch, the new executioner . . .

"Ho ho! Otto, *hierher!*" There was a stir; more shadowy forms with winged and horned iron hats drifted up. "*Der Kerl behaupt, das er der neuer Henker ist!*"

"Vunderful," rumbled a voice. "A fine story. The only flaw is that *I* the new executioner am!" Nash saw that the speaker was a stocky man who leaned on a huge ax. "*Doch,* I make you apprentice. I give you vun lesson, very short, very sharp. It is too bad you vill not be able to take more . . ."

The Wotanists gathered around them like a wave about to break.

Nash heard the jingle as D'Amelio dropped the ape's chain, and the *wheep* of emerging sword and dagger. He released the sabertooth. "Smiley! Kulu! *Carpe! Carpe!*"

The kulukama gave a short, piercing scream; the cat roared. A gun crashed somewhere and lit up the scene for a blink. Nash drove his rapier through Otto's chest, while the latter was still starting to swing his ponderous ax. He almost stuck another figure before he realized that it was Alicia, hacking away with a Wotanist sword.

The confusion opened out; the three found themselves alone with a few corpses. More guns banged, and the shouts, roars, and screams faded into the distance.

One rowboat stood on the boathouse apron; they tumbled into it and pushed off. "You row, D'Amelio," said Nash.

"But, signor, a little weak man like me . . ."

"Row, damn it! I've got to work this watch."

The *condottiere* put his massive shoulders into it, and the boat whizzed through the ripples. Nash directed it toward the desert island.

"It's beginning to get light," said Alicia.

"Gosh! Have we been all night? We'll have a swell chance of getting away in daytime."

"Maybe somebody'll hide us," suggested Alicia, not too hopefully.

"Maybe. More on your right, D'Amelio."

Nash was not sure that they had entered the smooth strip that marked the intersection of Tukiphat's hollow sphere of refraction and the surface of the lake, until the surroundings were suddenly and swiftly stretched out of all recognizable shape. D'Amelio dropped his oars and crossed himself.

"Keep on," Nash ordered him, and pressed the stud on the side of the stop watch. At once, the environment returned, if not to normal, at least to a recognizable distortion thereof. Tukiphat's island was visible, as if seen through a concave lens. A few more strokes carried them through the refractory zone altogether, and another half-minute's rowing to the island itself.

The keel grated softly against the sand, and before the boat had stopped, Alicia had jumped out into inch-deep water and was pulling on the painter. D'Amelio scrambled after, and then Nash.

The last whispered, "He's supposed to be con-

templating his navel beside the entrance to his cave. That's around the hill. Damn it, D'Amelio, stop that jingling!"

They padded noiselessly over the sand. A dark spot came into view on the side of the knoll, and beside it could be discerned an amorphous gray shape the size of a seated man.

A sound that to Nash's excited imagination resembled the explosion of a string of firecrackers made him jump, until he realized that it was the slight crackle of Alicia's sheet of typewriter paper.

"Light the candle," breathed Nash.

"Can't. I haven't enough hands. You'll have to."

Nash fumbled and dropped his match, and had to comb the sand with his fingers for it. The shapeless figure was as still as a headstone, which it slightly resembled.

Nash struck a light and sought the candlewick. The surroundings seemed suddenly much darker.

"Ouch!" said Alicia, quite audibly.

"What?" said Nash.

"Wax burned me."

"Sh! He's coming to!"

In the microcosmic candlelight, the gray thing was stirring. A head emerged from the top of the bundle: high forehead, fiercely aquiline nose, in a lean, old, but firm-skinned face; the whole utterly devoid of hair.

The black gimlet eyes threw back tiny reflections

of the candle flame, and the whole bundle stirred. A bare arm thrust itself out of the voluminous gray mantle, and the being started to heave itself to its feet. A voice, deep and clear, boomed out: "Damned impertinence . . ."

Alicia flapped her paper sharply to flatten it out, and cried: "Tukiphat, I command and abjure thee, be thou still in the name of Metraton! Genius of the Shamir, be thou fixed by Mizkun and Nikita! By the fiery serpents of the caduceus, be thou rendered immobile, in the holy names Trinitas, Sother, Sabahot, Adonai, Athenatos, and Pentagna! I order thee to remain rigid by Tetragram and Tetragrammaton . . ."

The cloaked figure creaked to a stop. Its toga slipped from its shoulders and fell in a heap around its feet, leaving it fixed in an awkward semi-erect position. Nash saw that Tukiphat wore on a chain around his neck a many-faceted star-shaped stone the size of a man's hand.

