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FIRST BOOK PUBLICATION

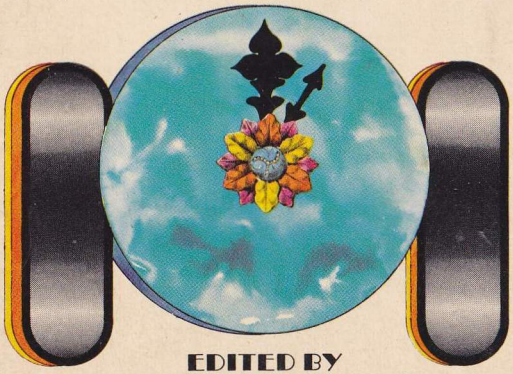
THE "CECIL CORWIN" STORIES OF

C.M. KORNBLUTH

A GREAT SCIENCE FICTION MASTER

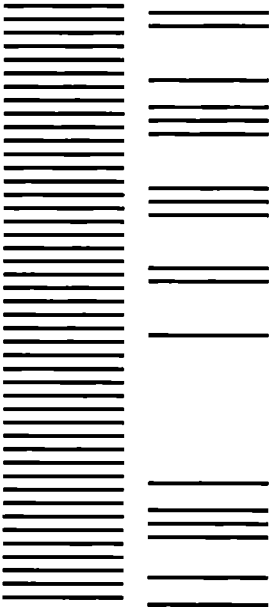
THIRTEEN O'CLOCK

AND OTHER ZERO HOURS



EDITED BY

JAMES BLISH



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THIRTEEN O'CLOCK

AND OTHER ZERO HOURS

C. M. KORNBLUTH

writing as

"Cecil Corwin"

Edited by James Blish

A DELL BOOK

to MARY—
of course

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PREFACE

In the very first years of the 1940s, the late C. M. Kornbluth, who was not only a master of many kinds of writing but also almost incredibly prolific, turned out eight delicious fantasies under the pen name of "Cecil Corwin." These pieces appeared in low-paying, short-lived magazines, such as *Stirring Science Stories* and *Cosmic Stories,* and very few of them have ever been reprinted, even in Kornbluth's own short-story collections—perhaps in part because few anthologists even know where to look for them.

I am delighted to be able to redress this injustice, however belatedly. The Corwin fantasies are all gorgeously imaginative and witty—even the shortest of them has a bite like a coral snake—but they have something else, too, which was rare in Kornbluth's other work. It is hard to characterize this special quality, but if pressed, I should be tempted to call it joy.

The best-remembered of these little-known *jeux d' esprit* are the two stories about the bemused but resourceful Peter and Almarish Packer, which have a wild Carrollian logic nobody else since Lewis Carroll himself has ever approached. (An exception might be made for James Branch Cabell's "The Nightmare Had Triplets," but regardless of Cabell's intentions, this trilogy is pure Cabell, not Carrollian at all.) Though I may be struck by lightning for it, I will say that I think the Packer stories superior to some of Carroll's own fiction: for example, "Sylvie and Bruno." I think this is true despite a few small stylistic blemishes in this very early work which Cyril outgrew later: that is, a slight tendency toward said-bookism, and some conventional pulp reactions which vanish about halfway through the first chapter. Above all, these stories,

like most of the other Corwin pieces, are genuinely, unsentimentally funny, which is an attribute painfully difficult to find in the science-fiction and fantasy field as a whole.

These two stories appeared separately as "Thirteen O'Clock" and "Mr. Packer Goes to Hell," but with only slight editing they merge smoothly into one continuous and mountingly hilarious narrative, which is the way they are presented in this book. This did not prove possible to do for the two stories about Cyril's soldier of fortune, Lt. J. C. Battle, but at least I have offered them here in the order in which they were written.

The first Battle story appeared with the notation "by Cecil Corwin (author of 'Thirteen O'Clock,' 'The Fly-by-Nights,' etc.)." There is no Corwin story called "The Fly-by-Nights"; Cyril was fond of this title, his editor of the period anything but, and he kept putting it on each new Corwin story he submitted. Then came the appearance of "The Reversible Revolutions" with its underline. "Now," said the editor, "you *can't* use the title on any further manuscripts, because 'The Fly-by-Nights' has *already* been published. See—it says so right here in print!" At this point Cyril struck his colors.*

The other stories are unrelated to each other, but they are all pure Kornbluth, in a genre he handled every bit as well as he did science fiction, adventure, the *roman à clef,* or any other field he ever touched. With one exception, they and the Battle stories might be classified as marginal science fiction, but obviously Cyril did not think of them as such or he would not have appended the Corwin pseudonym to them. The exception, of course, is the magnificent "The Golden Road."

The final story, "Ms. Found in a Chinese Fortune Cookie," has been reprinted several times before, but it certainly belongs in this collection; for though it was not signed by Cecil Corwin, it contains Corwin, who is in fact the leading character. This story has a curious underground history. In 1953, a literary agent who did *not*

* For this explanation I am indebted to Robert A. W. Lowndes, who knew Cyril well back in those days, whereas my first personal contact with him was in 1950. The succeeding anecdote about "Fortune Cookie," however, I got from Cyril himself.

represent Cyril somehow put his hands on an old Kornbluth manuscript—not a finished story, but a sketch for a collaboration with another writer. Without Cyril's knowledge, the agent sold the sketch to a magazine, signed jointly by Corwin and a pseudonym of the other writer. Cyril did not in fact know about this until the piece appeared in print, and both discovering how it had happened and collecting the money for the sale turned out to be difficult.

The literary agent in question appears, in (not surprisingly) a not very flattering light, in "Ms. Found in a Chinese Fortune Cookie"; and the story also shows that, given the nature of poor Corwin's retirement from the world of letters, he couldn't possibly have written that sketch. (Just incidentally, the story also contains what I believe to be the very first reference to LSD in fiction.)

The sketch, on the other hand, is the one story with Corwin's name on it which I have not included in this collection. Clearly, that would have been Cyril's own preference.

Some rather serious—or at least, deadpan—remarks might be made about the Corwin fantasies, for they do contain germs of what were to be preoccupations of Cyril's in later years. One such, for example, is the question of the interchangeability of Good and Evil, which is the subject both of "The Golden Road," which is dead serious, and "The Reversible Revolutions," which most decidedly is not. Or one might note that "The Golden Road" contains a great deal of material about music (more than is to be found in any other work of Cyril's) and that the title itself—which is never explained in the text—is drawn from James Elroy Flecker's play *Hassan*, with one line of which Cyril was familiar because it had been set to music by Delius ("We take the Golden Road to Samarkand"). But critical apparatus of this kind would be inappropriate to the Corwin spirit, which—again except for "The Golden Road"—is all bounce and persiflage, and ought to be read as such.*

* It is certainly worth noticing, though, that every story in this book except "Fortune Cookie" was written in Cyril's 17th and 18th years. He died in 1958 at the age of 34.

I am most indebted to Mrs. Mary Kornbluth for permission to reprint these rare and lovely pieces . . . and, of course, to Cyril, who was a dear friend of mine as well, for having written them.

JAMES BLISH

Marlow, Bucks., U.K.
1969

THIRTEEN O'CLOCK

1

PETER PACKER excitedly dialed his slide rule, peering through a lens as one of the minutely scored lines met with another. He rose from his knees, brushing dust from the neat crease of his serge trousers. No doubt of it—the house had a secret attic room. Peter didn't know anything about sliding panels or hidden buttons; in the most direct way imaginable he lifted the axe he had brought and crunched it into the wall.

On his third blow he holed through. The rush of air from the darkness was cool and sweet. Smart old boy, his grandfather, thought Peter. Direct ventilation all over the house—even in a false compartment. He chopped away heartily, the hollow strokes ringing through the empty attic and down the stairs.

He could have walked through the hole erect when he was satisfied with his labors; instead he cautiously turned a flashlight inside the space. The beam was invisible; all dust had long since settled. Peter grunted. The floor seemed to be sound. He tested it with one foot, half in, half out of the hidden chamber. It held.

The young man stepped through easily, turning the flash on walls and floor. The room was not large, but it was cluttered with a miscellany of objects—chests, furniture, knickknacks and whatnots. Peter opened a chest, wondering about pirate gold. But there was no gold, for the thing was full to the lid with chiffons in delicate hues. A faint fragrance of musk filled the air; sachets long since packed away were not entirely gone.

Funny thing to hide away, thought Peter. But Grandfather Packer had been a funny man—having this house built to his own very sound plans, waiting always on

the Braintree docks for the China and India clippers and what rare cargo they might have brought. Chiffons! Peter poked around in the box for a moment, then closed the lid again. There were others.

He turned the beam of the light on a wall lined with shelves. Pots of old workmanship—spices and preserves, probably. And a clock. Peter stared at the clock. It was about two by two by three feet—an unusual and awkward size. The workmanship was plain, the case of crudely finished wood. And yet there was something about it—his eyes widened as he realized what it was. The dial showed thirteen hours!

Between the flat figures XII and I there was another—an equally flat XIII. What sort of freak this was the young man did not know. Vaguely he conjectured on prayer time, egg boiling and all the other practical applications of chronometry. But nothing he could dredge up from his well-stored mind would square with this freak. He set the flash on a shelf and hefted the clock in his arms, lifting it easily.

This, he thought, would bear looking into. Putting the light in his pocket, he carried the clock down the stairs to his second-floor bedroom. It looked strangely incongruous there, set on a draftman's table hung with rules and T squares. Determinedly, Peter began to pry open the back with a chisel, when it glided smoothly open without tooling. There was better construction in the old timepiece than he had realized. The little hinges were still firm and in working order. He peered into the works and ticked his nail against one of the chimes. It sounded sweet and clear.

The young man took up a pair of pliers. Lord knew where the key was, he thought, as he began to wind the clock. Slowly it got under way, ticking loudly. The thing had stopped at 12:59. That would be nearly one o'clock on any other timepiece; on this, the minute hand crept slowly toward the enigmatic XIII.

Peter wound the striking mechanism carefully, and watched as a little whir sounded. The minute hand met the roman numeral, and with a click the chimes sounded out in an eerie, jangling discord. Peter thought with sudden confusion that all was not as well with the clock as he had

thought. The chimes grew louder, filling the little bedroom with their clang.

Horrified, the young man put his hands on the clock as though he could stop off the noise. As he shook the old cabinet, the peals redoubled until they battered against the eardrums of the draftsman, ringing in his skull and resounding from the walls, making instruments dance and rattle on the drawing board. Peter drew back, his hands to his ears. He was filled with nausea, his eyes bleared and smarting. As the terrible clock thundered out its din without end, he reached the door feebly, the room swaying and spinning about him, nothing real but the suddenly glowing clock dial and the clang and thunder of its chimes.

As he opened the door it ceased, and he closed his eyes in relief as his nausea passed. He looked up again, and his eyes widened with horror. Though it was noon outside, a night wind fanned his face, and though he was on the second-story landing of his Grandfather Packer's house, dark trees rose about him, stretching as far as the eye could see.

For three hours—by his wristwatch's luminous dial—Peter had wandered, aimless and horrified, waiting for dawn. The aura of strangeness that hung over the forest in which he walked was bearable; it was the gnawing suspicion that he had gone mad that shook him to his very bones. The trees were no ordinary things, of that he was sure. For he had sat under one forest giant and leaned back against its bole only to rise with a cry of terror. He had felt its pulse beat slowly and regularly under the bark. After that he did not dare to rest, but he was a young and normal male. Whether he would or not, he found himself blundering into ditches and stones from sheer exhaustion. Finally, sprawled on the ground, he slept.

Peter awoke stiff and sore from his nap on the bare ground, but he felt better for it. The sun was high in the heavens; he saw that it was about eleven o'clock. Remembering his terrors of the night, he nearly laughed at himself. This was a forest, and there were any number of sane explanations of how he had got here. An attack of amnesia lasting about twelve hours would be one cause. And there were probably others less disturbing.

He thought the country might be Maine. God knew how many trains or busses he had taken since he lost his memory in his bedroom. Beginning to whistle, he strode through the woods. Things were different in the daytime.

There was a sign ahead! He sprinted up to its base. The thing was curiously large, painted in red characters on a great slab of wood, posted on a dead tree some twelve feet from the ground. The sign said: ELLIL. He rolled the name over in his mind and decided that he didn't recognize it. But he couldn't be far from a town or house.

Ahead of him sounded a thunderous grunt.

Bears! he thought in a panic. They had been his childhood bogies; he had been frightened of them ever since. But it was no bear, he saw. He almost wished it was. For the thing that was veering on him was a frightful composite of every monster of mythology, menacing him with saber-like claws and teeth and gusts of flame from its ravening throat. It stood only about as high as the man, and its legs were long, but to the engineer it seemed ideally styled for destruction.

Without ado he jumped for a tree and dug his toes into the grooves of the bark, shinning up it as he used to as a child. But there was nothing childlike about it now. With the creature's flaming breath scorching his heels, he climbed like a monkey, stopping only at the third set of main branches, twenty-five feet from the ground. There he clung, limp and shuddering, and looked down.

The creature was hopping grotesquely about the base of the tree, its baleful eyes on him. The man's hand reached for a firmer purchase on the branch, and part came away in his hand. He had picked a sort of coconut—heavy, hard, and with sharp corners. Peter raised his eyebrows. Why not? Carefully noting the path that the creature below took around the trunk, he poised the fruit carefully. Wetting a finger, he adjusted the placing. On a free drop that long you had to allow for windage, he thought.

Twice more around went the creature, and then its head and the murderous fruit reached the same point at the same time. There was a crunching noise which Peter could hear from where he was, and the insides of its head spilled on the forest sward.

"Clever," said a voice beside him on the branch.

He turned with a cry. The speaker was only faintly visible—the diaphanous shadow of a young girl, not more than eighteen, he thought.

Calmly it went on, "You must be very mancic to be able to land a fruit so accurately. Did he give you an extra sense?" Her tone was light, but from what he could see of her dim features, they were curled in an angry smile.

Nearly letting go of the branch in his bewilderment, he answered as calmly as he could, "I don't know whom you mean. And what is mancic?"

"Innocent," she said coldly. "Eh? I could push you off this branch without a second thought. But first you tell me where Almarish got the model for you. I might turn out a few myself. Are you a doppelgaenger or a golem?"

"Neither," he spat, bewildered and horrified. "I don't even know what they are!"

"Strange," said the girl. "I can't read you." Her eyes squinted prettily and suddenly became solid, luminous wedges in her transparent face. "Well," she sighed, "let's get out of this." She took the man by his elbow and dropped from the branch, hauling him after her. Ready for a sickening impact with the ground, Peter winced as his heels touched it light as a feather. He tried to disengage the girl's grip, but it was hard as steel.

"None of that," she warned him. "I have a blast finger. Or didn't he tell you?"

"What's a blast finger?" demanded the engineer.

"Just so you won't try anything," she commented. "Watch." Her body solidified then, and she pointed her left index finger at a middling-sized tree. Peter hardly saw what happened, being more interested in the incidental miracle of her face and figure. But his attention was distracted by a flat crash of thunder and sudden glare. And the tree was riven as if by a terrific stroke of lightning. Peter smelled ozone as he looked from the tree to the girl's finger and back again.

"No nonsense?" she asked.

"Okay," he said.

"Come on."

They passed between two trees, and the vista of forest

shimmered and tore, revealing a sort of palace—all white stone and maple timbers.

"That's my place," said the girl.

2

"Now," she said, settling herself into a cane-backed chair.

Peter looked about the room. It was furnished comfortably with pieces of antique merit, in the best New England tradition. His gaze shifted to the girl, slender and palely luminous, with a half-smile playing about her chiseled features.

"Do you mind," he said slowly, "not interrupting until I'm finished with what I have to say?"

"A message from Almarish? Go on."

And at that he completely lost his temper. "Listen, you snip!" he raged. "I don't know who you are or where I am, but I'd like to tell you that this mystery isn't funny or even mysterious—just downright rude. Do you get that? Now—my name is Peter Packer. I live in Braintree, Mass. I make my living as a consulting and industrial engineer. This place obviously isn't Braintree, Mass. Right? Then where is it?"

"Ellil," said the girl simply.

"I saw that on a sign," said Packer. "It still doesn't mean anything to me. Where is Ellil?"

Her face became suddenly grave. "You may be telling the truth," she said thoughtfully. "I do not know yet. Will you allow me to test you?"

"Why should I?" he snapped.

"Remember my blast finger?"

Packer winced. "Yes," he said. "What are the tests?"

"The usual," she smiled. "Rosemary and garlic, crucifixes and the secret name of Jehovah. If you get through those you're okay."

"Then get on with it," the man said confusedly.

"Hold these." She passed him a flowery sprig and a clove of garlic. He took them, one in each hand.

"All right?" he asked.

"Oh, those, yes. Now take the cross and read this name. You can put the vegetables down now."

He followed instructions, stammering over the harsh Hebrew word.

In a cold fury the girl sprang to her feet and leveled her left index finger at him. "Clever," she blazed. "But you can't get away with it! I'll blow you so wide open—"

"Wait," he pleaded. "What did I do?" The girl, though sweet-looking, seemed to be absolutely irresponsible.

"Mispronounced the name," she snapped. "Because you can't say it straight without crumbling into dust!"

He looked at the paper again, and read aloud, slowly and carefully. "Was that right?" he asked.

Crestfallen, the girl sat down. "Yes," she said. "I'm sorry. You seem to be okay. A real human. Now what do you want to know?"

"Well—who are you?"

"My name's Millicent." She smiled deprecatingly. "I'm a—sort of a sorceress."

"I can believe that," grunted the man. "Now, why should you take me for a demon, or whatever you thought I was?"

"Doppelgaenger," she corrected him. "I was sure—well, I'd better begin at the beginning.

"You see, I haven't been a sorceress very long—only two years. My mother was a witch—a real one, and pretty first class. I've heard it said that she brewed the neatest spells in Ellil. All I know I learned from her—never studied it formally. My mother didn't die a natural sort of death, you see. Almarish got her."

"Who's Almarish?"

