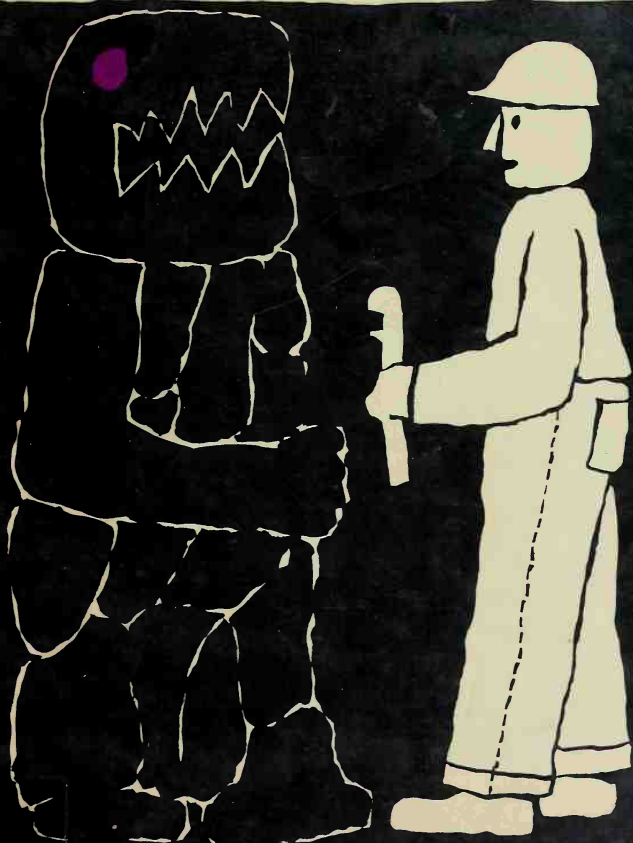


# ODD JOB #101

*And Other Future Crimes and Intrigues*



**RON GOULART**

# ODD JOB #101

*And Other Future Crimes and Intrigues*

**RON GOULART**

RON GOULART tickles us with more future crimes and irreverent intrigues in this lively successor to *What's Become of Screw-loose?*. Created by a master entertainer, this new collection of seven science fiction stories highlights the antics of androids, lizard men, and humans alike.

José Silvera, Ron Goulart's well-known free-lance writer, is featured in three of *Odd Job #101's* stories. Silvera continually gets himself in and out of bizarre situations on various planets while trying to collect past-due payments on writing assignments like "Sex and God Through Electricity." The situations of the four other stories are equally manic: the Nob Hill sex fiend of 1897 is devastated by an ad man accidentally transported back in time; ironic justice visits a guerilla warfare leader through the demise of "Patient 724"; and a sacred religious object is mysteriously stolen by telepathy during an anti-crime convention in "The Cybernetic Tabernacle Job."

Oddest of all seven stories is the 101st mystery of Odd Job, Inc., which involves

*(continued on back flap)*

(continued from front flap)

a Presidential kidnapping and a robot chimp. This last tale, like the others, taps the zaniness of a particular vein of science fiction Ron Goulart has made his own.

---

**RON GOULART** has published widely in science fiction and other magazines like *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and *Playboy*. His anthologies and novels include *What's Become of Screwloose?*, *The Day After Things Fell Apart*, and *The Gadget Man*.

Widely celebrated as a master storyteller, Ron Goulart is described by José Silvera as "...second only to myself as a free-lance writer."





# ODD JOB #101

Books by Ron Goulart

THE DAY AFTER THINGS FELL APART

BROKE DOWN ENGINE

THE SWORD SWALLOWER

THE FIRE EATER

GADGET MAN

WHAT'S BECOME OF SCREWLOOSE?



# ODD JOB

#101

*And  
Other Future Crimes  
and Intrigues*

---

**RON GOULART**

---

*Charles Scribner's Sons    New York*

Copyright © 1975 Ron Goulart

These stories are reprinted by permission.

"Passage To Murdstone," copyright © 1971 by Mercury Press, Inc.

"The Way Things Work," copyright © 1971 by Mercury Press, Inc.

"Varieties Of Religious Experience," copyright © 1973 by Mercury Press, Inc.

"Odd Job # 101," copyright © 1974 by Mercury Press, Inc.

The above are from *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

"Plumrose," copyright © 1963 by Ziff-Davis Publishing Co.

From *Fantastic*.

"The Cybernetic Tabernacle Job," copyright © 1972 by Lancer Books, Inc.

From *Infinity Three*.

"Concerning Patient 724," copyright © 1973 by Conde Nast Publications, Inc.

From *Analog*.

This book published simultaneously in the  
United States of America and in Canada—  
Copyright under the Berne Convention

All rights reserved. No part of this book  
may be reproduced in any form without the  
permission of Charles Scribner's Sons.

1 3 5 7 9 11 13 15 17 19 C/C 20 18 16 14 12 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America  
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 74-10853  
ISBN 0-684-13996-0

# CONTENTS

1. Passage to Murdstone	<i>1</i>
2. The Cybernetic Tabernacle Job	<i>29</i>
3. Regarding Patient 724	<i>55</i>
4. The Way Things Work	<i>79</i>
5. Plumrose	<i>103</i>
6. Varieties of Religious Experience	<i>125</i>
7. Odd Job #101	<i>147</i>



1

---

Passage  
to Murdstone





**T**HE LONG DARK girl in the black polyethylene lingerie asked Silvera, "Does it affect your powers of concentration, his nibbling on my foot like that?"

"No, Lissa," replied Jose Silvera. He moved back from her lounging chair, edged around one of the robot cameras in the stateroom, and looked out a porthole of the space liner. He was a tall, wide-shouldered man, dark-haired and in his early thirties.

"I noticed you weren't taking notes," said the long-haired Lissa. She drew up one tan leg, and the large blond actor who'd been kneeling at her feet looked up, blinking.

Silvera watched the dark silent space between planets. "What's significant I remember."

Lissa rubbed long fingers up along her inner thigh, tangling her fingertips in black lace. She shrugged. "I've never done an autobiography before; so I was only just wondering. Obviously, Joe, you're an old pro. Oh, stop for a minute, Rollo." She made her hand into a fist and socked the youthful actor on the top of his curly head.

Rollo O'Sorley ceased licking at the young actress' knee and stretched away from the white pseudo-leather sofa. "My art means a lot to me, Lissa. Acting to me is a way of life. It's a house and a home, a wife and little ones. So when a director I respect as much as I respect Almondega says we need about two hours more foreplay footage for *Buttocks*, I oblige. But then my ego is my ego and not yours."

Lissa gave a gentle snort, her pretty left cheek puckering.

She rolled more completely onto her back and thrust one bare foot up at his chest. "Oh, okay, fondle my ankle or something. Just so you don't distract Joe. You are being distracted, aren't you, Joe?"

A second robot motion picture camera rolled in front of Silvera and glided in for a close-up of Rollo nuzzling Lissa's ankle with his broad straight nose. "Not at all," replied Silvera. He came back to the girl's sofa. "Will it spoil the filming if I sit here?"

"You don't know Almondega's work, obviously," said Rollo as he nuzzled.

"I saw his *Hunkers* in an arthouse satellite orbiting Tarragon last fall," said Silvera, sitting.

"A writer," observed Rollo, kissing Lissa's instep, "even a professional hack, ought to have some sensitivity, Silvera. The credo of Almondega is . . . how shall I put it? . . . is whatever happens is art. Yes, whatever happens is art. You sit there and you are now part of art and part of Almondega's *Buttocks*."

"I should get paid actor's scale," said Silvera.

"You're being more than amply paid to assist Lissa in this silly autobiographical project," said Rollo. "Hold on, Lissa. I think this is a good place to take off my shirt. Yes, Silvera, \$5000 for merely giving shape to Lissa's rambling memoirs is my notion of a generous, more than generous, sum. Not to mention the fact Almondega threw in this first-class passage to Murdstone for free."

"I wasn't planning to go to Murdstone," said Silvera.

"When I was young," said Rollo, starting to unzip the front of his butterfly-patterned tunic, "and I'm not quite thirty now, I worked for a good deal less than \$5000. Of course, with me it's art."

Silvera noticed Lissa had placed her left foot in his lap.

Watching her wiggling toes, he said, "You were telling me about your life in the convent school."

Lissa put her tongue against her inner cheek, closing one long-lashed eye. "You know, Joe, in most of my six large-grossing Almondega films I've been teamed with pale blond types like Rollo here. I'm wondering. How'd you like to be written into *Buttocks*? A big dark fellow like you might be interesting."

Silvera shook his head. "Let's get on with your autobiography, Lissa. Barnum News Synd wants to start running the serial version of *Une Vie* early next month. As of today we haven't written you out of grade school yet."

Lissa crinkled her toes against Silvera's flat stomach. "You're right. We've got enough copy on my sensual awakening. I told you the anecdote about the bishop, didn't I?"

"I've got that, yes."

"Zipper is stuck," complained Rollo. He had his tunic bunched up around his midsection. "This hasn't happened to me since I did *Haunches* with Almondega two years ago. Darn." He was breathing heavily and a slight wheeze sounded in his chest.

The third silver robot camera in the cabin dollied up to watch and record Rollo's struggles with his zipper.

Lissa brought her long legs together and rested her palms on her bare stomach. "I wonder if my readers would be interested in my summer job on the girl scout rocket when I was fifteen. The navigator tried to seduce me. Maybe the incident is too close to the bishop anecdote. What do you think?"

"We can always use one more attempted seduction," Silvera told the pretty young girl.

"We're getting closer to the years when the attempts start succeeding more regularly," said Lissa, steepling her fingers

over her convex navel. She frowned at the three cameras now circling the wheezing Rollo. "Sometimes I think Almondega's method of filming is too demanding. You know? Cameras grinding on, recording hour after hour of everything you do." She sighed. "I suspect he has other, teenier cameras hidden all around, too. There's a sequence in *Hindquarters* I swear I never expected to see on the screen. Well, scenes like that account for my success, I guess. Later on, Joe, we'll put some speculations and reflections into my autobiography. My philosophy of life. If you think my readers want any philosophy."

"In moderation."

The door of the stateroom popped open, and a small large-faced man jumped in, calling out, "Cut!"

The three robot cameras pulled back from the panting Rollo, regrouping near the newly arrived Almondega. "Have I botched up the foreplay footage?" asked the wheezing Rollo.

"We have, I believe, enough," announced Almondega. "You seem to be tiring yourself, dear Rollo. Even youth, I believe, must rest now and again."

Rollo gave his director a brief negative look. "The business with the zipper might play well on the screen."

Almondega shook his large head. "I was watching it on the monitors in my stateroom, and I feel not. How is the autobiography of dear Lissa progressing, Silvera? I like the title. *Une Vie*. A provocative and, I believe, potentially saleable title."

"The title's the best of what we have so far," said Silvera.

Almondega placed a hand on Rollo's back. "Go to your stateroom and rest, Rollo. You young people must learn, as those of us who are in our middle years have, when to rest and relax."

Rollo rezippered his tunic. "Why are you suddenly so benevolent?"

Almondega's large eyebrows rose. "Does it show, Rollo? I am, I believe, highly elated. You can't imagine who I'm lunching with today. She turns out, completely unanticipated by me, to be a passenger on this very same luxury space flight to the planet Murdstone."

Lissa stretched out, putting both long legs across Silvera's lap. "Not Mrs. Searl again? I thought you agreed to drop your affair with her."

"The ex-Mrs. Searl," corrected Almondega.

Silvera lifted Lissa's legs and stood up suddenly. "Would she be any relation to Lurton Searl?"

"Ex-relation," said Almondega, grinning widely. "A very difficult man, Lurton Searl. As I learned during my past encounters with the former Mrs. Searl. In fact, the impetuous fellow has pursued her onto this very spaceship."

"Lurton Searl is on board?" asked Silvera.

Lissa hugged her knees again. "I didn't know you followed ladies' television, Joe. Are you actually a fan of Searl's Masked Glutton show?"

Silvera said, "I wrote three of Searl's Masked Glutton cookbooks. Ghosted them."

"My mother has all his books," said Lissa. "Which ones did you do?"

"Stew," said Silvera, striding toward the door. "*Dumplings* and *Squash*."

"I remember the last time I saw my mother she spoke of being especially fond of *Squash*," said Lissa. "She never dreamed you could have so much fun with only just squash."

Silvera said, "Searl still owes me the final \$3000 of my fee for those books."

## ODD JOB #101

Rollo had moved to the cabin door. "That's right. You have some sort of free-lance code about always getting paid, no matter how long it takes. I would think such a credo might get you in trouble."

"Often," said Silvera as the youthful actor left.

The uniformed steward grabbed at Silvera's arm with one white-gloved hand. "The drop holes are on strike, sir," he cautioned. "Temporarily."

Silvera stepped back from the edge of the drift tube entrance. "On strike?"

"Not the holes themselves, but the drop hole operators," explained the crimson-uniformed man. "Up here in first class you never actually see the operators, a pack of ill-kempt lizard men. They want to renegotiate the sick benefits clause in their contract to cover hives and roseola. Top-level talks have been going on around the clock, and full service should be returned shortly. I'm in the process of taping up a sign warning all first-class passengers to avoid the drop holes during this emergency and thus avoid a dangerous plummet."

"I never saw a lizard man with the hives."

"They feel there's always a first time," said the steward. "The captain suggests passengers use the belt stairs during this temporary labor dispute."

"I want to get to the main galley," Silvera told the brightly uniformed man. "The android valet in Lurton Searl's state-room tells me he's down there autographing utensils for the ship's cooking staff."

The steward chuckled. "For a man with a broken heart, Mr. Searl is being quite co-operative and jovial. Take Stairwell 26, sir."

At the white metal doorway to the spaceship's galley, a

shaggy, seven-foot-tall man in a pastry chef's hat and suit placed a giant floury hand against Silvera's chest. "Staff only," he said.

"I'm an associate of Mr. Searl's."

Behind the enormous pastry chef stretched a long narrow kitchen, rich with hanging copperware and robot equipment. Five cooks and chefs clustered near a tall lanky man who was etching his name across the bottom of a skillet with an electric knife. "Whoops," he said in his thin voice, "I almost didn't have enough room for the final 1." He smiled a small puckered smile and then happened to look toward the entrance. "Whoops. Jose Silvera. How are you, Jose?"

"Three thousand dollars," said Silvera, starting to push by the giant pastry chef.

"Whoops." Searl was not wearing his famous mask now, and his whole face showed pale.

The huge pastry chef commenced gripping Silvera. "You know this man, Mr. Searl?"

Searl puckered his mouth and swallowed. "Yes, he's a notorious industrial spy who specializes in stealing recipes. I suggest you have the captain put him in irons. Or at least lock him up a safe distance away from me."

"I'll take care . . ." began the pastry chef.

Silvera swung an elbow into the big shaggy man's stomach and then brought the flat of his palms against both sides of his neck.

The enormous chef hopped backwards, with a raspy bellow, wiping his flour-smeared hands on his striped apron. He got himself upright and swung a giant right at Silvera.

Silvera ducked under the blow and dived, crouching, through the galley doorway.

"Whoops," said Searl.

The head chef was a smooth, red-faced man, nearly as tall as

the pastry chef. He grabbed the autographed skillet from Searl and came stalking through the kitchen equipment, swinging the utensil. "We don't take kindly to those who violate the sanctity of the kitchen."

As he swung the heavy skillet, Silvera made a swooping jump to the left. "Either cash or a certified check," he called toward Searl.

"Jose," said the Masked Glutton, "I really had to do extensive rewriting on those three books you lent a hand on. For instance, in *Dumplings* you gave all the measurements in tablespoons instead of teaspoons."

Quite near to Silvera's back someone hooted, "Oh, ho!"

A giant shaggy hand, smelling of soy flour and pseudo-sugar, clamped itself over Silvera's mouth and chin while a similar hand clutched him in the groin.

The head chef leaped in, and his autographed skillet thunked down twice on the top of Silvera's skull.

"Call the authorities," suggested Searl as Silvera fell.

A round-headed man in a fuzzy plaid cape was feeling Silvera's head. "Every boulder that falls through a cottager's roof brings at least one mountain wild flower with it," he said.

Sitting up on the white infirmary table, Silvera blinked awake. "Inspector Ludd of the Murdstone Police."

"Yes," acknowledged the round-headed policeman. "I was remarking that your unfortunate encounter in the kitchens of this great space liner performed the small positive service of bringing us together once again." He reached up and poked again at the top of Silvera's head. "I've investigated sufficient blow-on-the-head cases to have become something of an expert. I'd say you were only mildly injured."



Silvera felt his head himself. "Are the ship's doctors on strike, too?"

Inspector Ludd shuffled back from the table. "You've picked up a nice suntan since we met on Murdstone during the Commando Killer case, Jose."

"I just finished ghosting a manifesto for the leader of a band of desert guerrillas on Tarragon. Why are you on this flight?"

"We've extradited a notorious telekinetic criminal. A rascal who specialized in teleporting women across state lines for immoral purposes. I'm escorting him back home to Murdstone," explained the inspector. "Careful you don't step on the nurse's aide."

Silvera looked down and noticed a broken android sprawled on the white floor. The android's head and chest had been battered in, and then a compartment in its side had been pried roughly open. "Who did this?"

"Sometimes life hands us the pieces of the jigsaw without giving us a look at the picture on the puzzle box," said the round-headed inspector. "The ship's captain, knowing something of my reputation, asked me to investigate this unfortunate incident. As yet, I know neither the why nor the who."

Silvera swung to the floor, wobbling toward the inspector and then getting his balance. "I was trying to collect a fee from a television chef."

"Once again your freelance philosophy has brought us together," said Ludd, nodding. "I was here when you were brought in, and I interceded to keep you from the brig."

"Searl owes me \$3000." Silvera knelt beside the ruined medical android. "Don't these medico-tech andys have a compartment here to keep patient records in?"

"Yes," said the inspector. "Perhaps whoever put an end to this poor mechanism's life wanted those records. As you can see, they've been, rather rudely, taken."

Massaging the back of his neck, Silvera said, "Doesn't look as though we'll be collaborating on this case." He stood and moved away from the ruined medical android. "I'm going to concentrate on writing the life of an actress named Lissa. And on collecting \$3000 from Lurton Searl."

"Streams commence in many locations but often meet in the same ocean," observed Inspector Ludd. "Give my compliments to Lissa. We confiscated one of her films in a recent raid back home on Murdstone. It was entitled *Dorsal Region*, and I thought her performance quite charming. It must be difficult to exude charm in some of those positions."

"You ought to see some of the positions we write the autobiography in." Silvera avoided a pool of machine oil and went to the infirmary exit.

"By the way," added the round-headed inspector. "I understand Mr. Searl has been persuaded to give one of his Masked Glutton cooking demonstrations for the passengers. He'll appear in the first-class passenger auditorium at three this afternoon, complete with mask. I noticed, in one of my strolls of the ship, that to reach the performer's entrance of the auditorium from the dressing rooms, one must pass along Corridor 22 for several hundred yards. Perhaps you might encounter Mr. Searl there a bit before three today."

"Perhaps," said Silvera.

Inspector Ludd went sliding across the dining room floor, studying the lunch crowd. He approached the first of a row of alcoves and looked in. "Excuse me, please," he said, bowing his round head for an instant. "The steward informed me Mr. Rollo O'Sorley would be lunching here with you, Mr. Almondega."

The large-faced director grinned. "There's been a last

minute, and highly pleasant, change. You're Inspector Ludd, aren't you? Yes. Let me introduce you to the former Mrs. Lurton Searl. Marianna, Inspector Ludd of Murdstone."

Marianna Searl was a small, tan woman of thirty-six. She had been sitting with her fingers pressed against the alcove's large view window, gazing out at the immensity of space. "Can you arrest people between planets, inspector?"

"Depending on the crime."

"My ex-husband is hounding me," she said, turning wide grey eyes toward Ludd. "He attempts to gain access to my stateroom. He makes passionate calls over the first-class intercom. He sends me baked goods with sentimental messages iced on top. He slips sample menus for future love feasts under my door."

Almondega clutched one of Marianna's hands. "I'll do something about Lurton, my dear Marianna. This is an affair of the heart, inspector, and not a police matter."

"With the heart in the driver's seat, the omnibus of life often turns into unexpected byways."

Almondega grinned once more. "Rollo is in Alcove 3."

Two alcoves down from the director, Ludd heard O'Sorley and Lissa. The young actress was saying, "Imagine making a fortune with a simple gimmick like that. Putting on a mask while you give recipes. Well, I suppose women like an element of mystery and romance, even in the kitchen. You know, Searl's probably made more putting on that little mask than I have taking off everything. Now he goes and hits Joe on the head with a pot."

O'Sorley said, "Silvera is the kind of fellow who invites attacks with pots. Anyway, it was a skillet in this instance, and I understand a chef, not the Masked Glutton, struck the actual blow."

## ODD JOB #101

"I hope Joe isn't going to be too groggy to continue my autobiography."

"Mr. Silvera, whom I've just left in his cabin, is in excellent condition," said Inspector Ludd, bowing into the alcove. "I am Inspector Ludd, attached to the police of Murdstone. Mr. O'Sorley, I understand you were one of the people who required some sort of medical aid earlier today."

The youthful blond actor broke a soy roll in half. "Well, yes. Why?"

"Something unusual has happened. I'd like to ask you a few questions."

Lissa rose from her chair. "We're just finishing, inspector. Why don't you sit down and talk right here. That is, if police regulations allow you to cross-examine suspects in dining alcoves."

"I'm not a suspect in anything, Lissa," said O'Sorley. "And Inspector Ludd isn't going to cross-examine. Lawyers do that."

"Now I am merely dropping pebbles down the well to see how much water splashes up into my listening ear."

"Very nicely put." Lissa patted the inspector's cheek. "I'm going to see if I can comfort Joe. It is okay to comfort him in his present condition, isn't it?"

"Perfectly." Inspector Ludd waited until the long lovely actress had departed and then turned to O'Sorley.

The tall masked man came around a bend in Corridor 22 and stopped. "Whoops," he said, touching knobby fingers to his full-face black metal mask.

"About the \$3000." Silvera was standing, hands on hips, in mid-corridor.

"Joe, I really ought to show you the sales figures on *Stew*," said the masked man. "Even with all those attractive three-

dimensional pop-up illustrations, the book's sales were, whoops, terribly low."

"My fee has nothing to do with sales." Silvera reached for the tall thin man.

The Masked Glutton dropped both hands to his sides, giving a wheezing sigh. "Joe, do you realize the expenses involved with being an interplanetary gourmet television chef? Why, during the last fiscal year alone, I spent well over \$3000 to send out autographed pots to my ladies."

Silvera took hold of the masked man's thin shoulder. "You're going to end up on the Culinary Writers of the Universe blacklist, Searl. Then you won't be able to hire any reputable ghosts."

The Masked Glutton twisted away from Silvera. "Joe, you've hit home, you Latin rogue. I don't want to get in Dutch with CWU, especially this year when they're planning to send out twenty thousand copies of *Mutton* as Christmas gifts." He slid a thin hand back into his hip pocket and drew forth a wallet. "Cash will satisfy you, won't it?"

Silvera let go and watched the masked man. "Yes."

"Let's see then. Whoops, that's only a \$100 bill. Ah, the rest are \$500s. One, two, three, four, five, six. There, \$3000. Oh, you may as well keep this extra \$100 for your trouble."

Silvera pocketed the six bills and handed the \$100 back. "Three thousand is what you owe me."

"Your code again," said the masked man, laughing behind the black metal. "Care to come in and watch my lecture and demonstration? I'm going to be featuring several of the recipes you helped write. Oh, and I'm fairly certain your latest customer, Lissa, is going to attend."

"Okay, but don't call on me to sample anything."

The Masked Glutton walked on toward the auditorium entrance. "You don't know what you're missing."

Silvera stayed in the corridor a moment longer, his eyes on the still blackness outside the portholes.

The Masked Glutton's wrist snapped twice over the kettle on the portable stove. "Whoops, not too much thyme." He set the spice cruet aside and reached for a bottle of wine. "Now, ladies, we want three generous cups of this full-bodied young red wine. So. One, two, three." After he measured out each cup, he flipped it into the kettle. "The real secret of this particular stew from the backwoods of Murdstone is the handful of dummler beans which we, whoops, fling into the pot."

Silvera turned from Lissa and frowned toward the stage of the small auditorium.

"Now, ladies," continued the Masked Glutton, "and you smattering of gentlemen, too, while our stew begins to simmer, let's sample some of the Martian fondue we began earlier." He wiped steam off the black surface of his metal face mask and scooped a chafing dish up from the top of his worktable. Inserting a fork holding a square of bread into the fondue mixture, he asked, "Who will be the first to sample this delight?" He sat himself on the edge of the low stage and studied the audience of some thirty passengers.

In the second row, arms folded and shoulders hunched, sat Almondega. "Cheap bits of business," he muttered. He was the only man, besides Silvera, in the audience.

"Whoops," said the masked man. "I think—don't you, ladies?—the most skeptical member of our little audience should be the first to be converted to the joys of interplanetary gourmet cooking. He came only to heckle me, but he may stay to enjoy the food." He dropped from the stage, cradling the

chafing dish. "A famous recipe for a famous talent. Here, Mr. Almondega."

The large-faced director turned away from the proffered square of dipped bread.

"It tastes best while still warm." The Masked Glutton thrust the fork toward Almondega's mouth.

"Don't be churlish," called out one of the older women in the audience. "Try it, for goodness sake."

"Okay, okay." Almondega made a chomping sound and caught the fondued bread off the fork.

"Delicious, isn't it?" asked the masked man, watching him chew. "Now, ladies, let's take another squint at our backwoods stew." He gave a knees-together jump and was back on stage.

Almondega swallowed, making an odd noise.

"Whoops, I've forgotten to add the bay leaves. Excuse me, ladies, and I'll fetch some." The Masked Glutton went bounding off into the wings.

Almondega stood up, his arms straight out at his sides. "I believe I've . . ." His head snapped back once and then fell against his chest. He toppled over.

Lissa said, "Jesus," and bolted out of the seat next to Silvera.

"Easy," he said, following her to the aisle and toward the fallen director.

A broad woman in a simulated-fur suit reached Almondega first. "Back, ladies. I'm a physician." She squatted down and touched the director. "Huh."

Lissa stopped beside the lady physician. "What's the matter with him?"

"Dead." The broad woman sniffed. "Poison."

Lissa turned toward the stage. "What did you give him, Searl?"

The kettle was still simmering on the portable stove, but the Masked Glutton had not returned to the stage.

## ODD JOB #101

Inspector Ludd came into the dressing room with his characteristic skating shuffle. He had his hands in the slash pockets of his loose plaid cape. "Arrows shot from different bows sometimes reach the same target," he said, smiling at Silvera.

"He was partially trussed up when I ran in," said Silvera, nodding at the unmasked Lurton Searl, who was seated on the floor with a coil of rope still entwined around his lanky legs.

"Partially? I was sufficiently tied for my tastes, Silvera." The gourmet chef tilted his head at Inspector Ludd. "Are you a physician? I was clouted on the head. Probably by this mercenary Silvera. See the lump?"