Nash and D'Amelio went into action like a pair of surgeons racing against peritonitis. The former yanked the gem off over Tukiphat's head; the latter whipped the rope around and around, binding wrist and ankle and crossing the ends against the chest of the genius.

Tukiphat blinked and shuddered as a big gob of sealing wax scorched his hide. As he started to come out of the fixation-spell, Nash pressed the seal

against the wax. The genius twiddled his fingers and squirmed a little, but seemed unable to do anything practical toward ridding himself of the rope.

"Fools!" he roared. "Release me! That loot will do you no good. You cannot escape me . . ."

But the three were hurrying back to their boat. Alicia put the candle out, as it was now light enough to see their way without it. They passed another, smaller rowboat—the same one that had been there when Nash had made his abortive attempt to raid the island—no doubt Tukiphat's own boat.

D'Amelio broke into a brief run. Before he reached the large rowboat, he turned and drew his weapons: a sword and a broad, foot-long dagger with a massive guard.

"I am *so* sorry!" he remarked amiably, "but I mus' ask you to give me the jewel . . ."

"Oh, yeah?" snarled Nash. He had been subconsciously expecting something of the sort. Almost before he knew it, he was boring in.

D'Amelio's sword was a pre-rapier, with a cut-and-thrust blade much heavier than his opponent's. Nash had little trouble getting past this slow crow-bar, but the *condottiere* did not seem to mind. He did most of his parrying with the big dagger anyway. As Nash finished one lunge, D'Amelio snaked his left hand out and hooked a projection of the guard of his dagger into the guard of Nash's sword. Nash

could not recover, and D'Amelio sent a lethal thrust straight at his chest.

Nash felt a blow like that of a fist against his breastbone; it almost tore his grip on his hilt loose, but did not penetrate. D'Amelio tried again, and again his point stopped and his blade bowed in compression.

D'Amelio's eyes widened. "You are invulnerable! No fair!"

Nash snorted with truculent relief. He put his foot against D'Amelio's body, took his hilt in both hands, and tore the dagger out of the *condottiere's* grasp. Then he lunged, but into thin air; D'Amelio danced back out of range. A sound made him turn. Alicia Woodson was ankle-deep in the water, wading purposefully ashore with one of the oars in her hands.

D'Amelio ran back some more to avoid being flanked. As Nash followed, he cried, "Wait, my friend! Look!" His left hand went into his trunk-hose and came out with a small shiny object: Nash's magical watch.

"Where'd you get that?" asked Nash.

"I pick your pocket!" The swarthy face grinned with high good humor. "Now, you got the jewel, I got the watch. Let's be friends, split the dough fifty-fifty. Otherwise I throw the watch in the water!"

"Won't work. Not going to sell it. Gimme!" Nash advanced; D'Amelio would hardly throw away their

only means of escaping Tukiphat's vengeance . . .

But Muzio Sforza D'Amelio did just that. A small black blob arced high against the breaking clouds and disappeared with a plunk.

"You damned idiot!" yelled Nash, starting for the mercenary. The big man whirled and fled again, light as a ballet dancer. "You think you catch me? Ha ha!"

"Prosper!" called Alicia. "Quick!"

She had the oars in the locks and the boat ready to shove off.

"The watch . . ." objected Nash.

"I know! Hurry, before water gets into the works!"

There seemed to be no percentage in chasing the elusive Italian, so Nash took to the rowboat. "Hope you know what you're doing, Alicia."

"Of course I do! Look behind you. The watch fell into the refractory zone, so now there isn't any refractory zone!"

Nash took a quick glance. "Gosh, that's so!"

"But," she continued, "when water works into the gear wheels, the watch will stop, and the refractory zone will be right back where it was!"

Nash only half paid attention, for he was pulling with all his might. Behind Alicia in the stern appeared Muzio Sforza, rowing Tukiphat's small rowboat.

"That man," panted Nash, "is hard to discourage."

They entered the area of optical distortion that marked the partly neutralized refractory sphere. The pursuing boat at once looked much farther off, but it gained rapidly.

"Chevalier!" called D'Amelio over his shoulder. "You are a man of honor, yes? Then you will not risk your beautiful lady by a naval battle, yes?"

Alicia said, "Give me your sword, Prosper, and when he gets close enough . . ."

"Not . . . necessary," grunted Nash. They were almost out of the zone. They crossed the line . . . and three seconds later the zone reappeared in full force.

Nash rested on his oars for a few seconds. "Guess the watch stopped, all right. Look at the poor fellow, Alicia!"