She wrinkled her mouth with disgust. "That thug!" she spat. "He and his gang of half-breed demons are out to get control of Ellil. My mother wouldn't stand for it—she told him so, right out flat over a multiplex apparition. And after that he was gunning for her steadily—no letup at all. And believe me, there are mighty few witches who can stand up under much of that, but Mother stood him off for fifteen years. They got my father—he wasn't much good—a little while after I was born. Vampires.

"Mother got caught alone in the woods one morning without her tools—unguents, staffs and things—by a whole flock of golems and zombies." The girl shuddered. "Some of them—well, Mother finished about half before they

overwhelmed her and got a stake of myrtle through her heart. That finished her—she lost all her magic, of course, and Almarish sent an ordinary plague of ants against her. Adding insult to injury, I call it!" There were real tears of rage in her eyes.

"And what's this Almarish doing now?" asked Peter, fascinated.

Millicent shrugged. "He's after me," she said simply. "The bandur you killed was one of my watchdogs. And I thought he'd sent you. I'm sorry."

"I see," breathed the man slowly. "What powers has he?"

"The usual, I suppose. But he has no principles about using them. And he has his gang—I can't afford real retainers. Of course I whip up some simulacra whenever I hold a reception or anything of that sort. Just images to serve and take wraps. They can't fight."

Peter tightened his jaw. "You must be in a pretty bad way," he volunteered diffidently.

The girl looked him full in the eye, her lip trembling. She choked out, "I'm in such a hell of a spot!" and then the gates opened and she was weeping as if her heart would break.

The man stared frozenly, wondering how he could comfort a despondent sorceress. "There, there," he said tentatively.

She wiped her eyes and looked at him. "I'm sorry," she said, sniffling. "But it's seeing a fairly friendly face again after all these years—no callers but leprechauns and things. You don't know what it's like."

"I wonder," said Peter, "how you'd like to live in Braintree."

"I don't know," she said brightly. "But how could I get there?"

"There should be at least one way," reflected the man.

"But why— What was that?" shot out the girl, snatching up a wand.

"Knock on the door," said Peter. "Shall I open it?"

"Please," said Millicent nervously, holding up the slender staff.

The man stood aside and swung the door wide. In walked a curious person of mottled red and white coloring. One

eye was small and blue, the other large and savagely red. His teeth were quite normal—except that the four canines protruded two inches each out of his mouth. He walked with a limp; one shoe seemed curiously small. And there was a sort of bulge in the trousers that he wore beneath his formal morning coat.

"May I introduce myself?" said this individual, removing his sleek black topper. "I am Balthazar Pike. You must be Miss Millicent? And this—ah—zombie?" He indicated Peter with a dirty leer.

"Mr. Packer, Mr. Pike," said the girl.

Peter simply stared in horror while the creature murmured, "Enchanted."

Millicent drew herself up proudly. "And this, I suppose," she said, "is the end?"

"I fear so, Miss Millicent," said the creature regretfully. "I have my orders. Your house has been surrounded by picked forces; any attempt to use your blast finger or any other weapon of offense will be construed as resistance. Under the laws of civilized warfare we are empowered to reduce you to ashes should such resistance be forthcoming. May I have your reply?"

The girl surveyed him haughtily, then, with a lightning-like sweep of her wand, seemed to blot out every light in the room. Peter heard her agitated voice. "We're in a neutral screen, Mr. Packer. I won't be able to keep it up for long. Listen! That was one of Almarish's stinkers—the big cheese. He didn't expect any trouble from me. He'll take me captive as soon as they break the screen down. Do you want to help me?"

"Of course!" exploded the man.

"Good. Then you find the third oak from the front door on the left and walk widdershins three times. You'll find out what to do from them."

"Walk how?" asked Peter.

"Widdershins—counterclockwise. Lord, you're dumb!"

Then the lights seemed to go on again, and Peter saw that the room was filled with the half-breed creatures. With an expression of injured dignity, the formally attired Balthazar Pike asked, "Are you ready to leave now, Miss Millicent? Quite ready?"

"Thank you, General, yes," said the girl coldly. Two of the creatures took her arms and walked her from the room. Peter saw that as they stepped over the threshhold they vanished, all three.

The last to leave was Pike, who turned and said to the man, "I must remind you, Mister—er—ah—that you are trespassing. This property now belongs to the Almarish Realty Corporation. All offenders will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Good day, Mister—er—ah—" With which he stepped over the doorsill and vanished.

Hastily Peter followed him across the line, but found himself alone outside the house. For which he was grateful. "Third oak left from the door," he repeated. Simple enough. Feeling foolish, he walked widdershins three times around and stopped dead, waiting for something.

What a sweet, brave kid she had been! He hoped nothing would really happen to her—before he got there.

He felt a sort of tugging at his serge trousers and stepped back in alarm. "Well?" shrilled a small voice. Peter looked down and winced. The dirtiest, most bedraggled little creature he had ever seen was regarding him with tiny, sharp eyes. There were others, too, squatting on pebbles and toadstools.

"Miss Millicent told me to ask you what I should do," said Peter. As the little leader of the troop glared at him he added hastily, "If you please."

"Likely tale," piped the voice of the creature. "What's in it for us?"

"I dunno," said the man, bewildered. "What do you want?"

"Green cloth," the creature answered promptly. "Lots of it. And if you have any small brass buttons, them, too."

Peter hastily conducted an inventory of his person. "I'm sorry," he said hesitantly. "I haven't any green. How about blue? I can spare my vest." He carefully lowered the garment to the ground among the little people.

"Looks all right," said the leader. "Jake!" One of the creatures advanced and fingered the cloth. "Hmm—" he said. "Good material." Then there was a whispered consultation with the leader, who at last shouted up to Peter, "Head east for water. You can't miss it!"

"Hey!" said Peter, blinking. But they were already gone.

And though he widdershin-walked for the next half hour, and even tried a few incantations remembered from his childhood, they did not come back—nor did his vest.

So, with his back to the sinking sun, he headed east for water.

3

The sign said: MAHOORA CITY LIMITS.

Peter scratched his head and passed it. He had hit the stretch of highway a few miles back, once he had got out of the forest, and it seemed to be leading straight into a city of some kind. There was a glow ahead in the sky—a glow which abruptly became a glare.

"Jeepers!" the man gasped. "Buildings—skyscrapers!" Before him reared a sort of triple Wall Street with which were combined the most spectacular features of Rockefeller Center. In the sudden way in which things happened in Ellil, he turned a sort of blind corner in the road and found himself in the thick of it.

A taxi roared past him; with a muttered imprecation he jumped out of the way. The bustling people on the sidewalks ignored him completely. It was about six o'clock; they were probably going home from their offices. There were all sorts of people—women and girls, plain and pretty, men and boys, slim, fat, healthy and dissipated. And there, Peter saw striding along in lordly indifference, was a cop.

"Excuse me," said Peter, elbowing his way through the crowd to the member of Mahoora's finest. "Can you tell me where I can find water?" That was, he realized, putting it a bit crudely. But he was hopelessly confused by the traffic and swarms of pedestrians.

The cop turned on him with a glassy stare. "Water?" he rumbled. "Would yez be wantin' tap, ditch, fire—or cologne?"

The man hesitated. He didn't know, he realized in a sudden panic. The elves, or whatever they had been, hadn't specified. Cagily he raised his hand to his brow and muttered, " 'Scuse me—previous engagement—made the appointment for today—just forgot—" He was edging away from the cop when he felt a hand on his arm.

"What was that about water?" asked the cop hoarsely, putting his face near Peter's.

Desperately the man blurted, "The water I have to find to lick Almarish!" Who could tell? Maybe the cop would help him.

"What?" thundered M.P.D. Shield No. 2435957607. "And me a loyal supporter of the Mayor Almarish Freedom, Peace and Progress Reform Administration?" He frowned. "You look subversive to me—come on!" He raised his nightstick suggestively, and Peter meekly followed him through the crowds.

"How'd they get you in here?" asked Peter's cellmate.

Peter inspected him. He was a short, dark sort of person with a pair of disconcertingly bright eyes. "Suspicion," said Peter evasively. "How about you?"

"Practicing mancy without a license, theoretically. Actually because I tried to buck the Almarish machine. You know how it is."

"Can't say I do," answered Peter. "I'm a stranger here."

"Yeah? Well—like this. Few years ago we had a neat little hamlet here. Mahoora was the biggest little city in these parts of Ellil, though I say it myself. A little industry —magic chalices for export, sandals of swiftness, invisibility cloaks, invincible weapons—you know?"

"Um," said Peter noncommittally.

"Well, I had a factory—modest little chemical works. We turned out love philters from my own prescription. It's what I call a neat dodge—eliminates the *balneum mariae* entirely from the processing, cuts down drying time—maybe you aren't familiar with the latest things in the line?"

"Sorry, no."

"Oh—well, then, in came these plugs of Almarish's. Flying goon squads that wrecked plants and shops on order, labor spies, provocateurs, everything. Soon they'd run out every racketeer in the place and hijacked them lock, stock and barrel. Then they went into politics. There was a little scandal about buying votes with fairy gold—people kicked when it turned into ashes. But they smoothed that over when they got in.

"And then—! Graft right and left, patronage, unemploy-

ment, rotten-food scandals, bribery, inefficiency—everything that's on the list. And this is their fifth term. How do you like that?"

"Lord," said Peter, shocked. "But how do they stay in office?"

"Oh," grinned his friend. "The first thing they did was to run up some pretty imposing public works—tall buildings, bridges, highways and monuments. Then they let it out that they were partly made of half-stuff. You know what that is?"

"No," said Peter. "What is it?"

"Well—it's a little hard to describe. But it isn't really there and it isn't really not there. You can walk on it and pick it up and things, but—well, it's a little hard to describe. The kicker is this: half-stuff is there only as long as you—the one who prepared a batch of it, that is—keep the formula going. So if we voted those leeches out of office they'd relax their formula and the half-stuff would vanish and the rest of the buildings and bridges and highways and monuments would fall with a helluva noise and damage. How do you like that?"

"Efficiency plus," said Peter. "Where's this Almarish hang out?"

"The mayor?" asked his cellmate sourly. "You don't think he'd be seen in the city, do you? Some disgruntled citizen might sic a flock of vampires on His Honor. He was elected in absentia. I hear he lives around Mal-Tava way."

"Where's that?" asked Peter eagerly.

"You don't know? Say, you're as green as they come! That's a pretty nasty corner of Ellil—the nastiest anywhere, I guess. It's a volcanic region, and those lava nymphs are pretty tough molls. Then there's a dragon ranch down there. The owner got careless and showed up missing one day. The dragons broke out and ran wild; they're the killingest you could hope to see. Anything else?"

"No," said Peter, heavyhearted. "I guess not."

"That's good. Because I think we're going to trial right now."

A guard was opening the door, club poised. "His Honor, Judge Balthazar Pike, will see you now," said the warden. Peter groaned.

The half-breed demon, his sartorial splendor of the preceding afternoon replaced by judiciary black silk, smiled grimly on the two prisoners. "Mr. Morden," he said, indicating the erstwhile love-philter manufacturer, "and Mister—er—ah—?"

"Packer!" exploded the man. "What are you doing here?"

"Haw!" laughed the judge. "That's what I was going to ask you. But first we have this matter of Mr. Morden to dispose of. Excuse me a moment? Clerk, read the charges."

A cowed-looking little man picked an index card from a stack and read, "Whereas Mr. Percival Morden of Mahoora has been apprehended in the act of practicing mancy and whereas this Mr. Morden does not possess an approved license for such practice it is directed that His Honor Chief Judge Balthazar Pike declare him guilty of the practice of mancy without a license. Signed, Mayor Almarish. Vote straight Freedom Peace and Progress Reform Party for a clean and efficient administration." He paused for a moment and looked timidly at the judge, who was cleaning his talons. "That's it, Your Honor," he said.

"Oh—thank you. Now, Morden—guilty or not guilty?"

"What's the difference?" asked the manufacturer sourly. "Not guilty, I guess."

"Thank you." The judge took a coin from his pocket. "Heads or tails?" he asked.

"Tails," answered Morden. Then, aside to Peter, "It's magic, of course. You can't win."

The half-breed demon spun the coin dexterously on the judicial bench; it wobbled, slowed, and fell with a tinkle. The judge glanced at it. "Sorry, old man," he said sympathetically. "You seem to be guilty. Imprisonment for life in an oak tree. You'll find Merlin de Bleys in there with you. You'll like him, I rather fancy. Next case," he called sharply as Morden fell through a trapdoor in the floor.

Peter advanced before the bar of justice. "Can't we reason this thing out?" he asked agitatedly. "I mean, I'm a stranger here and if I've done anything I'm sorry—"

"Tut!" exclaimed the demon. He had torn the cuticle of his left index talon, and it was bleeding. He stanched the

green liquid with a handkerchief and looked down at the man. "Done anything?" he asked mildly. "Oh—dear me, no! Except for a few trifles like felonious impediment of an officer in the course of his duty, indecent display, seditious publication, high treason and unlawful possession of military and naval secrets—done anything?" His two odd eyes looked reproachfully down on the man.

Peter felt something flimsy in his hand. Covertly he looked down and saw a slip of blue paper on which was written in green ink: *This is Hugo, my other watchdog. Feed him once a day on green vegetables. He does not like tobacco. In haste, Millicent.*

There was a stir in the back of the courtroom, and Peter turned to see one of the fire-breathing horrors which had first attacked him in the forest tearing down the aisle, lashing out to right and left, incinerating a troop of officers with one blast of its terrible breath. Balthazar Pike was crawling around under his desk, bawling for more police.

Peter cried, "You can add one more—possession of a bandur without a license! Sic 'em, Hugo!"

The monster flashed an affectionate look at him and went on with the good work of clearing the court. The man sprang aside as the trapdoor opened beneath his feet, and whirled on a cop who was trying to swarm over him. With a quick one-two he laid him out and proceeded to the rear of the courtroom, where Hugo was standing off a section of the fire department that was trying to extinguish his throat. Peter snatched an axe from one and mowed away heartily. Resistance melted away in a hurry, and Peter pushed the hair out of his eyes to find that they were alone in the court.

"Come on, boy," he said. Whistling cheerily, he left the building, the bandur at his heels, smoking gently. Peter collared a cop—the same one who had first arrested him. "Now," he snarled, "where do I find water?"

Stuttering with fright, and with two popping eyes on the bandur, the officer said, "The harbor's two blocks down the street if you mean—"

"Never mind what I mean!" growled Peter, luxuriating in his new-found power. He strode off pugnaciously, Hugo following.

4

"I beg your pardon—are you looking for water?" asked a tall, dark man over Peter's shoulder. Hugo growled and let loose a tongue of flame at the stranger's foot.

"Shuddup, Hugo," said Peter. Then, turning to the stranger, "As a matter of fact, I was. Do you—?"

"I heard about you from them," said the stranger. "You know. The little people."

"Yes," said Peter. "What do I do now?"

"Underground railroad," said the stranger. "Built after the best Civil War model. Neat, speedy and efficient. Transportation at half the usual cost. I hope you weren't planning to go by magic carpet?"

"No," Peter assured him hastily. "I never use them."

"That's great," said the stranger, swishing his long black cloak. "Those carpet people—stifling industry, I call it. They spread a whispering campaign that our road was unsafe! Can you imagine it?"

"Unsafe," scoffed Peter. "I'll bet they wish their carpets were half as safe as your railroad!"

"Well," said the stranger thoughtfully, "perhaps not half as safe. . . . No, I wouldn't say half as safe. . . ." He seemed likely to go on indefinitely.

Peter asked, "Where do I get the Underground?"

"A little east of here," said the stranger. He looked about apprehensively. "We'd better not be seen together," he muttered out of the corner of his mouth. "Meet you over there by the clock tower—you can get it there."

"Okay," said Peter. "But why the secrecy?"

"We're really underground," said the stranger, walking away.

Peter rejoined him at the corner of the clock tower. With an elaborate display of unconcern the stranger walked off, Peter following at some distance. Soon they were again in the forest that seemed to border the city of Mahoora.

Once they were past the city-limits sign the stranger turned, smiling. "I guess we're safe now," he said. "They could try a raid and drag us back across the line, but they wouldn't like to play with your bandur, I think. Here's the station."

He pressed a section of bark on a huge tree; silently it slid open like a door. Peter saw a row of steps leading down into blackness. "Sort of spooky," he said.

"Not at all! I have the place ghostproofed once a year." The stranger led the way, taking out what looked like a five-branched electric torch.

"What's that?" asked Peter, fascinated by the weird blue light it shed.

"Hand of glory," said the stranger casually. Peter looked closer and shuddered, holding his stomach. Magic, he thought, was probably all right up to the point where it became grave robbery.

They arrived at a neatly tiled station; Peter was surprised to find that the trains were tiny things. The one pulled up on the tracks was not as high as he was.

"You'll have to stoke, of course," said the stranger.

"What?" demanded Peter indignantly.

"Usual arrangement. Are you coming or aren't you?"

"Of course—but it seems strange," complained Peter, climbing into the engine. Hugo climbed into the coal car and curled up, emitting short smoky bursts of flame, which caused the stranger to keep glancing at him in fear for his fuel.

"What's in the rest of the train?" asked Peter.

"Freight. This is the through cannonball to Mal-Tava. I have a special shipment for Almarish. Books and things, furniture, a few cases of liquor—you know?"

"Yes. Any other passengers?"

"Not this month. I haven't much trouble with them. They're usually knights and things out to kill sorcerers like Almarish. They take their horses along or send them ahead by carpet. Do you plan to kill Almarish?"

Peter choked. "Yes," he finally said. "What's it to you?"

"Nothing—I take your money and leave you where you want to go. A tradesman can't afford opinions. Let's get up some steam, eh?"

Amateurishly Peter shoveled coal into the little furnace while the stranger in the black cloak juggled with steam valves and levers. "Don't be worried," he advised Peter. "You'll get the hang of things after a while." He glanced at a watch. "Here we go," he said, yanking the whistle cord.