Ludd put his fingers to Searl's head. "Yes, a lump surely." To Silvera he said, "How long after the Masked Glutton left the stage did you reach here, Jose?"

"Three or four minutes. Searl seemed to be bound and gagged when I came in. I ran straight down the corridor after jumping up on the stage. By the way, Searl, your stew's burning."

"What stew?" Searl, who was in a suit of all-season underwear, shook himself up out of the ropes. "Do you have an alibi for the time of the assault, Silvera?"

"What's more important, Searl, is your alibi."

"Whoops, since when do I need an alibi for an attack on myself? What's he talking about, doctor?"

"I am Inspector Ludd of the Murdstone police." The round-headed inspector kicked at the floor dispozhole with one foot. He bent and retrieved a square of paper from the lip of the hole. "Fortunately the trash burners are on strike this afternoon. Do you use meskin in your cooking, Mr. Searl?"

"No, what is it?"

"A deadly vegetable poison, native to the planet Jaspar. I have here the label from a packet."



"Jaspar?" asked Silvera.

"This is of some significance to you, Jose?"

Silvera replied, "The Masked Glutton got his stew recipes mixed up out there. The ingredients he gave, especially the dummler beans, were for a Jaspar-style stew and not what he announced. Searl and I collaborated on his stew book; so I know."

"What Masked Glutton are you talking about?" Searl was on his feet and scowling.

"The thicker the sand the longer it takes to run through the hourglass," said Inspector Ludd. "For now, Mr. Searl, let me say only that some fifteen minutes ago three dozen people saw you murder your rival, Almondega."

"Whoops," said Searl.

The bandmaster dropped his baton and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, we are now beginning a work slowdown as a move to gain higher wages for members of the Interplanetary Dance Band Guild. We hope you'll bear with us in this honest effort to improve our lot and will not mind our playing only one number every fifteen minutes."

"If I'd known, I wouldn't have sat this last one out," said Lissa, who was dressed now in a noryl-vinyl sheath and sitting across a table from Silvera.

Silvera watched the dozen musicians on the bandstand set aside their instruments and begin tilting back in their chairs and chatting. From an inner pocket of his tunic he withdrew a notebook. "Maybe we'll progress more rapidly with *Une Vie* if I do take notes."

"I'm not sure I should be reliving happy memories with poor Almondega just dead and stretched out on a slab," said the lovely dark girl. "It is a slab, isn't it?"

"No, a drawer."

"Maybe I shouldn't even have come to this cocktail dance. But then I can't stay in mourning forever." She rested one slender hand on her noryl purse, her fingers drumming. "Do you think Almondega would understand?"

"I can't speak for him." Silvera turned to a fresh page in the notebook. "Myself, if I'm ever murdered by a masked gourmet chef using poisoned fondue, I'll have no objection to your going dancing the same afternoon."

"The dancing is probably not so bad," said Lissa. "I probably shouldn't drink, though. Out of respect for the dead?"

"Speaking for myself, I wouldn't object any more to drinking than to dancing, Lissa."

"What do you and Inspector Ludd think about the murder, Joe? Did somebody really impersonate Searl, or is he only trying to make it look that way? He was jealous of Almondega and his ex-wife."

"The Masked Glutton I met in Corridor 22 paid me the \$3000 I was owed without much objection," said Silvera. "Though Searl might do something uncharacteristic to establish the idea that it wasn't him behind the mask."

"Oh, you did get your money then?"

"Inspector Ludd has it right now and is checking for fingerprints," said Silvera. "Why don't we pick up the narrative of your life at your fifteenth year. You told me you went to the old actors' home to participate in a holiday show and . . ."

Lissa shook her head. "I remember a better anecdote from when I was still fourteen." She pulled the notebook from Silvera. "Let me write it down. I'm too embarrassed to tell it out loud."

A heavy-set man was standing directly in front of the

bandstand. "My doctor says I have to dance an hour a day for the exercise, schmucks," he shouted. "Not sit. You trying to kill me off? Come, strike up the band."

"Wait ten minutes," called the small bandleader.

"Fah." The heavy-set man ran closer to the stand, wheezing some, and grabbed the leader's baton. He snapped it over his knee.

"You shouldn't take our legitimate slowdown action this way, sir."

The heavy-set man caught the small bandleader by one short leg and pulled him from the stand, attempting thereafter to break the man's leg as he had the baton.

The rest of the bandsmen leaped in sequence from the stand and piled onto the heavy-set man and the leader. Patrons of the spaceship's lounge ran to watch and participate. The heavy-set man freed himself from the group and ran out an exit.

The lights in the dim lounge all went out.

"Darn," said Lissa. "I dropped your notebook, Joe. Wait, I'll fetch the thing. I'm good at finding stuff in the dark." Her chair made a skidding sound.

Suddenly their table gave off a great splintering crack and glass smashed. Silvera was on his feet and reaching for a dark shape showing to the right of Lissa's chair. Something round and metallic cracked against the side of his head, and Silvera tripped into Lissa's chair and fell over atop the lovely girl.

"I found it, Joe," said Lissa, close to his ear. "Why did you fall? And what was that noise?"

The illumination returned and Silvera looked around. There was no sign of the person who had hit him and tried for Lissa. "Somebody wanted to hit you on the head with a pipe."

Lissa came up beside him, looking at the ruined table. "If I'd been in the chair, my head would look like that tabletop. Where's my purse?"

## ODD JOB #101

"Gone," he said after scanning the floor. "What was in it?"

"Ninety-five dollars in cash, eight charge cards, and all kinds of keys. Keys to my stateroom and luggage and so on."

Silvera said, "The guy who attempted to do you in won't risk going to your stateroom now. Had you been knocked out, though, he'd have had time to search it."

"You know, I wonder if this ties in with poor dead Almondega."

"How?"

"He gave me a little reel of film to guard for him. I've got it in my stateroom safe. That's one of the keys in the purse."

"Let's check the safe."

"Can you open it without the key?"

"It's one of the things you learn in this business," he told her.

Inspector Ludd paced, in his skating fashion, around the captain's cabin as the short piece of film flickered to a conclusion. The bed-sheet screen showed an old man sitting in a massage chair in a metal-walled living room. The old man wheezed slightly now and again as the chair ran its multiple hands over him. The film ended. "Sometimes fate gives away free floor plans to the labyrinth," said the inspector.

The captain, a tall, sparse-haired man, said, "I was under the impression Almondega's films were a little more sensual. Or did I miss something?" He moved to the sheet tacked to his wall. "I'm sorry our robot projectionists are on strike today."

Inspector Ludd frowned across the room at Lissa and Silvera. "Do you recognize the old gentleman, Lissa? Or the room in which the film was made?"

The long lovely girl shook her head. "I can't shake the habit of holding hands in the movies," she said, letting go of Silvera

as the inspector turned up the lights. "Sorry, Inspector Ludd, I've never seen that old man before. I don't know where Almondegia took the pictures, though I'd guess he used one of his hidden cameras."

"I'll go ahead and put this sheet back on my bed then?" asked the captain, reaching for it.

"Thank you so much," murmured Ludd. "Jose?"

"The wheeze is familiar," replied Silvera.

"Learned to make a bed in the Space Marines." The captain removed the sheet from the wall and returned it to his bunk.

"Rollo O'Sorley." Lissa grabbed Silvera's hand back. "You're right, Joe. That was Rollo O'Sorley's wheeze."

The captain brought his watch up near his face. "You folks'll excuse me, but I'm going on strike now. The Interplanetary Brotherhood of Spaceship Captains has called a symbolic walkout for this hour." He ceased making his bed and marched to the door. "Don't worry. The token strike will only last three hours. I'll be back in command in time for the ball tonight." He left his cabin.

"What ball?" asked Silvera.

"The first-class passengers' Psychoencounter Ball," explained Lissa. "Therapeutic dancing is very popular on Murdstone, you know. The ship's social therapist has asked me to be the queen of tonight's ball. That means I'm to be the first one to take off my shoes."

Silvera turned to the still-pacing Inspector Ludd. "Have you questioned O'Sorley about the murder?"

Removing the film from the captain's small projector, the inspector said, "Mr. O'Sorley has disappeared."

Lissa let go of Silvera again and pressed her palms to her breasts. "Rollo's vanished?"

"There is no longer a Rollo O'Sorley aboard our ship." Ludd unrolled the film from the reel, bringing each frame up

## ODD JOB #101

close to his face. "I questioned Mr. O'Sorley earlier today in connection with the assault on the medical android. According to the ship's records, he was one of the three passengers treated by the machine before its accident. O'Sorley suffered a slight fall on the deck and was momentarily giddy. Against his will he was taken to the infirmary and examined. Mr. O'Sorley maintained he was playing badminton with one of the staff robots on the recreation deck at the time of the actual attack on the android."

Silvera asked, "His alibi didn't check?"

"During that particular hour, the robots were taking a temporary job action and no badminton was played. No tennis or handball, for that matter."

"Whose fingerprints did you find on the money I was given?"

Inspector Ludd, with film tangled round him, drew a folding of money from beneath his plaid cape. "Yours," he said, "and Lurton Searl's. Here, as my semiofficial associate in this case, you will look after this cash once again." He winked and flipped Silvera the \$3000.

Catching the money, Silvera said, "The Masked Glutton I encountered had the O'Sorley wheeze. I was expecting his fingerprints on this."

"What do you think the mechanical nurse might have found out about Rollo O'Sorley?" asked the inspector.

Silvera watched the frames of film unraveling between the inspector's fingers. "That's O'Sorley in the film. He's not really thirty at all. He's a seventy-year-old man. The medical android would have found that out during the examination. No matter what O'Sorley looks like on the outside, he's seventy-some on the inside."

"This old gentleman in Almondega's secret film is someone I have seen before," said the inspector. "He is an old actor

from the planet Jaspur who is a suspect in the murder four years ago of a one-time Chameleon Corps physician."

"Chameleon Corps?" said Lissa. "They're secret agents who can change shape, aren't they?"

"Their shape and even their fingerprints," replied the inspector. "O'Sorley must have been processed, illegally, by the doctor. Once he'd learned to change himself into a seeming youth, he did away with the helpful doctor."

"Actors," said Lissa. "They all want to make a comeback."

"Almondega's hidden cameras picked up this footage of O'Sorley when he was relaxing as himself," continued Inspector Ludd. "Almondega was no doubt blackmailing the now highly successful O'Sorley. Then O'Sorley impersonated the Masked Glutton, down to his fingerprints, to make everyone think Searl had killed Almondega in a moment of jealousy."

Lissa shifted in her chair. "So where is Rollo?"

"O'Sorley is by now aware I suspect him in the assault on the medical android and possibly even in the matter of Almondega," said Inspector Ludd. "I imagine he has assumed a new identity and will attempt to maintain it until we land on Murdstone and he can slip safely away."

Silvera said, "Suppose we insert a small tribute into the Psychoencounter Ball tonight. A tribute to Almondega."

"Would that really be in good taste?" asked the lovely Lissa.

"And announce Almondega's last film, a fragment he entrusted to Lissa, will be shown," resumed Silvera.

Inspector Ludd nodded and began to roll the film back on its spool.

From the ballroom projection booth Lissa's voice sounded dim and small. She was on a pedestal in the center of the ship's large dance floor, wearing a slit-front polyester ball-gown.

## ODD JOB #101

"The idea is, you know," she was saying into her silver hand-mike, "to have fun, get to know people, and lose our various neuroses. Statistics tell us you can expect to shed about one neurosis per dance. So you can see what a whole evening will do. At first, to break the ice, grab onto someone you'd like to dance with. Then, as you dance, start telling your partner what's wrong with him or her. Oh, and you'll feel much better if you yell that stuff. You know, things like, 'I can't stand that mole on your fat chin!' or 'You're a cold-hearted son of a bitch, aren't you?' Don't worry about not being able to hear the music over all the shouting and screaming because our orchestra leader assures me that he and the boys are really rested up after their little strike this afternoon and are going to play really loud. By the way, don't come up on the bandstand and ask for therapy. The orchestra isn't allowed by its union to practice therapy. No, you have to wait until one of the ship's several social therapists cuts in on you. Let us begin then by taking off our shoes, which has been shown to have a pronounced effect on our awareness of each other." She hopped on one long leg and tugged off a shoe. "Oh, and let's not forget we're going to stop midway in tonight's ball and pay tribute to a great fallen giant of the cinema. So don't get so involved and engaged you can't take a few minutes to look at Almondega's last film."

Inspector Ludd turned away from the window of the booth and began his slide-footed pacing. He held the small reel of film against his caped chest. Two large man-high robot projectors stood nearby. "Evil often befalls the man who gets into the trap along with the cheese," he murmured to himself.

The band started playing and the sound of a hundred shoes dropping drifted up to the small cool booth.

"Certainly exciting, isn't it?" asked the captain, stepping into the room.



"And a fitting tribute to a great film artist."

The sparse-haired captain strode nearer to the inspector. He started to speak, but a rattling wheeze came out of his mouth instead of words. "I really think it would be better for no one to see this film, inspector." From beneath his gold and white captain's tunic he drew a blaster pistol.

"Good evening, Mr. O'Sorley," acknowledged Ludd.

"Your trap has closed on you," said the spurious captain.

A large panel in the second robot projector swung open and knocked O'Sorley's pistol from his grasp. Silvera leaped from the gutted machine and grabbed the old actor. "You ought to do something about that wheeze." He got O'Sorley's arms locked behind him. "It gives you away every time."

"I know," panted O'Sorley. "Whenever I get excited, it shows up. I've had it since I was a kid, a long time." Gradually he let his face change away from that of the captain.

Inspector Ludd stepped forward and put manacles on the bent old actor.

Silvera left them and went downstairs to the ballroom to encounter Lissa.



# The Cybernetic Tabernacle Job



**D**ECKER unplugged the pianist and threw him clear across the silver-walled room. A metal-shaded lamp toppled over onto a loveseat when the android hit. The upright tin piano switched to automatic and resumed playing.

The lizard man receptionist said, "Next question. Color of eyes?"

"I'm in a hurry." Decker was a large, muscular man in his early thirties. "I'd prefer to avoid the formalities."

The receptionist said, "The Aluminum Madam isn't your usual whorehouse, sir. We believe in a complete prelim questioning, since that results in more satisfaction for everyone. Violence doesn't impress us."

Decker grimaced, then answered, "Blue."

"Which blue? Bluebell blue, cornflower blue, blue sky blue?"

Decker stepped over the piano-playing robot and grabbed up the receptionist. "Ice blue."

The green-toned lizard man twisted and wrote on the application form on his aluminum desk. "Ice blue. Color of hair?"

Decker tightened his grip on the green lizard man's lapels. "Look, I'm not a customer. I'm trying to find a friend of mine named Palma. I just arrived on your planet, on Barafunda, and they told me at Palma's apartment house he was over here."

The receptionist licked his green lips. "I'm afraid I can't tell you if he's here, sir."

Decker dropped the lizard back in his bronze chair. He

## ODD JOB #101

strode around the parlor of the bordello. He kicked the piano, asking, "Doesn't this play anything but ragtime?"

"It also plays waltzes, gavottes, military marches and folk melodies. What would you like to hear?"

"I'd like to hear nothing," he replied. "Look, my name is Decker. I'm not known for patience."

"Not *the* Decker? Interplanetary rogue and thief? What brings you to the Novato Territory, sir?"

"A job," answered Decker. "Now where's Palma?"

The lizard man punched keys on an iron filing box next to his desk. "Theft must be a fascinating profession, especially on a galactic scale. Let's see now. Yes, Palma is up on Floor Six."

"Can you get him down here or shall I go up and fetch him?"

"I think," said the lizard man, "it would be best if I buzzed for him. We can't have you getting impatient up there, too."

"Okay." Decker let his wide shoulders slump slightly and he sat on the edge of a loveseat. He'd come out to this planet to earn a half million dollars. That kind of money still made him anxious. It was a bad habit and Decker told himself he'd have to shake it.

Palma bent straight-legged and turned up the temperature of his thermal rug. He then moved around on the rug in a slow skating motion, bare-footed. "I can still touch my toes a hundred times in a row," he told Decker. "That's what good shape I'm in."

Decker paced in giant steps across Palma's living room. He frowned at the plump, curly-haired man. "This new job doesn't call for a toe toucher, Palma." He sat down impatiently in a leather Morris chair. "Ouch." He jumped back up and

## The Cybernetic Tabernacle Job

reached under the chair cushion, grabbing out a small microphone. "What's this?"

"Law Office mike," replied the plump Palma, touching his toes once.

"I thought you said we could talk here?"

"We can, Decker. Look underneath the Law Office mike."

Decker turned the device over. "A counter-bug?"

"Right, so feel free to talk," said Palma. "What's the new job, Decker? We haven't worked together since the Enormous Commando job on Murdstone. Another statue maybe?"

"No," replied Decker. "This one has religious overtones."

Palma blinked and came sliding suddenly across the rug. He grabbed the listening device out of Decker's big hand. "Look. Those crafty LO bastards have put an anti-bug on my counter-bug. We'll fix that." He fished a small magnetized silver-colored disk out of the pocket of his net jumpsuit and attached it to the bugging devices. "This anti-anti-bug should negate the whole works."

"You sure you've got all the law bugs spotted?"

"I'm sure." Palma cracked his plump toes. "The job?"

"What do you know about the Mechanistic Brotherhood?"

"They're one of the prominent religious orders here in the Novato Territory. Believers in the divinity of machinery. Their giant temple near Lake Novato is protected by every security device known to man. What about them?"

"I'm going to steal something out of the temple."

"That's sacrilege, isn't it?"

"It'll pay half a million dollars."

"Well, a worthwhile sacrilege."

Decker said, "I have a client back on the planet Barnum who'll pay a half million for an object called the Verdadero Brickbat."

Palma, who was still holding the composite of listening and anti-listening devices, dropped it. "Impossible," he said finally. "That's the Mechanistic Brotherhood's most prized relic. Do you know what it is?"

"A brick."

"Not any brick, Decker. This is the brick that felled their founder, some three hundred years ago. During a street riot somebody chucked the brick at Verdadero and knocked him senseless. There's hundreds of years of religious tradition connected with the Verdadero Brickbat."

"There's a half million connected with it, too."

"Who's willing to pay that kind of dough anyway?"

"The same collector who bought the Enormous Commando and the invisible nickel off us," said Decker. "He's a guy who loves to acquire rare one-of-a-kind things."

Palma asked, "Suppose we do get the brickbat. How you going to get it off Barafunda and back to Barnum?"

Impatiently Decker said, "My customer has made arrangements with a bootleg matter transmitter here in the territory. Soon as we have the brick we take it there and it gets sent to him. Then he sends us the half million in cash and it gets split up."

"The Verdadero Brickbat, huh?"

"How can we get inside the temple to case it?"

Palma shook his curly head. "You can't. Not unless you were a convert. They don't allow tourists," he said. "But, Decker, those brothers have got anti-burglary devices and mean black dogs and android police hounds programmed to go straight for your throat. They've got an outer fence of laser beams and behind that an old-fashioned electric fence and then a stone wall with broken glass on top. You cross all that and you still have to face a moat filled with quicklime. Everything runs on their own generators, too."



## The Cybernetic Tabernacle Job

Decker nodded. "Where exactly is the brickbat kept?"

"I'm not sure," said Palma.

Decker said, "We'll have to recruit an esper and a telek."

"A telekinetic heist expert?" Palma brightened, then shook his head. "But even a telek has to get inside there at least once, Decker. You know they can't move anything they haven't seen in person at least once."

"That's why we need the esper."

Palma glided, flatfooted, around on the warm rug for a moment. "I don't know, Decker. Things are particularly tight on this planet now, especially here in Novato Territory. You know there's a big anti-crime convention going on at the Novato Lakeshore Hotel. You heard about that. Even your old nemesis Lt. Seams of the Barnum Law Office is out here for that. And that Mrs. Cardwell, the new president of the Anti-Crime Federation of the Barnum Planets. Neither one of them is fond of you, especially after you took the Enormous Commando."

Decker nodded again and held up two fingers. He touched them in sequence, impatiently. "A telek and an esper. Quick."

Lt. Seams was listening to his elbow. The elbow was hollow and filled with miniature surveillance relay equipment. He listened in on a group of anarchists for a while, then watched a pornographic lizard film being shown down in the shacktown near the lake. Even when on another planet and conventioning, Seams liked to keep up with the underworld. He tuned in another report and then became so excited he thwacked himself in the nose with his false vinyl elbow. "Hey," he said aloud. "Decker's on Barafunda." Seams was a heavy, short-haired man of thirty-seven and he was sitting now at a table in the local Law Office employees' cafeteria.

A plainclotheswoman next to him stopped eating and asked, "Did you hurt your nose, Lt. Seams?"

"Decker," repeated the policeman. "Right here in Novato Territory."

Across the cafeteria table a second plainclotheswoman, younger and prettier, a blonde, asked, "You mean Decker the clever cracksman and elusive interplanetary thief?"

Lt. Seams put his elbow down and noticed the girl. "That Decker, yes."

"Is it true the Enormous Commando he stole weighed fifteen tons?"

"No, eleven tons."

"Still, that's pretty enormous," said the pretty blonde policewoman.

Lt. Seams massaged his chin. "He must be here to pull a job. What's he going to swipe?" Seams had been eating a soyloaf sandwich by himself until the news that the anti-bug in Palma's apartment had picked up a mention of Decker before being blocked.

The blonde suggested, "Something small."

Seams frowned over at her. "Why do you think so?"

"That's what I'd do," she replied. "I mean, he just recently stole something weighing fifteen tons and he figures you'll expect him to steal something else large. So while the Law Office is standing around guarding all the fifteen-ton objects of value in Novato Territory, Decker sneaks in and snatches something teeny. I would."

The other policewoman said, "Janey specializes in thinking like a criminal, Lt. Seams. Your nose is puffing up."

"It always does when I'm thinking."

Janey, the pretty blonde policewoman, said, "You're lucky you're here in our territory, Lt. Seams. We have the best

## The Cybernetic Tabernacle Job

crime labs and surveillance materials on the whole planet. You'll be able to scrutinize Decker's every move."

Seams snorted. "Not Decker. I've long since tried every kind of gadget on him."

He shifted his bulk on the cafeteria bench. "Miss," he observed to the blonde, "what I really need is a wild talent. Yes, exactly. Do you people have any precogs with the Law Office here?"

"Seers, you mean?"

"Guys who can look into the future," said Lt. Seams. "I think it's time to try one on Decker."

Janey said, "We have one precog, but he's home all this week with a bad headache. Oh, but we have a very nice black man. He goes into trances."

"Trances?"

The pretty Janey closed her eyes and put her hands stiff at her sides. "Like this, you know, and then he has visions. He's rated 87% accurate. His name is Sabu MacQuarrie."

"Get him," Seams said.

The pale-brown lizard man flipped his tail over the side of the slow-moving power boat and let it trail in the bright afternoon waters of the lake. "My, I don't know," he sighed to Decker.

Decker was watching the many-towered Mechanistic Brotherhood temple on the far side of the small lake. Its fences and metal dogs flickered harshly in the sunlight. Decker turned his narrowed eyes toward Palma, who was dozing at the steering keyboard. "This is the best telek you can get me?"

"It's the off season," said Palma, yawning. "The anti-crime convention has scared a lot of people off." He pointed at the

## ODD JOB #101

sprawling glass and metal shore hotel that they were passing.

Decker made a fist of one of his big hands and tapped the lizard man's knee. "Are you on this job or not, Yard?"

The fourth passenger in the rented pleasure boat was a fat, bearded man. He said now, "Yard is scared."

Yard pulled his dripping tail back into the boat. "No, it's not cowardice, Mercer. What bothers me is the religious implications." He stroked a scaly hand along his tail. "Telekinetic power, this special ability to will an object to move from one spot to another, is a gift. There's something mystical about it all."

"I'm offering you 10% of the take," put in Decker, impatient.

"Oh, very well. I'm in, I guess."

Mercer said, "Ask him to tell you about the governor's silverware."

Yard looked at his brown feet. "I dropped it, is all."

"Dropped it?" said Decker.

"He was teleporting a chest of silver we'd spotted at the governor's daughter's wedding reception," said the bearded Mercer. "Somewhere between the hotel there and our rendezvous spot Yard lost contact. So the silverware popped up, materialized, someplace else. Fortunately I was able to get an extrasensory hunch and located it under the floorboards at a homosexual roller-skating rink fifteen miles from here. I had to drag him there to look at it again before he could teleport it."

"I can't move anything I don't see first. So I know where it's sitting exactly," said Yard.

Decker nodded negatively at Palma. "This job is starting to smell sour."

"Yard had that screwup over two years ago," Palma assured him.

Yard said, "I really must have a look at the brick first."

## The Cybernetic Tabernacle Job

Decker pointed at Mercer. "Find out exactly where they keep the brickbat."

Mercer closed his small puffed eyes. "I'm concentrating. There, I see it. Nope, wrong brick. That's the fireplace in the vestry. Wait now, I'm seeing the right brick. Yes, it's in a glass box with gold encrusted doors. A tabernacle it's in. Underneath there's a silver plaque reading *Verdadero Brickbat*. I bet that little plaque itself is worth a few thousand."

"I won't be able to get the brickbat and the plaque at the same time," said the brown lizard man. "Telekinetic pilfering has specific and rigid rules. One object at a time."

Decker hit Yard once more on the knee. "We don't want the plaque."

Palma asked Mercer, "What room do you see that tabernacle in?"

"Just a second, I'm close up on the brickbat still. I'll pull back for a long shot. Over the door it says 'Shrine of the Cybernetic Tabernacle. Reserved for New Converts and Miracle Witnesses Only.'"

Decker told Yard, "Okay, this afternoon you and Palma go to the temple and tell the brothers you witnessed a miracle."

The lizard man rubbed his knee. "I hate to tell lies."

"What kind of miracle do we need?" Decker asked Palma.

"Something involving the divinity of machines," said the chubby man at the steering mechanism.

Decker said to Yard, "Tell them you couldn't walk until yesterday. Then when you were sitting in your kitchen you accidentally bumped into the refrigerator and it made a very strange sound. The next thing you knew you were up and walking."

Mercer opened his tiny eyes. "You've got part of the Verdadero legend mixed in there, Decker. Verdadero himself was cured of his stammer by his refrigerator."

## ODD JOB #101

"Stammering isn't the same as not walking," said Decker.

Yard said, "How about instead I was hungry and starving and a candy dispensing machine in a monorail station stopped me and gave me a pound of peanut brittle and saved my life?"

"That's too silly," said Palma.

"I like peanut brittle," said Yard. "I ought to be able to pick my own miracle."

Decker cut in, "Yard, you were crippled and your refrigerator cured you." He hit the lizard man again on the knee.

Yard said, "I don't know if I can walk now." He stood, swaying, and wiggled his leg. "I guess I'm okay."

"After you and Yard come out of the temple, Palma," said Decker, "go get a replica of the brickbat made and meet me down by the shore here at sundown."

"How soon before we get our money?" asked Mercer.

Decker gave them a shacktown address. "Be there at midnight and you'll get your cut," he told them.