A few feet away, Muzio Sforza D'Amelio bobbed up and down on the smooth dull surface of the refractory strip. He and his boat were there, and as large as life, but they seemed to have lost all depth. Except for their motion, they looked just like a big cardboard cutout facing Nash and his lady.

D'Amelio's head turned, like the head of a character in a colored movie, and his mouth moved. After a few seconds his voice reached them: "Signor! Signora! Where are you? I am los'! Oh, help me, dear friends!"

Nash grinned. "He's such an impudent duck you can't help liking him. I'm almost tempted to . . . but I guess . . ."

"Prosper! Don't you dare!"

"I was saying I guess I'd better not. We have enough troubles." He glanced at the lightening sky. "The sun's due any time."

"Why don't you use the Shamir now to get back to your own plane?" Alicia suggested.

"And leave you in this hellhole? Don't be silly!" He glanced down at the gem on his chest, which in the waxing light was sending out gleams of all the spectral colors from red to violet.

No Wotanists were in sight, though faint traffic-sounds began to filter in from the unseen city surrounding the park. Nash rowed to the side of the lake as far as possible from Shapiro's landing. They hauled the boat out and into the bushes.

Nash suggested, "Maybe we'd better climb a tree until dark . . ."

"The leaves are all off, Prosper."

"Yeah, so they are. But if we can find some sort of hideout during the day, we can sneak down to the waterfront tonight. Jones said he'd be there to pick us up . . ."

The shrubbery, which up till then had been so accursedly dense, suddenly looked so sparse as to be practically nonexistent.

"They'll be hunting for us around here anyway," said Nash. "Let's hike up north a mile or so."

That procedure went well until they came to a big open field. "Too risky to cross," said Nash. "Let's skirt it . . ."

Around they went, flitting from tree to tree. Halfway around . . .

"Halt!"

They jumped and whirled. Fifty feet away, a Wotanist sat on an outcropping of rock, covering them with his rifle. He was in the plainest of plain sight, but the fugitive pair had been watching the field so closely as to overlook him completely.

Nash, without a word, seized Alicia's hand and set off at a clumping run. Ka-*pow!* went the rifle; ka-*pow!*

Alicia, once started, quickly got ahead of Nash, but did not run away from him altogether. The rifle crashed twice more, and the sentry shouted. Other shouts came through the bare trees from different directions.

"Rotten bad shooting," panted Nash. "This way . . ."

"No, this way! There's a Votie over that way . . ."

It made little difference, for another Wotanist hove in sight running, and then another. A bullet went *whick* close to their heads.

"Hi, partner!"

The voice came from nowhere visible, until Nash noticed that the curtain of ivy that cascaded down over a granite outcrop was parted at the base, and a lantern-jawed face looked out—that of Arizona Bill Averoff.

They did not need instructions, but ducked down out of sight of their pursuers and went through the ivy on hands and knees. After a few knee-bruising irregularities, the tunnel expanded to walkable size. It was no longer a natural cave-entrance but a man-made passageway.

"What's this, Arizona?" asked Nash, after a quick handshake.

"This yere," said Averoff, "is an old tunnel that leads out from the cellar of the old Arsenal. I shore hope them Voties don't find the exit, because they's several of us hidin' out in that there cellar."

"Say, Arizona, what's this I heard about your going astray with the message I gave you?"

"It's so," said Averoff gloomily. "You shoulda wrote the gent's name down. Now I gotta watch out for both the Voties *and* my own government, which says it's gonna hang me and you if it catches us. 'Course in time they'll see it was bad luck steada our fault, but that won't do us no good if we been already suspendered."

"Thanks for those kind words, partner," said Nash. "Is that your cellar ahead?"

"Yeah." There were a couple of empty hinges on the side of the tunnel where a door had once been, and a ten-by-sixteen concrete-floored chamber lit by one candle. Five men and a woman sat around the wall. Rickety steps led up to a closed trapdoor.

"Folks," said Averoff, "I got a couple recruits. Miss Woodson and Mr. de Nêche. The lady is Mrs. Russell, the soldier is General Leeds, and the Turkish gent is Sultan Arslan— Oh, do you boys know each other already?"

Arslan Bey got to his feet and said heavily, "In view of the fact that M. de Nêche just robbed us of everything we had, even our women—we . . . think . . . we . . . do!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Wait a minute, Arslan," said Nash. "Why do you say I robbed you?"

"Ha! Our faithful Kutluk"—the sultan jerked his head toward a second Turk, also rising and unlimbering his scimitar—"was one of those whom you treacherously threw into the North River. Since the Wotanists stopped our barges at the mouth of Minetta Brook, we were unable to leave Manhattan, and Kutluk returned hither at risk of life to acquaint us with your perfidy. You even have the impudence to confront us with our favorite wife, Number three hundred and one . . ."