The train started off into its tunnel, sliding smoothly and almost silently along, the only noise being from the driving rods. "Why doesn't it clack against the rails?" asked Peter.

"Levitation. Didn't you notice? We're an inch off the track. Simple, really."

"Then why have a track?" asked Peter.

The stranger smiled and said, "Without—" then stopped abruptly and looked concerned and baffled. And that was all the answer Peter got.

"Wake up," shouted the stranger, nudging Peter. "We're in the war zone!"

"Zasso?" asked Peter, blinking. He had been napping after hours of steady travel. "What war zone?"

"Trolls—you know."

"No, I don't!" snapped Peter. "What side are we on?"

"Depends on who stops us," said the stranger, speeding the engine. They were out of the tunnel now, Peter saw, speeding along a couple of inches above the floor of an immense dim cave. Ahead, the glittering double strand of the track stretched into the distance.

"Oh—oh!" muttered the cloaked stranger. "Trouble ahead!"

Peter saw a vague, stirring crowd before them. "Those trolls?" he asked.

"Yep," answered the engineer resignedly, slowing the train. "What do you want?" he asked a solid-looking little man in a ragged uniform.

"To get the hell out of here," said the little man. He was about three feet tall, Peter saw.

"What happened?" he asked.

"The lousy Insurgents licked us," said the troll. "Will you let us on the train before they cut us down?"

"First," said the engineer methodically, "there isn't room. Second, I have to keep friends with the party in power. Third, you know very well that you can't be killed."

"What if we are immortal?" asked the troll agitatedly. "Would you like to live forever scattered in little pieces?"

"Second," said Peter abruptly, "you can get out of it as best you can." He was speaking to the engineer. "And

first, you can dump all the freight you have for Almarish. He won't want it anyway when I'm through with him."

"That right?" asked the troll.

"Not by me!" exploded the engineer. "Now get your gang off the track before I plough them under!"

"Hugo," whispered Peter. With a lazy growl the bandur scorched the nape of the engineer's neck.

"All right," said the engineer. "All right. Use force—all right." Then, to the leader of the trolls, "You tell your men they can unload the freight and get as comfortable as they can."

"Wait!" interjected Peter. "Inasmuch as I got you out of this scrape—I think—would you be willing to help me out in a little affair of honor with Almarish?"

"Sure!" said the troll. "Anything at all. You know, for a surface-dweller you're not half bad." With which he began to spread the good news among his army.

Later, when they were all together in the cab, taking turns with the shovel, the troll introduced himself as General Skaldberg of the Third Loyalist Army. They were steaming ahead again at full speed.

The end of the cavern was in sight when another swarm of trolls blocked the path. "Go through them!" ordered Peter coldly.

"For pity's sake," pleaded the stranger. "Think of what this will do to my franchise!"

"That's your worry," said the general. "You fix it up with the Insurgents. We gave you the franchise anyway—they have no right of search."

"Maybe," muttered the engineer. He closed his eyes as they went slapping into the band of trolls under full steam. When it was all over and they were again tearing through the tunnel, he looked up. "How many?" he asked brokenly.

"Only three," said the general regretfully. "Why didn't you do a good job while you were at it?"

"You should have had your men fire from the freight cars," said the engineer coldly.

"Too bad I didn't think of it. Could you turn back and take them in a surprise attack?"

The engineer cursed violently, giving no direct answer. But for the next half hour he muttered to himself dis-

traitly, groaning "Franchise!" over and over again.

"How much farther before we get to Mal-Tava?" asked Peter glumly.

"Very soon now," said the troll. "I was there once. Very broken terrain—fine for guerrilla work."

"Got any ideas on how to handle the business of Almarish?"

The general scratched his head. "As I remember," he said slowly, "I once thought it was a pushover for some of Clausewitz's ideas. It's a funny tactical problem—practically no fortifications within the citadel—everything lumped outside in a wall of steel. Of course Almarish probably has a lot on the ball personally. All kinds of direct magic at his fingertips. And that's where I get off with my men. We trolls don't even pretend to know the fine points of thaumaturgy. Mostly straight military stuff with us."

"So I have to face him alone?"

"More or less," said the general. "I have a couple of guys that majored in Military Divination at Ellil Tech Prep. They can probably give you a complete layout of the citadel, but they won't be responsible for illusions, multiplex apparitions or anything else Almarish might decide to throw in the way. My personal advice to you is—be skeptical."

"Yes?" asked Peter miserably.

"Exactly," said Skaldberg. "The real difficulty in handling arcane warfare is in knowing what's there and what ain't. Have you any way of sneaking in a confederate? Not a spy, exactly—we military men don't approve of spying—but a sort of—ah—one-man intelligence unit."

"I have already," said Peter diffidently. "She's a sorceress, but not much good, I think. Has a blast finger, though."

"Very good," grunted Skaldberg. "Very good indeed. God, how we could have used her against the Insurgents! The hounds had us in a sort of peninsular spot—with only one weak line of supply and communication between us and the main force—and I was holding a hill against a grand piquet of flying carpets that were hurling thunderbolts at our munitions supply. But their sights were away off and they only got a few of our snipers. God, what a blast

finger would have done to those bloody carpets!"

The engineer showed signs of interest. "You're right!" he snapped. "Blow 'em out of the sky—menace to life and limb! I have a bill pending at the All Ellil Conference on Communication and Transportation—would you be interested?"

"No," grunted the general. The engineer, swishing his long black cloak, returned to his throttle, muttering about injunctions and fair play.

5

"Easy, now!" whispered the general.

"Yessir," answered a troll, going through obvious mental strain while his hand, seemingly of its own volition, scrawled lines and symbols on a sheet of paper. Peter was watching, fascinated and mystified, as the specialist in military divination was doing his stuff.

"There!" said the troll, relaxing. He looked at the paper curiously and signed it: *Borgenssen, Capt.*

"Well?" asked General Skaldberg excitedly. "What was it like?"

The captain groaned. "You should see for yourself, sir!" he said despondently. "Their air force is flying dragons and their infantry's a kind of Kraken squad. What they're doing out of water I don't know."

"Okay," said the general. He studied the drawing. "How about their mobility?"

"They haven't got any and they don't need any," complained the diviner. "They just sit there waiting for you—in a solid ring. And the air force has a couple of auxiliary rocs that pick up the Krakens and drop them behind your forces. Pincer stuff—very bad."

"I'll be the judge of that!" thundered the general. "Get out of my office!" The captain saluted and stumbled out of the little cave which the general had chosen to designate as GHQ. His men were "barracked" on the bare rock outside. Volcanoes rumbled and spat in the distance. There came one rolling crash that stood Peter's hair on end.

"Think that was for us?" he asked nervously.

"Nope—I picked this spot for lava drainage. I have a hundred men erecting a shutoff at the only exposed point.

We'll be safe enough." He turned again to the map, frowning. "This is our real worry—what I call impregnable, or damn near it. If we could get them to attack us—but those rocs smash anything along that line. We'd be cut off like a rosebud. And with our short munitions we can't afford to be discovered and surrounded. Ugh! What a spot for an army man to find himself in!"

A brassy female voice asked, "Somep'n bodderin' you, shorty?"

The general spun around in a fine purple rage. Peter looked in horror and astonishment on the immodest form of a woman who had entered the cave entirely unperceived—presumably by some occult means. She was a slutty creature, her hair dyed a vivid red and her satin skirt quite a few inches above the knee. She was violently made up with flame-colored rouge, lipstick and even eye shadow.

"Well," she complained stridently, puffing on a red cigarette, "wadda you joiks gawkin' at? Aincha nevva seen a lady befaw?"

"Madam—" began the general, outraged.

"Can dat," she advised him easily. "I hoid youse guys chewin' da fat—I wanna help youse out." She seated herself on an outcropping of rock and adjusted her skirt—northward.

"I concede that women," spluttered the general, "have their place in activities of the military—but that place has little or nothing to do with warfare as such! I demand that you make yourself known. Where did you come from?"

"Weh did I come from?" she asked mockingly. "Weh, he wansa know. Lookit dat!" She pointed one of her bright-glazed fingernails at the rocky floor of the cave, which grew liquid in a moment, glowing cherry red. She leered at the two and spat at the floor. It grew cold in another moment. "Don't dat mean nothin' to youse?" she asked.

The general stared at the floor. "You must be a volcano nymph."

"Good fa you, shorty!" she sneered. "I represent da goils from Local Toity-Tree. In brief, chums, our demands are dese: one, dat youse clear away from our union hall pronto; two, dat youse hang around in easy reach—in case we want use fa poiposes of our own. In retoin fa

dese demands we—dat's me an' da goils—will help youse guys out against Almarish. Dat lousy fink don't give his hands time off no more. Dis place might as well be a goddam desert fa all da men around. Get me?"

"These—ah—purposes of your own in clause two," said the general hesitantly. "What would they be?"

She smiled dirtily and half-closed her eyes. "Escort soivice, ya might call it. Nuttin' harmful ta yer men, Cap. We'll probably get tired of dem in a munt' or two and send dem off safe. You trolls are kinda cute."

The general stared, too horrified even to resent being called "Cap."

"Well?" demanded the nymph.

"Well—yes," said the general.

"Okay, shorty," she said, crushing out her cigarette against her palm. "Da goils'll be aroun' at dawn fa da attack. I'll try ta keep 'em off yer army until da battle's over. So long!" She sank into the earth, leaving behind only a smell of fleur-de-floozy perfume.

"God!" whispered General Skaldberg. "The things I do for the army!"

In irregular open formation the trolls advanced, followed closely by the jeering mob of volcano nymphs.

"How about it, General?" asked Peter. He and the old soldier were surveying the field of battle from a hill in advance of their forces; the hideous octopoid forms of the defenders of Almarish could be plainly seen, lumbering onward to meet the trolls with a peculiar sucking gait.

"Any minute now—any second," said Skaldberg. Then, "Here it comes!" The farthest advanced of the trolls had met with the first of the Krakens. The creature lashed out viciously; Peter saw that its tentacles had been fitted with studded bands and other murderous devices. The troll dodged nimbly and pulled an invincible sword on the octopoid myth. They mixed it; when the struggle went behind an outcropping of rock the troll was in the lead, unharmed, while the slow-moving Kraken was leaking thinly from a score of punctures.

"The dragons," said Peter, pointing. "Here they are." In V formation the monsters were landing on a far end of the battlefield, then coming at a scrabbling run.

"If they make it quicker than the nymphs—" breathed the general. Then he sighed relievedly. They had not. The carnage among the dragons was almost funny; at will the nymphs lifted them high in the air on jets of steam and squirted melted rock in their eyes. Squalling in terror, the dragons flapped into the air and lumbered off southward.

"That's ocean," grinned the general. "They'll never come back—trying to find new homes, I suspect."

In an incredibly short time the field was littered with the flopping chunks that had been hewed from the Krakens. Living still they were, but powerless. The general shook his hand warmly. "You're on your own now," he said. "Good luck, boy. For a civilian, you're not a bad sort of egg at all." He walked away.

Glumly Peter surveyed the colossal fortress of Almarish. He walked aimlessly up to its gate, a huge thing of bronze and silver, and pulled at the silken cord hanging there. A gong sounded and the door swung open. Peter advanced hopelessly into a sort of audience chamber.

"So!" thundered a mighty voice.

"So what?" asked Peter despondently. He saw on a throne high above him an imposing figure. "You Almarish?" he asked listlessly.

"I am. And who are you?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm Peter Packer of Braintree, Mass. I don't even expect you to believe me." The throne lowered slowly and jerkily, as if on hydraulic pumps. The wizard descended and approached Peter. He was a man of about forty, with a full brown beard reaching almost to his belt.

"Why," asked the sorcerer, "have you come bearing arms?"

"It's the only way I could come," said Peter. "Let me first congratulate you on an efficient, well-oiled set of political machinery. Not even back in the United States have I seen graft carried to such a high degree. Second, your choice of assistants is an eye-opener. Your Mr. Pike is the neatest henchman I've ever seen. Third, produce the person of Miss Millicent or I'll have to use force."

"Is that so?" rumbled Almarish. "Young puppy! I'd like

to see you try it. Wrestle with me—two falls out of three. I dare you!"

Peter took off his coat of blue serge. "I never passed up a dare yet," he said. "How about a mat?"

"Think I'm a sissy?" the sorcerer jeered.

Peter was stripped for action. "Okay," he said. Slowly Almarish advanced on him, grappling for a hold. Peter let him take his forearm, then shifted his weight so as to hurl the magician over his shoulder. A moment later Peter was astonished to find himself on the floor underneath the wizard.

"Haw!" grunted Almarish, rising. "You still game?" He braced himself.

"Yep!" snapped Peter. He hurled himself in a flying tackle that began ten feet away from the wizard and ended in a bone-crushing grip about the knees. Peter swarmed up his trunk and cruelly twisted an arm across his chest. The magician yelped in sudden agony, and let himself fall against the floor. Peter rose, grinning. "One all," he said cheerfully.

Almarish grappled for the third fall; Peter cagily backed away. The wizard hurled himself in a bruising body block against Peter, battering him off his feet and falling on the young man. Instinctively Peter bridged his body, arching it off the floor. Almarish, grunting fiercely, gripped his arm and turned it slowly, as though he were winding a clock. Peter snapped over, rolling on the wizard's own body as a fulcrum. He had his toe in his hand, and closed his fist with every ounce of muscle he had. The sorcerer screamed and fell over on his face. Peter jammed his knee in the wizard's inside socket and bore down terribly. He could feel the bones bend in his grip.

"Enough!" gasped the wizard. Peter let him loose.

"You made it," said Almarish. "Two out of three."

Peter studied his face curiously. Take off that beard and you had—

"You said it, Grandfather Packer," said Peter, grinning.

Almarish groaned. "It's a wise child that knows its own father—grandfather, in this case," he said. "How could you tell?"

"Everything just clicked," said Peter simply. "You

disappearing—that clock—somebody applying American methods in Ellil—and then I shaved you mentally and there you were. Simple?"

"Sure is. But how do you think I made out here, boy?"

"Shamefully. That kind of thing isn't tolerated any more. It's gangsterism—you'll have to cut it out, Gramp."

"Gangsterism be damned!" snorted the wizard. "It's business. Business and common sense."

"Business maybe—certainly not common sense. My boys wiped out your guard, and I might have wiped out you if I had magic stronger than yours."

Grandfather Packer chuckled in glee. "Magic? I'll begin at the beginning. When I got that dad-blamed clock back in '63, I dropped right into Ellil—onto the head of an assassin who was going for a real magician. Getting the setup, I pinned the killer with a half nelson and the magician dispatched him. Then he got grateful—said he was retiring from public life and gave me a kind of token—good for any three wishes.

"So I took it, thanking him kindly, and wished for a palace and a bunch of gutty retainers. It was in my mind to run Ellil like a business, and I did it the only way I knew how—force. And from that day to this I used only one wish and I haven't a dab of magic more than that!"

"I'll be damned!" whispered Peter.

"And you know what I'm going to do with those other two wishes? I'm going to take you and me right back into the good old U.S.A.!"

"Will it only send two people?"

"So the magician said."

"Grandfather Packer," said Peter earnestly, "I am about to ask a very great sacrifice of you. It is also your duty to undo the damage which you have done."

"Oh," said Almarish glumly. "The girl? All right."

"You don't mind?" asked Peter incredulously.

"Far be it from me to stand in the way of young love," grunted the wizard sourly. "She's up there."

Peter entered timidly; the girl was alternately reading a copy of the *Braintree Informer* and staring passionately at a photograph of Peter. "Darling," said Peter.

"Dearest," said Millicent, catching on almost immediately.

A short while later Peter was asking her, "Do you mind, dearest, if I ask one favor of you—a very great sacrifice?" He produced a small, sharp penknife.

And all the gossip for a month in Braintree was of Peter Packer's stunning young wife, though some people wondered how it was that she had only nine fingers.

6

"Drat it!" cursed Almarish, enchanter supreme and master of all Ellil. "Drat the sizzling dingus!" Lifting his stiffly embroidered robes of imperial purple, he was dashing to left and right about his bedroom, stooping low, snatching with his jeweled hands at an elusive something that skidded about the floor with little, chuckling snickers.

Outside, beyond the oaken door, there was a sinister thud of footsteps, firm and normal slaps of bare sole against pavement alternating with sinister tappings of bone. "Slap-click. Slap-click. Slap-click," was the beat. Almarish shot a glance over his shoulder at the door, his bearded face pale with strain.

"Young 'un," he snapped to an empty room, "this ain't the silly season. Come out, or when I find you I'll jest take your pointed ears and twist them till they come off in my hands."

Again there was the chuckling snicker, this time from under the bed. Almarish, his beard streaming, dove headlong, his hands snapping shut. The snicker turned into a pathetic wail.

"Leggo!" shrilled a small voice. "You're crushing me, you ox!"

Outside the alternating footsteps had stopped before his door. A horny hand pounded on the solid oak.

"Be with ye in a minute," called the bearded enchanter. Sweat had broken out on his brow. He drew out his clenched fists from under the bed.

"Now, young lady!" he said grimly, addressing his prize.

The remarkable creature in his hands appeared to be young; at least she was not senile. But if ever a creature looked less like a lady it was she. From tiny feet, shod in rhinestone, high-heeled pumps to softly waved chestnut

hair at her very crown, she was an efficient engine of seduction and disaster. And to omit what came between would be a sin: her voluptuous nine inches were encased in a *lamé* that glittered with the fire of burnished silver, cut and fitted in the guise of an evening gown. Pouting and sullen as she was in Almarish's grasp, she hadn't noticed that the hem was scarcely below her ankles, as was intended by the unknown couturier who had spared no pains on her. That hem, or the maladjustment of it, revealed, in fact, that she had a pretty, though miniature, taste in silks and lacework.

"Ox!" she stormed at the bearded sorcerer. "Beastly oaf—you'll squeeze me out of shape with your great, clumsy hands!"

"That would be a pity," said Almarish. "It's *quite* a shape, as you seem to know."

The pounding on the door redoubled. "Lord Almarish!" shouted a voice, clumsily feigning anxiety. "Are you all right?"