Lt. Seams nudged the rigid black man with his vinyl elbow. "What is he now, asleep or in a trance?"

Janey, the lovely blonde policewoman, replied, "Sabu MacQuarrie informed me there's a fine line between napping and the trance state."

"Which side of the line is he on now?"

"I'd guess this is a trance, lieutenant. You'd best take notes from this point on."

"He would have to go into his trance on top of my temporary desk." Seams slid a hand gingerly under the stiff MacQuarrie, searching for a memo pad. His hand came out with a desk calendar. The Barnum law officer snorted, flung the calendar aside and reached under again.

## The Cybernetic Tabernacle Job

"I see, I see," murmured MacQuarrie.

"Wait till I get the damn notebook." This time Seams had it. Flipping to a blank page, he tugged an electric pencil from his pocket. "Okay, now."

"I see a splendid hotel."

"Splendid hotel. Got that."

"I see a splendid hotel."

"Yes, I got that."

"It is . . . it is the . . . Novato Lakeshore Hotel."

"The hotel where we're having the anti-crime convention?"

"I see an anti-crime convention in progress."

"Even Decker wouldn't dare try a caper at the hotel during our convention."

"I see a man. A big, devil-may-care, hell-for-leather sort of roguish man."

"Sounds like Decker," observed the lovely blonde Janey.

"This man is called . . . Decker. I see him stroll into the hotel. In his mind there is but a single thought."

"What thought?" demanded Lt. Seams.

"Theft."

"What's he going to try for?"

"I see . . ." Sabu MacQuarrie's eyes snapped open and he sat up. "Well, that was a nice trance." He yawned. "I trust I've been of service, sir."

"What's Decker going to swipe at the hotel?"

"Who?"

Janey put in, "He doesn't even remember what he views while in the trance, lieutenant."

"Go back under then and get a look at what Decker's stealing."

The black man smiled. "I only have one trance a day as a rule. This has been that trance."

"Okay, never mind," grumbled Seams. "We know Decker is going to hit during the convention. Sometime during the next two days. If your prognostication is worth a damn."

"I am 89% accurate, sir."

"Isn't it 87%?" asked Janey.

"New figures came in the beginning of this week," replied the seer, "and I went up two percentage points."

"Enough," said Lt. Seams. "I have to alert everybody. I'm going to have so many men waiting for Decker he won't be able to come within ten feet of that damn hotel without getting nabbed."

"What hotel?" asked MacQuarrie.

Decker, hidden away among the spikey shore bushes, unwrapped the fake brick. He carefully held the brick out toward Yard. "Okay, get yourself ready."

The lizard man frowned. "That doesn't look much like the brick we saw this afternoon."

Decker turned and gestured, impatiently, through the twilight at the chubby Palma. "You were there. I told you to get an authentic fake."

Palma, flat on his stomach on the sandy ground, replied, "I only had two hours to get it done, Decker, and besides the art forger I used never did a brick before."

Yard reached out and touched the brick with one scaley hand. "Perhaps I'm being finicky."

Decker gave a noncommittal grunt. The three of them were crouched in the darkening day, across the lake from the temple of the Mechanistic Brotherhood and up the shore from the convention hotel. "Okay, Yard. You concentrate and materialize this fake brick into the tabernacle and the real one out."

"This false brick in and the authentic Verdadero Brickbat



## The Cybernetic Tabernacle Job

out? Sounds simple enough." Yard turned away from Decker and grinned at Palma. "This should take, oh, about ten seconds. Your brick will get substituted for the real one and nobody will be the wiser. Probably."

"Probably?" echoed Decker.

"Here goes," said the lizard man.

Decker's big flat hand felt suddenly lighter. He saw the fake relic was gone. "Good," he said.

With brownish fists clenched Yard said, "And here comes the real brickbat."

All three of them were watching Decker's empty hand.

After a moment more Palma shifted position, saying, "Must be a good ten seconds by now."

Decker stood straight up in the oncoming darkness and made his open hand into an enormous fist. "It's more like a goddamn minute."

Yard ran his tongue along his lips. "Put your hand out again and I'll try to hit it."

Decker grabbed the lizard man up out of the protective scrub. "Where's the Verdadero Brickbat?"

"Well, it's not here."

Decker made an impatient noise.

"Nor is it any longer there."

Palma asked, "Not in the tabernacle. How do you know?"

Yard touched his sternum. "I have a feeling, is all."

Decker said, "Where do you feel it is, then?"

Yard shrugged. "I don't get those kind of feelings, Decker. For those kind of feelings you need Mercer again."

Decker gripped the lizard man once again. "You better not be trying to sell me out."

Yard's tongue flickered in his half open mouth and he swallowed hard. "I know better," he said. "Anyway, I wouldn't know how to fence a brick."

## ODD JOB #101

Letting him go, Decker said to Palma, "Take Yard with you and go see Mercer. Find out where the brickbat is. Call me in two hours and we'll meet. Good night." He made a final impatient gesture and strode off into the new night.

Mrs. Cardwell was a small, plump woman of eighty. She passed Lt. Seams a tray of soy crackers and near-cheese. "I want to whisper something in your ear," she said softly. "Don't react too violently, Lt. Seams, and spoil our cocktail party here in the lovely grand ballroom of the Novato Lakeshore Hotel."

The lieutenant snorted and rubbed at his pseudo-elbow. "What?" Beyond the lady president of the Anti-Crime Federation's head shone the darkening waters of the lake.

The old law enforcement expert took hold of Seams' ear and pulled his head nearer to hers. "I don't want any of our six hundred guests to hear. There's a poor murdered colored man behind that sofa over there."

"That's Sabu MacQuarrie."

"Ah, then you're already on top of the case."

"He's working for me, Mrs. Cardwell," said Seams. "He's only in a trance."

Mrs. Cardwell smiled, still holding the lieutenant's ear. "I'm pleased to see you've finally taken my advice about trying some of the more unconventional methods of crime control."

Seams said, "Now I'll tell you something. Decker is on this planet and in this territory."

Mrs. Cardwell let go. "Decker?"

"Yes. According to MacQuarrie, Decker is planning a heist at this very hotel."

"He's audacious enough," admitted Mrs. Cardwell. "What's the rascal after?"

## The Cybernetic Tabernacle Job

"My seer hasn't come up with that information as yet. I decided to give him a sleeping potion and make him try for another trance," explained Lt. Seams. "As you noted earlier there are six hundred guests here tonight instead of the invited five hundred."

"The usual gate crashers."

"No, a hundred of them are crack plainclothesmen and plainclotheswomen," said Seams with a pleased snort. "I've got another hundred crack police operatives spread throughout this place." His elbow suddenly gave off a low hum. "Excuse me, Mrs. Cardwell." Seams unfastened his cuff seam, rolled up his shirt sleeve and his tunic sleeve. He opened his elbow and took out his communication unit. "Lt. Seams here." After listening for a moment he growled and hung up. "Decker has struck at the temple of the Mechanistic Brotherhood."

"Are you certain?"

"They have just noticed that a spurious brick has been substituted for a priceless relic known as the Verdadero Brickbat."

Mrs. Cardwell nodded. "Yes, only Decker would attempt that."

"I'll round up my two hundred operatives and take them across to the temple at once," he said. "This is the last time I listen to a seer."

"Shall I let the poor man go on sleeping?" called Mrs. Cardwell.

Lt. Seams was already out of hearing range.

Decker didn't like the restaurant. "Why'd you pick this place?" he asked, taking a seat opposite Palma.

"I like the ambience," replied the dark, chubby man.

A light rain began to fall from the cloudy ceiling and

Decker covered his head with a large menu. "Weather Bureau Cafe," he said disdainfully.

"Wait until a thunderstorm." Palma grinned up into the gentle rain. "They have one every hour, right after the sandstorm."

"We won't be here in an hour," said Decker. Rain skittered off the slick menu on down onto his wide shoulders. "Did you locate Mercer again?"

Palma said, "Yes. Now the rain will slacken and we'll have a lovely rainbow."

"What did Mercer say?" Decker lowered his menu as the rain ceased.

"He located the brick, using all his extrasensory abilities," said Palma.

"Where is the damn thing?"

Palma was watching daisies and marigolds sprout up out of the floor of the restaurant. "Maybe we ought to forget it."

"Where?"

"Well, at the Lakeshore Hotel. On the sixth floor."

"Does Mercer see the exact location?"

Palma backed in his chair and plucked an artificial daisy. "Don't yell out loud when I tell you."

"I don't yell out loud."

"It's under Mrs. Cardwell's bed."

"What?"

"See, you yelled out loud."

"How'd the Verdadero Brickbat get under her bed?"

"I asked Yard that question," said Palma. "He says while we were crouching in the brush along the shore and chatting about the anti-crime convention he grew nervous and distraught. Which is why he couldn't get the brick all the way teleported to us."

## The Cybernetic Tabernacle Job

"I noticed that," cut in Decker. "So he was thinking about Mrs. Cardwell and the brick ended up there."

"He can't explain it, but every once in awhile something he's swiping goes astray. Like the governor's silverware."

Decker turned up his collar against the hurricane now blowing through the cafe. "We know where the brick is again. We'll get Yard to teleport it out."

"He says he can't. Unless he sees it where it lies."

"By the time I smuggle that lizard in to get a look under her bed I can steal the brick myself twice." Decker grew thoughtful. The wind carried his menu away and it went tumbling and flapping across the domed room and came to rest in a pool of rainwater next to a table where three men and a plump, redhaired woman were seated. "Who's that guy with the little beard?"

Palma turned. "Harry 'Thrill Kill' Arneson."

"Isn't he doing ten years in that prison satellite that orbits Murdstone?"

"He escaped."

"What's he doing here?"

"Promoting a book he wrote entitled *I Escaped From That Prison Satellite That Orbits Murdstone*. He's been autographing copies and making personal appearances in all the territories," explained the chubby Palma. "He's even going to give a speech tomorrow afternoon at the anti-crime convention."

"What would you say Harry 'Thrill Kill' Arneson weighs?"

"One-sixty or thereabouts."

"Can Yard lift that much weight telekinetically?"

"If he isn't nervous," said Palma. "There's no weight limit."

Decker nodded. "Kidnap Arneson. Within the next hour or so."

"Okay," said Palma.

## ODD JOB #101

"Then hire me an impostor, a shape-changer if possible. Who's available?"

"I can get Anmar."

"No, he's too addled. He's never sure who he is in the first place."

"I hear Eli Goss is in town. He's a deserter from the Chameleon Corps."

"Goss should do," said Decker. "Hire him. Get him to my hotel before ten tonight." Decker stood up from the table.

"Aren't you going to eat?"

"Yes, but indoors." Decker walked impatiently out of the place.

The elevator clock struck eleven as Decker, wearing a blond wig and tinted contact lenses and carrying a black satchel, escorted the spurious Harry Arneson onto the sixth floor of the Lakeshore Hotel. The noryl plastic wall of the corridor showed the night-dark lake speckled with the lights of the few last police launches heading for the temple of the Mechanistic Brotherhood.

At the door of Mrs. Cardwell's suite Eli Goss, now an accurate facsimile of the bearded Arneson, stopped and tapped three times.

A view-hole irised open and a wrinkle-bordered eye looked out through the thick door. "Is that Harry 'Thrill Kill' Arneson?" asked Mrs. Cardwell.

"Yes, Ma'am," answered Goss. "I have to see you about my lecture tomorrow."

"Who's that vaguely roguish-looking man with you?"

"My trusted physician, Dr. Leiningen."

"Are you ill?"

"Frankly, Ma'am, my claustrophobia has been acting up,"

## The Cybernetic Tabernacle Job

Goss told the eyehole. "I'd like to come in and discuss it with you."

"I really don't know."

"This man," said Decker, "shouldn't be standing around hotel corridors at this hour of the night."

"I don't want him collapsing before the talk tomorrow," said Mrs. Cardwell. "Very well, come in." Her eye left the hole and the door rattled, ratcheted and buzzed open.

Goss and Decker moved quickly into the large fur-trimmed living room of the president of the Anti-Crime Federation's suite. "Doc," said Goss, "this room isn't very big, is it?"

"Appears to be a standard size fur-trimmed luxury hotel living room to me, Harry," said Decker, quickly surveying every part of the room.

"Really? Then I must be having one of my spells." Goss made a broken whooping sound and tumbled to the floor.

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Cardwell jumped backward.

"One of his spells." Decker dropped his satchel and scooped up Goss. "Where's the bedroom?"

Mrs. Cardwell pointed one wrinkled hand toward an orange door. "But I already have a colored man in there."

"This is an emergency," said Decker with impatience. "Can't you ask him to get up for a while?"

"He's in a trance," explained Mrs. Cardwell. "His name is Sabu MacQuarrie and he's working for Lt. Seams of the Barnum Law Office. When the lieutenant rushed off to investigate a crime across the lake he left poor Mr. MacQuarrie behind. So I brought him up here, with police help."

"Police help?"

"A very lovely plainclotheswoman named Janey something or other. She lent a hand and then volunteered to sit with him until he's over it," said Mrs. Cardwell. "Would you know anything about trances, doctor?"

"As a matter of fact, I did my doctoral thesis on the topic of trances and related stupors." Decker spotted a green rubber sofa and plumped Goss down on it. "We'll leave Thrill Kill here while I examine your Mr. MacQuarrie. Meantime, Mrs. Cardwell, get some hot compresses ready." Decker strode to the orange door and knocked on it briskly. "This is Dr. Leiningen."

"Yes?" said the soft voice of the policewoman.

"My specialty is trances."

Janey opened the orange door, smiling expectantly at Decker. "He's not actually in a trance. Lt. Seams gave him a handful of sleeping tablets."

"Let me be the judge of that, miss."

The pretty blonde Janey offered, "I'll stand by to help you."

Decker wished he had more time in his life schedule for girls like this Janey. He shook his head. "I must be alone for the preliminary examination." Decker took her by one fair arm and eased her out into the living room.

"I have the oddest feeling I've met you before, doctor," the girl said as the door closed on her.

Locking himself in with the unconscious MacQuarrie, Decker ran to the bedside. He frowned at the rigid black man, then knelt and reached under the bed.

"I see . . . I see," muttered the sleeping MacQuarrie. "I see Decker . . ."

Decker had his big hand over the Verdadero Brickbat. He straightened up and watched the seer.

". . . he is stealing a quantity of gold."

"You're two jobs ahead of me." Decker popped the brick into his satchel and went back into the living room. "I'm afraid we'll have to send for the emergency squad, Mrs. Cardwell."

"For which man?"

"For poor MacQuarrie."



## The Cybernetic Tabernacle Job

Eli Goss sat up on the rubber sofa. "Where am I?"

"You'd better come to my office with me now, Thrill Kill," Decker said to Goss. "I believe I know what's ailing you."

"Shouldn't I talk to Mrs. Cardwell first?"

"Yes," said the old woman. "He did risk his health to tell me something."

Decker smiled. "I'll send him back to you within the hour."

Mrs. Cardwell touched her bosom. "Conventions always disorient me."

Decker helped Goss to his feet. "Stand by for the emergency squad, Mrs. Cardwell."

The lovely Janey crossed to the suite door. "I'm happy to have met you, doctor. Though I can't help thinking I've met you before. Perhaps we'll see each other again."

Decker nodded impatiently and he and Goss stepped out into the corridor.

The smell of lake scum was strong in the basement shack. "I didn't expect a thermal rug down here," said Palma, starting to take off his shoes.

Decker nudged him ahead. "Go on through the damn secret panel."

Behind a ramshackle section of the shanty wall was a small, clean room with a large illegal matter transmitter its only piece of furniture. Bent beside it was an old woman in a feather dress. "Your client, Mr.—"

"Keep his name out of this," Decker told her. He held the black satchel, though he'd shed the blond wig and the contact lenses.

"Mr. you-know-who then," resumed the old woman, "is impatient. It is now a full nine minutes past midnight, Barafunda time, and much later than that on Barnum."

"We had to wait while our shape-changer changed back to himself," explained Palma, nodding in greeting to the fat, small-eyed Mercer and the lizard man Yard, who were already in the concealed room. "He had a few moments when he couldn't remember who he really was, but he's okay now."

Eli Goss, now thin and freckled, came in after Decker and the hidden panel shut at his back. "I'm still guessing about the freckles."

Decker shoved a big hand into the satchel. "Here's the brickbat."

"Bless my soul," said the old woman. "In all my years in the clandestine matter transmitting dodge, in one location and another, I don't believe I've ever handled an authentic religious relic before."

"Send the thing off," ordered Decker.

The old woman took the brick from him and thrust it into a silver-lined cubicle in the man-high mechanism. "I've had it all set since well before midnight. There, it's on its way to Mr. you-know-who."

The complex silver and black transmitter quivered through all its height and breadth and the Verdadero Brickbat vanished. Fifteen seconds passed, then thirty. Finally, a full two minutes after the brick had gone, packets of Barnum currency appeared in the three-foot-square cubicle and kept tumbling out onto the clean metallic floor of the hidden room until a half million dollars had arrived.

"Okay, I'll divide it," said Decker, stooping.

The wall of the room crackled and melted away. Lt. Seams, Mrs. Cardwell, the lovely blonde Janey and six armed Law Office troopers were there.

"I just knew I recognized you," said Janey. "Fortunately I remembered soon enough for Mrs. Cardwell and I to trail you here and then summon help, Mr. Decker."

## The Cybernetic Tabernacle Job

Decker turned to Yard. "Teleport them out of here."

"Who?" asked the nervous lizard man.

Decker started to point and then he felt strange. His stomach gave a spiralling turn and he found he couldn't swallow.

He was standing alone now on a deserted open platform of a monorail station. Next to him was a peanut brittle vending machine. "Not me, them," he said impatiently.

Decker waited on the platform for ten minutes but no one else was teleported there, nor was the money. Lt. Seams must have taken action before anything else could happen.

When an automatic train came drifting in Decker looked once more around the night platform and then stepped aboard. He'd look up another of his contacts and see about getting himself smuggled off-planet.

"Damn it," he said, stepping into the warm fur-trimmed passenger car, "I could have used that half million dollars."

"Beg pardon?" asked the robot conductor.

Decker thought about kicking him, but didn't.



3

---

Regarding  
Patient 724



**T**HE ROBOTS were harder to fool than the lizards or the humans. When he heard an android rolling toward the door of his hospital room Bernie Rolfe went bounding across the pseudotile floor. He jumped into the air-cushion bed, slipping the three folded fifty-dollar bills under his far buttock.

Seated on the window sill, Associate Dr. Gennifer, an enormous human, gave a rumbling sigh as the money disappeared. "Darn it," he said, wiping jelly tart crumbs from his notched chin.

"Well, how are we this morning, Reverend Saboya?" asked the copper-colored android who wheeled into Rolfe's private room.

"It's three o'clock in the afternoon," replied Rolfe, who was pretending to be Reverend Francis Xavier Saboya.

The wheel-footed android rolled until he hit against Rolfe's soft bed. He then whanged his metallic side with a copper fist. "That's typical of the Gamela Territory Hospital," he said. "Build \$90,000 worth of ocular equipment into me, then skimp and stick in a \$15 watch." He made a sound like a vacuum cleaner sucking up pebbles. "Well, I hope you'll enjoy your stay with us, reverend. Now then, how long have you been blind?"

"I'm not blind," said Rolfe.

The android looked at a pixscreen built into the palm of his hand. "You'll find a handicap easier to live with if you face up to it. Look at me . . . oops, that's not the thing to say to a

blind man . . . consider me. I've learned to live with a cheap watch in my works."

"Calling Dr. Nork, calling Dr. Nork," said a grid mounted high in the pale blue room.

"My problem isn't blindness," said Rolfe. "I had myself admitted yesterday, at the suggestion of my bishop, because I've been seeing visions."

Fat Dr. Gennifer snorted, then reached out to take the last filbert torte off Rolfe's snack tray.

"Oh, that sort of vision problem." The android made a sound like an egg beater working on gravel. "Do you think you really need an oculist at all?"

"I don't know," replied Rolfe. "I'm entirely in your hands, you hospital people. This is all mostly my bishop's idea." He sat up, looking beyond the munching human doctor on the sill. The territorial hospital was triangular, built around a thick decorative jungle park. From his third-floor room in Ward 20 Rolfe could see, over the yellow and orange tree tops, the part of the hospital which must house Ward X. The place he had to get to.

"You probably aren't even color-blind?" asked the oculist android. "They just built a lot of really nice color-blind tests into my elbow. I could project a few on the wall."

"Dr. Mangus, report to Wilderness Therapy, Dr. Mangus, report to Wilderness Therapy."

Rolfe said, "My trouble is that while I was out fasting in the desert last week I had a vision. I witnessed a whole choir of angels up in the sky, singing hosannas."

"I don't know much about music," said the android. "Still that's an unusual thing to see, isn't it?"

"Such was my feeling," said Rolfe. "However, when I reported it to my bishop he was less than enthusiastic. He has an inordinate fear of bogus miracles and he suggested I come



here and have myself thoroughly tested before we make news of my vision public. He suspects it may simply be a hallucination."

Nodding his head, the android asked, "Are you still seeing these angels?"

"No," said Rolfe. "Though once in awhile I do spot a cherub or two, very small ones, floating around at the edge of things."

"Really? Do you see them clearly? They aren't fuzzy or blurred?"

"No, they seem quite sharp."

"Then you probably don't even need glasses."

"Dr. Gennifer, your chocolate cream balls are ready, Dr. Gennifer, your chocolate cream balls are ready."

Grunting himself up, the enormous associate doctor moved to a wall phone. "This is Dr. Gennifer, send those chocolate balls up the food chute to Room 302." He patted the android's shoulder on the way back to the sill. "I don't think you'll be needed any further on the reverend's case. Don't you have other calls to make?"

"Well, I have a couple of blind blues singers to comfort up in Ward 43," admitted the copper-colored android, rolling back from the bed on his small, slightly rattling footwheels. "Still, I'd hate for the Central Computer to get down on me for neglect of duty."

"I'll put in a good word for you." A two-foot-square door in the wall near the window made a hum. "Excuse me, this will be my pastry."

"Would you at least like some eye drops?" the android asked Rolfe. "I can squirt eye drops out of my little finger."

"No, thanks."

"Well, God bless you, reverend."

"Same to you."

When the android rolled out into the hall fat Dr. Gennifer was kneeling, puffing, at the low food chute opening. "You could have made up a more conventional fake malady," he told Rolfe.

"My experience has been that it's good to be a little audacious," said Rolfe. "Besides, we happened to have the reverend's identification packet."

The chute delivered a plate out to Gennifer. "This is sliced streusel roll you've sent up, you ninnies," he yelled into the open food hole. "Darn it."

Swinging out of bed, Rolfe asked, "What else have you found out about Lloyd McMaxon?"

"Did you hear me, you poops?" Dr. Gennifer was shouting into the chute through cupped hands. "Sliced streusel roll is sure not my idea of chocolate cream balls."

Rolfe nudged the squatting doctor with his toe. "You can go into the capital of Gamela Territory and buy \$150 worth of chocolate cream balls if you have some more to tell me about McMaxon."

Wheezing, the fat Gennifer pushed down on his enormous thighs and got himself upright. "No, I wouldn't blow the whole amount on chocolate cream balls. I'll probably spread it out over jelly doughnuts, cinnamon buns, macaroon jam slices, madeleines, brownies . . ."

Rolfe jabbed the doctor's arm with the fist holding the money. "Where have they got McMaxon?"

"He's in Ward X, as I suggested last night. Just a moment." Grunting, he knelt again. "I might as well eat this stupid streusel as long as they sent it." He withdrew the plate of sliced pastry, carried it to the wide, high windows.

"You're sure McMaxon isn't in the Prison Wing?"

"You paid me fifty bucks to find out where Lloyd McMaxon was. I did. They've got him over in Ward X."

"What room is he in?"

Biting into his nut-crust cake, Dr. Gennifer said, "I still haven't found that out. Remember I have sixty-four other patients to look after. Most of them aren't fakes like you and I really have to work my butt to the bone to handle my case load."

Rolfe hid the money away into a concealed pocket in his all-season shorts. "Do you have any idea why McMaxon isn't in with the other prisoners they're treating here?"

"Probably because they consider him a political criminal," said Dr. Gennifer. "It's mostly everyday crooks in the Prison Wing. This McMaxon belongs to those Uptown Commandos who plague the capital, doesn't he?"

"So I've heard." There was no need for the associate doctor to know Rolfe was with the UC himself.

Sucking his ring and middle fingers, Gennifer said, "They're using phenylalanine in this topping instead of real rich creamery butter, but even so the stuff isn't bad."

"What exactly is going on in Ward X?"

Gennifer wiped his free hand on his white pullover medical smock, then raised it with fingers outspread. "I don't have the clearance for that, to find out what they're up to over there. Some kind of government-funded project is all I know."

Rolfe asked, "They wouldn't be . . . interrogating him?"

"Heck no," the fat doctor assured him. "Our planet of Tarragon subscribes to the Barnum System Accords, after all. You're not allowed to go using sophisticated query equipment on a political prisoner anymore, even an alleged urban guerrilla like McMaxon." He made his little blue eyes go as wide as they could. "Are you afraid of what he'll say to somebody?"

Rolfe shook his head, pressing lean fingers against the paper money concealed in his shorts. "My reasons for talking to him don't have to concern you."

## ODD JOB #101

"So long as you assure me you don't mean to do him any harm."

"Of course I can assure you that," smiled Rolfe, who'd come into the Gamela Territory Hospital to kill McMaxon.

"Dr. Gennifer, wanted in the pastry kitchen, Dr. Gennifer wanted in the pastry kitchen."

"Maybe they can clear up the chocolate cream ball confusion." The enormous doctor started for the exit.

"Find out what room McMaxon is in," said Rolfe. "And how I can get to see him."

"I'll give it a try." The fat doctor held out his fat hand. "How about fifty bucks in front?"

"Okay, but get me some results by tomorrow."

Dr. Gennifer got the bill wadded into a tight trouser pocket just as Nurse Clumm came shuffling into the room. "You're doing fine, reverend," said the fat doctor from the doorway. "I'll drop in on you again tomorrow."

"Up and around, eh?" said Nurse Clumm. She was a ninety-two-year-old lizard woman cyborg. "Central Computer doesn't have you down for Up&Around yet, reverend. Pop back into bed."

Rolfe sat on the edge of the bed. "Ever work over in Ward X?"

"Couldn't tell you if I had," replied the old green-blue lizard woman. "Now let's get your pulse and temperature." She pressed his wrist with a scaly thumb.

"I thought maybe . . ."

"Open up," requested the nurse. She jabbed the forefinger of her metallic right arm into his mouth. There was an oral thermometer built into the finger.

Six of them ringed Lloyd McMaxon's wheelchair. Dr.

Trollope, the middle-aged neobiologist lizard man who headed the Anthropomorphic Tactics Center of the Gamela Territory Hospital; Surgeon General Sheldonmayer, the small, wrinkled-up human who had something to do with the territorial government; Combat Nurse Wordsmith, a lovely six-foot-tall blonde with an always-flushed face and three cat men in ill-fitting floor-length medical smocks.