"Sh! Don't be a fool. You'll bring the Voties down . . ."

"Yah!" screamed Arslan. "Die, Nazarene dog!"

Since Alicia was standing beside Nash when Arslan launched his attack, Prosper Nash's first concern was to get her out of the way. But in sweeping her behind him, he allowed Arslan to get between him and the tunnel entrance.

Nash had never experienced anything like the demoniac fury of the Sultan's attack; the slashes came so fast that he had no time for ripostes. Kutluk took a position back to back with his master, with his scimitar ready in case anyone else was minded to take a hand; but as none of the others was armed, they simply watched.

The weight of Arslan's assault pushed Nash back toward a corner. Then under the hail of blows Nash's blade snapped.

The jeweled scimitar whistled round and hit Nash's neck. Nash, instead of parting company with his body as he expected to do, felt a dull, heavy blow that staggered him . . . Then another on his scalp, and another on his shoulder. The Shamir!

He dropped the remains of his rapier and lunged for Arslan's body. He got a hand under the sultan's thigh, heaved him off the floor—the animal must weigh a ton—and sat him down heavily. When he tried to pin his opponent, Arslan pulled Nash down on top of him, and they rolled about, kicking and gouging. Kutluk spun around to do his part, but Arizona Bill climbed on his back and fastened his bowlegs around the soulless one's waist.

"Hey!" cried one of the noncombatants. "The Voties! They must have found the tunnel!"

Nash had secured a three-quarter nelson on his antagonist and was trying without success to break

Arslan's bull-neck. He heard Alicia's voice: "Turn him over, Prosper, so I can get at his eyes . . ."

"Don't bother! Take the Shamir off my neck! Unh!"

"What? But then you'll be vulner—"

"Do as I say! And get that paper out of my rear inside coat pocket!"

"But . . ."

"Now blow on the Shamir and magic yourself down to the mundane plane . . . unh . . . and look up . . ."

"I won't leave you! Up the ladder, quick!"

The general had climbed the steps leading to the main floor of the Arsenal and was pounding on the lower side of the trapdoor. The tramp of Wotanist feet came down the tunnel.

"Don't argue!" yelled Nash. "Go look up my friend Montague Allen Stark . . . unh . . . at the Central Park Y.M.C.A.! Maybe he can help . . ."

"*Halt!* You are under arrest!"

The trapdoor flew open, and the gold-braided soldier scrambled out, followed by Mrs. Russell.

"Stop or you vill be shot!" The shrill bark was close.

Alicia's voice penetrated Nash's consciousness: ". . . great Adonai, Elohim, and Jehovam, *conjuro* . . ."

Arizona Bill Averoff's chaps disappeared through

the trapdoor. A gun roared, and the civilian following him groaned, doubled up, and fell down the steps. The cellar suddenly swarmed with Wotanists. They hauled Nash to his feet and kicked him, and did likewise with the ex-sultan.

Kutluk was stretched out, not quite conscious. The Wotanists kicked him. He stirred and groaned, but did not rise. When a few more kicks failed to bring him to his feet, a Wotanist fired a bullet through his head. Kutluk quivered and began to fade out. The civilian had already done so; Alice had disappeared completely. That left Nash, Arslan Bey, and the other civilian in the bag.

The Wotanists handcuffed their prisoners together and kicked them up the cellar steps and out the door of the arsenal.

The sun was cool and bright on the field, which was much like the one Nash and Alicia had been trying to skirt when they had flushed their first Wotanist. A section of Wotanists stood at ease, and in front of them slouched several dejected-looking non-Aryans.

"Guess we'll fade out in good company," said Nash.

"You've got nerve, Chevalier," said the civilian.

Nash lowered his voice: "I'm scared half to death, but don't tell . . ."

"Silence, sub-man!" A kick followed the admonition. Nash painfully guessed that his hams must be all the colors of the rainbow by now.

Two of the previous arrivals were arguing heatedly: one a soldier, the other a shabby man wearing a cloth cap and a red brassard. The Wotanists let them shout, enjoying the spectacle.

Nash heard the soldier say: ". . . if you damned anarchists hadn't . . ."

The other—an obvious Blanqui—interrupted: "We had to do what we did because of Historical Necessity. If you degenerate bourgeois had co-operated. . ."

"Yeah? By 'co-operate,' you guys mean let you be the almighty . . ."

"Of course! If you weren't blinded by prejudice, you'd see . . . Ah!" The Blanqui glared venomously at Nash. "One of the decadent aristocracy! I thought we'd liquidated them all, but I guess the Votie bloodsuckers will . . ."