"Sure, Pike," called the sorcerer. "Don't bother me now. I have a lady with me. We're looking at my potted plants."

"Oh," said the voice of Pike. "All right—my business can wait."

"That stalled him," grunted Almarish. "But not for long. You, what's your name?"

She stuck out a tiny tongue at him.

"Look here," said Almarish gently. He contracted his fist a little and the creature let out an agonized squawk on a small scale. "What's your name?" he repeated.

"Moira," she snapped tartly. "And if your throat weren't behind all that hay I'd cut it."

"Forget that, kid," he said. "Let me give you a brief *résumé* of pertinent facts:

"My name is Packer and I'm from Braintree, Mass., which you never heard of. I came to Ellil by means of a clock with thirteen hours. Unusual, eh? Once here I sized things up and began to organize on a business basis with the assistance of a gang of half-breed demons. I had three wishes, but they're all used up now. I had to send back to Braintree my grandson Peter, who got here the same way I did, and with him a sweet young witch he picked up.

"Before leaving he read me a little lecture on business

reform and the New Deal. What I thought was commercial common sense—little things like bribes, subornation of perjury, arson, assassination and the like—he claimed was criminal. So I, like a conscientious Packer, began to set things right. This my gang didn't like. The best testimony of that fact is that the gentleman outside my door is Balthazar Pike, my trusted lieutenant, who has determined to take over.

"I learned that from Count Hacza, the vampire, when he called yesterday, and he said that I was to be wiped out today. He wrung my hand with real tears in his eyes—an affectionate chap—as he said goodbye."

"And," snarled the creature, "ain't that too damn' bad?"

"No," said Almarish mildly. "No, because you're going to get me out of this. I knew you were good luck the moment you poked your nose through the wall and began to snicker."

Moira eyed him keenly. "What's in it for me?" she finally demanded.

There was again the pounding on the door. "Lord Almarish," yelled Balthazar Pike, "aren't you through with those potted plants yet?"

"No," called the sorcerer. "We've just barely got to the gladioli."

"Pretty slow working," grumbled the trusted lieutenant. "Get some snap into it."

"Sure, Pike. Sure. Only a few minutes more." He turned on the little creature. "What do you want?" he asked.

There was a curious catch in her voice as she answered, "A vial of tears from *la Bête Joyeux*."

"Cut out the bunk," snapped Almarish impatiently. "Gold, jewels—anything at all. Name it."

"Look, whiskers," snarled the little creature. "I told you my price and I'll stick to it. What's more I'll take you to the right place."

"And on the strength of that," grinned the sorcerer, "I'm supposed to let you out of my hands?"

"That's the idea," snapped Moira. "You have to trust somebody in this lousy world—why not me? After all, mister, I'm taking your word—if you'll give it."

"Done," said Almarish with great decision. "I hereby

pledge myself to do everything I can to get you that whatever-it-was's tears, up to and including risk and loss of life."

"Okay, whiskers," she said. "Put me down." He obliged, and saw her begin to pace out pentacles and figures on the mosaic floor. As she began muttering to herself with great concentration he leaned his head against the door. There were agitated murmurs without.

"Don't be silly," Pike was saying. "He told me with his own mouth he had a woman—"

"Look, Bally," said another voice, one that Almarish recognized as that of a gatekeeper, "I ain't sayin' you're wacked up, but they ain't even no mice in his room. I ain't let no one in and the ectoplasmeter don't show nothin' on the grounds of the castle."

"Then," said Pike, "he must be stalling. Rourke, you get the rest of the 'breeds and we'll break down the door and settle Lord Almarish's hash for good. The lousy weakling!"

Lord Almarish began to sweat afresh and cast a glance at Moira, who was standing stock-still to one side of the mosaic design in the floor. He noted abruptly a series of black tiles in the center that he had never seen before. Then others surrounding them turned black, and he saw that they were not coloring but ceasing to exist. Apparently something of a bottomless pit was opening up beneath his palace.

Outside the padding and clicking of feet sounded. "Okay, boys! Get it in line!"

They would be swinging up a battering ram, Almarish surmised. The shivering crash of the first blow against the oaken door made his ears ring. Futilely he braced his own brawny body against the planking and felt the next two blows run through his bones.

"One more!" yelled his trusted lieutenant. And with that one more the door would give way, he knew, and what they would do to him would be no picnic. He had schooled them well, though crudely, in the techniques of strike-breaking effected by employers of the 1880s.

"Hurry it up!" he snapped at Moira. She didn't answer, being wholly intent, it seemed, on the enlargement of the pit which was growing in the floor. It would now admit

the passage of a slimmer man than the sorcerer, but his own big bones would never make it.

With agonizing slowness the pit grew, tile by tile, as the tiny creature frowned into it till her face was white and bloodless. Almarish fancied he could hear through the door the labored breathing of the half-breed demons as they made ready to swing again.

Crash! It came again, and only his own body kept the door from falling in fragments.

"Right—*dive!*" shrilled the little voice of Moira as the battering ram poked through into the room. He caught her up in one hand and squeezed through into the blackness of the pit. He looked up and could see a circle of faces snarling with rage as he slid down a kind of infinitely smooth inclined tunnel. Abruptly the patch of light above him was blotted out and there was absolutely nothing to be seen.

All Almarish knew was that he was gliding in utter blackness at some terrifying speed in excess of anything sane down to a place he knew nothing of in the company of a vicious little creature whose sole desire seemed to be to cut his throat and drink his blood with glee.

7

"Where," asked Almarish, "does this end?"

"You'll find out," snarled the little creature. "Maybe you're yellow already?"

"Don't say that," he warned. "Not unless you want to get playfully pinched—in half."

"Cold-blooded," she marveled. "Like a snake or lizard. Heart's probably three-ventricled, too."

"Our verbal contract," said the sorcerer, delicately emphasizing *verbal,* "didn't include an exchange of insults."

"Yeah," she said abstractedly. And though they were in the dark, he could sense that she was worried. "Yeah, that's right."

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"It's your fault," she shrilled. "It's your own damned fault hurrying me up so I did this!" The man knew that she was near distraction with alarm. And he could feel the

reason why. They were slowing down, and this deceleration, presumably, was not on Moira's schedule.

"We on the wrong line?" he asked coolly.

"Yes. That's about it. And don't ask me what happens now, because I don't know, you stupid cow!" Then she was sniffling quietly in his hand, and the sorcerer was wondering how he could comfort her without breaking her in two.

"There now," he soothed tentatively, stroking her hair carefully with the tip of a finger. "There, now, don't get all upset—"

It occurred to him to worry on his own account. They had slowed to a mere snail's pace, and at the dramatically, psychologically correct moment a light appeared ahead. A dull chanting resounded through the tube:

"Slimy flesh,
Clotted blood,
Fat, white worms,
These are food."

From Moira there was a little, strangled wail. "Ghouls!"

"Grave robbers?" asked the sorcerer. "I can take care of them—knock a few heads together."

"No," she said in thin, hopeless tones. "You don't understand. These are the real thing. You'll see."

As they slid from the tube onto a sort of receiving table Almarish hastily pocketed the little creature. Then, staring about him in bewilderment, he dropped his jaw and let it hang.

The amiable dietary ditty was being ground out by a phonograph, tending which there was a heavy-eyed person dressed all in gray. He seemed shapeless, lumpy, like a half-burned tallow candle on whose sides the drops of wax have congealed in half-teardrops and cancerous clusters. He had four limbs and, on the upper two, hands of a sort, and wore what could roughly be described as a face.

"You," said Almarish. "What's—where—?" He broke off in confusion as a lackluster eye turned on him.

From a stack beside him the creature handed him a pamphlet. The sorcerer studied the title:

WORKERS!
FIGHT TO *PRESERVE* AND *EXTEND*
the GLORIOUS REVOLUTION which has BEFALLEN
Y O U!

He read further:

There are those among you who still can remember the haphazard days of individual enterprise and communal wealth. Those days were bad; many starved for lack of nutritious corpses. And yet people died Above; why this poverty in the midst of plenty?

There were Above as usual your scouts who cast about for likely members of your elite circle, those who wished to live forever on the traditional banquets of the Immortal Eaters. Fortunate indeed was the scout who enrolled Ingvar Hemming. For it was he who, descending to the Halls of the Eaters, saw the pitiful confusion which existed.

Even as he had brought order into the vast holdings which had been his when Above, he brought order to the Halls. A ratio was established between production and consumption and civilized habits of life-in-death were publicized. Nowadays no Immortal Eater would be seen barbarously clawing the flesh from a corpse as in the bad old days; in these times your Safety-Tasty cans are the warrant of cleanliness and flavor.

Bug-eyed, Almarish turned to the back of the booklet and scanned the advertisements:

There's STRENGTH
s-p-e-e-d
grace
In A HEMMING HEARSE
"To serve we strive
The dead-alive."

He tore his eyes from the repulsive pages. "Chum," he demanded hoarsely of the phonograph attendant, "what the hell goes on here?"

"Hell?" asked the ghoul in a creaky, slushy voice. "You're way off. You'll never get there now. I buzzed the receiving desk—they'll come soon."

"I mean this thing." Gingerly he held it up between thumb and forefinger.

"Oh—that. I'm supposed to give it to each new arrival. It's full of bunk. If you could possibly get out of here, you'd do it. This ain't no paradise, not by a long shot."

"I thought," said Almarish, "that you all had enough to eat now. And if you can afford hearses you must be well off."

"You think so?" asked the attendant. "I can remember back when things was different. And then this Hemming man—he comes down from Above, corners the supply, hires men to can it and don't pay them enough to buy it in cans. I don't understand it, but I know it ain't right."

"But who buys the—the eyes and hearses?"

"Foremen an' ex-ex-ekky-tives. And whut they are I don't know. It jest ain't jolly down here no more."

"Where you from?" asked Almarish.

"Kentucky. Met a scout, 1794. Liked it and been here ever since. You change—cain't git back. It's a sad thing naow." He dummied up abruptly as a squad of ghouls approached. They were much less far gone—"changed"—than the attendant. One snapped out a notebook.

"Name?" he demanded.

"Packer, Almarish—what you will," he said, fingering an invincible dagger in his sleeve.

"Almarish—*the* Almarish?"

"Overlord of Ellil," he modestly confessed, assuming, and rightly, that the news of his recent deposition had not yet reached the Halls of the Eternal Eaters. "Come on a tour of inspection. I was wondering if I ought to take over this glorified cafeteria."

"I assume," said one of the reception committee—for into such it had hastily resolved itself—"you'll want to see our vice-president in charge of Inspection and Regulation?"

"You assume wrongly," said the sorcerer coldly. "I want to see the president."

"Mr. Hemming?" demanded the spokesman. All heads save that of Almarish bowed solemnly. "You—you haven't an appointment, you know."

"Lead on," ordered the sorcerer grimly. "To Mr. *Hemming.*" Again the heads bowed.

Almarish strode majestically through the frosted-glass door simply lettered with the name and title of the man who owned the nation of ghouls body and soul.

"Hello, Hemming," said he to the man behind the desk, sitting down unbidden.

The president was scarcely "changed" at all. It was possible that he had been eating food that he had been used to when Above. What Almarish saw was an ordinary man in a business suit, white-haired, with a pair of burning eyes and a stoop forward that gave him the aspect of a cougar about to pounce.

"Almarish," he said, "I welcome you to my—corporation."

"Yes—thank you," said the sorcerer. He was vaguely worried. Superb businessman that he was, he could tell with infallible instinct that something was wrong—that his stupendous bluff was working none too well.

"I've just received an interesting communication," said Hemming casually. "A report via rock signals that there was some sort of disturbance in your Ellil. A sort of—palace revolution. Successful, too, I believe."

Almarish was about to spring at his throat and bring down guards about his head when he felt a stirring in his pocket. Over the top of one peeked the head of Moira.

"Won't you," she said, "introduce me to the handsome man?"

Almarish, grinning quietly, brought her out into full view. With a little purr she gloriously stretched her lithe body. Hemming was staring like an old goat.

"This," said the sorcerer, "is Moira."

"For sale?" demanded the president, clenching his hands till the knuckles whitened on the top of his desk.

"Of course," she drawled amiably. "At the moment a free agent. Right?" She tipped Almarish a wink.

"Of course," he managed to say regretfully, "you know your own mind, Moira, but I wish you'd stay with me a little longer."

"I'm tired of you," she said. "A lively girl like me needs them young and handsome to keep my interest alive. There are some men"—she cast a sidelong, slumbrous glance at Hemming—"*some men* I'd never grow tired of."

"Bring her over," said the president, trying to control his voice.

Almarish realized that there was something in the combination of endemic desirability and smallness which was irresistible. He didn't know it, but that fact was being demonstrated in his own Braintree, Mass., at that very time by a shop which had abandoned full-sized window dummies and was using gorgeous things a little taller than Moira but scarcely as sexy. In the crowds around their windows there were four men to every woman.

His Moira pirouetted on the desk top, displaying herself. "And," she said, "for *some men* I'll do a really extraordinary favor."

"What's that?" asked Hemming, fighting with himself to keep his hands off her. He was plainly terrified of squashing this gorgeous creature.

"I could make you," she said, "my size. Only a little taller, of course. Women like that."

"You can?" he asked, his voice breaking. "Then go ahead!"

"I have your full consent?"

"Yes," he said. "Full consent."

"Then—" A smile curved her lips as she swept her hands through the air in juggling little patterns.

A lizard about ten inches long reared up on its hind legs, then frantically skittered across the tabletop. Almarish looked for Hemming; could not see him anywhere. He

picked up Moira. In a sleepy, contented voice she was saying:

"My size. Only a little taller, of course."

8

Back in the tube from which they had been shunted into the Halls of the Eternal Eaters, as the ghouls fancied calling themselves, Almarish couldn't get sense out of Moira. She had fallen asleep in his pocket and was snoring quietly, like a kitten that purred in its sleep.

And more than ever he marveled at this cold-blooded little creature. She had had the routine of seduction and transformation down so pat that he was sure she had done it a hundred times—or a thousand. You couldn't tell ages in any of these unreal places; he, who should be a hundred and eight, looked just thirty-five and felt fifteen years younger than that.

All the same, it would be a good thing not to give Moira full and clear consent to anything at all. That must be an important part of the ceremony.

He hoped that the ghouls would straighten themselves out now that their president was a ten-inch lizard. But there were probably twenty villainous vice-presidents, assorted as to size, shape and duties, to fill his place. Maybe they'd get to fighting over it, and the ghouls-in-ordinary would be able to toss them all over.

Just like Ellil. A good thing he'd gotten out of *that.*

Not that he liked this way of traveling, he assured himself. It couldn't be anything half so honest as it seemed—a smooth-lined tube slanting down through solid rock. It was actually, of course, God-knew-what tricky path between the planes of existence. That thirteen-hour clock was one way, this was another, but more versatile.

Lights ahead again—red lights. He took Moira from his pocket and shook her with incredible delicacy.

"You ox!" she snapped. "Trying to break my back?"

"Sorry," he said. "Lights—red ones. What about them?"

"That's it," she said grimly. "Do you feel like a demigod—particularly?"

"No," he admitted. "Not—particularly."

"Then that's too damn bad," she snapped. "Remember,

you have a job to do. When you get past the first trials and things, wake me up."

"Trials?"

"Yes, always. Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Norse—they all have a Weigher of Souls. It's always the same place, of course, but they like the formality. Now let me sleep."

He put her back into his pocket and tried to brake with his hands and feet. No go. But soon he began to decelerate. Calling up what little he knew of such things, he tried to draw a desperate analogy between molecules standing radially instead of in line and whatever phenomenon this was which made him—who was actually, he knew, not moving at all—not-move more slowly than before, when he had been standing still at an inconceivably rapid pace.

The lights flared ahead into a bloody brilliance, and he skidded onto another of the delivery tables of sardonyx.

A thing with a hawk face took his arm.

"Stwm stm!" it said irritably.

"Velly solly," said the sorcerer. "Me no spik—whatever in Hades you're speaking."

"R khrt sr tf mtht," it said with a clash of its beak. Almarish drew his invincible dirk, and the thing shrugged disarmingly.

"Chdl nfr," it grinned, sauntering off.

A Chinese approached, surveying him. "Sholom aleichim," he greeted Almarish, apparently fooled by the beard.

"Aleichim sholom," replied the enchanter, "but you've made a mistake."

"Sorry," said the Chinese. "We'll put you on the calendar at General Sessions. Take him away!" he called sharply.

Almarish was hustled into a building and up a flight of stairs by two men in shiny blue uniforms before he had a chance to ask what the charge was. He was hustled through a pen, through innumerable corridors, through a sort of chicken-wire cage, and finally into a courtroom.

"Hurrah!" yelled thousands of voices. Dazedly he looked over a sea of faces, mostly bloodthirsty.

"Tough crowd," one of the attendants muttered. "We better stick around to take care of you. They like to collect souvenirs. Arms . . . scalps. . . ."

"See him?" demanded the other attendant, pointing at

the judge. "Used to be a Neminant Divine. This is his punishment. This and dyspepsia. Chronic."

Almarish could read the sour lines in the judge's face like a book. And the book looked as though it had an unhappy ending.

"Prisoner to the bar," wheezed the justice.

THE COURT: Prisoner, give your name and occupation.

PRISONER: Which ones, Your Honor? There are so many.

(Laughter and hisses.)

A VOICE: Heretic—burn him!

THE COURT: Order! Prisoner, give the ones you like best. And remember—We Know All.

PRISONER: Yes, Your Honor. Packer, ex-overlord of Ellil.

THE COURT: Read the accusation, clerk.

CLERK: *(several words lost)* did willfully conspire to transform said Hemming into a lizard ten inches long.

(Laughter in the court.)

THE COURT: Poppycock!

RECORDING CLERK: How do you spell that, Your Honor?

THE COURT: Silence! I said *Poppycock!*

RECORDING CLERK: Thank you, Your Honor.

PRISONER'S COUNSEL: Your Honor, *(several words lost),* known *(several words lost)* childhood *(several words lost).*

THE COURT: Prisoner's counsel is very vague.