By stretching, McMaxon, a plump, blond man of thirty, could see over their heads and watch the late afternoon sky from his tenth-floor window.

"Would you like to check the latest X-rays of your foot?" the brownish-green Dr. Trollope asked him. He had a sheaf of black pictures under his arm.

"No." McMaxon decided to look at Combat Nurse Wordsmith, who reminded him a little of Elena.

"You'll be on your feet again in no time," said the lovely blonde nurse.

Keeping his wrinkle-rimmed eyes aimed at his white boots, Surgeon General Sheldonmayer said, "Uh . . . what exactly does no time indicate? I mean . . . uh . . . how long before this fellow . . . uh . . . can go sweeping through Peralta Territory visiting doom on our prickchinking enemies, who even now . . ."

"We're all very happy about the way your foot is mending so nicely, Lloyd," said Dr. Trollope. "What's even better, your volunteer job for the Anthropomorphic Tactics Center is coming along at a much more rapid rate than we'd anticipated. I should say you'll be primed and ready in another few short days."

"Uh . . . ready to spread justly deserved destruction on our jiggleboned opponents across the border?"

"Yes, sir," the lizard doctor told the surgeon general. "Lloyd, I'd like you to meet some of the other chaps from

## ODD JOB #101

ATC. Here are Dr. Gowdy, Dr. Pagsilang and Dr. Tchin-Veblen. Come to take a friendly gander at you."

"How do you do," said McMaxon, automatically holding out his hand.

"Wait," cautioned the lizard. "Dr. Gowdy can shake your hand and so can Dr. Tchin-Veblen. Dr. Pagsilang, however, hasn't had his final booster."

"I'd just as well skip it, too," said the cat man in the middle of the trio of cat man doctors.

"That's what I said. Dr. Pagsilang can bypass."

"I'm Dr. Tchin-Veblen." The middle cat man rested his furry cheek against his shoulder so he could read his name tag. "Oh, I seem to have slipped into Dr. Pagsilang's robe by mistake. Here, Phil."

"That's okay, Burt, we can change back in the barracks wing," said the calico-colored Dr. Pagsilang.

"No, I don't like to wear other people's things. It makes me feel crawly." Dr. Tchin-Veblen began unzipping his long white smock.

Dr. Gowdy asked, "How did you break your foot, Mr. McMaxon?"

"Escaping," answered McMaxon.

"Mr. McMaxon is an urban terrorist," the lovely warm-looking nurse explained. "He and his fellow Uptown Commandos—correct me if I misinterpret your views in any way, Mr. McMaxon—believe in overthrowing our territorial government by force and violence and replacing it with a neosocialistic ruling committee. Is that about right so far?"

McMaxon nodded. "Yep."

"My zipper's stuck, Burt. Couldn't we forget about switching?"

"Not on your life. Come on, tug the thing."

"Mr. McMaxon's guerilla friends and he have been bomb-

ing government buildings, destroying central heating systems, derailling monorail trains, kidnapping key officials . . . anything else?"

"Assassinating policemen," added McMaxon. "And we have a hot lunch program for senior citizens."

The lovely nurse snapped her warm-looking fingers. "I forgot the most important part. The Uptown Commandos also commit robberies to finance their other works. It was while running away from one such that Mr. McMaxon fell and injured himself."

"Well, pull it off over your head then."

"Don't jerk at the hem, Burt. I don't care for people pawing my garments."

"You were subsequently captured then, Mr. McMaxon?"

"That's right, yes." McMaxon went along with all the UC rules, but he believed Bernie Rolfe, who was still on the supermarket copter pad when he tripped over the robot boxboy, could have come back for him. Well, maybe McMaxon was too critical of him because Rolfe had been seeing Elena just before she quit the movement.

"Don't pull so hard, Burt. Now you've got it crumpled and gathered around my throat and face. I might smother."

Dr. Gowdy gave McMaxon a tentative pat on the arm. "Considering your political viewpoint, I think it's terrific of you to volunteer to help the government this way."

"They promised to drop the charges against me if I did this," said McMaxon. "You may not know it but committing a robbery to aid a political cause is a crime punishable by death in our territory, especially during war time."

"Oh, really?"

Watching his white-booted toes, the surgeon general said, "Uh . . . if this fellow didn't play ball with us . . . uh . . . he'd be standing against a wall about now . . . uh . . .

## ODD JOB #101

waiting for blaster rifle beams to come sizzling at him and burn enormous gaping and fantastically painful holes into his person."

"Don't clutch like that, Burt. You're pulling out great tufts of hair."

"You should pay better attention to whose robe you go gadding about in."

Dr. Trollope took a step toward McMaxon. "Have you been having night sweats or stool problems, Lloyd?"

"No, sir."

"Uh . . . what difference does that make? . . . uh . . . I mean . . . uh . . . a compact and deadly human weapon like this fellow . . . uh . . . who cares about his bowel movements?"

"We're also trying to answer many questions which aren't of a military nature during these experiments," said the brown and green lizard.

"Okay, Burt, it's off. Here."

"We'll leave you now, Lloyd," said Dr. Trollope. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Well, you might see if I can have more vegetables at meals. I'm trying to give up meat."

"I'll take care of that," said the lovely combat nurse.

McMaxon nodded at all of them, then guided his chair over to the windows. He was at the pseudoglass, watching the tangle of decorative jungle far below, before the last doctor was out the door of Room 724.

The enormous Dr. Gennifer sat himself down on the edge of Rolfe's air-filled bed, causing Rolfe to rise up high. "I'm not much of an artist," said the fat doctor.



"Where were you yesterday?"

"Central Computer had you down for a day of fasting," replied Gennifer. "I don't like to be around for things like that." He unfolded the sheet of paper he'd pulled out of a side pocket in his medical tunic.

"Apparently the food chutes didn't know you weren't going to be stopping in here yesterday. They sent you a half dozen blueberry turnovers."

"Did you keep them?"

"In my bedside cabinet."

Chuffing off the bed, Gennifer bent, with a groan, and opened the low off-white cabinet. "I only see four."

"I ate two."

"That isn't right when you're supposed to be fasting."

"I'm not really sick at all, remember? I'm in here under false pretenses. My real purpose is to contact Lloyd McMaxon over in Ward X. I'm bribing you to help me."

"Don't keep reminding me of my venality." The enormous doctor grabbed a turnover with each hand.

"I'm reminding you of what I paid you to find out."

Tossing the paper to Rolfe, Gennifer said, "Have a look."

Rolfe brushed pastry flakes off the thin sheet of paper. It was a rough architectural plan. "Why do I want a drawing of the hospital food center?"

"See the red dot."

"It's marking the pastry kitchen. Damn it, Gennifer, can't you . . ."

"Wait now." The fat doctor located another drawing in another pocket. "This is the companion piece."

Rolfe studied the new sheet of paper. "This is the floor Ward X is on, huh?"

"Exactly. I had to spend over half of what you've given me

## ODD JOB #101

to get it," said Gennifer as he finished the first turnover. "Notice the little broken blue line I've put on both drawings. That's your route."

Rolfe followed the line with his middle finger. "From the food center to the pastry kitchen, then across to the wing over there by way of the food delivery ramp. From there . . ."

"Dr. Busino wanted in cryptobiosis, Dr. Busino wanted in cryptobiosis."

"From there up through the food chute to the Doctors' Mess on the tenth floor."

"The chutes over there are somewhat larger, so you'll have no trouble ascending."

"You've got me ending up in someplace labeled . . . I can't make out the word."

"Kennels."

"Kennels?"

"Where they keep the animals."

"Animals for what?"

Gennifer shook his head, scattering powdered sugar from his cheeks. "It would take a good deal more than the teenie weenie bribe you gave me to buy so much information, reverend. They must be using the animals for some of their experiments in X."

"Okay, so I pay you \$300 altogether and I end up in a dog kennel."

"They've got all kinds of animals there I think, not only dogs. Twice a day, or possibly thrice, a jitney-load of experimental animals goes into Ward X. The process is automatic, no live personnel involved. There is a late evening delivery of animals to be used the first thing the next morning. Should you be able to conceal yourself aboard that specific jitney you'll end up at the spot I've marked with a green cross."

"There's no green cross."

"Oh, that's right. I got called away to perform a knee operation before I finished annotating. Here, I'll show you." The enormous doctor poked at the floor plan. "There's the Pre-Test Room."

"You still don't know which room McMaxon is in?"

"There are only a dozen or so patients in all of Ward X, far as I've been able to find out. Even if you have to hunt and peck, it shouldn't take you all that long to nose him out."

"Okay," said Rolfe. "What do these orange blotches on the map signify?"

"Disregard those, it's some filling from an apricot horn," replied Gennifer. "But do trace the yellow line. There's your exit route. By way of the scrap disposal system."

"I'm supposed to get out with the garbage?"

"It's the best escape route I could arrange, unless you want to wait around all night in Pre-Test and ride back on the empty robot jitney after your talk with McMaxon."

After his talk with McMaxon Rolfe wanted to get out of the ward, out of the entire hospital, as soon as possible. The Penultimate Council of the Uptown Commandos had decided McMaxon, like his nitwit girlfriend Elena, wasn't reliable enough. He couldn't be left in the hands of the territorial government. Even if the government men were following the rules of the Barnum Accords, McMaxon might decide to give them information. Rolfe had told the council he might be able to get McMaxon out of the hospital and back to them, but they'd voted, 7 to 3, to take the simpler course. "I'll use the chute," said Rolfe.

Surgeon General Sheldonmayer was speaking to his boots. "Uh . . . far be it from me to violate the mollycoddling

## ODD JOB #101

conventions of the prickchinking Barnum Accords, Patient 724 . . . uh . . . can I call you Lloyd?"

McMaxon rolled himself a few feet back from the view. The noon glare, bouncing off the jungle park, made his plump pale face glow orange and yellow-green. "Sure, general." He and the wrinkled little military medical man were alone in his Ward X room.

"Uh . . . Lloyd, it would be a nice gesture if you'd tell us all you know about the rumpsplitter organization you're affiliated with . . . uh . . . names of all the membership, addresses, pixphone numbers . . . any fiendish plots they're cooking up."

Shaking his head, McMaxon said, "I have a certain loyalty to the Uptown Commandos, general, even though I'm going along with this experiment."

"Uh . . . I admire your pigheaded dedication to your cause, even though the cause is full of beans," said Sheldonmayer. "However . . . uh . . . I was hoping you'd change your mind when I made it . . . uh . . . crystal clear to you exactly what you can expect from those guerilla comrades of yours. Uh . . . as an example of how they treat their people . . . uh . . . look what they did to . . . uh . . . this Elena somebody-or-other." The wrinkled man held four small photos toward McMaxon.

"What?" He rolled across to take the little color pictures.

"Uh . . . these aren't the best photos I've ever seen. . . . The Territorial Police are trying out some reconditioned photo-journalism robots and . . . uh . . . the tugmutton things jiggle too much . . ."

McMaxon looked at the top picture, then tried to stand up on his broken foot. "Christ!" he said, stumbling and falling to his knees.

"I thought you'd given up slapping patients, Sheldonmayer," remarked Dr. Trollope as he came into the room.

"Uh . . . don't be a plugtail, doc." With McMaxon on the floor the surgeon general found he was looking directly into his eyes. He moved away.

The green-brown lizard physician strode quickly over to help McMaxon back into his wheelchair. "You mustn't be overanxious, Lloyd. Plenty of time to learn to walk again. Ah, what are these?" He took the photos as McMaxon, paler than ever, went slumping back into the bright metal frame. "I'd say a severe case of drowning. Notice the bloated condition of . . ."

"Yang!" McMaxon made his chair roll close to Sheldonmayer. "When did they find her?"

"Uh . . . yesterday afternoon."

"Where?"

"You . . . uh . . . should have studied the entire set of pics. There's one in there which, despite its fuzziness, gives you . . . uh . . . a good idea of the location."

"Yes, here we go." Dr. Trollope had shuffled through the pictures of the dead Elena. "You're right, Sheldonmayer, the quality of the photos isn't that good." He brought the picture close to his scaly face. "Yes, this is obviously the lagoon in the Generalissimo Vurmo Memorial Park."

"I thought it was simply the Generalissimo Vurmo Park," said tall, lovely Combat Nurse Wordsmith. She had a white rabbit under each arm.

"No, it's been the Generalissimo Vurmo Memorial Park since last Tuesday," said Dr. Trollope. "Tuesday being the day the generalissimo was assassinated."

"I should really keep more up on current events," sighed the warm-looking nurse. "What with my top secret duties here in Ward X and a full and well-rounded social life I . . ."

"Who killed her?" McMaxon asked the wrinkled surgeon

general. He knew Elena was to have gone to the park with Bernie Rolfe on the night she disappeared. Rolfe had told him she never showed up there. No one had seen her since.

"Uh . . . who do you think? . . . look at the way she's tied and at . . . uh . . . the marks on her neck . . . uh . . . a typical urban guerilla mode of killing."

"I hadn't noticed those neck marks or the ropes," said Dr. Trollope, going through the pictures of Elena's body once again. "You're right, Sheldonmayer. This complicates my original theory of simple drowning."

Nurse Wordsmith cleared her lovely throat. "What about the bunny rabbits, doctor?"

McMaxon was breathing slowly through his mouth. He frowned at the nurse. "I don't want any pets."

"These little rascals aren't pets, Lloyd," said the lizard doctor. "If you can postpone your business with Lloyd, Sheldonmayer, we'll get on with our test."

"Uh . . . yes. I'm as anxious as you are to . . . uh . . . unleash this human weapon on our enemies across the border."

"Lloyd," began Dr. Trollope, "we believe you're just about ready, after the initial series of treatments and tests, to function for us in a paramilitary capacity."

"You want to try me out on the rabbits?"

"Right you are." The lizard doctor beckoned the nurse nearer. "According to the last virulence rating on you, Lloyd, you are now a fully functioning carrier of our Anthropomorphic Tactics Centers' synthetic virus RS-036-Strain 14."

McMaxon said, "Anybody I touch gets it?"

"Uh . . . we intensely hope so . . ." The surgeon general reached out to nuzzle the nearest rabbit. "Uh . . . I confidently look forward to the day when we have a hundred or . . . uh . . . two hundred RS-036 carriers roaming the

countryside of Peralta Territory, spreading . . . uh . . . fatality and pestilence in their . . . uh . . . wake.”

“Touch one of the bunnies,” suggested pretty Nurse Wordsmith.

McMaxon hesitated.

“The first time is always the most difficult.” Dr. Trollope smiled with his thin scaly mouth.

“Here goes.” McMaxon missed the rabbit on the first grab and his hand smacked Nurse Wordsmith’s right breast. “Excuse me.”

“Don’t blush. It’s an understandable mistake. Here, I’ll hold this bunny out closer to you.”

McMaxon gingerly rubbed his palm along the soft furry back of the right-hand rabbit.

“In the case of human beings,” pointed out Dr. Trollope, “we expect a longer period of time before the disease takes effect. We can’t have them pitching forward the minute you shake hands or pat them on . . .”

The white rabbit screamed once, stiffened and died. It quickly turned an oily black color.

“Uh . . . very good.”

Nurse Wordsmith puckered her lips, looking for someplace to drop the dead rabbit. Its mate took advantage of the girl’s distraction to leap free of her grasp.

“Uh . . . the cunning fellow is making a break,” cried the wrinkled little surgeon general, zigzagging around the room after the hopping rabbit.

“Toss that one in the dispozhole under the bed,” suggested Dr. Trollope. He had his scaly hands locked behind his back and was chuckling happily. “Our RS-036 works even better than I anticipated. I can hardly wait until we smuggle you across into Peralta Territory for some field tests.”

"On people?"

"That was part of our agreement, Lloyd," the lizard doctor reminded him. "You know, we all have to do things we don't think we like. Why, not a day goes by . . ."

"Uh . . . the little jigger's got out into the corridor." Surgeon General Sheldonmayer dived out the partially open door of Room 724 after the leaping lab rabbit.

"Shall I fetch the frogs next?" asked the lovely nurse.

Dr. Trollope scratched his chin, making a dry raspy sound. "Let's bypass the frogs and get right to the dogs."

"I have to kill dogs, too?"

"Only two or three."

"What kind of dogs?"

"I don't actually know. Do you, Nurse Wordsmith?"

"A cocker spaniel and two Venusian huskies."

McMaxon said, "I had a cocker spaniel named Sparky when I was a kid. He ran off after an ice-cream-vending robot and we never saw him again."

"It's unlikely this is the same cocker. And, as I was just saying, we all have to . . ."

"I caught him!" The wrinkled little Sheldonmayer trotted back into the room, clutching the white rabbit by the ears.

Rolfe arrived in the Doctors' Mess smelling of nut bars and petits fours. He'd had to crouch in a pastry kitchen storage cabinet for an hour before the associate pastry chef Dr. Gennifer had bribed thought it was safe for Rolfe to make his way across the food ramp. It took Rolfe ten minutes to climb up the metallic ropes dangling in the narrow shadowy chute.

He caught the edge of the delivery slot, it was marked 10 on the chute side, and eased its sliding panel open a half inch.

He heard crunching in the dim room beyond.



"Uh . . . I hate going into the capital for those Junta press conferences . . . uh . . . it's so prickchinking tedious. . . . By the . . . uh . . . time an eight-man junta explains itself . . . uh . . . hours elapse," a faint tired voice was saying.

"I kept your tray on the hot plate, sir," said a robot serving boy.

"Uh . . ."

Hanging in the food chute, Rolfe waited. It sounded as though the man with the weary voice was munching crackers, meaning he was probably only on the soup course.

"Uh . . . I don't suppose Nurse Wordsmith is still up at this hour . . . uh . . . must be close to midnight."

"Only twenty past eleven, sir," replied the serving mechanism. "I believe the young lady flew into the capital to attend a masked ball at the Department of Agriculture. I saw her going toward the descend chute two hours ago dressed as a sack of organically grown wheat and wearing a domino mask."

Carefully Rolfe shifted his grip. He was holding to a cable with his left hand and to the delivery opening rim with his right. Someone had spilled soy-mayonnaise and for an instant his right hand went sluicing across the edge of the opening.

He hung there in the food-scented dark for twenty-five minutes, flexing and shifting every few minutes.

"How about another one of these babas au rhum, sir?"

"Uh . . . too many babas and I . . . uh . . . get a pain."

"You ought to see a doctor."

Five more minutes passed, then the tired man left the dining room.

The robot cleaned up, turned out the last of the overhead light strips and shuffled out.

Rolfe waited a full minute longer before opening the panel full wide and swinging into the large darkened room. He dropped to the long serving table below the opening. His foot

## ODD JOB #101

squished on something soft and spongy, which he figured must be a baba au rhum.

He jumped to the floor, edged across the dining room, listening. From far off came the noise of a robot falling down. There was no other sound.

Rolfe had gone over his plans again while hanging in the food chute. Once he found McMaxon he had to quickly give him the impression he'd come to get him out of there. Be friendly and then, when McMaxon was off guard, use the coil of plastic cord he'd swiped back down in the second-floor supply closet. With Elena it had been simple because she'd believed him to be interested in her. Meeting him in the park that night had seemed romantic to her. Well, there shouldn't be any trouble convincing McMaxon they were still friends, comrades in arms.

As he was about to leave, Rolfe noticed a side door marked Meal Co-ordination. He worked the door open. The compact computer built into the wall was a lowgrade one, simple-minded, and it told him what he wanted to know without any protest. Lloyd McMaxon was on a vegetable diet, which he was served at 6:00, 12:00 and 5:00. He was in Room 724.

The animal jitney was on automatic. Rolfe found it sitting in the kennel area, already loaded with the five animals scheduled to go into Ward X. Rolfe had brought a meat patty and some synthcarrots in his pocket, but the animals in the trunk-size jitney wagon were all sleeping a drugged sleep.

The lock on the barred rear door was simple to open. Rolfe was still getting himself huddled in a corner, covered with two shaggy albino squirrels and a long-haired goat, when the jitney made a clacking sound and commenced to roll.

It rolled by a human guard who was asleep at the force screen entrance to Ward X proper. The jitney automatically broke the invisible screen, which ceased its low sizzling for the

ten seconds it took the wagon to roll across the wide threshold. The guard did not awaken.

Once in the dark Pre-Test Room Rolfe nudged the snoring goat off, slipped out of the cage.

The corridor which held rooms 721-726 was empty and silent, except for one hanging speaker grid which was making a soft, high-pitched clucking.

Rolfe, running on tiptoe, headed for the door of 724. He listened at the door, then tapped gently and went in.

"Who is it?"

This was McMaxon all right, sitting up in his bed in the moonlit room's center. "It's me, Lloyd. It's Bernie."

"Bernie Rolfe?"

"What other Bernie do you know who'd go through all this to get you out of here?"

McMaxon didn't answer.

Closing the door at his back, Rolfe eased closer. "I know you may be a little annoyed with me, Lloyd. For leaving you at the market. You know, though, what the Uptown Commandos feel about such situations."

"Sure, I know."

"Everything is going to work out now," said Rolfe. "Because here I am. We'll get you out of here with no trouble."

"I appreciate that, Bernie."

With his left hand, the one farthest from McMaxon, Rolfe reached out the looped cord. "I'm glad you're in such good shape, Lloyd. I'm glad you're reacting this way. I had a moment when I thought maybe . . ."

"We weren't still friends?"

"Right," said Rolfe. "But we are still friends, aren't we?"

"Sure, we are," said McMaxon in the moonlit darkness.

"Let's shake hands on it, Bernie."



# 4

---

## The Way Things Work



**T**HE TELEPHONE had pink eyes and bunny ears. Jose Silvera jiggled it again, punching at the number keys concealed among the vinyl whiskers. The pixscreen in the bunny phone's stomach flashed on once more, and the giant switchboard teddy bear android appeared, saying, "You've already had your phone-a-fairy-tale for today, little boy. Please don't be greedy. Hang up real quick or I'll have to, really, tell Doc Wimby on you."

Silvera, a large wide-shouldered man in his early thirties, dropped the bunny phone back on the pumpkin-shaped phone table. "I'm not a little boy. I'm Jose Silvera, a free-lance writer, and I'm here at Doc Wimby's Mechanics Hill School to ghostwrite a series of educational adventure books for children. Right now I'm trying to get a call through to Abandoned City No. 14, to a Miss Willa de Aragon, a lovely and talented writer whom I met recently on the planet Murdstone. It was she, in fact, who held this ghostwriting job here on Jasper prior to my arrival. Doc Wimby says she gave up the position quite abruptly to go live in an urban commune some hundred miles from here. The phone number of her commune is RAbuja 6-8091."

The mechanical teddy bear sighed. "Oh, very well, you naughty little fellow. Just once more. But don't you snitch to Doc Wimby that I'm spoiling you rotten."

The screen blurred and then an unclish-looking mechanism showed. "Dial-a-fairy-tale No. 106. Brought to you free of charge by Doc Wimby's highly thought-of Mechanics Hill School, grades 1-6 inclusive. The Sleeping Beauty. Once upon

a time there lived a king and a queen, who lacked but one thing on earth to make them entirely happy. The king was young, handsome and wealthy; the queen had a nature as good and gentle as . . .”

Silvera hung up by putting the speaker back in the bunny phone’s left ear. He got out of the swan boat chair he’d been on the edge of and walked around the room. It was bright noon outside the heart-shaped windows, and he could see tall green trees and rolling hills beyond the rows of fun cottages that immediately surrounded him. He wandered by the pink talk-typewriter Doc Wimby had issued him and bent to look at the unfinished page of the chapter he’d been working on.

“ABC, ABC,” said the smooth pink typewriter. “Wouldn’t it be fun to learn the alphabet, boys and girls? And what do you think comes first ABC, ABC. Do you think you can repeat that?”

“I don’t know,” said Silvera. “What does it pay?” He unplugged the typing machine and moved toward the lace-trimmed doorway.

The bunny phone rang. “This is the phone, boys and girls. It rings like this and when it does it brings you all kinds of news and important messages. Phone. P-h-o-n-e.”

Silvera grabbed the speaker out of its ear. “Yes?”

On the screen was a serious-looking and quite long man in a one-piece white suit. He was wearing pale-yellow contact lenses and smoking soy tobacco in a clay pipe. “Well, good morning, Jose. Had your lunch yet?”

“No,” answered Silvera. “How do I make an outside call, Doc Wimby?”

Wimby smiled seriously. “Well, Jose, I don’t know if you can. I’m awfully sorry about our being so cramped and having to put you up in one of our first-grader dorm cottages. But it should be fun. We call them fun cottages.”



## The Way Things Work

"Yes, I know," said Silvera. "I spent two hours with one of your publicity computers last night. It introduced me to all sorts of other mechanisms and computers. I know the history of your school, its aims and enrollments. I even know all the floor plans. Including that of the underground wing."

Doc Wimby put in, "There's no such thing as an underground wing here, Jose. The computer who told you that was teasing you. For fun. Which machine was it?"

"I can't recall," said Silvera. "About that outside call?"

"Gosh, Jose. We don't like to encourage our grade 1-ers to call outside. So all the phones are fixed to prevent that. If your call is darned important you can hop over to the teachers' compound. They have swell phones over there. Real grown-up."

"I want to get in touch with Miss de Aragon," said Silvera. "When my agents got me this assignment, they mentioned she'd had it earlier and left quite abruptly."

"Yes, quite abruptly. That's right, you know the young lady, huh?"

"I do, yes. I understand she's run off to join a commune."

"She has. Right in the middle of Chapter 6 of *The Machinery Twins Visit A Dynamo*," said Doc Wimby, still smiling seriously. "As to the purpose of my ringing you up, Jose. I wanted to tell you how pleased I am with the work you've done in the two days you've been here. Imagine your finishing up two books in the series in as many days. Our book division is such an important part of our operation. I'm terribly glad we have someone of your ability. As you may know, we paid Miss de Aragon only \$1500 per Machinery Twins book. I think you're really going to be worth every single darn penny of the extra \$500 per book your agents demanded. Those scenes with the drop forge are absolutely brilliant. Yet educational. Which is our aim in our Mechanics Hill School

book division. We show our young readers the way things work, but we entertain them along the way."

Silvera said, "And you're certain Miss de Aragon is living in Abandoned City No. 14?"

"Golly, yes. Far as I know," answered the long, serious owner of the school. "Oh, one more thing, Jose. Should your work load allow, we'd like you to drop in at the ball tonight."

"Ball?"

"Yes, this is Saturday. Gosh, you've probably been wrestling the typewriter so hot and heavy you've lost all track of time. Tonight's our big Third Grade Graduation Ball. There'll be grownups as well. And fun."

Silvera nodded. "If I finish *The Machinery Twins Visit A Hot Dog Factory* today, I'd like to start on *The Machinery Twins Visit A Boat Yard*."

"Another book, another \$2000, huh?" said Doc Wimby. "Just be sure you leave some time in your schedule for fun. And have a nice lunch." He left the phone screen.

Over beside the rocking horse bed, a fallen-over white-enameled android said, "See, see. You hear what Doc Wimby told you, you bad boy?"

Silvera seamed up his tunic and said, "I'll be over at the teachers' compound."