"Silence!" The nearest Wotanist kicked the Blanqui, who folded up with a howl. A punch in the face brought him back upright, spitting out a tooth.

Nash and his two companions were lined up with the other victims; their handcuffs were changed around to one per man. After an excruciating wait, the chief Wotanist addressed them: "According to regulations, you must be executed in alphabetical order. So . . ."

"Ah, Commander!" growled Arslan Bey. "We have a favor to ask."

"Vot?"

"If you intend to slay us all, allow me the boon of killing this villainous unbeliever de Nêche!"

"De Nêche?" cried the soldier. "That's the traitor who didn't deliver the message! Let me at him!"

A general wrangle broke out. The Blanqui grinned brokenly through his little blond beard. "So that's de Nêche? Seems to me he showed almost proletarian realism! He made our coup possible. Of course, since gratitude is a mere bourgeois superstition, I'd kill him anyway . . ."

"Silence! Silence!" The usual kicks quieted the dispute. One Wotanist said to the chief, "Since they love each other so, vy not give them knives and let them fight it out?"

"Not according to regulations! Now, sub-men, give me your names. You?" He addressed a mild-looking civilian.

"Zwuggle," answered the man promptly.

"Vot?"

"Zwuggle! Z—W—U—G—"

"There is no such name! You are trying to get a place at the end of the line! Answer truthfully, or you vill be executed!"

"But you're going to execute me anyway!" said the astralite plaintively. "And it really is Zwuggle!"

"I don't believe it. Put him at the beginning of

the line. Now ve know this Asiatic is named Arslan Bey; he is an A. Put him next to Herr Zwuggle. De Nêche, that is a D—"

"It's an N!" protested Nash. "I'm listed under N in the 'phone book . . ."

"Vot is a 'phone book? I never heard of it, so there can be no such thing. Get over here, *schwein*, or . . ."

"I know," said Nash. "I'll be executed."

"Your name?"

"Harris."

"Stand there. Your name?"

"Wright."

"R goes dere."

"It's a W!"

"You said 'Wright,' not 'Vright.' Next?"

This was the Blanqui. "Darmer!" he cried. "Nicolai Frunze Darmer!"

"Party name or real name?"

"Party name, of course. My real name begins with S, but a proletarian hero like me doesn't purchase a few lousy minutes of life by telling his real name to cowardly murderers like . . ."

A tattoo of punches and kicks ended the demonstration. The rest of the party was soon sorted out. Then there was another wait while the Wotanists conferred among themselves; a messenger was dispatched, and returned twenty minutes later.

The chief Wotanist grinned sardonically. "I am

so sorry ve cannot do you the honor of meeting the regular executioner, but he vas killed last night and has not been replaced. So . . ." Another Wotanist stepped forward, swung up a light battle-ax, and brought it down on the skull of the unformate Zwuggle.

The Wotanist then stepped in front of Arslan Bey. *Chunk!* Then the Blanqui, who cried: "We shall be avenged! The masses will . . ." *Chunk!*

Nash knew that one could not run well with one's hands tied behind one's back, but he was determined to try. The only person between him and the ax was a certain Davis, a young man in a baseball-player's uniform. Mr. Davis tried to avert his fate by dodging the ax, which prolonged his send-off, and made it less neat than the previous ones. The other Wotanists laughed.

"Ach, was ist . . ."

"Achtung!"

The laughter died; the Wotanists stared horrified past their victims. Nash craned his neck.

A monstrous army was erupting out of the trees on the west side of the field. Strung out in open order from one end of the field to the other was a line of things somewhat resembling Kulu, the late ex-sultan's pet ape. But these were eight feet tall, wore steel helmets and breastplates; and each one had four arms full of lethal weapons.

And just behind the center of the line came a rider

whose mount seemed to have been assembled out of spare parts from all the monsters of mythology. Its head was like that of a huge turtle, except that it had ears and horns. Its body and limbs were shaped like those of a bear, but were covered with scales. Its massive tail ended in a ball of spikes.

A gun roared from the skirmish line, and the head of a Wotanist vanished. The chief shouted, "*Sieg heil!*" and pushed through the line of executionees toward the apes.

The victims came to life and ran in all directions. The remaining Wotanists rushed after their leader, echoing his war cry. The firing became hot; Nash, running awkwardly like the rest, sighted a hollow and dived into it.

He was still straining futilely at the handcuffs when the firing ceased and a voice said, "Excuse me, sir, but are you the man with the soul of Prosper Nash?"

Nash looked up; one of the apes was bending over his depression.