PRISONER: My God—is *he* my lawyer?

THE COURT: So it would appear.

PRISONER: But I never saw the man before, and he's obviously drunk, Your Honor!

THE COURT: Hic! What of it, prisoner?

PRISONER: Nothing. Nothing at all. Move to proceed.

PROSECUTING ATT'Y: I object! Your Honor, I object!

THE COURT: Sustained.

(A long silence. Hisses and groans.)

THE COURT: Mr. Prosecutor, *you* got us into this—what have you to say for yourself?

PROSECUTING ATT'Y: Your Honor, I—I—I move to proceed.

PRISONER: It's my turn, Your Honor. *I* object.

THE COURT: Overruled.

(Cheers and whistles.)

VOICES: Hang him by the thumbs!
Cut his face off!
Heretic—burn him!

THE COURT: I wish it to go on record that I am much gratified by the intelligent interest which the public is taking in this trial.

(Cheers and whistles.)

PROSECUTING ATT'Y: Your Honor, I see no need further to dillydally. This is a clear-cut case and the state feels no hesitation in demanding that the Court impose maximum penalty under law—which, if I remember aright, is death *per flagitionem extremum, peine forte et dure, crucifictio ultima* and *inundation sub aqua regia*—in that order.

(Cheers and screams. Wild demonstration.)

THE COURT: I so—

A VOICE: Hey, blue-eyes!

THE COURT: I so—

A VOICE *(the same)*: Hey, you, cutie-pants!

THE COURT: Prisoner.

PRISONER: Yes, Your Honor?

THE COURT: Prisoner, are you aware of what you have in your pocket?

PRISONER: Oh—*her.* Cute, isn't she?

THE COURT: Bring it closer. I shall make it Exhibit A.

A VOICE *(the same)*: Hey—that tickles!

THE COURT: Exhibit A, have you any testimony to give?

(Demonstration, mostly whistles.)

EXHIBIT A: Yes, Your Honor. Take me away from this horrible man! The things he's done to me—

THE COURT: Yes? Yes?

EXHIBIT A: You can't imagine. But Your Honor, you're not like him. You know, Your Honor, there are *some men (rest of testimony lost).*

THE COURT: *(comments lost).*

EXHIBIT A: *(testimony lost).*

THE COURT: Really! You don't mean it! Well, go ahead.

EXHIBIT A: Have I your full consent?

THE COURT: You have—free, clear and legal.

EXHIBIT A: *(gestures with both hands).*

THE COURT: *(turns into lizard approx. 10 in. long).*

EXHIBIT A: Come on, whiskers—let's beat it!

PRISONER: I hear you talkin'!
PROSECUTING ATT'Y: Go after them, you damfools!
COURT ATTACHÉS: Not us, bud. What kind of dopes do we look like to you?

(Screams, howls, whistles, yells, demonstrations, complete pandemonium.)

9

"How will I know," demanded Almarish, "when I'm supposed to turn left?"

"When the three moons show up as an equilateral triangle," said Moira, "will be high time. Now, damn you, let me go to sleep."

"Why are you always so tired after these little transformation acts of yours?"

"You, not being a real sorcerer, wouldn't understand. But suffice it to say that any magic-worker would have to do as much. Watch out for ghosts. Good night."

She was in his pocket again, either purring or snoring. He never could decide which was the right word. And Almarish realized that this little lady had somehow become very dear to him.

He was walking along a narrow, sullen strip of desert bordered on either side by devil trees that lashed out with poisonous, thorny branches. The things must have had sharp ears, for they would regularly lie in wait for him and lash up as he stepped past. Fortunately, they could not make the extra yard or two of leeway he had.

Above, the three moons of the present night were shifting in a stately drill, more like dancers than celestial bodies, sometimes drawing near to an equilateral triangle but never quite achieving it. And she had been most specific about it.

There was still *la Bête Joyeux* to face, from whose eyes had to be wrung a vial of tears for purpose or purposes unknown to the sorcerer. His French was a little weak, but he surmised that the thing was a happy beast, and that to make it weep would bear looking into. He made a mental note to ask her about it. He was always asking her about things.

The devil trees were at it again, this time with a new

twist. They would snap their tentacles at him like whips, so that one or more of the darts would fly off and whiz past his face. And it was just as well that they did. One of those things would drop a rhino in full charge, Moira had told him. Odd name, Moira. Sounded Irish.

He looked up and drew his breath in sharply. The moons had formed their triangle and held it for a long, long five minutes. Time to turn left. The way was blocked, of course, by ill-tempered trees. He drew the invincible dirk, hoping that the trees did not know enough magic to render the thing just an innocent little brand, and deliberately stepped within reach of one of the trees.

It lashed out beautifully; Almarish did not have to cut at it. The tentacle struck against the blade and lopped itself clean off. The tree uttered a mournful squeal and tried to find and haul in the severed tentacle with the others. They had a way of sticking them back on again.

He slashed away heartily, counting them as they fell. With each fresh gush of pussy sap the tree wailed more and more weakly. Finally it drooped, seemingly completely done in. Treachery, of course. He flung a lump of sandstone into the nest of arms and saw them close, slowly and with little crushing power, around it. Were it he instead of the stone, he could have hacked himself free before the thing burst into sand.

Quite boldly, therefore, he picked his way among the oozing tendrils, now and then cutting at one from the wrist. He gum-shoed past the trunk itself and saw the pulsing membranes quiver malevolently at his step. They had things like this back in Ellil; he felt more than competent to deal with them.

But ghosts, now—ghosts were something else again. He had never seen a ghost, though the rumors did go about. And if ever ghosts were to be seen, it was in this spot.

Here the moons did not send their light—he didn't know why—and the grass underfoot was fatty, round rods. From shrubs shone a vague, reddish light that frayed on a man's nerves. There was the suggestion of a sound in the air, like the ghost itself of a noise dispersed.

"Moira," he said softly. "Snap out of it. I'm scared."

A tiny head peeked over the top of his pocket. "Yellow

already?" she insultingly asked. "The master of all Ellil's turning green?"

"Look," he said. "Just you tell me what we're up against and I'll go ahead. Otherwise, no."

"Ghosts," she said. "This place is a den of them. I suppose you've heard all the stories about them and don't quite believe. Well, the stories are true. Just forget about the whimsy *à la* John Kendrick Bangs. Ghosts aren't funny; they're the most frightening things that ever were. There's nothing you can do about them; none of the magical formulas work because they aren't even magical. They are distilled essence of terror in tactile form. There's absolutely nothing you can do with, to, or about them. I can't give you a word of advice. You know what you have to do, whiskers. We're after that vial of tears."

"Right," he said. "Keep your head out—here we go."

He—they—walked into a vast glob of darkness that saturated their minds, seeped between their molecules and into their lungs and hearts.

"Oh my God!" wailed a voice. "Oh, my God!"

Almarish didn't turn his head; kept walking straight on.

"Stranger—help me—here they come—" the voice shrilled. There was a sickening sound of crackling, then a mushy voice that spoke a few indistinguishable words.

"They're at it," said Moira tremulously. "Don't let it get you down."

"A big man like you," said the sweet voice of a young girl, "consorting with that evil little creature! You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I'm *ever* so much nicer. . . ."

In the gooey blackness appeared a figure—wispy, luminous—of a charming maiden whose head was a skull and whose hair was a convolution of pink, writhing worms. Gently they hissed in chorus:

"Bold, big master,
Come to terms;
Feed the dainty
Maid of Worms."

The last line of the ditty echoed from all sides in a variety of voices, ranging from a new-born wail to the hoarseness of a death rattle.

Almarish shut his eyes and walked ahead as the Maid reached out her arms. He walked into her and felt a clammy, gelid coldness, the tightness of arms around him, and ropy things fumbling on his face. Repressing a shriek, breathing heavily, he strode on, finally opening his eyes. Again he—they—were in the blackness, without a sound or light. Fumbling for a handkerchief, he swabbed at his brow and cheeks, dripping with cold sweat. As he thought of the Maid again, his back rose into little prickles of ice.

"It was me," he said, trembling violently, "who could never stand mice and roaches, Moira."

"Keep going," she snapped coldly. "This isn't a picnic." The little creature was upset again. Almarish walked on, missed his footing and fell, sprawling grotesquely. Slowly he drifted down through unimaginable depths of blackness, reaching out frantically for holds, and there were none.

"Stop it!" shrilled Moira. "Stop struggling!"

Obediently he relaxed. His fall ended with a bump, on a twilit road sloping gently downward as far as the eye could see. There was a vague, rumbling noise underfoot, as if there were heavy carts on the road.

He looked up along the road. Something was coming, and it was brutally big. Legless, it rolled along on iron wheels, coming at him. The thing was a flattened ovoid of dark, sharkish gray, and like a shark it had a gruesome, toothy slit of mouth. Growing bigger and bigger, it thundered down the road as he watched, petrified, his own mouth open in childish alarm.

A shrill scream from his pocket brought him to. "Jump, you dummy!" shrieked Moira. *"Jump!"* He leaped into the air as the thing, its triangular mouth snapping savagely, teeth clashing, thundered beneath him.

He watched it go on down the road, still cold with terror.

"Can it come back?" he asked.

"Of course not," said Moira. "Could *you* roll uphill?"

"You're right," he said. "Quite right. But what do we do now?" He mopped his brow again.

"Look," said the little creature kindly. "I know how you feel, but don't worry. You're doing a lot better than you think you are. We'll be out of this in a minute, if you don't break down." She looked sharply into his face.

"Maybe I won't," he said. "I'm not making promises, the way I feel. What—what in Hades—?"

He—they—were snatched up by a gigantic wind and were sucked through the air like flies in an air-conditioning plant.

"Close your eyes," said Moira. "Close them tight and think of something—anything—except what's going to happen to you. Because if you think of something else, it won't happen."

Almarish squeezed his eyes tight shut as a thunderous droning noise filled his ears. "Ex sub one sub two," he gabbled, "equals ei square plus two ei plus the square root of bee plus and minus ei square minus two ei bee over two ei." The droning roar was louder; he jammed his thumbs into his ears.

He felt a hideous impulse to open his eyes. Little, stinging particles of dust struck against his neck.

Flying through the air, turning over and over, the droning roar became one continual crash that battered against his body with physical force. There was one indescribable, utterly, incomparably violent noise that nearly blew his brain out like an overload of electricity. Then things became more or less quiet, and he tumbled onto a marshy sort of ground.

"All clear?" he asked, without opening his eyes.

"Yes," said Moira. "You were magnificent."

He lifted his lids warily and saw that he sat on a stretch of forest sward. Looking behind him—

"My God!" he screamed. "Did we go through *that?*"

"Yes," said Moira. "It's a ghost—unless you're afraid of it, it can't hurt you."

Behind them, the thousand-foot blades of a monstrous electric fan swirled brilliantly at several hundred r.p.s. The noise reached them in a softening blur of sound. Gently it faded away.

Almarish of Ellil leaned back quietly.

"The big calf!" muttered Moira. "*Now* he faints on me!"

10

"Now," said Almarish, "what about this happy animal?"

"*La Bête Joyeux?*" asked the little creature.

"If that's what its name is. Why this damned nonsense about tears?"

"It's a curse," said Moira grimly. "A very terrible curse."

"Then it'll keep. Who's in there?"

He pointed to a stony hut that blocked the barely defined trail they were following. Moira shaded her tiny eyes and wrinkled her brow as she stared. "I don't know," she admitted at last. "It's something new."

Almarish prepared to detour. The stone door slid open. Out looked a wrinkled, weazened face, iron-rimmed spectacles slid down over the nose. It was whiskered, but not as resplendently as Almarish's, whose imposing mattress spread from his chin to his waist. And the beard straggling from the face was not the rich mahogany hue of the sorcerer's, but a dirty white, streaked with gray and soup stains.

"Hello," said Almarish amiably, getting his fingers around the invincible dirk.

"Beaver!" shrilled the old man, pointing a dirty-yellow, quavering, derisive finger at Almarish. Then he lit a cigarette with a big, apparently homemade match and puffed nervously.

"Is there anything," inquired the sorcerer, "we can do for you? Otherwise we'd like to be on our way."

"We?" shrilled the old man.

Almarish realized that Moira had retreated into his pocket again. "I mean I," he said hastily. "I was a king once—you get into the habit."

"Come in," said the old man quaveringly. By dint of extraordinarily hard puffing, he had already smoked down the cigarette to his yellowed teeth. Carefully he lit another from its butt.

Almarish did not want to come in. At least he had not wanted to, but there was growing in his mind a conviction that this was a very nice old man, and that it would be a right and proper thing to go in. That happy-animal nonsense could wait. Hospitality was hospitality.

He went in and saw an utterly revolting interior, littered with the big, clumsy matches and with cigarette butts smoked down to eighth-inches and stamped out. The reek of nicotine filled the air; ashtrays deep as water buckets overflowed everywhere onto the floor.

"Perhaps," said the sorcerer, "we'd better introduce ourselves. I'm Almarish, formerly of Ellil."

"Pleased to meet you," shrilled the ancient. Already he was chain-smoking his third cigarette. "My name's Hopper. I'm a geasan."

"What?"

"Geasan—layer-on of geases. A geas is an injunction which can't be disobeyed. Sit down."

Almarish felt suddenly that it was about time he took a little rest. "Thanks," he said, sitting in a pile of ashes and burned matches. "But I don't believe that business about you being able to command people."

The geasan started his sixth cigarette and cackled shrilly. "You'll see. Young man, I want that beard of yours. My mattress needs restuffing. You'll let me have it, of course."

"Of course," said Almarish. Anything at all for a nice old man like this, he thought. But that business about geases was too silly for words.

"And I may take your head with it. You won't object."

"Why, no," said the sorcerer. What in Hades was the point of living, anyway?

Lighting his tenth cigarette from the butt of the ninth, the geasan took down from the wall a gigantic razor.

A tiny head peeked over the top of the sorcerer's pocket.

"Won't you," said a little voice, "introduce me, Almarish, to your handsome friend?"

The eleventh cigarette dropped from the lips of the ancient as Almarish brought out Moira and she pirouetted on his palm. She cast a meaningful glance at the geasan. "Almarish is *such* a boor," she declared. "Not one bit like *some* men. . . ."

"It was the cigarettes that gave him his power, of course," decided the sorcerer as he climbed the rocky bluff.

"My size," purred Moira, "only a little taller, of course. Women like that." She began to snore daintily in his pocket.

Almarish heaved himself over the top of the bluff, and found himself on a stony plain or plateau scattered with tumbled rocks.

"Vials, sir?" demanded a voice next to his ear.

"Ugh!" he grunted, rapidly sidestepping. "Where are you?"

"Right here." Almarish stared. "No—*here.*" Still he could see nothing.

"What was that about vials?" he asked, fingering the dirk.

Something took shape in the air before his eyes. He picked it out of space and inspected the thing. It was a delicate bottle, now empty, designed to hold only a few drops. Golden wires ran through the glass forming patterns suggestive of murder and other forms of sudden death.

"How much?" he asked.

"That ring?" suggested the voice. Almarish felt his hand being taken and one of his rings being twisted off.

"Okay," he said. "It's yours."

"Thanks ever so much," replied the voice gratefully. "Miss Megaera will *love* it."

"Keep away from those Eumenides, boy," Almarish warned. "They're tricky sluts."

"I'll thank you to mind your own business, sir," snapped the voice. It began to whistle an air, which trailed away into the distance.

From behind one of the great, tumbled cairns of rock slid, with a colossal clashing of scales, a monster.

"Ah, there," said the monster.

Almarish surveyed it carefully. The thing was a metallic cross among the octopus, scorpion, flying dragon, tortoise, ape and toad families. Its middle face smiled amiably, almost condescendingly, down on the sorcerer.

"You the *Bête Joyeux?*" asked Almarish.

"See here," said the monster, snorting a bit and dribbling lava from a corner of its mouth. "See here—I've been called many things, some unprintable, but that's a new one. What's it mean?"

"Happy animal, I think," said Almarish.

"Then I probably am," said the monster. It chuckled. "Now what do you want?"

"See this vial? It has to be filled with your tears."

"So what?" asked the monster, scratching itself.

"Will you weep for me?"

"Out of sheer perversity, no. Shall we fight now?"

"I suppose so," said Almarish, heavyhearted. "There's only one other way to get your tears that I can think of. Put up your dukes, chum."

The monster squared off slowly. It didn't move like a fighter; it seemed to rely on static fire power, like a battle-tank. It reached out a tentacle whose end opened slowly into a steaming nozzle. Almarish snapped away as a squirt of sulfurous matter gushed from the tip.

With a lively blow the sorcerer slashed off the tentacle, which scuttled for shelter. The monster proper let out a yell of pain. One of its lionlike paws slapped down and sidewise at Almarish; he stood his ground and let the thing run into the dirk its full length, then jumped inside the thing's guard and scaled its shoulder.

"No fair!" squalled the monster.

He replied with a slash that took off an ear. The creature scratched frantically for him, but he easily eluded the clumsy nails that raked past its hide. As he danced over the skin, stabbing and slashing more like a plowman than a warrior, the nails did fully as much damage as he did.

Suddenly, treacherously, the monster rolled over. Almarish birled it like a log in a pond, harrowing up its exposed belly as it lay on its back.

Back on its feet again, the thing was suddenly still. The sorcerer, catching his breath, began to worry. The squawking pants that had been its inhalations and exhalations had stopped. But it wasn't dead, he knew. The thing was holding its breath. But why was it doing that?

The temperature of the skin began to rise, sharply. So, thought Almarish, it was trying to smoke him off by containing all its heat! He scrambled down over its forehead. The nostril flaps were tight shut. Seemingly, it breathed only by its middle head, the one he was exploring.

His heels were smoking, and the air was growing superheated. Something had to be done, but good and quick.

With a muttered prayer, Almarish balanced the dirk in his hand and flung it with every ounce of his amazing brawn. Then, not waiting to see the results, he jumped down and ran frantically to the nearest rock. He dodged behind it and watched.