"Knock a servomechanism on his keaster just for trying to feed you a nice bowl of soymush and three chocolate-flavored funstix," said the fallen waiter android. "You jumbled up all my insides with that kick, buster. Most kids in Rabuja Territory like to be dandled on a knee and spoon-fed. What's the good of having nicely set-up parents if you can't have a few luxuries? Um. I think I've got mush all in my parabolic reflector and pseudo-honey is dripping down into my tension springs."

## The Way Things Work

"Look to it as a learning experience." Silvera left the cottage.

The tall naked blonde girl said, "Jose Silvera. What a coincidence. There was a priest denouncing you on television only a few moments ago."

"Oh, so?"

"By the way, I'm J. Joanna Hopter. In case you forgot the introductions that were made during your quick hour through the school the other day. I teach 1 to 10."

"Ages one to ten?" asked Silvera, who was standing on the threshold of her cottage. The low realwood house was just inside the gate of the teachers' compound. Silvera had stopped at the first cottage in his quest for a working phone. There was steam pouring out of the cottage, swirling around the tan girl.

"No, numbers 1 to 10. I handle recognitions in your nursery division." She reached back into the thick mist. "I make use of a lot of puppets. Puppets have been proven highly effective in teaching number comprehension to children in the three-year-old range and possessing a middle- to upper-middle-class background and upbringing." She slipped a hand puppet on each hand and held them up level with her breasts. "Here are One the Bunny and Three the Bee."

Silvera pointed at the steam. "Before I ask about what I came over for, is there something wrong in there?"

J. Joanna slapped her pretty forehead with Three the Bee. "I forgot when you knocked. Yes, I was about to call our maintenance computer. My sauna bath unit is on the fritz, I'm afraid. Do you know how to fix one?"

"Probably," answered Silvera. "Is your pixphone working and in touch with the outside world?"

"Why, yes." The pretty naked blonde stepped back farther into her cottage. "Come in, won't you? I was sitting in the sauna closet and, you know, blooey, all of a sudden too much steam." She rubbed her perspiring stomach with One the Bunny.

"You want to put some clothes on while I work on the sauna unit?" asked Silvera, following her into the fog.

"I guess not," answered the naked instructor. "Actually, this is a good chance to practice what I'm learning in the Body Unawareness class I'm attending nights in Capital City. That's the sauna over there, next to the cassette library."

Great swirls of hot fog were misting out of the narrow bronze-colored doorway that Silvera noticed. He knelt and touched the control unit. It was hot. "Toss me a couple of those puppets." When the girl did, he used them as gloves and got the lid off and the steam control buttons punched. "A simple overload and backlock," he said, standing back and returning the hand puppets.

"You've got grease on Nine the Swine, but I'm grateful." She smiled and brushed at her long hair with the bee hand.

The mist began to thin. "Did you say somebody was denouncing me on television, Miss Hopter?"

"You can call me J. Joanna, since we're more or less colleagues." She sat down on a mist-freckled tin butterfly chair, sighing faintly. "Yes, the noon news showed a film clip of that phantom priest. You know, Brother Armour of the Church of the Occult Light."

"Yes, I saw his picture on the news yesterday. He's gone underground and is being hunted by the Jaspar Security Corps. He threw a dead cat into the House of Parliament in Capital City last month to protest government policies. How does he know about me?"

The pretty blonde shrugged. "They only showed a few

## The Way Things Work

minutes of one of his hideout sermons. You know, he's been popping up here and there all over the Rabuja Territory in the weeks since he went into hiding. He has very good public relations for a fugitive."

"Did he denounce me on moral grounds?" Silvera crossed to the aluminum table that held a pixphone.

"He said there were a lot of scoundrels and carpetbaggers and freebooters coming into Rabuja to bilk and exploit the public. All sanctioned by our government, which is made up of pork barrellers, fascists, diddlers and boondogglers."

"Which am I?"

"He said a notorious mercenary freebooter and propagandist named Jose Silvera was here on our planet now, selling his talents to the worst elements," said the girl. "And condoning gross acts of repression."

"Me?" said Silvera. "I wonder how your phantom priest got hold of my name?"

"You're not a mercenary freebooter, are you?"

"I'm a free-lance writer," Silvera told the naked girl. "That's a couple notches higher up. I'm really here to ghost some of the Machinery Twins books. Then I'll be gone. What else did Brother Armour have to say?"

"Nothing more relating to you. He went on to denounce the UKs. That's the Unofficial Killers organization, a frightful group of political vigilantes that the government can't, or won't, stop. Then he denounced several fat local tycoons, men such as Marco Hayflea, W. Robert Reisberson and Lorenzo Bellglass."

"Lorenzo Bellglass?" Silvera straightened up.

"You know him?"

"Lorenzo Bellglass owes me \$4000."

"Oh, really? For some past writing chore?"

"Yes, for two pulp novels, a still-popular genre on the planet

Tarragon," explained Silvera, pacing. "Bellglass owns a pulp magazine publishing company on Tarragon. It's called Cheap Magazines, Inc. He publishes *Cheap Detective*, *Cheap Adventure* and *Cheap Love*. I did four novels about a character known as The Disguised Detective. Bellglass only paid me for two."

"The free-lance life certainly has its negative side, doesn't it? I'm glad I picked the security and challenge of the teaching profession."

"Why's Bellglass on Jasper?"

"He recently purchased a big summer home out beyond Capital City, rambling sort of place named Moatsworth."

"I'll have to see him before I leave this planet, and get my money."

"You always collect?"

"Usually," said Silvera. "Eventually."

The pretty naked blonde smiled. "I imagine someone as large and muscular as yourself would have little trouble."

Silvera returned the smile. "Now, the phone?"

"Yes, go ahead. I owe you at least one favor."

After punching out the number of the Abandoned City commune, Silvera rested one foot on a cast-iron ottoman. "Did you get to know Willa de Aragon while she was here?"

"Who?"

"Willa de Aragon. She apparently held this ghostwriting job before me."

"Oh, yes, her," replied J. Joanna. "Frail girl. I didn't know her very well. She was only here a matter of weeks. Left in a great hurry. Friend of yours, is she?"

"Yes. I'm trying to call her."

The oval pixscreen showed a thin young man in a plaid coverall, sitting on a cracked stretch of sidewalk next to a bent-over phone booth. "Commune No. 14, good afternoon." He had a thick catalogue open on his knees, and behind him

## The Way Things Work

rose dusty many-storied metal and glass city buildings. A monorail engine was lying, smashed and rusted, on its back on the sidewalk to his right. "Can you make head or tail out of one of these?"

"What?" asked Silvera.

The bony boy held up the catalogue. "The name of it is *So You're Going To Start A Commune*, subtitled *Here's All You Need To Know . . . Plus a Profusely Illustrated Guide to Both Rural and Abandoned City Communal Living*. I can't figure out the captions or the profuse illustrations. I've only been a resident here six days. They got me on phone duty."

"I wrote one of those books once, but it was on another planet, where survival conditions are different," said Silvera. "I want to talk to Willa de Aragon. She's new to your commune, too."

"Who?"

"Willa de Aragon."

"Is that her right name?"

"Yes."

"Then she must not be using it hereabouts. What's she look like?"

"She's a tall, coltish brunette, with a deeply tanned skin and a slight feverish look."

The thin boy slapped his catalogue closed and shook his head. "No. I'd have noticed any girl looked that good. What we got here in the way of women is mostly fat girls and one old lady who's tattooed on the right arm above the elbow. But we sure don't have any feverish and coltish brunettes."

"You're certain?"

"Well, I'm new but I think I've met everybody."

"Ask around."

"All I could do for you is yell over the public address system they got set up across the street."

"Do that."

"Just a second." He rose and carefully rested the book on the uneven pavement. He loped out of range.

"Feverish and coltish," said the bee puppet on J. Joanna's hand. "My, my."

Silvera glanced over at the naked girl. "You're the first lady ventriloquist I've ever met."

The thin boy was back on the screen, saying, "No one responds. What I figure is . . ." His image was replaced by blackness.

Silvera punched the commune number over again but continued to see only blackness. He tried two more times and abandoned the phone.

"Illusive," said the blonde. "Perhaps she got restless yet again and made another move."

Silvera said, "I think I'll go into Capital City and see about taking a skytram ride out to Abandoned City No. 14."

"Immediately?"

Silvera faced her. "Eventually."

"You're welcome to stay here for a while. Perhaps I could, you know, console you."

Silvera said, "Okay, but you'll have to take off those puppets."

Silvera was three blocks from the Capital City skytram depot when he walked into the half-dozen Unofficial Killers at their work. He was crossing a mall thick with low ornamental trees when the UK vigilantes struck. At one side of the mosaic-tiled mall stood an outdoor cafe built in a circle around an all-season skating rink. Two waiters in black jumpsuits were skimming across the ice as Silvera passed near. There was also a black couple and a thin blonde girl who was doing



## The Way Things Work

lopsided figure-8s. From the opaque dome that housed the automatic kitchen six men came, suddenly, skating. They were dressed in grey sheets, ankle length and with two narrow eye slits. Silvera paused to watch.

The young blonde stopped in mid-8 and made a screaming motion, silent, with one thin fist against her bright mouth. The dozen customers, spotted at round white tables, stopped eating. Some stood, pushing back from their places.

"Death to softies!" cried the lead assassin. He reached into a slash pocket in his sheet and drew out a blaster pistol.

At the table nearest Silvera an overweight man with sparse red hair leaped from his chair. "The UKs," he said. He had been dining alone. He grabbed down beneath the shadows under his small table and caught up a pair of ice skates. "I can escape across the ice, outfox them." He began trying to untangle the skate laces. "Drat. What a time for these darn strings to get all knotted." He noticed Silvera. "Say, young fellow. I'm pretty sure I'm about to be the victim of a radical right-wing assassination attempt. What I plan to do is outfox them on the ice. The thing is, I can't get these skates untangled. I guess I should have dined with the skates on. But I said to myself, you'll look silly eating knockwurst with your skates on. Can you lend me a hand and . . ."

Two blasters crackled, and Silvera ducked behind the low stone wall around the outdoor restaurant. Something fell on his head, and pain sparkled around the left side of his skull for an instant. Still hunkered down, he heard the braking of metal skate blades on ice and then a flurry of slush splashed over the low wall on him.

"UK vindicated!" shouted the lead assassin, in a diminishing voice.

When Silvera looked up, there were a waiter and two customers kneeling around the remains of the red-haired man.

## ODD JOB #101

Silvera shook his head, flexed his knees and walked on. A few yards along, when he had recovered completely from the blow on the head, he noticed that the dead man's ice skates were tangled in the belt of his walking coat. And something was stuffed inside one of the skates that had thwacked him. Gingerly, Silvera fished it out. The object was a flat grout-hide wallet. Silvera opened the wallet to see who the man had been. Before he came to the identification papers, he saw a folded square of heavy cream-colored paper.

"You, Leroy Trinner, are cordially invited to a Clandestine Cocktail Party for the benefit of Certain Liberal Causes," read Silvera. "The time six o'clock, today's date, at Moatsworth. Your host is Lorenzo Bellglass. Your individual admittance password is: day-old bread. Destroy this invitation once you have memorized your password. No need to RSVP." Silvera refolded Leroy Trinner's invitation and ticked it against his chin. He decided to postpone his trip out to the Abandoned City commune.

The butler whispered, "You're not one of the Mexicans?"

Standing on the mansion side of the weathered drawbridge, Silvera shook his head. "Day-old bread," he said toward the butler's eye-sized spy hole in the vast house's oak door.

"Day-old bread," said the butler. "Hold on while I check this nitwit list." The door creaked two inches open. "You're absolutely sure you're not one of the Mexicans?"

"Yes, I am," said Silvera. "Which Mexicans is this?"

"They're supposed to be one of our featured minority groups at today's fund-raising party, sir," explained the butler. He was a small, round pink man. "Mr. Bellglass had them teleported all the way from Barnum. They're very hard to get in our Barnum System of planets. I believe Barnum is, in fact,

## The Way Things Work

the only planet to possess Mexicans in any quantity. Oppressed Mexicans at least. It's no use teleporting rich, comfortable Mexicans out to a fund-raising affair. At any rate, none of ours have showed up. Six of them and their marimba."

"Marimba?"

"Some sort of musical instrument is how it was explained to me, sir," said the pink butler, a bit more of him showing as the door swung farther open. "Mr. Bellglass feels it makes for a pretty tame party if your oppressed group merely stands around. So he always specifies they have to do something. Music, dancing, oratory, dramatic readings. We had some absolutely first-rate acrobatic lepers last week. Day-old bread, here you are. Come in, Mr. Trinner."

Inside, the Moatsworth house was all ramps and galleries and platforms. Rooms hung at various levels and had a varied number of walls. "And where is our host?"

"I believe, sir, you'll find Mr. Bellglass in the entertainment storeroom at the rear of the house," answered the small, round pink butler. "He's selecting something to divert the guests before the sermon."

"Sermon?"

"Yes, we're proud to have the phantom priest dropping in this evening."

"Brother Armour? I thought he'd denounced Bellglass."

"Merely a subterfuge, sir."

Silvera left the butler and climbed a gold-carpeted ramp. There were already, at a half hour beyond six, two hundred or so guests in the mansion, scattered around on different levels. The first three-walled room Silvera passed held three beautiful young girls, talking to a thin man.

A blonde, absently tweaking her own bare left breast, was asking the thin man, "And how long, exactly, have you been suffering from malnutrition?"

## ODD JOB #101

Silvera continued climbing and descending through the multi-leveled Moatsworth house. Here and there lovely girls and slim young men circulated with crisp new wicker collection baskets. Silvera gave a bare-chested silver-haired girl ten of Leroy Trinner's dollars, and she tilted up and kissed his cheek.

"That makes an even three thousand dollars in my little basket already, and the night is young. Thank you, sir."

A jovial woman of fifty stopped him at the foot of the ramp that led to the entertainment storeroom. "Are you Mexican?"

"No."

"You look dark and furtively sensual. I've been told that so is your average Mexican," said the jovial woman. "But you're too tall, I calculate, by half a foot. What is your ethnic background anyway?"

"I'm part marimba." Silvera headed up the blue ramp to the door of the four-walled storeroom. He pushed at the door, which had a warm fleshy feel, and it slid away sideways.

Lorenzo Bellglass was a five-foot-tall man of seventy-nine. His skin sun-dried to a sharp ochre brown, his white hair long and in two braids. A twenty-three-year-old blonde was stroking the small of his back while he bent over a packing crate. She was telling the old man, "You look and act ten years younger than your chronological age, Lorry."

"That's still too frigging old, Doretta." The brown and brittle publisher continued to rummage in the large crate. "There's nothing but harmonica-playing midgets in here. Not what's needed for tonight."

"How can all those poor tiny bitty little men breath inside there, Lorry? When you put the lid down."

"They're frigging androids, you pea-witted bimbo."

Doretta noticed the approaching Silvera, and her stroking of the ancient pulp king's back slowed. "Lorry, here comes a big,

## The Way Things Work

dark swarthy man. Tall and rather handsome in a wide, outdoorsy manner."

"Stow the frigging description and tell him to go away," said Bellglass, not turning.

"Bellglass," said Silvera, "you owe me \$4000."

"Silvera!" The old man spun around. "Yes, it is Jose Silvera. Doretta, this is one of our most brilliant younger writers. He could be, he could well be one of the major writers in the Barnum System of planets. Except. Except he's too frigging intent on the money side of things. He doesn't think enough about the esthetic side of things."

"I didn't write four Disguised Detective novels for esthetic reasons. Now let's have that \$4000."

"Impossible," said Bellglass. "What you want to do, Silvera, is get hold of someone in our accounting office. You know where that is, don't you? Eighteenth floor of the Cheap Building on the planet Tarragon. See them and I'm sure they'll clear all this up. Because I know a voucher was sent through long, long ago."

"\$4000 now."

Something behind Silvera bumped into a tin player piano. "Day-old bread, indeed," said a rasping voice. A gun tip poked at Silvera. "By the Great Arcanum, you're a fraud. Not an hour ago I heard of poor Trinner being felled by UKs, in broad daylight."

"On ice." Silvera turned. The man with the silver gun was as tall as he was. Thinner, smiling, wearing a dark-blue tunic and leotard. "You must be Brother Armour."

"Praise Gruagach," said the phantom priest. "And you are the notorious freebooter, Jose Silvera."

"I'll have to read one of your books, Mr. Silvera," said the blonde Doretta. "Everyone seems to have heard of you except me."

## ODD JOB #101

"Shut up, you flea-wit," said old Bellglass. "You suspect Silvera here of being some kind of UK agent, Brother Armour?"

"What else? By Horbehutet, he works for Doc Wimby. Didn't that sweet Willa de Aragon tell me at my clandestine occult mass last month that she was soon to have positive proof that Doc Wimby himself was linked with the Unofficial Killers?"

"Wait," suggested Silvera. He moved sideways, distancing himself a little more from the point of the phantom priest's gun. This put his back to an android symphony orchestra, black-suited and holding their instruments, lined up in straight stiff rows. "You know Willa?"

"That I do, by Oupnekhat," said Brother Armour. He leaned one sharp elbow on a peep show machine, his gun still aimed at Silvera. "It's my assumption that, since you stepped into her job so sudden, you must be in cahoots with Doc Wimby and his conservative cohorts."

"That's why you denounced me on television?"

"Did you see that?"

"No, but I was told."

"I was wondering how I looked to you. Some of my furtive parishioners mentioned I looked extremely green in the face this time," said Brother Armour. "You'll understand that being a guerrilla priest I have no time for much television make-up."

"My informant didn't mention your looking excessively green," said Silvera. "Look, Willa and I have the same literary agents now, and that's why I took this job so soon after her. I've been trying to find Willa myself. I was heading out to Abandoned City No. 14 when I got sidetracked."

"Ha," laughed the occult priest. "You'll not find her there, by Zabulon."

"That's the address Doc Wimby has," said Silvera, taking a

## The Way Things Work

further step backwards. "And it's what she wrote to my agents."

Brother Armour shook his head. "I held a benediction service in Abandoned City No. 14 not three days ago. Willa de Aragon was not there," he said. "What is more, Silvera, she was never there."

Silvera, frowning, asked, "So where is she?"

"You must know that," replied Brother Armour. "For my inner senses tell me you must be in league with Doc Wimby."

Silvera said, "It's your notion that while she was working at the school Willa stumbled on information that ties Wimby up with the vigilantes."

"Of course and to be sure," replied the phantom priest. "Since she told me as much. She confided in me because she had already realized that our territorial government will do little to stamp out the UKs."

"You suspect Willa never really went to live in a commune."

"Never, exactly."

"Then Doc Wimby has either done away with her, or he's holding her out of sight somewhere."

"The UKs never kill women," said Brother Armour. "They're wretched slaughterers, but they have their code. No, I believe he is holding the poor girl prisoner."

"Where?"

"There is more to Doc Wimby's school than meets the eye."

Silvera said, "The underground wing."

"Which?"

"There's an underground wing at the school," said Silvera. "An old computer I got friendly with told me about it and showed me some floor plans while I was researching for a book. Doc Wimby told me the machine was mistaken."

## ODD JOB #101

The pistol lowered slightly. "I've half a mind to believe you. Perhaps you're not a foul spy and hand in glove with the vigilantes."

"While you're debating with your inner spaces," Silvera told him, "I'm going back to the school and see if I can find Willa or at least some trace of her."

"You'd best stay here until I can put out feelers and verify your story."

Silvera said, "That would try my patience."

The gun was now pointed directly at him once more. "I must ask you, by Zabulon, to remain here."

Silvera ducked suddenly and shot his buttocks out. The cymbal-playing android directly behind him toppled over and fell forward, clunking down on the approaching Brother Armour. Silvera stood quickly, caught up the first violinist, and thrust him, like a battering log, into old Bellglass. Then he tipped over the harpist and her harp, two cellists, and a bearded oboe player. He leaped clear of the toppling androids, kicked the silver pistol out of the semi-upright priest's hand, and ran to the door.

Outside the storeroom Silvera went down a ramp and headed for a rear exit. On a great hilly patio he encountered the silver-haired collection girl again.

"I'm only five dollars short of \$4000," she smiled.

Silvera slowed. "\$4000?"

"Actually I have \$3984. Would you help?"

"Why, yes." He took the crisp basket from her, wadded up the bills, and stuffed the lump of cash under his walking coat. "Mr. Bellglass will be glad to give you his personal check for an even \$4000. Tell him Silvera said it was okay."

"You really think . . . ?" began the girl.

Silvera moved away too rapidly to hear more.



## The Way Things Work

J. Joanna Hopter was now fully clothed in white. Silvera danced her over the broad ballroom floor. Dozens of eight- and nine-year-olds were dancing, too, in dark evening suits and white ball gowns. An equal number of similarly dressed parents and teachers were also on the floor. Swing music was currently popular on Jaspar, and for the third-graders' ball a twenty-four piece swing band had been hired. The members of the orchestra, with the exception of the bald saxophone-playing leader, were dressed in white bunny suits. The leader was costumed as a duck.

When the number ended, the leader's bill flapped and he announced, "It gives your old maestro a real kick to introduce to you now, boys and girls, the founder of your swell school. Here he is, let's have a nice hand for him, Doc Wimby."

After the applause began, Doc Wimby stepped up on the merry-go-round-shaped bandstand. Wimby was in his usual white suit but had added a red rubber nose and a lemon-yellow fright wig. "Before I start presenting some of the scholastic achievement awards, let's have a little extra fun," announced the serious-smiling Wimby. "For while I know that students and parents alike are anxious to learn who has taken first place in Tractability, in Retention, and in Kinesthetics, I know, too, we all enjoy a nice game of nose rolling." He held up a blue egg.

Silvera excused himself from the pretty J. Joanna and edged around the dim ballroom. He moved quietly out an exit and started down a dark corridor leading below. Near the first turning he tripped among shadows.

"What the blankety-blank are you up to, palsy-walsy?" A bleary-eyed little boy in a disordered evening suit was flat on his back on the smooth flooring.

"Are you hurt?"

"No, it's blankety-blanking John Barleycorn has laid me

low," answered the little boy. "I was seeking new thrills to lift me out of my habitual boredom and got talked into swigging most of a pint of apricot brandy in the boys' room."

"I'll help you up."

"Keep your blankety-blanking hands off, dago. I'm going to sleep it off out here."

"Okay."

"They haven't given out the awards yet?"

"No."

"I'm up for a scroll in Empathy," said the blurry little boy. "What a blankety-blank bore."

"Why all the blanks?"

"I'm much too young to swear."

Silvera continued on.

In a basement filled with computers, his second stop, he walked directly to the computer at the rear of the room. This was a large outmoded mechanism, dented and smelling of dust. "Evening, Pop," said Silvera, activating the machine.

"Howdy, Jose," replied the old computer. "Nice to see you again. They mostly ignore old Pop these days. Oh, but I guess I told you that the last time you were down."

"I'd like to know more about that underground wing."

"Sure thing. I know all about the place. I keep up. You don't keep up and you get stale. What is old age if it isn't not keeping up?"

"How do I get to the underground wing?"

"Take Corridor 18 after you leave here. Then go right and down Hall 46. Here comes the tricky part. When you reach the very smack-dab end of 46, go use the mountain-spring water cooler on your left. Left mind, not right. Turn the second additive button four times left, six right, five left. Then squirt the water button, and a panel will open in the dead end of the wall. Go down the spiral ramp, and you're in the

## The Way Things Work

underground wing. Built twenty years ago during a war scare. If you need to get out quick, there's another false exit in Hall 22 of the underground wing. Works the same way, with the water cooler," said the old computer. "You know, Jose, I got me a hunch there's something fishy going on down there. Men in sheets and all. They even got a girl locked up in a little room."

"Girl? Do you know where she is?"

"Sure thing, Jose. I keep up. They got her in a room that says Stationery and Supplies on the door."

"Thanks."

"Got to rush off? Well, come again. Don't forget old Pop."

Silvera left, followed the computer's instructions, and found himself an extra level below ground. The metal-walled halls were thinly lit with yellow light strips. While he was still looking for Stationery and Supplies, two men in grey sheets came around a turn.

"Who?" said the first vigilante, reaching into a sheet pocket.

"No time for that," said Silvera. "They've spotted that softie Brother Armour."

"Armour?"

"Right. He's up at the dance disguised as a bunny rabbit."

"Son of a gun," said the second UK vigilante. "But who are you?"

"A new recruit."

"Why aren't you sheeted up?"

"They didn't have one in my size."

The first man said, "Let's quit jawing, Virgil, and get topside." He gripped his pistol and ran.

Silvera caught Virgil's elbow. "Wait. Doc Wimby wants the girl, Willa de Aragon. She's got to be moved out the back way at once."

"Here's the key, recruit. You do it," said the hooded Virgil. "I have to hurry and catch up with my buddy."

"Right."

"Death to softies."

"Yes, indeed." Alone, Silvera ran. He found the right door in under five minutes. He got it open and there was Willa sitting on a large box of carbon paper. "Let's go."

"Jose," said the dark, rangy girl. "What have you been up to since we met on Murdstone last year?"

Silvera pulled her to her feet and out into the corridor. As they headed for the secret exit Pop had told him about, Silvera told the girl what he'd been up to.

They went through the exit opening and climbed a ridged ramp. It brought them out into a sloping woods a quarter of a mile above the school.

"How did you find out exactly where I was and how to get us out free?" asked Willa, breathing through her mouth.

"Mostly by making friends with a computer."

Willa sighed and leaned back against a young oak. She smiled at him. "I'm sorry this is one time you won't collect your fee. Nor will I."

Silvera reached into the breast pocket of his evening suit. "Here's the \$6000 Doc Wimby owes you." He showed her a pale blue check. "And the \$4000 he owes me." He held up a second check. "We have to get to the all-night bank in Capital City and cash these quick, Willa."

"How'd you get them, Jose?" she asked, taking his hand.

"While I was finding out how things work, I also made friends with the check-writing android," he said.

5

---

Plumrose



**T**HE MAN with the ginger whiskers smiled tentatively at me, then came over and handed me a hat and some kind of overcoat. Tucked up under his arm he had a square box that looked something like a rural telephone. There were streetcars all around now and I didn't hear what he was saying the first time he spoke. Behind the man a horse-drawn beer wagon clopped by.

Somehow I felt that if I accepted the clothes I'd be committed. I hesitated, looking back over my shoulder. My office building was still there. Except it was newer and brighter looking and there was a man with a black beard and an odd suit loitering in front of it.

"I'm afraid it will take a bit of getting used to," said the ginger-whiskered man. "I hope you will understand and give us a few hours of your time."

I had been working for Caulkins-Nowlan Publicity for nearly a year. Every morning at 10:15 I went out and walked around the block to a place called the Crescent Coffee Shop. The place wouldn't be there now I knew. And I knew that for some reason it was no longer September of 1961 in San Francisco.

I didn't smack myself on the brow and cry out. I felt a little unsettled in the stomach and that was about it. There are people who get up and walk a couple of blocks after they've been shot dead. You never know how you're going to react.

"You were expecting me?" I asked the man.