"Uh-huh," said Nash. "Now what do *you* want to execute me for?"

"Oh, sir, not at all at all! Devil a bit of it!" The ape put a tin whistle to his huge mouth and blew. A slight tremor of the earth hinted that the composite beast was approaching.

Nash rolled over and tried to rise, but found that getting up from a prone position with one's hands manacled behind one takes a special technique. As he

thrashed among the weeds, the ape reached down, gathered the nape of his jacket into one hairy hand, and set Nash gently but firmly on his feet.

The first group of Wotanists had disappeared. The skirmish line had crossed most of the field. Nash, looking at their backs, saw a group of Wotanists emerge from the trees beyond them. There was a brief moment of thunderous gunfire, and those Wotanists were gone, too. Other apes streamed out of the woods following the skirmish line.

The turtle-headed monstrosity lumbered up, and a massive young man in a ballet suit vaulted off. This individual combined the physique of a heavyweight champ with the face of . . . Montague Allen Stark.

"You're Nash?" he said crisply, extending a hand. "Good. Looks as though we weren't any too quick. We were created primarily to rescue you, and secondarily to clean up the Voties and Blanquis." He cocked his head as gunfire broke out. "Those are my babies now." He looked surprised as Nash appeared to ignore his hand, until Nash showed him the handcuffs.

"That's easy," he said. He signaled to the ape, who snapped the chain.

"Thanks," said Nash. "What's your name?"

"Let me see . . . haven't gotten used to it yet . . . I know! Flash Rogers Stark! Anything else we can do for you?"

"I . . . uh . . . don't know yet. I'm sort of at sea . . . Hullo, look who's here!"

A tall angry figure was approaching, all but his bare feet and glabrous head wrapped in yards of gray wool. "You!" roared Tukiphat. "It took me two hours to get free of that anathematized rope! What have you done with the Shamir, O youth of little prudence?"

"Now see here, sir," said Flash Rogers Stark, "I've got orders to protect Mr. Nash, and . . ."

"You!" sneered the genius. "O shadow-being of a mortal's irrational fancy, I can erase you with a wink. Behold!" Tukiphat waved his hand, and the super-Stark was hoisted six feet into the air. "Interfere not, and fear not for this temerarious imbecile's safety. Tukiphat is above such petty vengeance. Now, Jean-Prosper de Nash, or whatever you call yourself, answer me truly, for the fate of your plane may depend on your veracity. Where is the Star of Wisdom?"

"Far as I know, it's on the mundane plane," said Nash. This being might have too many inherent, built-in powers to monkey with. "I sent my girl friend down there with it when the Wotanists cornered us, and I guess she looked up my friend Monty Stark, as I told her to, and he imagined this fellow and his army."

Tukiphat snorted. "Well enough, but tell me not that you stole the Stone of Sages merely to have it

handy in such emergencies. What seduced you to this mad enterprise?"

"Well, you see, I've really got a mundane soul. The demon Bechard stole my mundane body . . ."

"Demon? Bechard?" Tukiphat gave a groan at which the whole field trembled slightly. "*Pater Omnipotens!* Mean you that a demon is on the same plane as the Shamir?"

"Looks that way. He told me to get it for him, or else."

"Quickly, the rest of your tale!"

Nash told him. Tukiphat went through the motions of tearing nonexistent hair. "I might have known! Should Bechard obtain the jewel, your plane will be overrun with demons, and your people enslaved or wiped out!"

"But . . . why . . . what . . ."

"Since Lerajie became their ruler, they have been incubating a plot to obtain more living space, as they put it. Bechard will bring his whole host in, body and soul, by means of the Shamir."

"Gosh! But my mag— I was told the Shamir only transports one at a time."

"Child of unwisdom, among demons the one is many and the many are one. 'Bechard' is but the name of a legion, all as alike as so many peas. But I will not burden your so-called mind with the metaphysics thereof. We must act quickly, if it be not already too late!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tukiphat bent over, extended a bony finger, and drew a circle in the earth. He added an ellipse, a couple of crosses, and a labarum; then sketched a smaller diagram tangent to the first. He did not seem perturbed by the fact that, because of the weeds, his pentacles lacked something of clarity.

"I conjure thee, Bechard, and constrain thee, in like manner, by the most holy names: Elohim, Adonai, Eloi, Agla, Samalbactai. Come without delay or evasion! Do thou obey me and fulfill my commands, by the nut and the moon! Come, Bechard!"

And there was the demon in the smaller pentacle, looking smaller than Nash remembered. Bechard was a little flickery around the edges, and there was something very peculiar about his manner.

"Wazzis?" muttered Bechard.