The dirk had struck home. The nostril flaps of the

monster had been *pinned* shut. He chuckled richly to himself as the thing pawed at its nose. The metallic skin was beginning to glow red-hot, then white.

He ducked behind the rock, huddled close to it as he saw the first faint hairline of weakness on the creature's glowing hide.

Crash! It exploded like a thunderclap. Parts whizzed past the rock like bullets, bounced and skidded along the ground, fusing rocks as they momentarily touched.

Almarish looked up at last. *La Bête Joyeux* was scattered over most of the plateau.

Almarish found the head at last. It had cooled down considerably; he fervently hoped that it had not dried out. With the handle of his dirk he pried up the eyelid and began a delicate operation.

Finally the dead-white sac was in his hands. Unstoppering the vial, he carefully milked the tear gland into it.

"Moira," he said gently, shaking her.

"You ox!"

She was awake in a moment, ill-tempered as ever.

"What is it now?"

"Your vial," he said, placing it on his palm beside her.

"Well, set it down on the ground. Me, too." He watched as she tugged off the stopper and plunged her face into the crystal-clear liquid.

Then, abruptly, he gasped. "Here," he said, averting his eyes. "Take my cloak."

"Thanks," said the tall young lady with a smile. "I didn't think, for the moment, that my clothes wouldn't grow when I did."

"Now—would you care to begin at the beginning?"

"Certainly. Moira O'Donnel's my name. Born in Dublin. Located in Antrim at the age of twenty-five, when I had the ill luck to antagonize a warlock named McGinty. He shrank me and gave me a beastly temper. Then, because I kept plaguing him, he banished me to these unreal parts.

"He was hipped on the Irish literary renaissance—Yeats, AE, Joyce, Shaw and the rest. So he put a tag on the curse that he found in one of Lord Dunsany's stories, about the tears of *la Bête Joyeux*. In the story it was 'the gladsome beast,' and Mac's French was always weak.

"What magic I know I picked up by eavesdropping. You can't help learning things knocking around the planes, I guess. There were lots of bits that I filed away because I couldn't use them until I achieved full stature again. And now, Almarish, they're all yours. I'm very grateful to you."

He stared into her level green eyes. "Think you could get us back to Ellil?"

"Like *that!*" She snapped her fingers.

"Good. Those rats—Pike and the rest—caught me unawares, but I can raise an army anywhere on a week's notice and take over again."

"I knew you could do it. I'm with you, Almarish, Packer, or whatever your name is."

Diffidently he said, "Moira, you grew very dear to me as you used to snore away in my pocket."

"I don't snore!" she declared.

"Anyway—you can pick whichever name you like. It's yours if you'll have it."

After a little while she said, smiling into his eyes:

"My size. Only a little taller, of course."

THE ROCKET OF 1955

THE SCHEME was all Fein's, but the trimmings that made it more than a pipe dream, and its actual operation, depended on me. How long the plan had been in incubation I do not know, but Fein, one day in the spring of 1954, broke it to me in a rather crude form. I pointed out some errors, corrected and amplified on the thing in general, and told him that I'd have no part of it—and changed my mind when he threatened to reveal certain indiscretions committed by me some years ago.

It was necessary that I spend some months in Europe, conducting research work incidental to the scheme. I returned with recorded statements, old newspapers, and photostatic copies of certain documents. There was a brief, quiet interview with that old, bushy-haired Viennese worshiped incontinently by the mob; he was convinced by the evidence I had compiled that it would be wise to assist us.

You all know what happened next—it was the professor's historic radio broadcast. Fein had drafted the thing; I had rewritten it and told the astronomer to assume a German accent while reading. Some of the phrases were beautiful: "American dominion over the very planets!—veil at last ripped aside—man defies gravity—travel through space—plant the glorious red, white and blue banner into the soil of Mars!"

The requested contributions poured in. Newspapers and magazines ostentatiously donated yard-long checks of a few thousand dollars; the Government gave a welcome half-million; heavy sugar came from the "Rocket Contribution Week" held in the nation's public schools; but independent contributions were the largest. We cleared

seven million dollars, and then started to build the spaceship.

The virginium that took up most of the money was tin plate; the monatomic fluorine that gave us our terrific speed was hydrogen. The takeoff was a party for the newsreels: the big, gleaming bullet extravagant with vanes and projections; speeches by the professor; Farley, who was to fly it to Mars, grinning into the cameras. He climbed an outside ladder to the nose of the thing, then dropped into the steering compartment. I screwed down the soundproof door, smiling as he hammered to be let out. Rather to his surprise, there was no duplicate of the elaborate dummy controls he had been practicing on for the past few weeks.

I cautioned the pressmen to stand back under the shelter, and gave the professor the knife switch that would send the rocket on its way. He hesitated too long—Fein hissed into his ear, "Anna Pareloff of Cracow, Herr Professor. . . ."

The triple blade clicked into the sockets. The vaned projectile roared a hundred yards into the air with a wabbling curve—then exploded.

A photographer, eager for an angle shot, was killed; so were some boys of the neighborhood. The steel roof protected the rest of us. Fein and I shook hands, while the pressmen screamed into the telephones which we had provided.

But the professor got drunk, and, disgusted with the part he had played in the affair, told all and poisoned himself. Fein and I left the cash behind and hopped a freight. We were picked off it by a vigilante committee (headed by a man who had lost fifty cents in our rocket). Fein was too frightened to talk or write, so they hanged him first, and gave me paper and pencil to tell the story as best I could.

Here they come, with an insultingly thick rope.

WHAT SORGHUM SAYS

UP IN THE foothills of the Cumberlands they have something new in the way of folklore. If you're lucky and haven't got the professional gleam in your eye, the tale is unfolded something like this:

Sorghum Hackett lived by himself up by Sowbelly Crag, not because he was afraid for his still, but because when he was a young man some girl blighted his life by running off to Nashville with a railroad man. Ever since that, he's been bitter against most people.

So this spring morning, when the scientific man came climbing up to his house he got out his squirrel gun and asked him like the mountain people do, "Will you make tracks or your peace with God?"

"Shut up!" said the scientific man, not even looking at him. Then he went pacing off the ground and writing down figures in a book. At last he turned to Sorghum. "How much do you want for your property?" he asked. "I suppose it's yours."

"Anyone in his right mind wouldn't be eager to dispute it," said Sorghum dryly. "But it ain't for sale."

"Don't be stubborn," said the scientific man. "I haven't any time to waste on benighted peasants."

Sorghum dropped his gun in real admiration for the bravery of the man, whoever he was. He held out a hand, saying, "I'm Sorghum Hackett, and I've killed men for less than what you said."

The man shook his hand absent-mindedly. "I'm Wayne Baily, and I've got to have the use of your land for about a month."

Hackett nearly fell in love with the man; he didn't know there was anyone who could stand up to him that way, and

he liked it. "I'm willing," he said at last. "But I won't take your money—it ain't clean."

So Baily just laughed, and then went down to the village and came back up with a Ford truck loaded to the gills with junk. "Hackett," he said, "first thing we do is run this penstock down from that springhead."

And by the next morning they had forty yards of big piping down from Chittling Spring, and the water gushing out the end of the pipe would have irrigated a whole farm. Baily rigged up a metal globe that he bolted to the pipe's end, a globe with a small-gauge turbine wheel in it, and he hooked that up to a little dynamo that stayed on the truck.

When a week was up there was precious little room in Sorghum's house for him and Baily, because it was cluttered up with the junk from town—insides of radios, big coils of wire, aerials, rods stuck into the ground so deep they were cold from underground water they touched —everything crazy you could think of, and all lit up every now and then whenever Baily turned on his dynamo in the truck.

Finally Baily said to Sorghum, "It's been a pleasure knowing you, Hackett. Now there's only one stipulation I'm putting on you, and that is to knock all my machinery into pieces as soon as I'm gone."

"Gone?" asked Sorghum, because Baily didn't say it as though he was going down to town for another storage battery.

"Yes—for good, Hackett," said Baily, puttering with the wires and finally turning a switch. The things lit up and glowed even brighter than ever before. "Goodbye, Hackett," said Baily. Then he grabbed at his chest and his face twisted. "Heart!" he gasped faintly, and even fainter he cut loose with a string of curses that made Sorghum blush.

Baily hit the floor, and Sorghum listened for his breath, but there wasn't any. He scratched his head, wondering how he'd explain things to the coroner, and reached automatically for his jug to help him think.

But one of the things he didn't think of was that his jug had been moved outside to make room for what the

late Mr. Baily had called a condenser. Sorghum got a shock that sent him crashing back on his heels into some of the deep-driven rods. The last thing he knew, the lights were still sparkling and glowing, but he never could tell what hit him.

There was a dizzying splash and Sorghum found himself floundering in water up to his knees. He looked around and wasn't in any place he knew, because he didn't know any places that were all marble and tile. Overhead a hot sun was beating down on him.

"Well!" said someone. And right there Sorghum knew that something was wrong, because though what he heard was "Well!" the sound he heard wasn't anything like that—more like "Ahoo!"

He looked up and saw a man facing him, dressed in sandals and a shirt that fell to his knees. And the man said, still talking so that Sorghum could understand him but not making a single sound in English, "It's a blundering assassin that falls into his victim's fishpond. Tiberius chooses unwisely."

"Are you calling me a bushwhacker, mister?" demanded Sorghum, who never killed except fairly.

The man, who had been grinning proudly, looked surprised then. Not frightened, surprised. "I don't know what language you speak, assassin," he said, "but it's a damnably strange one that confounds and is clear at the same time." He looked closer at Sorghum. "And you don't seem altogether real. Are you always as ghostly when you're sent on the Caesar's errands?"

Sorghum looked at himself and saw that the man wasn't lying. His own flesh seemed to have got a funny trick of being half here and half there, like a column of smoke that's always ready to break. "I reckon you're right, mister," said Sorghum, cracking one of his icy smiles. "I seem to be in a predicament. But I ain't what you take me for. I'm Sorghum Hackett of Tennessee."

"Never heard of the town," said the man. "I'm Asinius Gallo. Need I explain that this is Rome?"

Now, Sorghum had heard that foreigners were peculiar, but he didn't expect anything as peculiar as this, and he said so.

"Foreigners!" yelled the man. "I don't know what barbarous land you're from, stranger, but bear in mind that when you're in the City *you're* the foreigner until and unless naturalized. Though," he added, calmer, "what with that avaricious slut the Lady Livia raising the prices on the roll week after week, soon a Julio-Claudian himself won't be able to stay in his place."

"I don't get your talk, Mr. Gallo," said Sorghum. "I'm here by accident, and I'd like mightily to get back to Tennessee. How can I earn some passage money? I reckon it's overseas."

"Work, eh?" asked Asinius Gallo. "What can you do?"

Sorghum considered. "I can do a little carpentering," he said. "And I can make the best white mule in the Cumberlands."

"Carpentry's out of the question," said Asinius Gallo. "The Joiners' Guild has it tight as a drum. But I don't know of any guild covering the manufacture of white mules—doubt that it can be done."

"Do ye?" asked Sorghum, grinning again. "Just give me some corn, some copper, and a few days and I'll show you."

Asinius Gallo abruptly nodded. "It might be worth trying," he said. "Certainly I can't raise my own. And if they're really good they can be resold at a profit. Sorghum Hackett, I'll finance you."

So, working in privacy, the way the mountain folks like to, it took him a few days before he got a good run. He had to fool around a lot because they used a funny, stunted kind of grain, but finally it came out all right.

"Here, Mr. Gallo," he called to his backer. "It's finished."

"Will it kick?" asked Asinius Gallo cautiously.

Sorghum laughed. "Like the devil with a porky quill in him, I promise you that much. Best you ever saw."

"Well," said Asinius Gallo uncertainly as he entered. Sorghum held up the big jug he'd caught the run in. "What's that?"

"The white mule," Sorghum said, a little hurt.

His backer was downright bewildered. "I expected an animal," he explained. "What you've got in there I can't imagine."

"Oh," said Sorghum. "Well, if you don't agree with me, Mr. Gallo, that this is better than any animal you ever tasted, I'll make you an animal." And he said this because he felt pretty sure that the benighted idolater wouldn't take him up. Sorghum had asked the terrified servants, and they told him that they didn't have anything stronger than the sticky red wine they drank at supper. And that, Sorghum judged by the body, was no more than twenty proof, while this run of his would prove at least a hundred and twenty. He poured a medium slug—four fingers—for his host, who smelled it cautiously.

"Don't put your eyes over it, Mr. Gallo," cautioned Sorghum. "Just drink it right down the way we do in Tennessee." He filled a glass of his own with a man-sized drink.

"Feliciter," said Asinius Gallo, which sounded like "good luck" to Sorghum.

"Confusion to Tories," he replied, downing his.

His host immediately after swallowed his own shot convulsively. Almost immediately he screamed shrilly and clutched at his throat. Sorghum held a water pitcher out to him, grinning. The pitcher was empty when he took it back.

"That," said his host hoarsely, "was a potion worthy of Livia herself. Are you sure it won't kill me?"

"Sartin," replied Sorghum, enjoying the backwash of the home product. "That was almost the smoothest I've ever made."

"Then," said Asinius Gallo, "let's have another."

The Tennessee man had a few more runs, each better than the last as his equipment improved and settled, and with Asinius Gallo as his agent he had amassed quite a bit of the coinage of these foreigners. Altogether things were looking up when a slave appeared with a message.

Sorghum's host read from it: *The Lady Livia will be pleased to see Sorghum Hackett, the guest of the Senator Asinius Gallo. She believes that there are many mutual interests which it will be profitable to discuss.*

"Right kind of her," said Sorghum.

"Hah!" groaned his backer. "You don't know the old

hag. Sorghum Hackett, you're as good as dead, and it's no use hoping otherwise. She's always been down on me, but she never dared to strike at me direct because of my family. Now you're going to get it. Oh, I'm sorry, friend. And I thought I'd kept you a pretty close secret. Well, go on—no use postponing fate."

Sorghum grinned slowly. "We'll see," he said. He picked up two bottles of the latest run and rammed them into his boot tops. "Goodbye, Mr. Gallo," he said, entering the sedan chair that was waiting for him.

The bearers let him off at the Augustan Palace and conducted him to a side entrance. He waited only a moment before the door opened and a cracked voice bade him enter. "Come in, young man; come in!" it shrilled.

Sorghum closed the door behind him and faced the notorious Livia, mother of the Emperor Tiberius, poisoner supreme and unquestioned ruler of Rome. "Pleased t' meetcha, ma'am," he said.

"You're the Hackett they tell me about?" she demanded.

He studied her wispy white hair and the bony, hooked nose as he answered, "I'm the only Hackett in these parts."

"It's true!" she shrilled. "You are a magician—your body waves like a flame, and your language is strange, but I can understand it. Everything they said is true!"

"I reckon so, ma'am," admitted Sorghum.

"Then you're condemned," she said promptly. "I won't have any magicians going about in my empire. Can't tax the brutes—they're unfair. You're condemned, young man!"

"To what?" asked the Tennesseean.

"Amphitheater," she snapped. "Wild beasts. Take him away, you fools!"

Sorghum's arms were grabbed by two of the biggest, ugliest people he had ever seen in his born days and he was hustled down flights of stairs and hurled into something of a dungeon with other condemned magicians.

"You got in just under the wire," one of them informed him helpfully. "We're going to get chased out into the arena in a few minutes."

"What can I do?" asked Sorghum.

"Don't struggle. Don't shield your throat—let the

animals tear it out as soon as possible. That way it's over with at once and you cheat the mob of watching you squirm."

"I reckon so," said Sorghum thoughtfully. He remembered his courtesy and the bottles in his boots. "Have a drink?" he asked, producing them. The magicians clustered around him like flies around honey.

The afternoon games were to consist of such little things as a pack of craven magicians and fortunetellers being killed in a mass by leopards. Consensus favored the leopards; odds were quoted as something like eighty to one against the magicians.

Tiberius waved his hand from the emperor's box in one end of the colossal amphitheater, and the gate which admitted the beasts opened. There was a buzz from the audience as the magnificent animals came streaming through like a river of tawny fur.

The emperor waved again, and the public prepared to be amused by the customary sight of unwilling victims being prodded out into the arena by long-handled tridents. But something must have gone wrong, for the craven magicians came striding boldly out, roaring some song or other. At their head was a curiously shimmering figure who was beating time with two enormous bottles, both empty.

It roared in a titanic voice, as it sighted the animals, "Look out, ye hell-fired pussycats! I'm a-grapplin'!" The magicians charged in a body to the excited screams of the mob.

Roughly there was one cat to every man, and that was the sensible way that the men went about eliminating the cats. The favorite grip seemed to be the tail—a magician would pick up a leopard and swing it around heftily two or three times, then dash its head to the sand of the arena. The rest would be done with the feet.

In a surprisingly short time the magicians were sitting on the carcasses of the cats and resuming their song.

"Let out the lion!" shrilled Tiberius. "They can't do this to me!" The second gate opened, and the king of the jungle himself stalked through, his muscles rippling beneath his golden skin, tossing his huge mane. He sighted

the magicians, who weren't paying him any attention at all, and roared savagely.

The shimmering figure looked up in annoyance. "Another one!" it was heard to declare. The song broke off again as the grim, purposeful body of men went for the lion. He eyed them coldly and roared again. They kept on coming. The king of the jungle grew somewhat apprehensive, lashing his tail and crouching as for a spring. The bluff didn't work, he realized a second later, for the men were on him and all over him, gouging his face cruelly and kicking him in the ribs. He tumbled to the sand rather than suffer a broken leg and grunted convulsively as the magicians sat heavily on his flanks and continued their song.

"It was dow-wen in the Raid River Vail-lee—" mournfully chanted the leader—he with the empty bottles.

Tiberius stamped his feet and burst into tears of rage. "My lion!" he wailed. "They're sitting on my lion!"

The leader dropped his bottles and sauntered absently about the arena. One of the deep-driven iron posts of the inside wall caught his eye. He reached out to touch it and—was gone, with a shimmer of purple light.

Sorghum's reappearance was as unchronicled as his disappearance. He didn't tell anybody until they asked him, and then he told them from beginning to end, substantially as I have told it here.