"Not you specifically," he said. He smiled a little more

freely. "Someone, however, in your profession." He urged the hat and coat on me. "Get into these and you won't stand out. As it is, I think the fellow over there saw you materialize."

I put the coat on. It was a size too tight or maybe that was the fashion. I put the hat on, the first one I'd worn since I'd come to San Francisco. "Materialize?" I said as he took my arm.

"I have a carriage waiting nearby," he said. "If you'll do me the favor of coming to my home and speaking to my daughter. I think I can explain things as we travel."

"Fine," I said. I was in the mood for having things explained.

We got into the carriage, which was in an alley I didn't remember as being there. The man with the ginger whiskers carefully put the square box on the seat between us and then gave his driver the order to get under way.

"My name is Gibson G. Southwell," he said.

"Mine's Bert Willsey," I said. I was studying the streets, the people. "What year is this? Sometime in the 90s?"

Southwell smiled. "You're very perceptive. You would be in your profession. September 20, 1897."

"And how did you get me here?"

Southwell placed a hand on the square box. "Plumrose invented it. I must apologize, Mr. Willsey, for being desperate enough to use it. There seemed no other course of action. I hope that by sunset you will be back in your rightful era."

"It'll be a damned long coffee break even so." The carriage seemed to be heading for the general direction of Nob Hill. "Just what are you desperate about?"

"My daughter, Emily, has fallen under the spell of a



scoundrel," said Southwell, slumping slightly on the black leather seat.

"Oh?" There were more trees everywhere, turning to autumn.

"It all began when we took the braces off her teeth. Our regular dentist had passed away and we chose a new one on the suggestion of a close family friend, the daughter of a highly respected railroad executive. I myself, by the way, am in the tea business in an import way. To get on. Emily, my daughter, fell gradually in love with this dentist. You see, my wife, Mrs. Southwell, disappeared while on a pleasure cruise up the Sacramento three summers ago. Since then I've looked after Emily myself. Except for getting her teeth finally fixed properly I've bungled parenthood, Mr. Willsey."

"You mentioned a name awhile back," I said, taking my hat off and resting it between my knees. "Where does he come in?"

"Plumrose?" asked Southwell, blinking and frowning. "Surely you've heard of Edwin Plumrose?"

"I don't think so."

"Plumrose, the renowned ghost detective and occult investigator. Plumrose, who tampers with the most highly guarded secrets of Nature. He invented this time ray."

"It was his idea to bring me here?"

Southwell's whiskers drooped. "All else has failed. Yet I know this dentist is the guilty man. Proof, even with three Pinkertons at work, has not been forthcoming. He's a clever man, especially for a dentist. My good friend, Plumrose, agreed to advise me although this is not an occult case."

"It's pretty occult to me," I said as the carriage turned into a wide pathway. "I still don't know why I'm here."

"Oh, yes," said Southwell. The carriage stopped in front of a vast white Victorian house and we got out. I watched him lift the time ray box off the seat, ready to grab it if it looked at all like slipping. Southwell took my arm and we halted at the first step of the stairway. "Plumrose assumed that by your time the entire case would have been solved. He also feels that the present can be modified by an expert, which you will have to admit Plumrose is. So then. We brought you here to talk to Emily and to explain the final outcome of the case to her. After you tell her what you know of this man she's become infatuated with we will get to work saving her from him."

"Hold it, Mr. Southwell," I said. "What case is it I'm supposed to know about?"

"You are aware of so many, yes. Forgive me. My parental anxiety has caused me to be rather unspecific. I am referring to the famed Nob Hill Fiend case. I am afraid that this man Emily is involved with is the Fiend himself. I have several reasons for so thinking. She refuses to stop seeing him and, being no old-fashioned parent, I will not use force to prevent her. The man's name is Leo X. Guthrie." Southwell watched my face, waiting.

Finally I nodded. "Leo X. Guthrie."

"Then I'm right. He is indeed the Nob Hill Fiend."

"Mr. Southwell," I said, following him up the steps, "I've never heard of Leo X. Guthrie."

The brass knocker dropped from his hand. "It can't be that he is not the Fiend."

"He may be the Fiend and he may not be the Fiend. I have no way of telling."

"Surely by 1906 the case has been solved."

A butler with a stage Irish brogue let us in. After we'd gotten rid of our coats and hats Southwell took me into a long shadowy living room. The grilled fireplace had a fire going in

it and, after placing the time ray on a marble-topped table, Southwell held his hands to the glow.

"What has 1906 to do with it?" I asked, moving up to study the square box that had pulled me back to 1897.

Nothing happened for a few still seconds. Then Southwell dashed over to my side. "Willsey, aren't you from 1906?"

"No," I said. "1906 was the year of the big earthquake in San Francisco. Quite awhile before I was born. When I went out to coffee this morning it was September 20, 1961."

We both bent to study the dials on the time ray. "My lord," said Southwell, pointing. "The year gauge is all askew. Did that happen during the trip here do you think?"

"Something was askew to start with."

"Plumrose guaranteed it would work this time."

"Work this time?"

"There was some trouble a few weeks ago sending a rat back and forth in time. Plumrose promised that the trouble had been eliminated."

"What happened to the rat?"

"We lost him somewhere around 1901."

"Well, I'm happy to have been part of this scientific experiment, Mr. Southwell. How about you and your friend, Plumrose, sending me back home to 1961?"

"Suppose you get sidetracked in 1901 the way the rat did?" Southwell shook his head. "I'll have to consult Plumrose."

"Let's go now."

"Emily is already expecting us. I sent Bascom to summon her. She should be descending at any moment." Southwell suddenly grabbed me by the arms. "Even a reporter from 1961 must know of the Nob Hill Fiend case. Please try to remember."

"Mr. Southwell, I'm not a reporter."

He let go and stepped back. "I told Plumrose it would be this way. There was always the chance we wouldn't get a reporter."

"Seems like the odds would be against you. Picking one person out of the future at random."

"It wasn't at random. That's why I was stationed in front of the *Chronicle* building with the time ray. I sincerely hoped for a crime reporter, although any newsman would have done. A reporter from 1906 could give us all the details and end this situation before Emily comes to harm."

I sat down in a fat chair and let my head rest back against the antimacassar. "The *Chronicle* hasn't been in that building for years, Mr. Southwell. They're over on Mission Street."

Southwell went and stood closer to the fire, silent.

"Ready to concede, father? Even Plumrose has failed. It must be fate taking a hand. Can't you step aside and let Leo and I have our happiness?"

I turned. Standing in the doorway was a slim, dark-haired girl. Her hair was worn up and she had on a long dark skirt and a white blouse. Guthrie may have been a fiend but he was doing all right as a dentist. Emily had a fine smile. In fact, she was the best looking girl I'd seen since I came to San Francisco. I got to my feet. Things always work that way. You can hang around bars in Maiden Lane and North Beach and go to cocktail parties and never have spectacular luck. Then you're sucked back to 1897 and there's a beautiful girl where you least expect to see one.

Southwell shrugged and looked hopefully at me. "Can you tell us anything, Mr. Willsey?"

"I have a vague idea I've heard about this whole business, the Nob Hill Fiend and all, years ago." I shook my head. "Nothing definite, though. See, I'm in public relations.

Publicity and advertising sort of work. I'm not up on famous crimes."

"Perhaps Mr. Willsey would like a cup of tea," said the girl. "We have tea at all hours here," she said to me, smiling faintly.

I said that would be fine. "I'm sorry I can't help out in all this, Miss Southwell."

"You can help most by leaving things alone," Emily said. "I intend to marry Leo and if father does not give us his blessings soon we shall have to take more drastic steps."

Southwell clutched his side and gave an anguished cry. "I must lie down in my study. Forgive me, Mr. Willsey. I'll return shortly and settle things."

Emily pulled a bell rope as her father tottered off through a curtained doorway. "The tea will be here shortly," she said. "Bascom is out playing cards with some of the Pinkerton detectives and he may not hear the bell at once."

Conversationally I said, "What makes your father think Guthrie is a fiend?"

Emily's nostrils flared, which nostrils still did in 1897, and she said, "Father is mistaken. Anyone who really knew Leo could not believe that he was in any way connected with these terrible crimes."

"What has this fiend done exactly?"

"He murders young girls, using a disgusting assortment of surgical instruments. Father seems to feel that dentistry is one step from surgery and thus he suspects Leo."

"Your father told me Guthrie was recommended to you by a girl friend of yours. What does she think about the case?"

Emily paled. "She was the second victim of the Nob Hill Fiend."

"Coincidences like that do turn up," I said.

Southwell tottered back into the room. "Excuse us, my dear. I've decided we must see Plumrose at once."

"Give him my regards," the girl said. "Except for his behavior in this matter I have a great respect for him and his work. But occult detection is one thing and love another."

Southwell and I went to see Plumrose.

Plumrose lived in a narrow gable roofed house on a slanting street. The house stood back from a wrought iron fence and was bordered with high grass and wild shrubs. The sharp fall wind swayed the grass and arms of cast iron Cupids and Psyches flashed in the sun. Horns and antlers flashed, too, and something that looked like the left half of a goat.

A small round woman who looked something like a bleached-out gypsy let us in after Southwell had used the gargoyle knocker. "Mrs. Hoggins," he said, "we must see Plumrose at once."

She stepped aside, squinting at the time ray Southwell had under his arm. "He's in his study trying to communicate with Aristotle."

"For some new case?" asked Southwell, stepping into the soft-shadow-blurred hallway.

"No, he's simply in an argumentative mood and I won't let him bait me." The woman studied me. "This the one you fished from the future?"

"Yes," said Southwell, hanging his overcoat and hat and mine on the gold-pronged hat tree. "There's been some small error."

"I knew it," Mrs. Hoggins said to me. "I told him to try the contrivance on a few more rats first."

"That's splendid," said a deep voice from somewhere down the hall. "I had actually gotten through to Aristotle's personal secretary and then all this foolishness in the hallway cut me off." A fat pink man with white hair and whiskers stepped

from a doorway. He was wearing an art nouveau dressing gown and its pockets were heavy with papers and ribbon-tied scrolls and vague objects with obscure markings. He noticed me and said, "The chronic argonaut, is it?"

Southwell held out the time ray box. "The dial got askew."

"Go down in the cellar, Mrs. Hoggins, and fetch up some of the special brandy for our guests."

"Something fetid and loathsome is a-roam down there," the woman said, hiding her hands in her striped apron.

"On the contrary," said Plumrose. "I exorcised the place not a month ago and we also had that insect specialist in to nose around."

"A well run household would have its cellar exorcised once a week," the housekeeper said, rumbling off.

Plumrose beckoned us into his study. It was a medium-sized room with shuttered windows that almost hid a view of a weedy back yard dotted with more statuary. There were two twisted wood rocking chairs and a worn-down striped loveseat. Plumrose took the loveseat and left the rockers for Southwell and myself. "My Uncle Wendell was twice arrested for attempts on the life of his domestic," said Plumrose. He considered me for a moment. "This fellow looks fine to me, Southwell. Why the complaints?"

"He's from the wrong year," said Southwell, rocking nervously. "From 1961." He held out the time ray to Plumrose.

The fat occult investigator squinted an eye at the square box. "No wonder. You let the dial get askew."

"It was that way when you gave it to me."

"Nonsense," Plumrose grabbed the box and rattled it. "Listen to what other mischief you've caused, Southwell." Opening a small metal door in the time ray box Plumrose held it upside down over the thick flowered rug. "Out of there,

out." There was a squeak and a white mouse somersaulted to the floor and skittered under a clawfooted table. "What can you expect when you let mice get inside."

"There are no mice at my home," said Southwell. "That's one of your experimental mice."

"His leg wasn't banded."

"Hey," I said, "what say we forget out differences and get me back to 1961."

Plumrose took a flat stick from his dressing gown pocket and poked it into the time box. "This will take some work, Mr.—"

"Bert Willsey," I interjected.

"It will require some careful work, Willsey. I made the mistake of assuming Southwell knew how to use a time ray."

"Where would I learn to use a time ray? That's the only one in the world."

"My Cousin Raymond once guided a balloon across four hundred square miles of unfamiliar country and he had never before been higher off the ground than seventeen feet," said Plumrose, dropping the box onto an ottoman.

"How long to fix that?" I asked.

"A few days," said Plumrose.

"That's great. By the time I get back I'll be a missing person and unemployed."

"I'll give you a job here," said Plumrose. "I need a secretary. A newspaperman like yourself should fit in nicely in that capacity for a few days."

"He's not a newspaperman," said Southwell. "That's another factor that went afoul."

"You couldn't even aim it at the *Chronicle* building?"

"They moved the building over to Mission Street," I said.

Plumrose rested his arm on the back of the loveseat and looked at the fireplace. "Well," he said.



"He doesn't even know anything about Leo X. Guthrie," explained Southwell, standing. "While I am in sympathy with Mr. Willsey's problem, and feel indirectly responsible, this unfortunate blunder isn't helping my poor Emily any."

"I'll solve that case within two days," said Plumrose. To me he said, "What did you do up there in the future?"

"Publicity and advertising."

"Then you'll still make a good assistant and secretary. I'll have you back in the right time period within three days."

Mrs. Hoggins arrived with a dusty bottle of brandy and three bright glasses on a copper tray. "So much for what you know," she said to Plumrose as she put the tray on one of the round dark wood tables. "There's three trolls down there and they got into the sherry."

"Trolls should have better taste than that," said Plumrose, reaching for the brandy. "I'll attend to them after I solve the problems of Southwell and Willsey here."

"You had better. You know how trolls can multiply." She hid her hands in the apron and left.

Plumrose opened the brandy and poured a glass for each of us. "A toast," he said, raising his and smiling from Southwell to me. "To the future."

By night I was moved into one of Plumrose's spare rooms. There didn't seem to be much else to do until the time ray got fixed and Southwell had gone off without making any offer of putting me up at his place. The room was slant-ceilinged and on the second floor in back. The windows were leaded stained glass and as I paced they gave me kaleidoscope shots of the overgrown backyard.

The room was used for storage and there were piles of occult equipment stacked beyond the narrow canopied bed. As

## ODD JOB #101

I wandered around the room I tried to catalogue the stuff in my mind. There were parts of stone demons, Egyptian amulets, mystical baskets, bundles of spirit photographs, scraps of illuminated manuscripts, brass gongs, the upper half of a fortune telling automaton, three stuffed snakes and a neat stack of the past months' San Francisco newspapers. These last were actually on the bed itself and I gathered them up and sat in a tufted easy chair under the tiffany lamp on the reading table. I wasn't yet adjusted to being in 1897 and I handled the newspapers carefully, expecting them to flake and tatter. But they were crisp and new.

As I went through the back issues I spotted several stories about the Nob Hill Fiend. The papers didn't use many photos then, mostly sketches. The Fiend had done in six young girls so far over a period of some five and a half months. Five of the girls had either been found or had originally lived in the Nob Hill area. That was how the Fiend got his name. A sketch of one of the victims struck me.

The girl's name was Hester Cheyney and they'd found her body in an alley off Clay Street nearly two months back. I'd seen this girl's picture before. Where, I couldn't say.

In the back pages of the papers, among the ads for magnetic belts and massage parlors, I found a drawing of Leo X. Guthrie. It was featured in an ad for his painless dentistry offices on California Street. And I recognized him. Someplace I had seen this drawing and the drawing of the Cheyney girl. Seen them together.

Lighting one of my cigarettes I closed my eyes. Back, or rather ahead, in 1956 I had needed three extra units to finish my last semester at UCLA. I'd taken a criminology course that had given a quick survey of the great crimes of the past century. Guthrie's picture had been in the textbook. It had come just before the photo of a victim of the Detroit Trunk

Fiend. Since I always skipped over that one, Guthrie's picture was my cue to jump a few pages.

All at once I thought of Emily Southwell. Was she going to be the next victim? I couldn't remember a picture of her nor a mention of her as one of the victims. But since Guthrie was still running around loose it was obvious he was going to commit a few more crimes. I couldn't remember the final total of victims. If it was six he was all done. I wasn't sure.

I was sure, though, that Guthrie was the Nob Hill Fiend. I tossed the newspapers back on the bed and went to find Plumrose.

He was sitting on the top step ten feet down from my door. He had on a fresh dressing gown and was holding an opaque brandy glass. "You've been over the newspapers?"

"Yeah. You left them there?"

Plumrose nodded, spinning the glass under his wide flat nose. "I assumed a case as famous as this one is going to be would be known to a great many people in the future. The accounts and pictures set you to thinking in the manner I had hoped. Is Leo X. Guthrie the man?"

I told him Guthrie was and told him why I knew. "So what's to do about it? Emily might believe me if I talked to her."

"Doubtful," said Plumrose. "Confronting Guthrie is a better piece of action. You don't recall how he was finally caught?"

"No. Maybe that was in the pages I skipped."

"Are you up to giving the impression that you have a tooth ache?"

"Now that you mention it," I said. "Ever since I've been here in 1897 I've had a toothache."

## ODD JOB #101

"That's interesting." Plumrose caught the griffin newel post and tugged himself to a standing position. "Are you serious? Little is known about the side effects of time travel."

I touched my jaw. "I hadn't thought of it before but it's true."

"Very good."

"I go to Guthrie posing as a patient and try to throw a scare into him."

"Yes. Most pattern killers are very superstitious men. There's a strong possibility that you can frighten Guthrie into confessing. To be safe I'll also suggest to Southwell that he double the Pinkertons."

"How about clothes to wear when I visit Guthrie?"

"Wear what you have. The suit is not alarmingly futuristic. Yet it should have a vaguely unpleasant effect. Try it. Breakfast is at eight. Good night."

"Good night." I went back to my slant-ceilinged room and studied the drawing of Leo X. Guthrie.

All six of the chairs in Leo X. Guthrie's waiting room were filled. The half-dozen patients were all young girls, each one pretty enough to be an upcoming Fiend victim. I must have shuddered because the pretty young receptionist said to me, "You're in pain, sir?"

"It's nothing," I said, smiling manfully around at my fellow patients. "However, I would like to consult Dr. Guthrie if possible. He's been highly recommended."

"Oh? Well, I can let you see Dr. Guthrie at four this afternoon. Your name please?"

Since Emily might have mentioned me to him I decided to give a fake name. "Maxwell Arnold, Jr.," I said, using the name of the Detroit Trunk Fiend.

"We'll expect you back at four then, Mr. Arnold."

It was hardly one o'clock now. But I didn't want to let Guthrie slip away. "Thank you," I said. "I'll wait."

By two I got a chance to sit down and by five I was let into Guthrie's office. He was a tall man with pale skin and blue-black hair and mustache. "What seems to be bothering you, Mr. Arnold?" he asked, pointing me into the chair.

"Toothache, doctor," I said.

"That's an interesting suit you're wearing. European?"

"No," I said. "In fact . . ."

"Open your mouth, please."

I opened it. "The reason . . ."

"Wider. Don't talk."

"I've come to . . ."

"Very serious," he said, poking at a canine tooth. "Sit quietly, Mr. Arnold."

"Dr. Guthrie, I know who you . . ."

Guthrie clamped a rubber mouthpiece over my face and said, "Inhale, Mr. Willsey. When you wake up let this be a lesson to you. Don't stand in the way of young love."

"J'accuse," I said and fell asleep.

It was night outside when I woke up. I was still in the dentist chair, alone in the silent unlit office. I shook my head in small circles and stood up. Even in my 1961 suit I hadn't thrown much of a scare into Leo X. Guthrie.

I ran downstairs to the street and flagged a passing carriage. I'd hoped for a cab for hire but what I'd stopped was a drapery salesman on his way to the Cliff House to meet a cabaret singer. When I explained I was intent on saving a young girl from a fiend he agreed to give me a lift up hill.

Emily Southwell was not at home. Her father told me she

## ODD JOB #101

was attending a party at a nearby mansion and he feared she was planning to meet Guthrie there. I assured him I'd fix the Fiend before midnight and took off.

The party was at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Hollis Havenhurst. The house was a big, flat white thing fronted with marble columns. A few hundred square feet of close-cropped grass slanted up to the main entrance of the house. Carriages of all sorts were turning in at the wide driveway as I came running up. I shot over the three foot high stone wall and angled up for the side of the Havenhurst mansion.

I found a shadowy spot behind a shrub-bordered sundial and watched the windows of the ballroom. I had just caught sight of Emily and Guthrie when a hand tapped my left shoulder.

"Turn around quietly if you please," said a tenor voice.

I did. A black-overcoated man with a derby hat was pointing a pistol at me. I said, "I'm looking for a friend of mine." I nodded my head at the bright ballroom.

"Please to be putting your hands over your head, my lad," the man said. He had a spongy red mustache that seemed to move in counterpoint to his mouth.

"Miss Emily Southwell is expecting me," I said, raising my hands high.

"Not only expecting you but keeping a good weather eye out for you, my boy. So as to avoid being done in by the likes of you."

"Beg pardon?"

He stuck a hand into my coat pocket and brought out a silver scalpel. "You in the medical line, bucko?"

"That," I said, watching the thing catch the moonlight. "That's easily explained. I'm being framed. The man you want is Leo X. Guthrie, a dentist. He must have planted that on me. Look, just ask Miss Emily Southwell. She'll vouch for

me. Then we can call the police. You are with the Pinkertons aren't you?"

The red mustached man shook his head. "No, laddie. I'm Police Inspector Rafferty McCafferty."

"You can still check me out with Miss Southwell."

"Bucko, it was Miss Southwell as reported you to me and swore she was right certain you were the Nob Hill Fiend and would be lurking hereabouts tonight. Come along with you."

So I went to jail.

The Hollis Havenhurst's party had been on a Friday night. On Sunday an hour or so past lunch Plumrose finally succeeded in springing me. He told them I was his assistant and had been watching Emily on his orders. Plumrose really was highly thought of in San Francisco. According to McCafferty, Plumrose helped the Department out on all occult police matters. In a city like San Francisco that meant they worked together often.

Back safe at Plumrose's I hunched down in one of the rocking chairs and moved close to the fireplace. "How come you didn't get me out on Saturday?"

Plumrose poured two glasses of brandy. "I was locked in here most of yesterday, taking no messages. The result is a patched up time ray." He winked at the time box on the round dark table.

"It's fixed then? Great," I said. "Let's get me back to 1961. I want to get away from Nob Hill Fiends and ungrateful Southwells. Let him do Emily in for all I care. After she helped Guthrie frame me with the cops."

"Love does strange things."

"Not to me anymore."

"Wait," said Plumrose, handing me my brandy. "It seems to be fixed. However, considering what happened before I think it wise to try a few tests first."

I shrugged. "Sure. Go ahead."

"I'll begin in earnest tomorrow with a few rats and mice. Should we get the positive results I'm hoping for we can then proceed to use the ray on you."

I watched the fire crackle. "Today or tomorrow. What difference does it make?"

"That's the attitude. Should you, by the way, decide to remain in this more leisurely age my offer of a job will stand," he said. When I didn't respond he went on. "All this excitement has put me several days behind on my naps. Excuse me and I'll try to catch up."

After Plumrose left I slid the ottoman over under my feet and tried to doze. My attention kept being drawn to the time ray. It might be days before Plumrose thought it was ready. It was risky but the mood I was in I didn't much care. I'd turn the thing on myself and hope to get back to 1961.

Quietly I went to the machine. All I had to do was set the time dial and flip a couple of switches. Plumrose had told me that much about how the ray worked. I set the dial for September 20, 1961, figuring to try and get back on the same day I'd left. I held the time ray with my thumb on the switch.

I stopped, thinking of something. Plumrose's house might not be there in 1961 or it might be full of people. I'd hate to materialize in the middle of a dinner table or a stone wall. The solution was to go to a place I could be pretty sure would still be empty in 1961. Golden Gate Park seemed like a good bet. I could pick a clear stretch of treeless ground and flip the switches.

Wrapping the box in a Coptic prayer shawl I slipped quietly out of the house. Mrs. Hoggins was off visiting and I was able



to get up the street and catch a trolley without any trouble.

Twilight was filling the park when I finally reached it. Men in knickers and girls in bloomers were cycling all over the damn park and I had a tough time finding a quiet uncluttered stretch of ground.

Beyond a thick grove of cypresses I located a fine empty clearing free of cyclers or picnickers. Across the clearing the ground dropped away toward an overgrown pathway. There was silence all around me. I unwrapped the time ray and checked the dial. It had jiggled back to 1936 during the assorted trolley rides. I reset it for September 20, 1961, and held it out with the time ray nozzle pointed at my chest.

A girl screamed.

I hesitated. There was something familiar about the scream. It came again.

"Leo, can it be that I have misjudged you after all?"

A bicycle fell over. And another.

"Stand still and don't struggle so," said Leo X. Guthrie. "I certainly didn't bring you to this secluded glade for some vulgar romantic interlude."

"Good lord," cried Emily.

I held tight to the time ray box and ran over to the downsloping edge of my clearing. Some twenty feet below, Leo X. Guthrie was standing over the fallen Emily Southwell. He had a large surgical knife in his right hand and was throttling Emily with his left.

"Hey, Guthrie," I yelled. "Knock it off, you damned fiend!"

His head flicked back for a second and he laughed. "Too late, Willsey." He swung the knife up to strike Emily.

Well, I didn't have a chance of scrambling down hill and jumping him before he got her. So I did the only other thing. I threw the damn time box at him. It was a good toss. The heavy

## ODD JOB #101

box caught him on the side of the head and made a nice thunking sound. Guthrie went over sideways on top of the tangled bicycles and the knife flipped over into the shrubbery.

Emily didn't faint or swoon. She got uneasily up and smiled at me. "Mr. Willsey, what a brave thing to do." She glanced down at the ruined time machine. "Especially at the sacrifice of your means of transportation."

I started down toward her. Eventually Plumrose could make another time machine. But girls like Emily are hard to find.

# Varieties of Religious Experience



**T**HE ROBOT ORGAN ceased its hymn, and the yellow-robed reverend climbed up to the pulpit. He tapped his fingers twice on each of the three microphones, clearing his throat.

At the rear of the small domed chapel Jose Silvera narrowed his eyes. He had a pew near the animated stained-glass windows, and the flashing colored light was moderately distracting. Hunching his wide shoulders once, Silvera extracted a notebook from his trousers and flipped it open on one knee.

Reverend Newt Barndoor was ticking his thumbnail against the center mike. "Isn't the Territorial News Network picking me up this morning? Their mike is dead." Barndoor was a short wiry man of thirty-six. "Excuse me a moment, my friends." He bent down behind the pulpit and reappeared holding a hand pixphone. He punched out a number, waited.

The robot organ hummed and then rumbled into a new hymn.

"I'm trying to make a call," said Reverend Barndoor. "Keep still, won't you?"

The large silver and gold organ behind him piped a final note and turned off.