Tukiphat shouted: "Answer my questions truly and in a seemly manner, O Bechard, else I will torment thee with the holy words."

"Questions? Regret. Got a hang-over. Can't answer."

"Tagla in Oarios, Almoazin on Membrot!"

"Ouch!" said Bechard. Then, sulkily, "Don't know anything. Go peddle your papers."

"Sulphae, Gabots, and Zariatnatmik!"

"Ow! All right, you big bully. Ask away."

"Where is the Shamir?"

"Shush-shamir? Dunno. Told young gentleman to get. Lessee." Bechard moved his head, as if peering blearily. "*That* young gentleman! Ho, you, Prasper Nosh, where ish Samir?"

"Be silent!" snapped Tukiphat. Bechard sat down in the center of his pentacle and covered his face with his hands. Tukiphat turned a worried look on Nash. "I cannot destroy him, and I cannot release him. He will be dangerous unless translated back to the demoniac plane, and that will require a double exorcism. Not even I can be on two planes at once."

Bechard looked up and pointed a wobbly finger at Nash. "Young gentleman's maindun . . . mundane body. Die. In coma. Heh. Good joke on you."

"What?" yelled Nash.

"It is true," said Tukiphat. "Your mundane body, having now no tenant, is in coma and will soon die."

Nash began to dance with alarm. "Hey, can't you . . ."

"A matter of no importance, O Nash, compared with this. Interrupt me not. I must cerebrate . . ."

"Hey!" cried Nash. "Isn't your trouble that you've got to have an exorcist ready to catch Bechard when he reaches the mundane plane, and give him the heave-ho down to the demoniac plane?"

"True, but . . ."

"Well, what's wrong with me?"

"You! O worm who would be an eagle . . ."

"I mean it! You exorcise me back into my own body, and then send Bechard . . ."

"What, a mere . . . O boy, perhaps I misjudge you. It could be . . . but you are no exorcist! And, lacking the Shamir, I cannot send any material object with you. You could not remember the details of the spell without a writing."

"Sure I could! Remembering details is the one thing I *am* good at! I carry all my addresses and 'phone numbers in my head . . ."

"So be it, then!" Tukiphat rapidly dictated instructions for drawing the pentacles and pronouncing the exorcism that would pitch Bechard back to that dark region from which he had come.

"One more thing," said the genius. "As soon as you have disposed of Bechard, seek out your Alicia Woodson and instruct her to return to this plane at once with the Shamir, lest such a catastrophe threaten the harmony of the spheres again!"

"But," protested Nash, "I'm in love with the girl . . ."

"That, O youth, is your misfortune. It must be,

lest worse befall. Change not your mind, for I can conjure your spirit back hither as easily as Bechard's. And now, farewell. The grace of Adonai Elohim go with you . . ."

It seemed to Nash that Tukiphat had hardly begun the exorcism when he felt again that terrible rushing, falling sensation . . .

He was lying, dressed, on a rumpled bed. His mouth tasted like nothing in heaven or earth or the waters under the earth.

He blinked sticky eyelids, pulled himself up with cricks and twinges, and fumbled for his glasses.

Gosh, Bechard must have taken his body on a rare bender!

There was something he had to do—the exorcism!

He looked around his narrow room. Chalk—none. A pencil? Might; might not. Soap!

He drew the pentacles with a piece of soap and stood in the larger one, waiting.

He waited a long time, or so it seemed until he looked at the clock. It was quarter to ten; he had been waiting ten minutes. No doubt Tukiphat was allowing hm plenty of time to get ready. Did he remember the exorcism? Sure!

"Whassa idea? Mundane plane, astral plane, can't let a poor demon rest . . ."

There the spook was. Nash shouted: "I exorcise thee, Bechard, by the holy names . . ." He raced

through it in half the time it had taken Tukiphat to give it to him. Bechard went out like a match flame.

Nash drew a long breath. He felt his unshaven chin, and tried to raise Monty Stark on the telephone.

No answer. Monty would have left for school long before.

Nash looked distastefully at his rumpled suit, then at himself in the mirror. The face was pale and puffy; the eyes bloodshot. But it was at least his own face. He'd almost forgotten what it looked like.

He went downstairs, and sighted Robert S. Lanby at the cashier's window. "Hi, Bob!"

Lanby looked at him, without surprise but still a little oddly—in fact, with a suggestion of horror.

Then Nash remembered. "It's okay, Bob. I'm me again. Say, what happened to you?" He had observed that Lanby had a dark stain down the side of his face.