But every once in a while he remarks, "Foreigners are sartinly peculiar people. I know—I've lived among them. But some day I'm going to get me some money and take a boat back there and see that Mr. Gallo to find out if he ever did get the hang of running the mash. Foreigners are sartinly peculiar—behind the times, I call 'em."

That's what Sorghum says.

CRISIS

IF THE Karfiness hadn't cut herself badly while she was trimming her chelae one morning, the whole mess might never have happened. But fashion decreed that the ropy circle of tentacles about the neck of the female Martian would be worn short that year, and everybody in the Matriarchy, from Girl Guide to the Serene Karfiness herself, obeyed without question.

That was why her temper was short that morning, and why she snapped at the Venusian Plenipotentiary who had come to chat with her concerning the space-mining rights for the following year. The worthy lady glowered at the gentleman from Venus and shrieked, "By the Almighty, if you fish-faced baboons so much as try to lay a flipper on a single free electron between here and Venus I'll blow your waterlogged planet out of space!" And, unfortunately for the Venusians, she had the navy with which to do it.

The principles of compensation operated almost immediately; the Plenipotentiary ethered back to Venus, and Venus severed diplomatic relations with Earth. Should you fail to grasp the train of events, stop worrying. Those are the facts; the Karfiness cut herself and Venus made warlike noises at Earth.

Earth was in a very peculiar situation. Only a century ago it had begun really intensive spacing, with freight exchanges and mining. Venus and Mars, and in a smaller way Jupiter, had been a space culture for millennia. Earth had not had the elaborate machineries of foreign offices and consulates, embassies and delegates and envoys that the other planets maintained. Terra had gone into the complicated mess of astropolitics with her eyes serenely closed and the naive conviction that right would prevail.

To the cloistered Bureau of Protocol in Alaska came a

message under diplomatic seal from the Ambassador to Venus, right into the office of Code Clerk Weems.

Carefully he scanned the tape and lead that closed the pouch. "At it again," he said finally. "I sometimes wonder if the whole thing wouldn't go smash if we read our own mail before every other great power in space."

Dr. Helen Carewe, his highly privileged assistant, opened the pouch with a paper knife and a shrug. "Take it easy, career man," she advised. "Your daddy had the same trouble before they promoted him to Washington State. We get all the dirty work here in Nome—have to explain how and when and why the inviolable mail sacks arrive open and read." She scanned the messages heavily typed on official paper. "What," she asked, "does 'Aristotle' mean?"

"Inexcusable outrages on the dignity of a representative of Terra," said Weems after consulting the code book. "Sounds bad."

"It is. Oh, but it *is!* They took Ambassador Malcolm and painted him bright blue, then drove him naked through the streets of Venusport."

"Whew!" whistled Weems. "That's an 'Aristotle' if ever I heard one! What do we do now?" He was already reaching for the phone.

"Cut that out!" snapped Dr. Carewe. She could speak to him like that—or even more firmly—because she was more than old enough to be his mother. The number of career men she had coached through the Alaska Receiving Station would fill half the consulates in space—and with damned good men. Brow wrinkled, she brooded aloud, "While this isn't definitely spy stuff, we ought to know whether they have a line on our phones. Don't get Washington; try Intelligence in Wyoming."

Meekly, Weems rang the Central Intelligence Division. After a hasty conversation he turned to Dr. Carewe. "They say that we're being tapped—probably by Martians. What do I do?"

"Thank the man nicely and hang up." Weems obliged.

"Now," said Dr. Carewe, "the sooner Washington hears of this, the better. And if the Martians hear of this later, *much* better. What we have to avoid is the Martians' being able to let the Venusians know with any degree of credibility that Earth is very, very angry about the Aristotle.

Because that will get Venus very angry and virtuous. Which will get Earth very dignified and offensive—snotty, I might even say."

"I notice," commented Weems, "that Mars is practically out of the picture. Except as a silent purveyor of fighting ships to both sides, is that it?"

"It is. You learn quickly and cleanly. We'll have to go to Washington ourselves with the pouch."

"And report," said Weems, "to—Oh, my God!—Osgood!"

"Exactly," said she. "Oh-my-God Osgood."

And there was good and sufficient reason for the alarm in her voice.

In the chaste marble structure that housed the diminutive Foreign Office that Terra thought it sufficient to maintain, there were to be found persons who would be kicked out of any other department of the government in two seconds flat. But because astropolitics was something new to Earth, and because there had to be some place made for the half-witted offspring of the great legislative families, this chaste marble structure housed a gallery of subnormals that made St. Elizabeth's look like the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton on a sunny day. Or so the junior members thought. Not the least of these half-witted great ones was Jowett Osgood, the direct superior of Weems, to whom he would naturally report.

Weems and Carewe were announced with a strange pomp and circumstance; they entered the big office and found Osgood rudely buried in what was supposed to look like work. Weems stood dumbly as Dr. Carewe coughed sharply.

"Ah?" grunted Osgood, looking up. "What is it?" He was a gross man.

"A pouch from Venus. We decoded it, and we think it deserves your immediate attention. We didn't phone the contents because of tappers on the wires." Weems handed over the decodings, marked very prominently in red: CONFIDENTIAL—MAKE NO COPIES.

Osgood scanned them and heaved himself to his feet. "Gad!" he grunted. "We must brook no delay—arm to the teeth!" He turned on his dictaphone. "Henry!" he

snorted. "Listen to this! To Bureau of Protocol—" Dr. Carewe snapped off the dictaphone and shoved him back into his well-padded chair.

"This," she said between her teeth, "is entirely up to you. Take it from us, immediate action is demanded to smooth over this incident. You won't be able to pass the buck on to some other department; this is right in your lap. And you won't be able to delay the affair until you've forgotten it; even you can see that. Now, *what are you going to do?*"

Osgood considered the matter with great dignity for two full minutes. Finally he announced, "I don't know."

"My suggestion is that you appoint Mr. Weems here a sort of goodwill ambassador for special, but very vague, work. And give him an unlimited expense account. This thing mustn't get any further. Keep it between us three that the message arrived officially on Earth. The fiction will be that it was lost in space and that nobody has received official confirmation of the Aristotle. Any unofficial reports will be considered as sensational tales concocted by newscasters. That's the only way to keep Earth off the spot. And what a spot it is!"

"I see," said Osgood. "Be advised that I shall follow your suggestions—as closely as is compatible with the dignity of this Office."

Outside, she informed Weems, "That last was face-saving and nothing else. From here we go to Venus—spreading sweetness and light. Always remember, young man, that our interceptor rockets are pretty good, but that the Venus bombers are pretty *damned* good."

"War," mused Weems. "Nobody wins, really—it wouldn't be nice to see New York blown to pieces, even though we could do exactly the same thing to Venusport. Sweetness and light it is."

Venus politics are no joke. The fish-faced little people have at least two parties per acre and the dizziest system of alliances and superalliances that ever bewildered a struggling young diplomat. Typically, there were absolutely no points of agreement among any of the parties as to foreign policy, and yet the Venusian embassies spoke with authority that was backed up by a united planet. Their

military forces were likewise held in common by all the countries, but there were "state militias" engaged in intramural activities and constant border fighting.

Weems knew the language, and that was one very great advantage; also, he spent the long rocket trip to the foggy planet in learning what he could of the political setup. He arrived with a fanfare of trumpets; at the pier he was greeted by a score of minor officials. This was a deliberate insult from the Venusian army, for not a single high-ranking officer was present. He glossed it over for the sake of a splendid ovation from the population of Venusport, who were thoroughly hopped up with esteem for him. He was the shining young man who would assure peace and prosperity for the two inner planets, and the populace was all for him.

But, he knew very well, if one nasty word came from Earth, officially recognizing the Aristotle, their mood would change suddenly and savagely. And that was what he had to be ready for. He didn't trust the fat-headed Osgood.

From city to city he made a grand tour, speaking with very little accent before huge audiences of the little people and meeting few really high-up officials. Everywhere he went he met with disapproval from the public officials.

"How," he complained to Dr. Carewe, "they get together on a complicated issue like disliking me, I don't understand."

With a grim look about the hotel room, she explained, "It's the army. They must be partly in the pay of Mars. You're the finest thing that's happened in the way of friendly relations between Earth and Venus. If you take root long enough to get your message over, they won't be able to pounce on Earth, to the benefit of nobody except the red planet. So they're trying to cool things off." Again the nervous glance around the room.

"What's that for?"

"Dictaphones. But I don't think there are any. So at the risk of getting mushy I'm going to tell you what I think of your job. I think you're working like a madman, with some of the finest, single-hearted devotion to the cause of peace that I've ever seen. If you keep this up and handle the rest of your life the way you're handling this

part you won't be immortal—not the way Osgood is going to be, with a bust in the rotunda of the capitol and a chapter in the history books.

"No, you're going to be something different. There are going to be Venusians—and Martians and Earthmen—who'll talk about you many, many years from now. About how their fathers and grandfathers stood in the rain to hear you talk." She looked over her spectacles. "Which reminds me—get out on that balcony and don't make any slips."

He pressed the very old, very great lady's hand silently, then, mopping his brow, stepped out to the ledge beyond his window. It was in the twilight zone of perpetual rain, and the crowd of white pates and faces before him was hardly visible through the wisps of steam. He looked about uneasily as he turned on the fog-piercing lights that flooded him with a golden glow, so that the Venusians could see their superman. As he began to speak into the mike at his lips, there was a hoot of reproof from the crowd. And then there were others. Something was going the rounds; he could feel it.

Very distinctly there was a shrill cry from the sea of faces, *"Liar!"* And others echoed it, again and again. He tried to speak, but was howled down. A firm hand snapped off the lights and closed the window; Dr. Carewe dropped him into a chair, limp and shocked. She handed him a slip of paper that had just been delivered.

With her lips tightly compressed she said, "They knew before we did. Osgood spilled it—all."

They shot to Mars before assassins could take any tries at them. Weems was completely washed up and discredited on Venus; knew it and felt like it. What had his fine words been in the face of a stern, righteous declaration from the Foreign Office on Earth to the Foreign Office on Venus—gleefully published far and wide by the Mars-bribed officers in the latter—hurling the most frightful accusations of violating diplomatic immunity?

God only knew, brooded Weems, why Osgood had chosen precisely that moment to sound off. He had said fighting words, too: "—back up our determination to shield the weak with deeds as well as—" Ugh! What was

the matter with Osgood? The Martians couldn't touch Earth's Foreign Office; they bred them dumb but honest there. Why had Osgood—? Did he want to be an Iron Man? Did he think he could get further faster in time of war? Or did he actually, honestly believe that by this half-witted note insulting a friendly planet on account of a mere violation of etiquette he was striking a blow for justice and equality?

It probably was just that, Weems decided. And Dr. Carewe agreed.

When they landed on the red planet Weems felt very low, and was scarcely given a new lease on life by the warm reception he received from Martian notables. He was welcomed Earth fashion, with a band and speeches from a platform to twenty thousand cheering Martians. They could afford to treat him kindly; he'd failed utterly and miserably to block a new, magnificent source of income to Mars—the onrushing Earth-Venus war.

Mars wouldn't get into it. Oh, no! Mars didn't need colonies or prestige. When you have a navy like the Martian Matriarchal Fleet you don't need colonies or prestige. You just sit tight and sell the scrappers your second-rate equipment at premium prices.

At his first official reception he stood nervously among the ladies of the court. He had just received news from the Earth diplomatic colony that Venus had replied to Earth with a note just as stiff, charging that Earth was impeaching the authority of the Venusian Foreign Office with respect to its planetary jurisdiction. In plain language that meant: "Our army is bigger and better than yours. Knock this chip off—if you dare!"

One of the elegant ladies of the Matriarchal court sidled up to him. "We were presented to each other when you landed," she said, in French.

"Of course!" he said delightedly. "I remember you perfectly!" But all Martians looked alike to him.

"I was wondering, Mr. Weems, whether you would care to attend a party I'm giving tomorrow evening. I feel there would be features extremely entertaining to you."

"Delighted, madame!" He beckoned over Dr. Carewe.

"Your social secretary?" asked the Martian lady. "I'll give her the details."

Then the Karfiness entered regally and all the ladies of the court twiddled their curtailed chelae with deep veneration as she folded up in a basketlike affair.

"Mr. Weems," she said graciously. He advanced and bowed, Earth fashion, for all of his encumbering furs. "Mr. Weems, we are delighted to see you here. Such a refreshing change from those slimy little Venusians!" Her English was perfect, though lispy.

"And I, madame, am delighted to attend. If there is any message I can take back to Earth from you—any word of friendship—you have only to say it."

She regarded him amiably. "The people of Earth know well that the people of Mars are wholly committed to a policy of amicable industrial cooperation. Nothing will please me more than to reassure my friends of the third planet that there is no end of this policy in sight."

What did that mean? wondered Weems. Was she playing with him?

"I trust," he said, "that you are wholeheartedly working in the interests of peace among the planets?"

"So I have said," she said simply. "So I shall always say."

Incredible! Did she take him for an imbecile? Or—or—

"Thank you for this kind assurance," he said, bowing again and retiring.

When he had cornered Dr. Carewe he said agitatedly, "I don't get it at all. I simply don't understand. Is she lying into my teeth? The least she could have done would have been to turn aside the questions. I never dreamed I'd get an answer at a time like this!"

"Neither did I," she said slowly. "Something is rotten in the Matriarchy, and it isn't the customary scent of senile decay peculiar to dictatorships. The biology of the Martians demands a dictatorship, what with their weird reproductive methods. Unless there were a strong and centralized authority they'd slump back into barbarism after a few thousand years of unrestricted matings. Here's one dictator who's loved by the dictatees."

She was silent for a moment, then said, "To change the subject, I have the place and time for tomorrow's party. The lady is—I knew you couldn't tell one from another—director of a munitions and fabrication syndicate."

"Thanks," he said vaguely, taking the memo. "That's

the perfect spot of irony to top off the evening—in fact this whole damned mission that failed."

He went to the party with Dr. Carewe, both thoroughly wrapped up in fur and wool against the Martian indoors ten-below temperature. And they carried thermos flasks full of hot coffee for an occasional warming nip in a dark corner. Anything but that would be unmannerly.

His hostess presented Weems to her husband-brother-nephew, an example of the ungodly family relationships into which their anatomy naturally led. The creature was very much smaller than the female, and spoke only Martian, which the Earthman could not handle except sparingly. He got the idea that they were talking about auriferous sand, but how they got onto the subject he did not understand. He excused himself as quickly as he could and retreated for some of the steaming coffee.

"Earthman, of course!" said a hearty voice.

He turned to see a curious, stubby person, quite human in his appearance, but with a somehow distorted look—as though he had been squeezed in a hydraulic press. And the person wore elaborately ornamental trappings of a blackish-silver metal.

"You must be a Jovian," he said, corking the thermos. "I've never seen one of your people before. You're more—ah—human than these others."

"So they say. And you're the first Earthman I've ever seen. You're very—ah—*long*." They both laughed; then the Jovian introduced himself as a pilot on the regular Io-Mars freighters. He waved off Weems' introduction. "Don't bother, Weems," he said. "I know of you."

"Indeed?" There was a pause. With the diplomatic instinct to avoid embarrassment whenever possible, the Earthman asked, "Why don't your people appear more often on Earth? You could chuck some of that osmium you have to wear here on Mars."

"This?" the Jovian gestured at his trappings. "A mere drop in the bucket. I have a hundredweight in each shoe. But the reason is that the Earth is relatively undeveloped in its space culture—though, of course, much better developed than Jupiter. There are so few of us—fifty million on the whole planet." He shrugged whimsically.

"We're growing, of course. There was a polygamy decree a few years ago—did you hear of it?"

"No—I'm sorry to say I know nothing at all about your planet. I'm in the diplomatic service. Studying Venus, mostly."

"So? Perhaps you are the wrong man to come to, then. We know nothing about these matters. Is there a person more appropriate to whom I ought to broach the idea of a rapprochement between our two worlds?"

Weems was rocked back on his heels. Unheard of! Diplomacy as casual as this was tantamount to an interplanetary incident. The Jovian continued as casually as before, "You see, we've no navy and don't need space rights. It's strictly commercial, so we haven't got any Foreign Office. We hardly trade at all with Venus and Earth, and our Mars relations are settled by treaty once every four of Mars' years."

"Excuse me," said Weems abruptly. He had just caught a high sign from Dr. Carewe, who was holding a flimsy like a dead rat. He sidled over to her inconspicuously.

"Well—what turned up?"

"The chip," she said breathlessly, "has been knocked off. I just got this from our Embassy—by messenger. It's a copy of the note the Earth F.O. just sent to Venus. The Earth F.O. not only assures Venus that not only does Earth impeach the Venus F.O. but that she is prepared to put its jurisdiction to trial." She handed him the flimsy.

He scanned it almost unbelievingly. "The so-and-sos," he commented inaudibly. "That about fixes our little red wagon, Doc. Though we have an ally. Jupiter wants its place in the sun."

As the woman stared with amazement, he introduced the Jovian to her and explained the situation. The squat man listened with increasing anxiety as he dilated on the relations that would exist between the two worlds.

"Will we really," he asked at length, "need all those men—actually twenty-five on our end!—to handle a little thing like a military alliance?"

"Lord, yes!" breathed Weems. "Code clerks, secretaries, subsecretaries, second-subsecretaries—lots more."

"May I ask," said the woman, "why this sudden interest in protocol and procedure has come up on Jupiter?"

The Jovian looked a little embarrassed. "It's a matter of pride," he explained. "The three other planets have their own secret codes and messages. We're the only planet that hasn't got sealed diplomatic pouches absolutely inviolable in any jurisdiction! And so our Executive Committee decided that if it's good enough for them it's good enough for us."

"I see," said Weems thoughtfully. "But how is it that you, the A pilot on a freighter, are their Plenipotentiary without even identification?"

"As a matter of fact," confessed the Jovian with some hesitation, "I was given a note, but it seems to be lost. Do things like that really matter?"

"They do," said Weems solemnly. "But you were saying—?"