"Hello, this is the Reverend Barndoor out here at the Body Electric Church," the reverend said into the phone. "Are you people going to cover my sermon this morning? Oh, really. A news emergency. The Bishop Briney Brigade has kidnaped another official of the Portada Territory government? Who

was it? No, don't bother to go and ask. Well, if you want. Yes, I'll hold." Putting one small hand over the phone mike, Reverend Barndoor told the fifty parishioners in the chapel, "My sermon today is entitled *Sex and God through Electricity*. Interestingly enough, that is also the title of . . . Yes, I'm still hanging on. Bishop Briney kidnaped the Associate Minister of Minor Recreations, eh? I see, and you people are covering that. I understand. I was wondering why your mike here was dead." He raised his eyes to the ceiling, cocking his head to look between the revolving cherubs. "Now I notice, your cameras aren't on either. Very well then, I'll say a little prayer for the safe recovery of the Associate Minister. What? No, I don't actually need his full name. Well, if you have it handy." With his hand masking the speaking end of the small pixphone, Barndoor turned again to the people seated in the dozen rows of pews in the Body Electric Church. "As I was saying, *Sex and God through Electricity* is also the title of my forthcoming book, a project on which I am now engaged." He quickly winked at Silvera. "Yes? Well, I'm certain I can do without his name. We'll simply pray for him under his title of Associate Minister. To be on the safe side we can pray for the whole Department of Minor Recreations. Good-by then, God bless you."

A cool hand touched Silvera's. "How are you progressing?"

Silvera smiled at the slender brunette who'd seated herself next to him. "I've got a good working title for the book."

"Reverend Barndoor can be discursive at times," said the lovely girl. She was wearing a sleeveless short-skirted suit of the same hue as Barndoor's robes. "I met you briefly when you arrived last night, Mr. Silvera. Probably you don't recall, since the reverend's reception party for you was a little . . . a little . . ."

"Discursive?"

## Varieties of Religious Experience

"Yes. At any rate, I'm Electronic Nun JG Hulda Pierrepont," explained the long dark girl. "I was sitting on the revolving sofa next to you for a time last evening."

"Was that the one that started spinning too fast?"

"Oh, were you still there when Mr. Sollman got tossed out the window by centrifugal force? Or is it inertia that does that?"

"My dear friends," said Reverend Barndoor, "since many of you have been traveling the fifty weary miles from our capital city of Centro out here to the Body Electric Church for, lo, almost a year now, I need not pause to prove once again the link between God and sex and electricity. No, for you have heard all the proof before. Many of you, a very pleasing percentage, have also participated in evening Body Electric Church sessions involving the Primal Closet and related items of religious hardware. So, therefore, let me begin today's sermon by . . ." Something buzzed inside the pulpit and Barndoor smiled. "Excuse me once again, dear friends." He rolled the sleeves of his yellow robe halfway to his elbows and ducked out of sight.

"You needn't," said the lovely Hulda to Silvera, touching his arm, "jot all this down. I can provide you with a transcript after the service."

"Actually," explained Silvera, "I'm doodling."

Hulda turned the notebook so she could see the open page. "Oh, a little pig with a mustache. Very cute."

"It's supposed to be a cherub." Silvera pointed a thumb at the whirling vinyl cherubs high above.

"Cherubs don't have mustaches."

"That's his mouth."

The lovely girl smiled. "You creative people see things differently. I wish I was."

Reverend Barndoor had a tabletop pixphone sitting sideways

on the pulpit now, and a big blond man showed on the plate-sized screen. "You all of you know my right-hand man, Electronic Brother SG Gay Jacobis. Your call comes in the middle of my sermon, Brother Jacobis."

"Rat's ass," mumbled the blond young man. He inhaled, blinked. "Let me get hold of myself, Rev. Been having a few belts back here in the Electrified Sacristy. There. Feeling fine now. God bless you, Rev, and excuse my rude interruption. Wow! Whoopee! Did you ever drink six Venusian vodka martinis and then sit in one of your Primal Closets with the power turned way up? Yowie! Let me gather myself together. Forgive my festive language and God bless you and all your flock, Rev. Yowie yowie!"

"Did you have some message for me, Brother Jacobis?"

"Call me Gay," said Jacobis, blinking and making yawning motions with his mouth. "Let me organize my thoughts. Ah, yes. Our train has been canceled. You know, our little train for you know where. This afternoon's train has been called off, due to having been blown to smithereens by rebels and malcontents. However, this morning's train is still shipshape. Wowie wow! So we'll have to switch to this earlier train. Can you cut the crapola short?"

"Certainly, Brother Jacobis. I'll meet you in the sacristy shortly."

"What did I ever see in him?" said Hulda quietly.

"Who?" asked Silvera.

"Nothing," answered the lovely girl.

"Fortunately, my friends," announced the reverend after dropping the big pixphone out of sight, "I have a tri-op recording of a sermon quite similar to this one. If Brother Nolan up in Communications Loft will punch it up, I'll make my hasty departure on important church business."



## Varieties of Religious Experience

"What's the number?" called a nasal voice high in the rear of the Body Electric chapel.

"Sermon No. 87." The reverend smiled and gathered up the skirt of his yellow robe.

"What color box is it in?"

"Orange."

"Gee, they all are."

"I'll stop up and help you locate it, Brother Nolan. Meanwhile, our organ will play a hymn."

The robot organ quivered, hesitant.

"Go ahead," said the reverend. "It's all right this time."

As the new electronic hymn filled the chapel, Hulda leaned close to Silvera. "The reason I came looking for you," she said, "is that I just learned Reverend Barndoor has to leave earlier than anticipated. I'm to substitute for him and take you on your guided tour of our facility here. Show you the Research & Design Room and how the Primal Closet works, and so on. I imagine with a whole book to ghostwrite, you'll want to get oriented as soon as you can."

"I'd also like to know," said Silvera, "what material the reverend wants to put in the book."

"Didn't they tell you that when you were hired?"

"No," replied Silvera. "I've been out here on your planet, on Carob, for three months. Doing various free-lance writing assignments. My literary agents, back on Barnum, set up this job with the Body Electric Church. All I know is the book is going to be called *Sex and God through Electricity* and it pays \$3000."

"\$2500," corrected Hulda. "Though I suppose the figure is open to negotiation. Particularly with someone of your reputation. You've written several other books, as I understand it."

"Several," agreed Silvera.

The lovely Hulda poked her toes at the small heap her yellow dress made on the floor of the Research & Design Room. "Darn, this is always happening."

"How frequently?" Silvera was sitting, naked, on the lid of a trunklike electronic device.

"Well," answered the Electronic Nun JG, "only once before actually. When I became involved with Gay Jacobis. I thought it was an infatuation, but now I'm wondering if it isn't simply electricity."

Silvera swung down onto the thermal flooring and retrieved his trousers.

"Not that you aren't attractive, Joe," said Hulda. "I don't know, maybe I should stop demonstrating Reverend Barndoor's electronic devices to people. I seem to lose my head whenever I step inside one of these Primal Closets and throw the switch."

After pulling up his trousers, Silvera said, "Isn't that the purpose? Sex and God through electricity."

The lovely unclothed Hulda reached back and touched the pseudowood door of the electronic cabinet she and Silvera had recently occupied. "I don't feel any too spiritual." She sighed, bent to pick up her yellow lingerie. "Still, if you're going to write a book for Reverend Barndoor, you have to know about all the various religious appliances he's invented. Do you want to try the PrimalTrunk next?"

"Not just yet." Silvera pulled his tunic on over his head.

"It's really pretty much like the Primal Closet except the electric shock is less and the music isn't so loud. Also somewhat more cramped inside." The lovely brunette gestured at the other half-dozen mechanisms sitting around the large room. "I don't even think we can both fit in the Primal Suitcase together. That one's designed for smaller people, petites." Dressed again, she continued. "The basic philosophy of

## Varieties of Religious Experience

Reverend Barndoor is based on an integration of man with the deep forces of nature and the wonders of . . .” She made a sneezing sound and began to cry, head low.

Stepping over the Primal Suitcase, Silvera put an arm around the sobbing girl’s shoulders. “Easy now.”

“Oh, it isn’t postcoital depression. Nor postelectro letdown. No, I’m upset about something else.” She looked at him. “You seem like a man of some integrity, Joe, even though you are a hack.”

Silvera nodded. “Yes.”

“I’m in possession of some knowledge no one is aware I have,” said Hulda. “Now, don’t think because we’ve been recently intimate I suddenly want to load you down with my personal problems. This, though, is more a moral, and somewhat political, problem.”

Silvera guided her over to a Primal Sofa, and, making sure it was turned off, sat her down. “Tell me.”

“Gay Jacobis drinks.”

“I noticed.”

“When he drinks he talks,” she went on. “Having, lord knows why, been fairly close to him until recently, I have heard certain things. My problem is, would it be betraying a confidence to tell what Gay blurted out in a drunken stupor?”

“No.”

“I’ve been debating with myself for several days over this. I even came in and sat alone in the Primal Closet a few times,” she said. “Nothing much happens when I’m inside by myself, though. Except I get a little heat rash around my shins.”

“What Gay Jacobis said has something to do with Reverend Barndoor?”

“Yes, and with another admirable religious figure here in Portada Territory,” said the lovely Hulda. “Gay is going to assassinate Bishop Briney.”

"He can't do that."

"I feel the same way. Even though Bishop Briney is of a different faith and more given to aggressive acts against the government, still I believe him to be an honorable man who has been driven reluctantly underground by our repressive government. His work on behalf of student and labor groups in the territory has been admirable. And his play, *The Unfair Trial of Bishop Briney*, is one of the clandestine hits of the season. I know you agree a man of his character and moral vigor shouldn't be killed."

"I don't care about all that," said Silvera. "I don't want him killed because he still owes me \$1200."

Hulda blinked. "You mean you've done some ghostwriting for Bishop Briney? I didn't realize you could work in more than one faith."

"I doctored the last two acts of his damn play."

"You mean the beautiful curtain speech closing Act II is yours?"

"Most of it."

"A beautiful, and spiritual, piece of writing."

"My agents got me the job while I was back on Barnum," said Silvera. "Somebody out here on Carob thought the play needed patching up and they smuggled it to Barnum. I was supposed to get \$2400."

"You mean you can write beautiful spiritual passages simply for money?"

"I can write anything for money," answered Silvera. "One of the reasons I came to your planet is to collect the remaining \$1200 Bishop Briney owes me. But the bastard's gone underground. I have a rule about always collecting fees."

"Have you been writing other things since you've arrived?"

"Yes. Campaign speeches, a book of lyric poetry aimed exclusively at homosexual lizard men and a series of Gothic

## Varieties of Religious Experience

novels for the 8- to 12-year-old market,” said Silvera. “Get back to Gay Jacobis and how he’s going to kill Briney.”

“Well, Gay isn’t really a disciple of Reverend Barndoor at all. During one of his many stupors, he confided in me he’s actually a plant, a plain-clothes operative for the Portada Territory Secret Police. The dreaded PTSP. I wanted to warn the reverend, but I’ve been brought up to honor the sanctity of the bedroom. It’s been a real moral tussle, these past few days.”

“How is spying on Barndoor going to get him a crack at the bishop?”

“You don’t know this, but Reverend Barndoor is an intimate friend and secret supporter of Bishop Briney,” explained the lovely girl. “Though the reverend isn’t aware the PTSP knows. His trip, the trip he and Gay left on over an hour ago, is really to be a secret visit to Bishop Briney.”

“Why?”

“They’re putting on a benefit performance of *The Unfair Trial of Bishop Briney*,” said Hulda. “Tonight in the bishop’s underground headquarters.”

“Where’s Briney hiding out?”

Hulda hesitated, then said, “Do you know where the Good Food Supermarket Complex is in Centro City?”

“Passed it on the way out here. You mean he’s hiding in a health food store?”

“Underneath. Ours is a very old territory, Joe, and it seems there are ancient catacombs way down below the market complex. Very few people know the catacombs are there, certainly not the secret police.”

“Why are they staging the play now?”

“To raise funds. Apparently Bishop Briney’s scheme to kidnap key men in the territorial government isn’t having the desired effect. So far he’s kidnaped the Assistant Superintend-

ent of Indoor Parks, the Co-Chairman of the Teaching Mechanism Board, the Associate Arbitrator of Agricultural Disputes and the Junior Co-ordinator of Underground Rapid Transit. It hasn't paralyzed the government at all. In fact, the opp . . ."

There was a loud popping noise across the room and a crackling of light. "Here you are, Mr. Silvera," said the plump figure who had materialized, flickeringly. "You've kept me hopping."

Silvera left the girl and walked toward the shimmering image. "Who are you?"

"F. Hugh Hobbs," grinned the plump, forty-three-year-old man. "We met once in Tarragon. Though now I'm with the Carob office of Barnum Credit Mobilier. As you realize, what you're seeing is merely a tri-op Intrusion Projection of me. Right this minute I'm in the main office on Academy Street in the capital. Let me tell you, Mr. Silvera, it takes a real lot of rigmarole to get a permit for one of these intrusion things. Clerks, judges, the works. Then there's all the business of triangulating and tracking your body emanation patterns and focusing the projector."

"Why exactly are you intruding on me?"

The plump Hobbs held up a flickering grey card. "Can you read that?"

"No. It's blurred."

"All the rigmarole and I still come in out of focus," said Hobbs. "What can you expect these days? This card authorizes me to repossess your air cruiser, Mr. Silvera."

"I don't own an air cruiser."

"Yes, you do," said the three-dimensional projection of Hobbs. "It's back on Barnum in a private airdome. Model 8076-22. Purchased three years ago on Barnum, financed

## Varieties of Religious Experience

through our head office there. You still owe \$426 on it, Mr. Silvera, and have for the past several months."

"That cruiser? I sold it a year ago to a guy who writes how-to books. He assumed the payments."

"Not according to our master files, Mr. Silvera. So then, can you pay the \$426 or do we repo?"

"Take it back then."

"We'd settle for \$100 and an agreement, even a handshake agreement, to pay the rest as soon as possible."

"I don't want to shake hands with an optical illusion."

"How about \$50 now and skip the handshake?"

"Nope."

"Very well," said the image of Hobbs. "I'll present your version of the facts to the people here, and they'll recheck with our Barnum office." The plump projection faded away before the last words were out.

"How could they have made such a mistake?" said Hulda, with sympathy.

"They didn't," said Silvera. "I don't have a spare \$426 right now. How is Gay Jacobis planning to do in the bishop?"

"I'm not exactly certain," replied the girl. "He's intending to do it sometime during the performance. You see, Reverend Barndoor usually acts in the role of Misguided Civic Violence whenever he can. So he'll be in the cast, and I don't know where Gay will be."

"Barndoor and Jacobis caught the last train to the city," said Silvera. "I'll have to borrow transportation."

"I've a landcar I can lend you. May I tag along?"

"No," said Silvera.

Silvera parked the borrowed landcar at the edge of a riot. All

around the late afternoon parking area sign-waving men were tangling with the capital city police. Several hundred battling men filled much of the clear space around the vast Good Food Market complex. Dozens more were tussling on the catwalks between the separate domes of the mammoth health food center. Some of the police, the ones in blue and gold uniforms, were mounted and swinging stun rods at the crowd. They rode grouts, the six-legged semi-bovine animal native to the Barnum System of planets.

As Silvera jumped to the pink-tinted ground, a sprawl of rioters came smashing back through the thin see-through fencing of his particular parking section. Mounted police were forcing them backward. The grouts reared, four of their six gold-shoed hooves flashing in the air.

A shaggy cat man in striped overalls tripped into him and his pole sign thunked down on Silvera's dark head. The sign read *Boycott Lotus!*

Snatching the pole as the cat man fell on by him, Silvera swung the sign like a battle-ax and cleared a path for himself.

Ten overalled lizard men were unfurling a banner—*A Fair Deal For Lotus Pickers!*—immediately outside the smashed-in fence. Silvera edged around them and dodged ahead, head down, with the sign held now as a shield.

A thin man in sky-blue coveralls grabbed him. "Into the wagon, mister," he ordered.

"Who are you?"

"A plain-clothes police infiltrator," explained the thin man. "Come on, we want to round up all you dirty lotus pickers."

Silvera swung the pole end of his sign up between the man's coveralled legs and flipped him over into a cluster of punching men.

Silvera ran on. Up closer to the health food markets lotus pickers were hurling handfuls of lotus fruit at the police. The



## Varieties of Religious Experience

foot police were lobbing bright orange ball-shaped containers of pacifying gas back at them.

He backtracked and decided to approach his destination from the rear. According to Hulda there was a hidden entrance down to the catacombs in the storeroom of a place called the Soy Shop. On impulse he suddenly threw himself to the ground and a grout and rider went sailing over him.

Sprawled on the scarlet-tinted paving was a familiar-looking green man. Silvera rolled the dazed man over onto his back. "Senator Sanborn?"

Sanborn's lime-green eyelids flickered. "Associate Senator," he said, coming fully awake. "Oops." The associate senator clutched his middle, then sighed.

"Do you have a stomach injury?"

"Oh, hello, Silvera," said the green man. "Say, those campaign speeches you wrote for me a few months back really did the trick. I won a landslide victory over my opponents. The slogan you coined did it. 'Throw the rascals out!' Every time I waved my riding crop in the air and cried, 'Throw the rascals out!' I could feel the crowd empathizing with me." He rubbed his stomach again, lowered his voice and mumbled something.

Silvera couldn't hear him above the sounds of the riot. "Beg pardon?"

Getting to his knees, the green associate senator said, "I'm on a special hush-hush mission for the Under Treasury. Looks as though I picked a bad time." Sanborn stood, waved a fist at the rioting crowd. "Throw the rascals out!" He shrugged. "It doesn't work every time."

"You have to get their attention first," said Silvera. "Just what sort of secret mission?"

"What did you say?"

"I said, what kind of mission are you on, Senator?"

## ODD JOB #101

"I guess I can trust you, Silvera," the associate senator shouted at Silvera's right ear. "It has to do with Bishop Briney."

A flung sign reading *EAT NO MORE NON-UNION LOTUS!* came spinning, and they both ducked.

"I'm going to see Briney, too."

"I didn't catch that last remark, Silvera."

"I'm here to see Briney, too."

"What a coincidence," yelled the associate senator. "He and his followers are hiding in the ancient catacombs beneath this very shopping area. Then I suppose you know that."

"Yes." Silvera took the associate senator's arm and helped him across this parking section, watching the green man pat his stomach. "Money belt," said Silvera.

"What?"

"You're wearing a money belt, aren't you?"

"Yes," shouted Sanborn. "I'm secretly carrying \$10,000. It's ransom."

"Ransom?"

"For the kidnaped Assistant Superintendent of Indoor Parks, the Co-Chairman of the Teaching Mechanism Board, the Associate Arbitrator of Agricultural Disputes, the Junior Co-ordinator of Underground Rapid Transit and the Associate Minister of Minor Recreations," yelled the associate senator. "Bishop Briney's decided to sell them back to us."

"I thought he was going to hold them until the government was paralyzed."

"He's concluded you can't paralyze the Portada government this way. He keeps kidnaping high officials, and it has no effect. When he snatched the Co-Chairman of Teaching Mechanisms, nobody even noticed for nearly three days."

They were at the far end of the skirmish, nearing a passageway which led to the rear of the complex. "Did you

## Varieties of Religious Experience

know some of your people are planning to assassinate the bishop today?"

Associate Senator Sanborn halted. "No. Whose cockeyed idea is that? Wait, don't tell me. I bet I know. The Portada Territory Secret Police. Am I right?"

"That's who, yes." They moved into the yellow-tinted alleyway.

"Those PTSP guys never think about anything else," said Sanborn. "They're so damned circumspect. They know they're supposed to have senatorial and associate senatorial approval for all their assassinations. We never voted on Bishop Briney. Well, I'll have to warn him when I hand over the cash."

"Stop," said a cat man in crimson overalls. Instead of a sign he carried a silver-barreled blaster rifle. "Step along this way and into the Soy Shop." He was standing at the passageway's end, his rifle aimed at them. "We need a few more hostages. It helps later when we have to bargain with the police."

"I have an urgent . . ." began Sanborn, then stopped himself.

"We're certainly getting a lot of well-dressed middle-class hostages today," observed the lotus picker as he urged them into the Soy Shop.

A tall, forty-three-year-old blonde was whispering to Silvera. "I can't be too explicit because we're under guard, but are you here for the you-know-what?" She pointed one finger cautiously at the floor of the storeroom.

"Which you-know-what?" said Silvera. There were five hostages beside himself and the associate senator in here behind the Soy Shop, all guarded by a lizard man in overalls.

"The bishop's you-know-what."

"Yes." Hulda the Electronic Nun had told him one of the entrances down to the ancient catacombs was in this room.

"We have aisle seats," said the blonde woman, nodding at her green husband. "It's nearly 7:20, almost time for the curtain to rise on the you-know-what. I'm really very anxious to see this particular you-know-what. It got rave reviews over in Vibora Territory. As I recall, the critic on the *Vibora Bulletin* called it, 'One of the great you-know-whats of our generation.' Have you seen it before?"

"I wrote the last two what-you-may-call-its," he told her and moved to a new position in the room.

Associate Senator Sanborn had been trying again to talk their lotus-picker guard into letting them go. He came back to Silvera, shaking his head. "Can you imagine? He insists the rioting is still going on out there. Three hours and . . ." he checked his watch ". . . twenty-three minutes. A long time for a riot."

"Maybe they're trying for a record." In the right-hand corner of the room stood a large safe. Hulda had told him it was a dummy which would swing aside to allow them to use a stairway leading down to where Bishop Briney and his followers were hiding. "I wonder if he'll put on the play tonight at all."

"Probably so. There are two other secret ways besides this one to get down there, and I don't believe the rioting has closed them."

Silvera reached up and rested one large hand on a shelf near his shoulder. It was stacked with bubble containers of Soy Cafe. "Gay Jacobis is going to make a try for the bishop during *The Unfair Trial of Bishop Briney*, meaning he'll be doing it any minute now."

"Usually the curtain on these plays is delayed a few minutes," said the associate senator. "Even so, time is fast

## Varieties of Religious Experience

running out.” He shook his green head. “I wouldn’t try to rush the guard, Silvera. He tells me he’s won several scrolls for sharpshooting at recent lotus-pickers picnics.”

There was a loud popping explosion to the immediate left of the guard and a crackling of light. “Why can’t you ever stay put, Mr. Silvera?” asked the projection of F. Hugh Hobbs.

The lizard man guard whirled to face the newly materialized credit man. He swung his rifle to cover the image.

Silvera grasped one of the two-pound bubbles of soy coffee and tossed it straight at the lizard man. When the bubble smacked into the guard’s scaly temple, Silvera was on him. He chopped two flat-hand blows against his blue-green neck and then yanked his rifle from his grip.

The big guard made a protesting *oof* and slumped down hard on the rose-tinted flooring.

Silvera flipped the guard over on his front, twisted his arms behind his neck and tied the wrists together with strips of synthetic cloth ripped from the lizard man’s overalls. He gagged him and then trussed up his booted feet.

“Have I come at an inopportune time?” asked the flickering Hobbs. “I thought I’d hit you now and not mess up your dinner hour. It turns out, Mr. Silvera, you do indeed owe on that air cruiser. I guess you were trying to jolly me into . . .”

Silvera pulled Sanborn over to him and jerked the green man’s pullover tunic up out of his trousers. He unzipped a pouch in the grout-hide money belt and grabbed out a handful of cash. “One hundred, two hundred, three hundred, five hundred, seven hundred, nine hundred, eleven hundred, twelve hundred,” he said, stuffing the rest of the cash back into the associate senator’s pouch.

“Silvera?” said Sanborn, tucking his tunic into his trousers. “If you’re a little short of cash, I can maybe help you out. This money I’m carrying is a sacred trust.”

Silvera unfolded \$450 from the money he'd taken. "Here's some money, Hobbs. Can you collect it from where you are?"

"Sure thing," grinned the plump Hobbs. "Put it on what looks to be my hand, and it'll be in the active teleporting range. I can even repo a fairly heavy truck by teleportation."

After the cash had popped away, Silvera said, "Let's save Bishop Briney's life so he can vouch for the \$1200 payment."

Hobbs faded away, and Silvera and Sanborn ran for the fake safe.

"I see they've redecorated the catacombs considerably," remarked the associate senator as he and Silvera jogged along a twisting underground corridor. "I don't know as I care for the color . . ." He fell forward, skidded on hands and knees into a white-washed stone wall. The green man had tripped over a pair of feet extending from a low alcove.

The feet were tangled in the skirt of a yellow robe. Silvera tugged at them, and the Reverend Barndoor came sliding into view. He was unconscious, breathing through his mouth, bound with electric cords and wires. "Gay Jacobis must have done this," said Silvera.

From a distance, somewhere ahead of them, came the sound of applause. "Curtain time. The first act will be awkward, won't it? Since the reverend here is supposed to be playing the part of Misguided Civic Violence."

Silvera snapped his fingers, straightened. "Gay Jacobis is going to take over the role. It'll give him a chance to get close to the bishop with a gun."

"The play's symbolic. The gun won't be real in the confrontation between Bishop Briney and Civic Violence."

"It'll be real tonight." Silvera left the green associate senator and went running toward the applause. Under his arm he still

## Varieties of Religious Experience

carried the blaster rifle he'd taken from their lotus-picker guard.

Silvera found he was approaching a circular theater area from the left. Out on the stage Bishop Briney, a large heavy-fleshed man of fifty, was wrestling with Temptation. Temptation was played by a pretty black girl of twenty. Urban Corruption and Local Graft were waiting in the shadows to the left of the elevated stage. Silvera didn't see Gay Jacobis anywhere.

Stopping for a moment close to the stage, Silvera then pushed the two actors aside and leaped over the footlights.

Bishop Briney, astride the fallen Temptation, glanced up. "Bless me, it's Silvera the writer."

In a rough approximation of the heavy bishop's burry voice Silvera cried out, "A worse tyranny than that is the unleashed anarchy of Misguided Civic Violence."

From stage right Gay Jacobis came stumbling. "Whoopee," he said. "I guess I'm woozier than I figured. I didn't think I was supposed to enter for a good five minutes yet. Yowie. Never ignore a cue, first rule of the theater." He lifted the real blaster pistol he held in his hand, pointing at the still-kneeling bishop.

Silvera squeezed the trigger of his rifle, and it sizzled once. The pistol flipped from the blond police assassin's grasp.

"Yowie," said Jacobis, hopping madly.

"Bravo, bravo," called the audience. "Brilliant theater."

"It looks like we've missed a good part," said the forty-three-year-old blonde woman as she and her green husband began hunting for seats.

"I owe you my life," said Bishop Briney, rising.

"No, you owe me \$1200," said Silvera. "Which I've already collected."





7

---

Odd Job #101



**H**E WAS in the middle of the piano medley when the chimpanzee came over and asked to sit in. Jake Pace was at the Fats Waller sequence so he didn't have a hand free to swat the chimp off the piano bench. "Go away, Rollo," he suggested out of the side of his mouth.

Rollo held his metallic slate up, fished magnet-backed plastic word shapes out of the plyosack round his neck. He slapped a sentence on the board. "You need some help with that left hand, buster."

Jake was a long lean man of thirty-four, with a long bony face and a typical 1995 haircut. He and the white piano and the chimp were on a slowly revolving dias on the two-acre back lawn of Lorenzo Mostarda's New Westport estate. Roughly two hundred of the six hundred and eighty guests at this Sunday afternoon fund-raising party for the Republican-Democrats were scattered nearby listening to Jake play. This included fourteen Venusian lizard men and eight or nine Martian cat men.