"I . . . uh . . . you better ask Monty. All I know is a girl that looked like Alice came in here just after I went on duty. She was wearing some sort of pajamas under her coat, and she was panting as if she'd run a mile, and she asked to see Monty. Said it was a life-and-death matter. I tried to explain that we don't let girls up to fellows' rooms in a well-regulated Y, and she should telephone. She claimed she didn't know how to use a telephone, and one thing led to another, and pretty soon she threw the inkwell at me. I had to change all my clothes. But, Prosper, what happened to *you?* How'd you get back . . ."

"Tell you all about it later." Nash chuckled. "Seen Monty around?"

"Oh, yeah. He came down and went into a session with this girl. Then they went out, and he came back. I think he went down to breakfast a little while ago . . ."

"This late?"

"Sure, today's Saturday. He doesn't go to work. But listen, how'd you get rid of . . ."

Nash waved his friend to silence, and started to go. He turned back. "How do you feel, Bob?"

"All right. Why?"

"Don't feel as if somebody'd split your skull with an ax?"

"Well, come to think of it, I did have a little stabbing headache a while ago. What's it all . . ."

"Tell you later." Nash hurried down to the cafeteria.

Montague Stark's eyes met his over the lip of a coffee cup. Stark put the cup down and looked with the same badly concealed aversion that Lanby had shown, until Nash gave him the same reassurance he had given Bob.

"Did it work?" asked Stark at once.

"You mean your astral army? I'll say it worked! That monster your new astral body rode was a humdinger."

"I thought it was pretty cute. After your lady friend—some girl, by the way—explained what was

what, I left her and went up to my room. I got out the old bottle, and just sat and imagined myself a super-duper hero . . ."

"Where is she?" demanded Nash.

"I put her up in a room at the Imperator, and told her to wait until . . ."

"Monty, wouldn't you be interested in going up to the astral plane to live? It's a swell place, full of the damndest incongruities."

"Me? No, sir! Not on your life! I'll be satisfied to do things like that in my imagination. . . . Hey, where are you going? I've got a million questions to ask . . ."

Nash was on his way, but as he reached the door to the street, he changed his mind. He went upstairs, shaved, took a swim and a sun-lamp treatment, and put on his best suit. Thank the Lord there were no more waxed mustache-spikes to come unraveled!

"Wait a minute," said Alicia. "You're . . . you're not . . . Prosper Nash himself?"

"That's me. Sorry if I'm not as impressive as I was up there."

"Just let me get used to you . . ."

As he told of his adventures since their parting, she warmed to the familiar voice and turn of phrase. Eventually she cut loose in her own tempestuous fashion, and generally behaved like an uninhibited

girl who has just learned that her lover is safe from grievous perils.

"We're not through yet, darling," he told her. He glanced toward Solomon's stone, gleaming softly with all the colors from red to violet from the top of the dresser.

When he explained their predicament, she really did break down. Nash tried to stem the flood, awkwardly but as well as he could.

"C—couldn't we send someone else?" she sobbed.

"Monty won't go, and I wouldn't trust anybody else. Also, the thing will only take one of us. But I'll tell you what. I don't suppose Tukiphat would mind a *little* delay, say about twenty-four hours. And there are lots of things we can do in that time . . ."

It was Sunday noon when Prosper Nash drifted into Monty Stark's cubicle, to find Stark half buried in a blizzard of Sunday newspaper sections.

" 'Lo, Prosper," said Stark. "Where's your Alicia? Gone back?"

"Yep."

"Thought so, from that gone look on your face. Why did she have to?"

Nash explained. Stark commiserated with him, but when he tried to pump Nash for astral information, Prosper yawned. "Later, pal. I'm worn out; going back to bed. It's funny, too, since it wasn't this body that I raised so much hell with."

"Not funny at all, considering what Bechard did with this body while it was his."

"What did he do?"

Stark rolled his eyes and whistled.

"So you won't talk, eh? Maybe it's just as well I don't know. Have I still got my job?"

"I *think* so."

Nash grumbled: "Bechard has all the fun, and all I get is the reputation and the hang-over." Then his eye lighted on the curious sight of a wastebasket stuffed full of books, many of them of such venerable appearance as to make such treatment seem sacrilege.

Nash bent over the basket and fingered the books. "'Arbatel,' 'The Heptameron,' 'The Kabbalah' . . . say, aren't these your books on magic?"

"Yeah. I'm throwing 'em out. After this I'll stick to amateur archeology for a hobby."

Nash picked up the wastebasket, books and all, and started for the door. "If you don't want 'em, I do. Maybe I'll never see Alicia again, but it won't be for not trying!" As he departed, his back straightened and the spring returned to his stride.