As Jake segued into the Tatum sequence he asked the shaggy brown chimpanzee, "What are you doing here anyway, Rollo? You're a Democrat-Republican."

The chimp stuck new magnetic word symbols to his slate. "Oy," he said, "are you murdering *Sweet Lorraine!*"

Lorenzo Mostarda, the handsome grey-haired conductor of the Manhattan Robot Symphony, hopped gracefully onto the dias. "They must be looking for you in Washington, D.C. about now, Rollo." He made a grab at the chimpanzee.

Rollo, by stepping on the keyboard, leaped up atop the white piano.

The R-D supporters applauded, gave out awed sighs as Jake interpolated the chimp's footed chord into his tune.

"Beautiful, Jake, beautiful," said Lorenzo. "You really ought to think seriously about giving up the private detective work and devoting yourself full time to your music."

"I'm too eclectic to settle for one thing, Larry." Jake had reached the Thelonious Monk section and he commenced slapping his foot on the noryl plastic planks of the slow-turning dias.

Lorenzo, the host for this afternoon's fund raising fete, turned his attention again to Rollo. "Be a sport, won't you? Get off there."

"They didn't treat me like this in New Rio this A.M.," replied Rollo via his slate and bag of word symbols.

The conductor's eyebrows rose. "So you were there, eh? On the wheat deal?"

"Wheat was part of it," admitted Rollo. "However, I also set up a pretty nifty agreement on bananas. That's what this country needs more of. Bananas. You bet. For details you'll have to watch my press conference tonight, buster."

"Exactly." Lorenzo stretched, making another attempt to clutch the chimp. "You shouldn't be dawdling in Connecticut, you should be jetting to Washington."

"The President isn't in Washington, dopey," Rollo told him. "That's the trouble with you Republican-Democrats, unlike us Democrat-Republicans, you never know what's up. That's why I like to crash your functions, to fill you in. President Amberson is at the summer White House in Topeka. He won't be in Washington until tomorrow."

"This is October. Don't tell me he's . . . ?"

"Topeka is now the official autumn White House, too. Relax, jocko."

Jake had reached the Crippled Clarence Lofton portion of the piano styles medley, meaning he was two and a half minutes from the finish. As the piano passed his lovely, willowy red-haired wife down on the vast lawn he grinned at her.

Hilda Pace, five feet ten and a month past thirty, smiled back. A serving android was standing at her side, fixing her a vegetable juice cocktail. The android said something, which caused Hilda to frown suddenly.

The revolving dias took him out of visual range at this point. Jake switched from Lofton to Bud Powell and slammed into the end of his piano stint. Amid considerable applause, especially from the raspy-handed lizard men, Jake rose up and grinned his bony grin. "I'll handle him, Larry." He jumped to the top of the big white piano in an instant. He touched the chimp's neck, utilizing his knowledge of anthropoid anatomy, and put Rollo into a temporary state of paralysis.

Rollo had managed to slap one final word symbol onto his metal slate before he froze. "Schmuck!"

Scanning the small crowd, Jake spotted the National Security Office agent who must be bird-dogging Rollo. The man was in drag, not too deftly disguised in a grey wig and a grandmotherly jumpsuit. "Catch," Jake said, tossing first the chimp and then the slate.

On the believable synthgrass again, Jake strode quickly to the side of his lovely willowy wife. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing really," she said, touching his hand with hers. "We got offered a job, is all."

"By that andy?"

"Not an andy. He's an agent with the Republican-Democrat party's Security Wing."

"Huh," remarked Jake. "Not a bad disguise. Better than the Democrat-Republicans can come up with. That NSO guy's wig was even askew."

"The SW guy told me he sprayed himself with machine oil right before coming here."

"It's the little touches that make all the difference," said Jake, nodding. "What's the case?"

"Has something to do with President Amberson." Hilda sipped at her purplish glass of vegetable juice. "He'll fill you in if you're interested."

Studying the party crowd with narrowed eyes, Jake asked, "What's the fee?"

"\$25,000. Half in front."

Jake grimaced. "Not so good."

"They're on a tight budget, being out of power and all," said the lovely Hilda. "He appealed to our liberal-orientation and basic patriotism."

"Still," said Jake. "\$25,000. Can't SW swing at least \$40,000?"

Hilda shook her head, causing her long red hair to flash in the autumn sunlight. "He says nope. But why don't you talk to him, Jake? I told him you were the one who made the decisions, even though I am an equal partner in Odd Jobs, Inc."

Absently, Jake was stroking his wife's smooth bare shoulder. "I suppose if we could handle it in a couple of days . . . President Amberson and that damn chimp of his. Did you notice what Rollo was saying about my walking bass?"

"Yep," said Hilda. "But what does a chimpanzee know? Even one with a vocabulary of four thousand words."

"This late in the damn Twentieth Century he's lucky to find anybody who can play Harlem stride piano at all," said

Jake. "Okay, we may as well take the job. Where is the SW agent now?"

"Bottom of the indoor swimming pool."

"Oh, so?"

"He says you dive in, knock thrice on the sixteenth pool bottom tile from the left-hand ten-foot marker and a trap door will open."

"And all the water will woosh out of the pool."

"Nope, they've got an airlock arrangement. Lorenzo built it three years ago when he first got interested in political action."

"I'll put on a swim suit."

"No need, the indoor pool is nude swimming. Remember?"

"Right, I forgot." He kissed her on the cheek. "Wait around." Jack hurried across the crisp imitation lawn, went up the realmarble steps to the natatorium two at a time. He took off his clothes, climbed to the high board, executed a perfect double jack-knife and swam down to the bottom of the pool for his rendezvous with their new client.

Flying back through the October dusk to their West Redding home and office complex, Jake played his wife an edited video tape of his underwater interview with Kane Bunshaft, the nervous thirty-year-old agent for the opposition party's Security Wing. Jake always carried a microminiaturized taping unit in his armpit.

"He looked better as an android," remarked Hilda, twisting a finger through her auburn hair as she watched the tape on one of the monitor screens on their aircruiser dash.

Jake had set their blue ship on an automatic course for home and was mixing himself a glass of fresh tomato juice and brewers yeast. "He hadn't had time to wash all the machine oil

## ODD JOB #101

off," he said. "I've edited the thing down to essentials. So you can get the gist of it without all the filigrees and twitches."

On the screen the small blond Bunshaft was saying, "Golly, Jake—may I call you Jake?—golly, Jake, you sure play a wicked piano. I mean, I've seen andys programmed to recreate piano masters of the past, but never have these old eyes witnessed such a display of keyboard artistry from a living breathing human being. Your left hand work during the James P. Johnson tune was simply . . ."

"Some essential information." Hilda looked out into the oncoming night and at the artificial pines and birches two thousand feet below.

"I left this in to prove that stupid chimpanzee is a minority voice," replied her husband.

Agent Bunshaft scratched his tousled head. "That nitwit monkey sure came close to fouling up your act, Jake—you did say I could call you Jake, didn't you?—It makes one wonder what this country is coming to. President Amberson now has this chimpanzee as his special presidential advisor. It's disheartening. I thought we had grounds for an impeachment when Amberson came back from Topeka with Rollo this past spring, but the polls indicate the public doesn't feel it's so very odd. In fact, they think Amberson's new affection for animals enhances his image, makes him warmer and more human."

"Does the case you want to hire Odd Jobs, Inc. for have anything to do with Rollo?" came Jake's voice.

"Right at this point we think maybe so, Jake," continued Bunshaft. "The thing is, we'd like you to look into the President Amberson situation. The Security Wing can't directly go into some of these matters. I would have thought we could, but the latest polls indicate no, so what are you going to do? Anyway, Jake, here's the problem. You're aware, of course, there's always been trouble about President Amber-



son's mental health. You recall last year right after the election he started to roam the capital at night wearing a black cloak, striking out at people with a gold-headed cane and calling himself Lloyd Dirt."

"Jekyll-Hyde syndrome."

"Precisely. Well, the Democrat-Republicans hustled him off to the Svengali Institute in Topeka and fixed him up. At least the polls showed the public thought Amberson was his old self again. But, golly, Jake, he's had to go back there to Topeka several times because he got to thinking he was Dirt again. The trip before last he came back with this intelligent chimp old Dr. Clayhanger, director of the Svengali Institute, had trained. And you know the rest."

"Except what you want Odd Jobs, Inc. for."

"Did you feel a few drops of water dripping down on us just then?"

"Nope."

"Must be my imagination. I've never been under so much water before. Well, where was I? Okay, here's what we want you and your wife to do—did I mention how really beau. . . . This then is the job."

Hilda said, "You cut something there."

"Nothing important. Keep listening."

"We have reason to believe," Bunshaft said on the screen, "someone at the Svengali place is having a strange influence on the President. In recent weeks, as you know, Amberson has come out in favor of relaxing the quota system for Venusians wishing to enter this country. Not only has he had a kind word for the lizard men, he's made congratulatory phone calls to such paramilitary fringe groups and Venusian supporters as the League of Women Assassins. We suspect these drastic policy changes are a result of what's been done to him each time he visits Topeka. We want you to get inside the Svengali

operation and see what's what, Jake. Further, we want you to find out more about Rollo. We have a hunch there's more to that chimp than meets the eye. Can you . . . you're sure you didn't feel another drip of water?"

Hilda snapped the sound off all at once. "Suspicious aircraft off our right wing, Jake."

Putting on a pair of night goggles, Jake turned to scan the twilight. "Yeah, they're riding us much too close. Get away, folks!" He made a shoo gesture at the black aircruiser which was flying a few yards from them. "Huh, that's odd."

"What?"

"They've got one-way plastic in their cockpit. You can't see in at all."

Hilda happened to glance at the still-running film on the monitor screen. "Why are you two swimming now?"

"Turns out he was right about the roof leaking," said Jake. "Here comes a wing walker out of that ship over there. Hey, it must be another NSO agent. Look at the cockeyed wig."

"Don't let that fool you," said Hilda, who had her night goggles on now, too. "That's a real old lady lugging that sonic gun. The wig is to throw us off."

Jake spun out of his seat, grabbed something out of a large chest at the rear of the compartment. "Going up on the roof."

"Better wear suction boots," his wife suggested.

"Like that old broad on the wing? Hah." Jake pulled himself up toward the ceiling, then went out the safety hatch escape tube onto the pseudochrome roof of their aircruiser. Under his arm he carried a crossbow. "Begone, granny," he called at the balancing old woman with the sonic gun.

The October wind carried his voice away into the darkening sky. The old woman took two more careful steps along the black wing, after which she knelt to aim her weapon.

"Nope." Jake fitted a bolt to the bow and fired.

The wig popped off the head of the old woman as the crossbow bolt dug into her left thigh. The impact broke the grip of the shoes. Both her hands went up over her head and the gun spun away. She looked like a cheerleader in the instant before she fell.

"Huh, no chute," observed Jake, watching her plummet. "No safety suit either. Must have been depending on those dumb shoes." He waved at the black ship with its masked windows. "Go away now," he suggested. Keeping his eyes on the ship, Jake made his way back inside the aircruiser.

"They're going," said Hilda, taking his hand. "Who were they do you think?"

"League of Women Assassins," he said as he carefully packed the crossbow away. "Which means we've got an information leak already. They must know Bunshaft and his people have hired us." •

"If it's LWA they may simply be trying to take us out for old times' sake," said his wife. "We've crossed with them before."

"Unlikely. They're very pro-Venusian." Jake slumped into the seat next to Hilda, put his steepled fingers under his chin. "We'll have to be doubly cautious on this case."

"We always are," she reminded him.

"Triply then, this time." His sharp chin tapped against his forefingers. "I'll handle the Topeka end of things. You check out Rollo."

"Sure you don't want Rollo?"

"Yep. We're too far apart esthetically."

Hilda smiled at him. "Why'd you use a crossbow on that old assassin lady? A short range stun gun would have worked equally as well in keeping her from vibrating our cruiser to pieces."

"Felt like using a crossbow."

“Grandstanding.”

“Don’t start sounding like that damn chimpanzee,” Jake told her.

Two United States senators carried Jake through the portals of the Svengali Institute. The mechanized therapy center was built in the center of an enormous flat field of decorative wheat and consisted of seventeen large colored cube buildings connected by noryl tubes.

Dr. Clayhanger was ninety years old, fifty-two inches high and he had wheels where most people have feet. He came rolling down along a rippled ramp to greet the senators, both members of the Republican-Democrat party who sat on important agriculture and mental health committees. “Close the blooming door,” the doctor said. “That aroma of dry grass wafting in here always gives me the sniffles.”

“It shouldn’t,” said the senator who had Jake’s feet. “It’s 97% allergent free.”

“So you say,” said the old doctor. He had a silver tongue depressor where most people have a left hand. This implement he waved at the rigid body of Jake. “We’re jampacked as it is. Why’d you zooks go pulling strings to get this guy in here?”

“This is Procter Nimm II,” explained the senator who had Jake’s shoulders and was a part-time agent for the Security Wing. “A very important man in the capital. His family, as I don’t have to tell you, is very big in synthetics.”

“So I hear.” Dr. Clayhanger’s right hand was a stethoscope. He rolled alongside Jake, tapped his chest and listened. “What’s supposed to be wrong with this zook?”

“Mystical catatonia,” said the senator at the foot end of Jake. “The best people in D.C. can’t do a thing.”

“Wouldn’t be suprised.” Clayhanger scrutinized Jake’s face,

which he'd built up with synthflesh until he was a highly convincing facsimile of the Nimm heir. "Catatonics are usually limp."

"Not mystical ones," said the senator at the other end.

"Don't tell me my business." The small-sized old doctor poked at Jake's semi-false nose with his silver depressor. "Nice nose. I used to have one like this, but I replaced it." He tapped his prominent nose and it made a metallic chime sound. "I'm 62% spare parts at the last count. With any luck I'll live to be ninety."

"You are ninety," said the senator at Jake's feet.

"Don't tell me my business," said Clayhanger. "Well, so long as you bully-boyed your way into these hallowed halls you may as well leave him. My machines will fix him up good."

"We sincerely appreciate this," said both senators.

The head end one asked, "What shall we do with him?"

"Drop him."

"Right here on the ramp?"

"As good a place as any. My gadgets'll come and fetch him eventually."

"Just drop him?"

"Like I said."

The two senators let Jake fall to the floor. In his self-induced trance state he felt nothing at all.

Two days later in the nation's capital Hilda Pace carried a steaming cauldron of kelp porridge into the presidential breakfast nook in the East Wing of the White House.

"About time," said Rollo, who was seated at the head of the round white dining table. "I've got to be in Arizona this P.M. for the dedication ceremonies at the canyon."

Except for the three secret service gunmen seated at strategic spots around the table, there was no one else at breakfast this crisp October morning. "Shall I wait until Mr. Amberson comes down before serving?" asked Hilda in a highly convincing Finnish accent. With a minimum of aid from Agent Bunshaft she'd been able to infiltrate the White House staff two days earlier and acquire the frequently vacant position of head chef.

"Skip it," said Rollo with his magnetic word symbols. "Old gearloose is already enroute to . . ."

"Ixnay," warned the bulky secret service man nearest the presidential advisor chimp. "No one must know the President's exact route."

"We can surely trust this bimbo," replied Rollo. "She's obviously got a brain no larger than a butter bean."

Down the table from the shaggy Rollo another bulky secret service man put a thick finger to his lips. "Mum's the word, Rollo."

"Oy," said Rollo.

"I assume," said Hilda, "that the rest of the secret service boys are all off protecting our President, wherever he may be."

"Right you are," said the bulky operative nearest her.

"Good." She moved one slender hand over the porridge pot. A few tiny grains of powder flickered down from the Finnish sorority ring she was wearing as part of her highly plausible disguise. Smiling affably, Hilda plumped the steaming cauldron on the breakfast table.

In a little over three seconds the bulky trio of secret service men had toppled forward into their places, the nearest one cracking his patriotic motif mush bowl.

"What the . . . ?" exclaimed Rollo on his slate.

Hilda deftly removed the miniature see-through gas mask

from her nostrils. "I want to have a little talk with you, Rollo. Look here at this medallion round my neck."

"You have awfully small . . ." began the chimp before his hands slowed.

"See it spinning around and around?"

"My my. It's a tiny silver banana. What I wouldn't give to . . ." The chimpanzee slumped in his chair, his eyes flapping shut.

Swiftly moving to his side, Hilda, who was even better than her husband at animal mesmerism, told the chimp, "You're going to answer my questions."

"Yes, ma'am," replied the entranced presidential advisor on his slate.

"Where is the President?"

"You mean the real President?"

Hilda blinked. "There's more than one?"

"Sure, sister. Ever since six weeks ago. You see, Doc Clayhanger decided it was too much trouble to plant all those post-hypnotic suggestions in the prez. Besides which . . . wait while I clear my slate. There we go. Besides which, the Lloyd Dirt side of Amberson's personality was getting awfully strong. It took the combined efforts of the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Agriculture to keep him from wearing his Lloyd Dirt cloak during his last fireside chat on TV."

"So who's pretending to be Amberson?"

"Nobody. It's a simulacra," explained the dazed chimp. "Really believable, isn't it? Doc Clayhanger built it in the android works in his basement in Topeka."

"And what's your real job?"

"Originally I was programmed to keep Amberson in line and make reports to the doc. Now I'm merely window dressing."

"Who's behind this plot?"

"Oh, the Venusians. They're not at all happy with the quota system. Do you realize there are something over eighty million of them crowded into the one habitable territory on that hothouse planet of theirs. They all want to come to Earth. And especially the United States, which to most Venusians is the promised land."

"Where is Clayhanger keeping the real Amberson?"

"Got him locked up in the incorrigible ward of the Svengali Institute," said Rollo. "He doesn't want anything to spoil today."

"What's today?"

"Columbus Day."

"So?"

"The President, our version of the President, is dedicating that new outdoor art work at the Grand Canyon in a few hours," explained the chimp. "During his speech he'll announce the relaxation of all quotas for Venusians. A red letter day."

"I'll have to put a stop to that."

"By the way," added Rollo with his magnetic word symbols. "I don't know who you're working for, so I don't know how your list of priorities and loyalties runs. But . . ."

"Go ahead."

"Well, I thought you might want to take a crack at saving the guy you people, or somebody, sent into doc's place. He is yours, isn't he?"

Hilda inhaled. "What about him?"

"Doc Clayhanger tumbled to him. Seems the guy's false nose melted during a steam room encounter session."

"He's still in Topeka?"

"But not for long," said Rollo. "They're going to drop him



into the canyon right before the festivities. Make it look like an accident, a protest thing that got out of hand."

"Okay, that's enough," Hilda told him. "I've got to get going."

"Made up your mind who you're going to rescue first, the prez or the agent?"

"No question in my mind," the lovely Hilda answered. "Now I'm going to tell you some things I want you to do for me when you come out of your trance."

Ten minutes later she was racing to the Washington jetport in a borrowed aircycle.

The largest American flag Jake, or anyone else, had ever seen was stretched all the way across the Grand Canyon.

"A real work of art," remarked the small Dr. Clayhanger.

"It brings a lump even to my throat," said the scaley green Venusian ambassador with their group at the canyon's edge. "And I'm extraterrestrial."

"Lovely," added Jake, who'd been given a docility drug.

The six men surrounding him were a hundred yards from the speakers' stand and the numerous rows of bleachers. The President was due to arrive in fifteen minutes to dedicate this mammoth new work of outdoor art. Several thousand people were already seated at the canyon rim in anticipation.

Clayhanger had replaced his tongue depressor with a fat marking pen. He was in the process of lettering a large protest slogan on the sandwich board he'd hung round the docile Jake's neck. "There, now. 'Withdraw U.S. Troops From Bolivia!' Very good, terse and to the point."

The lizard man cleared his throat. "Far be it from me to carp. Do you think, though, the Bolivia business is sufficient cause for flinging one's self into the Grand Canyon?"

"He's supposed to be goofy." The little doctor rolled a few feet back from Jake to admire his work. "It's sufficient motivation for somebody who's goofy. Trust me."

"I only thought perhaps we ought to use a sentiment more appropriate to our surroundings," said the greenish Venusian. "Some tie-in perhaps with the Indian question. How about . . . 'Don't Screw The Navajo'?"

"No," replied the cyborg doctor. "'Withdraw U.S. Troops From Bolivia!' is most exactly the right touch."

Pointing with one dry green hand, the lizard man said, "We have two sides to the signboard. I don't see why one little slogan about the plight of the Navajo wouldn't look good on the backside. Or are you intending to leave that absolutely blank?"

Snorting, Clayhanger wheeled around behind Jake to rapidly write "Withdraw U.S. Troops From Bolivia!" on that side of the placard, too.

Jake all this time had been calling on his extensive Yoga training to expel the effects of the docility drug from his system. He was having some luck and already had his left leg and the toes of his right foot back under his control.

"He's ready." Dr. Clayhanger turned to two of his orderlies. "I'm going up to the reviewing stand with the ambassador here. When I give you the old nod you give this zook the word to take a leap for himself." He rolled off.

Slowly, as he stood in the hot Arizona afternoon, Jake was getting control of his body again.

"Looks like the front runner of the presidential motorcade," remarked one of the orderlies as he nodded at a cloud of dust fast approaching.

"I imagine the motorcade will consist of more than one motorcycle," said his companion.

The dust cloud wasn't heading for the reviewing stand. It was, instead, billowing directly toward them.

"This could be trouble!" said one of the two orderlies as he snatched a stungun from under his tunic.

"Hah," said Jake, who now had control of both his legs. He jumped, slightly encumbered by the protest signboard, and expertly kicked the pistol out of the man's hand.

The dust cloud was upon them. Off the seat of the motorcycle at the cloud's center Hilda came flying. The cycle kept going, bowling into the man Jake had recently kicked.

Hilda gave the other one two expert chops beside the head, causing him to spreadeagle on the hot ground.

The cycle went sailing over the rim of the canyon. The other orderly was still tangled in the handlebars and he went with it.

Jake had control of his shoulders. He shrugged off the signboard. "Appreciate this," he said to his lovely wife.

Hilda kissed his cheek. "You know about the simulacra switch?"

"Yep. Found out right before old Clayhanger tumbled to me."

"I understand your nose melted."

"It wasn't quite that obvious. Matter of fact . . ."

"There's the fake President android arriving," cut in Hilda. "And there's Rollo on the stand exactly as I told him."

"You got friendly with the chimpanzee?"

"While your nose was melting, yes," replied Hilda. "Now watch."

They were moving along the canyon edge toward the festooned stand.

As the smiling President Amberson simulacra mounted the steps Rollo jumped up from his chair. The chimp ran toward

the imitation President, digging one hand into his word sack. A few feet short of his goal Rollo seemed to trip. A handful of word symbols flickered through the afternoon air.

"Hey, look at that," exclaimed an AP-UPI reporter.

"What's it mean?" a news cameraman wanted to know.

Most of Rollo's magnetized words were stuck to the front of the President. "I think I can explain this, folks," he began, plucking at the words.

"He's an android," called Hilda through cupped hands. "With a metal body. The real President Amberson is being held at the Svengali Institute."

Considerable activity broke out on the reviewing stand. Dr. Clayhanger tried to roll off the back, the secret service tried to stop him. Reporters were tapping at the President, getting bonging sounds.

Agent Bunshaft came free of the chaos and bounded up to Jake and Hilda. "Congratulations," he said, holding out his hand to Jake.

Not quite having control of his right hand yet, Jake merely grinned at the blond SW man.

"Of course this isn't exactly what we expected, but I think, all in all, you've done the Republican-Democrat party and the country at large a great service, Mr. and Mrs. Pace."

"Do you have the check for the rest of the fee?" asked Jake.

"Golly, no, but I can assure you it'll be in the mail to you two first thing tomorrow. Excuse me now, I've got to make a statement to the press boys."

Hilda was jotting something in an old-fashioned notebook. "Do you know what case this was?"

"Nope." Jake turned his back on the canyon, the enormous flag and the crowds.

"Our hundred and first," she said. "Don't you think maybe we ought to celebrate?"

"Wait until we get the check."



SAN MATEO CITY PUBLIC LIBRARY



3 9047 00040676 5

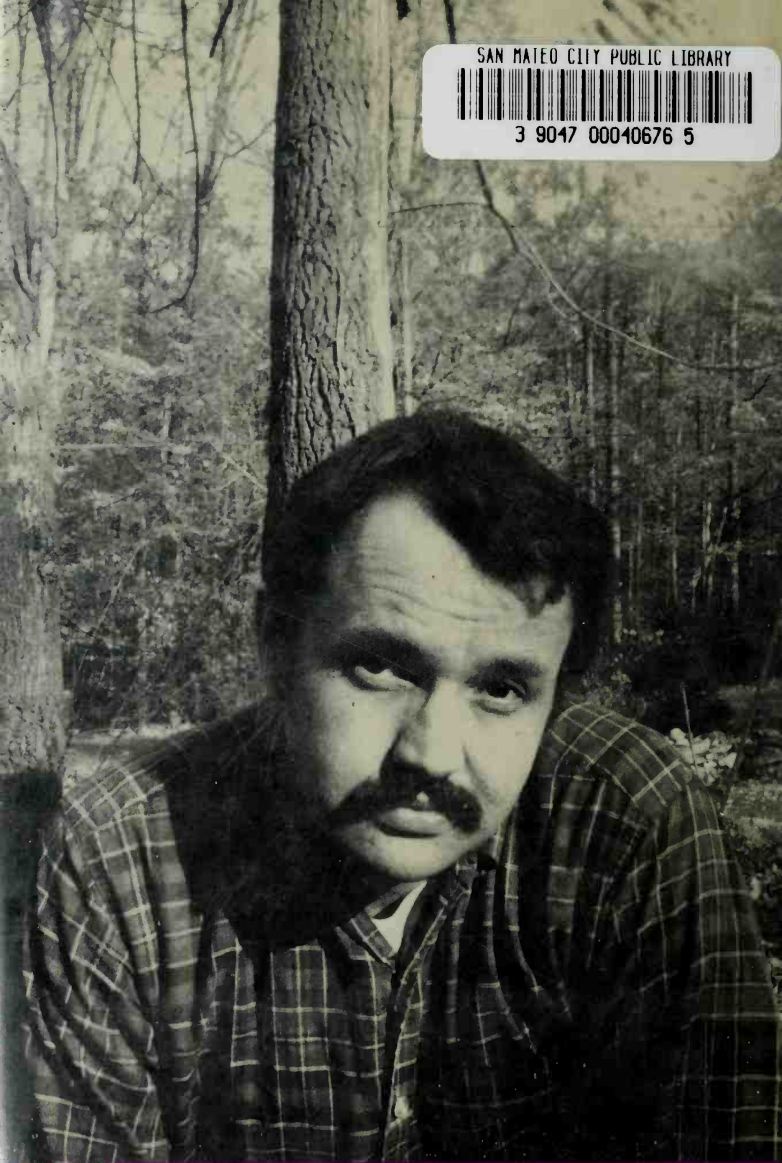


PHOTO: FRAN GOULART

004-1 1990-0