"Yes. They chose a freight pilot to avoid taking a man off real work. It's our principle of the economization of kinesis. Without its operation we'd have all sorts of superfluous men who did only half a man's work. And do not forget that to a people of only fifty million that is no small matter. We need every man, all the time."

"As to the treaty necessary," said the woman, "would you prefer it to be secret or published?"

"Secret," promptly replied the Jovian. "It'll be more fun that way."

Up dashed a very young subattaché from the Earth Embassy. "Excuse me," he shrilled, his voice breaking. "But you have to come at once. It's important as—as the very devil, sir, if you will excuse—" He found himself addressing empty air and an amused Jovian. The two Earth people had flown to their sand car. They had been awaiting the summons.

The ambassador was waiting for them, grim and white. He was no fool, this ambassador; his punishment for that was the dusty job on Mars instead of an office on Terra. He had just removed the earphone clamps, they saw; the diplomatic receiver set was on his desk.

Without waiting for a question from them he said, "The good word is—*ultimatum.*"

"God!" said Dr. Carewe, her old face quite white.

"When?" snapped Weems, taking out pencil and paper.

"Note delivered to Venus F.O.—that's the note from

Earth—and ten minutes or so later lynching of Venusians on the staff of the Earth Embassy by an outraged populace. Foolish defense by Earthmen attached to the Embassy. Several of them killed. Stronger note from Earth. Why didn't Venus F.O. notify immediately and offer indemnification? *Very* strong reply from Venus F.O.—chip on the shoulder. Earth knocks off chip. That's the last you saw at your party. Then ultimatum from Venus giving Earth twelve *dicenes* to apologize profoundly and offer an indemnity in good faith."

"And when is the time up?"

"The twelve *dicenes* will come to an end"—the ambassador consulted his watch—"about forty-eight hours from now."

There was a long pause, broken at last by a muffled groan from the ambassador. "Damn it—oh, damn it!" he wailed. "Why do the idiots have to fight? There's trade enough for everybody, isn't there?"

"And, of course," said Weems, "Earth will never back down. Not in a million years. They're built like that. And if they did back down, Venus would be sure of herself and force a war."

"Well," said the woman quietly, "are you just going to *sit* here?"

"Suggestions are in order," said the young man unhappily.

"You'll have to work like hell to stave this off," warned the woman.

"Ready and willing, Doctor. Tell me what to do."

Considering that the art of diplomacy is, ultimately reduced, the system found most practical in actual use when stalling for time to rush ahead with military expansion, it is not very remarkable that the two roving delegates did what they did with such neatness. The system was there for them to use.

Use it they did, to the fullest extent. They shot ethers through to most of the crowned heads of the inner planet; radioed Earth confidentially meanwhile to stand by for the answers from Venus; contacted the Martian Protocol Division regarding an alliance for trade purposes alone.

They were so thoroughly efficient in their functioning

that after ten hours of this the bureau chiefs back on Earth fell to their knees and prayed for a letup of this lunatic barrage of red tape that came, unasked-for and unanswerable, from a minor embassy on Mars.

Venus was bally well baffled. At first they made some pretense of replying stiffly to the muted threats from the Embassy on Mars, then gave up and hung onto the ropes, trying to decode the weird messages. It *must* be code, they decided. How could a message like "Advise your F.O. investigate frog ponds for specious abnormalities" be anything but an uncrackable cipher? They set their experts to work. The experts decided that the message meant: "All Earthmen on Venus are advised to sabotage production machinery and destroy records." But they were as wrong as they could be, for the message meant just what it said. Its value was on its face.

The consulate and the staff were drafted by the Embassy to aid in the good work of confusion; the ambassador himself sat for ten hours writing out messages which bore absolutely no relation to each other or the world at large. And if you think that sounds easy—try it!

Meanwhile the inseparables, Mr. Weems and Dr. Carewe, had been separated. The woman was gathering data from Martian libraries and Weems was paying social calls at the palace, interviewing secretaries without number. Meanwhile, authentic, distressing news releases kept rushing to him, causing him great pain. The first thing after the ultimatum he heard had called in all spacers except those related to navigation—fueling stations, etc. Venus retaliated in kind, and furthermore towed out the gigantic battle islands used to fuel fighting ships. Earth retaliated in kind, and furthermore began skirmishing war games around midway between Terra and Luna.

By the time the ten hours of lunatic messages were elapsed, the two great fleets of Earth and Venus were face to face midway between the planets, waiting for orders from the home planets to fire when ready.

"For the love of Heaven," he pleaded with a secretary to the Karfiness, "they won't even wait for the ultimatum to elapse. There's going to be a space war in two hours if I don't get to see Her Serene Tentaculosity!" The title he bestowed upon her was sheer whimsy; he wasn't half as

upset as he was supposed to be. It was all for effect. He rushed away,. distraught, with the information that he couldn't possibly see the Karfiness, and aware that the munitions interests of Mars would by now be rubbing their chelae with glee.

He reached a phone and rang up the ambassador. "Okay," he informed him. "Stop short!"

The ambassador, badly overworked and upset, stopped short with the messages. Venus and Earth were baffled again, this time because there was nothing to be baffled by. The strange silence that had fallen on the F.O.s was alarming in its implications. The diplomatic mind had already adjusted itself to the abnormal condition; restoration of normality created almost unbearable strain. Messages rushed to the Embassy; the ambassador left them severely alone and went to bed. From that moment anybody who touched a transmitter would be held for treason, he informed his staff. It was as though the Mars Embassy had been blown out of the ground.

"They are now," brooded Weems, "ready for anything. Let us hope that Venus hasn't lost her common sense along with her temper."

With that he set himself to the hardest job of all—waiting. He got a couple of hours of sleep, on the edge of a volcano, not knowing whether the lined-up Venus fleet would fire on the opposite Earth fleet before he woke. If it did, it would be all over before he really got started.

Even Weems hadn't imagined how well his plan was taking root. Back on Earth the whole F.O. had gone yellow, trembling at the gills lest they should actually have to fight. And it was perfectly obvious that they would, for when planetary integrity directs, no mere individual might stand in the way.

There was a great dearth of news; there had been for the past few hours of the crisis. Since that God-awful business from the Mars Embassy stopped and the entire staff there had—presumably—been shot in the back while hard at work fabricating incredible dispatches, there was a mighty and sullen silence over the air, ether and subetheric channels of communication.

On Venus things were pretty bad, too. A lot of Earthmen

had been interned and the whole planet was sitting on edge waiting for something to happen. It did happen, with superb precision, after exactly seven hours of silence and inactivity.

There was a frantic call from, of all Godforsaken places, Jupiter. Jupiter claimed that the whole business was a feint, and that the major part of the Earth fleet was even now descending on the Jovians to pillage and slay.

The official broadcast—*not* a beam dispatch—from Jupiter stated this. Earth promptly denied everything, in a stiff-necked communiqué.

Venus grinned out of the corner of her mouth. In an answering communiqué she stated that since Venus was invariably to be found on the side of the underdog, the Venus Grand Fleet would depart immediately for Jupiter to engage the enemy of her good friends, the Jovians.

Earth, to demonstrate her good faith, withdrew her own fleet from anywhere near the neighborhood of Jupiter, going clear around to the other side of the Sun for maneuvers.

Lovers of peace drew great, relieved sighs. The face-to-face had been broken up. The ultimatum had been forgotten in Earth's righteous stand that she had *not* invaded Jupiter nor intended to. This made Venus look and feel silly. This made the crisis collapse as though it had never been there at all.

And just after the Venus fleet had reported to its own home F.O.—this was three hours after the ultimatum had elapsed without being noticed by anybody—there were several people in the Earth Embassy on Mars acting hilariously. There was a Jovian who gurgled over and over:

"I didn't know it would be this much fun! We'd have gotten into the game years ago if we'd known."

"And I," said the ambassador, "have the satisfaction of knowing that I've given a pretty headache to the best code experts in the system. And all by the simple expedient of sending a code message that means just what it says."

"And I," said Weems, upending a glass, "have aided the cause of peace between the planets. If I can get to the Karfiness and let her know that she's being played for a sucker by the munitions people—"

"Let it come later," said Dr. Carewe. "I wish I could live another eighty years to read about it in the history books. But it really doesn't matter, because they'll say something like this:

" 'Toward the end of this year there arose a crisis between Earth and Venus, seemingly over matters of trade. It actually reached a point of ultimatums and reprisals. Fortunately the brilliant, calm and efficient work of the Hon. Secretary of Recession, Jowett Osgood, saved the day. He contracted a defensive alliance with Jupiter, the combined might of the Earth-Jovian fleet crushing any idea of victory that may have been the goal of the Venusians.' "

Dr. Carewe laughed loudly and raucously as she refilled her glass.

THE REVERSIBLE REVOLUTIONS

J. C. BATTLE, late of the Foreign Legion, Red Army, United States Marines, Invincibles De Bolivia and Coldstream Guards, alias Alexandre de Foma, Christopher Jukes, Burton Macauly and Joseph Hagstrom—*né* Etzel Bernstein—put up his hands.

"No tricks," warned the feminine voice. The ample muzzle of the gun in his back shifted slightly, seemingly from one hand to another. Battle felt his pockets being gone through. "Look out for the left hip," he volunteered. "That gat's on a hair-trigger."

"Thanks," said the feminine voice. He felt the little pencilgun being gingerly removed. "Two Colts," said the voice admiringly, "a police .38, three Mills grenades, pencilgun, brass knuckles, truncheons of lead, leather and rubber, one stiletto, tear-gas gun, shells for same, prussic-acid hypo kit, thuggee's braided cord, sleeve Derringer and a box of stink bombs. Well, you walking armory! Is that all?"

"Quite," said Battle. "Am I being taken for a ride?" He looked up and down the dark street and saw nothing in the way of accomplices.

"Nope. I may decide to drop you here. But before you find out, suppose you tell me how you got on my trail?" The gun jabbed viciously into his back. "Talk!" urged the feminine voice nastily.

"How *I* got on *your* trail?" exploded Battle. "Dear lady, I can't see your face, but I assure you that I don't recognize your voice, that I'm not on anybody's trail, that I'm just a soldier of fortune resting up during a slack spell in the trade. And anyway, I don't knock off ladies. We—we have a kind of code."

"Yeah?" asked the voice skeptically. "Let's see your

left wrist." Mutely Battle twitched up the cuff and displayed it. Aside from a couple of scars it was fairly ordinary. "What now?" he asked.

"I'll let you know," said the voice. Battle's hand was twisted behind his back, and he felt a cold, stinging liquid running over the disputed wrist. "What the—?" he began impatiently.

"Oh!" ejaculated the voice, aghast. "I'm sorry! I thought—" The gun relaxed and Battle turned. He could dimly see the girl in the light of the merc lamp far down the deserted street. She appeared to be blushing. "Here I've gone and taken you apart," she complained, "and you're not even from Breen at all! Let me help you." She began picking up Battle's assorted weapons from the sidewalk where she had deposited them. He stowed them away as she handed them over.

"There," she said. "That must be the last of them."

"The hypo kit," he reminded her. She was holding it, unconsciously, in her left hand. He hefted the shoulder holster under his coat and grunted. "That's better," he said.

"You must think I'm an awful silly," said the girl shyly.

Battle smiled generously as he caught sight of her face. "Not at all," he protested. "I've made the same mistake myself. Only I've not always caught myself in time to realize it." This with a tragic frown and sigh.

"Really?" she breathed. "You must be awfully important —all these guns and things."

"Tools of the trade," he said noncommittally. "My card." He handed her a simple pasteboard bearing the crest of the United States Marines and the legend:

LIEUTENANT J. C. BATTLE
SOLDIER OF FORTUNE
REVOLUTIONS A SPECIALTY

She stared, almost breathless. "How wonderful!" she said.

"In every major insurrection for the past thirty years," he assured her complacently.

"That must make you—let's see—" she mused.

"Thirty years, did I say?" he quickly interposed. "I meant twenty. In case you were wondering, I'm just

thirty-two years old." He tweaked his clipped, military moustache.

"Then you were in your first at—"

"Twelve. Twelve and a half, really. Shall we go somewhere for a cup of coffee, Miss—er—ah—?"

"McSweeney," she said, and added demurely, "but my friends all call me Spike."

"China? Dear me, yes! I was with the Eighth Route Army during the celebrated long trek from Annam to Szechuan Province. And I shouldn't call it boasting to admit that without me—"

Miss Spike McSweeney appeared to be hanging on his every word. "Have you ever," she asked, "done any technical work?"

"Engineering? Line of communication? Spike, we fighters leave that to the 'greaseballs,' as they are called in most armies. I admit that I fly a combat fighter as well as the next—assuming that he's pretty good—but as far as the engine goes, I let that take care if itself. Why do you ask?"

"Lieutenant," she said earnestly, "I think I ought to tell you what all this mess is about."

"Dear lady," he said gallantly, "the soldier does not question his orders."

"Anyway," said Miss McSweeney, "I need your help. It's a plot—a big one. A kind of revolution. You probably know more about them than I do, but this one seems to be the dirtiest trick that was ever contemplated."

"How big is it?" asked Battle, lighting a cigarette.

"Would you mind not smoking?" asked the girl hastily, shrinking away from the flame. "Thanks. How big is it? World-scale. A world revolution. Not from the Right, not from the Left, but, as near as I can make out, from Above."

"How's that?" asked Battle, startled.

"The leader is what you'd call a scientist-puritan, I guess. His name's Breen—Dr. Malachi Breen, formerly of every important university and lab in the world. And now he's got his own revolution all planned out. It's for a world without smoking, drinking, swearing, arguing, dancing, movies, music, rich foods, steam heat—all those things."

"Crackpot!" commented the lieutenant.

She stared at him grimly. "You wouldn't think so if you knew him," said Spike. "I'll tell you what I know. I went to work for him as a stenographer. He has a dummy concern with offices in Rockefeller Plaza and a factory in New Jersey. He's supposed to be manufacturing Pot-O-Klutch, a device to hold pots on the stove in case of an earthquake. With that as a front, he goes on with his planning. He's building machines of some kind in his plant—and with his science and his ambition, once he springs his plans, the world will be at his feet!"

"The field of action," said Battle thoughtfully, "would be New Jersey principally. Now, you want me to break this insurrection?

"Of course!" agonized the girl. "As soon as I found out what it really was, I hurried to escape. But I knew I was being followed by *his* creatures!"

"Exactly," said Battle. "Now, what's in this for me?"

"I don't understand. You mean—?"

"Money," said Battle. "The quartermaster's getting shorthanded. Say twenty thousand?"

The girl only stared. "I haven't any money," she finally gasped. "I thought—"

"You thought I was a dilettante?" asked Battle. "Dear lady, my terms are fifty percent cash, remainder conditional on the success of the campaign. I'm sorry I can't help you—"

"Look out!" screamed the girl. Battle spun around and ducked under the table as a bomb crashed through the window of the coffee shop and exploded in his face.

"Open your eyes, damn you!" growled a voice.

"Stephen—the profanity—" objected another voice mildly.

"Sorry, Doc. Wake, friend! The sun is high."

Battle came to with a start and saw a roast-beef face glowering into his. He felt for his weapons. They were all in place. "What can I do for you, gentlemen?" he asked.

"Ah," said the second voice gently. "Our convert has arisen. On your feet, Michael."

"My name is Battle," said the lieutenant. "J. C. Battle. My card."

"Henceforth you shall be known as Michael, the Destroying Angel," said the second voice. "It's the same name, really."

Battle looked around him. He was in a kind of factory, dim and vacant except for himself and the two who had spoken. They wore pure white military uniforms; one was a tough boy, obviously. It hurt Battle to see how clumsily he carried his guns. The bulges were plainly obvious through his jacket and under his shoulder. The other either wore his more skillfully or wasn't heeled at all. That seemed likely, for his gentle blue eyes carried not a trace of violence, and his rumpled, pure white hair was scholarly and innocent.

"Will you introduce yourselves?" asked the lieutenant calmly.

"Steve Haglund, outta Chi," said the tough.

"Malachi Breen, manufacturer of Pot-O-Klutch and temporal director of Sweetness and Light, the new world revolution," said the old man.

"Ah," said Battle, sizing them up. "What happened to Miss McSweeney?" he asked abruptly, remembering.

"She is in good hands," said Breen. "Rest easy on her account, Michael. You have work to do."

"Like what?" asked the lieutenant.

"Trigger work," said Haglund. "Can you shoot straight?"

In answer there roared out three flat crashes, and Battle stood with his smoking police special in his hand. As he reloaded he said, "Get yourself a new lathe, Dr. Breen. And if you'll look to see how close together the bullets were—"

The old man puttered over to Battle's target. "Extraordinary," he murmured. "A poker chip would cover them." His manner grew relatively brisk and businesslike. "How much do you want for the job?" he asked. "How about a controlling factor in the world of Sweetness and Light?"

Battle smiled slowly. "I *never* accept a proposition like that," he said. "Twenty thousand is my talking point for all services over a six-month period."

"Done," said Breen promptly, counting out twenty bills from an antiquated wallet. Battle pocketed them without batting an eyelash. "Now," he said, "what's my job?"

"As you may know," said Breen, "Sweetness and Light is intended to bring into being a new world. Everybody will be happy, and absolute freedom will be the rule and not the exception. All carnal vices will be forbidden and peace will reign. Now, there happens to be an enemy of this movement at large. He thinks he has, in fact, a rival movement. It is your job to convince him that there is no way but mine. And you are at absolute liberty to use any argument you wish. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, sir," said Battle. "What's his name?"

"Lenninger Underbottam," said Breen, grinding his teeth. "The most unprincipled faker that ever posed as a scientist and scholar throughout the long history of the world. His allegedly rival movement is called 'Devil Take the Hindmost.' The world he wishes to bring into being would be one of the most revolting excesses—all compulsory, mark you! I consider it my duty to the future to blot him out!"

His rage boiled over into a string of expletives. Then, looking properly ashamed, he apologized. "Underbottam affects me strangely and horribly. I believe that if I were left alone with him I should—I, exponent of Sweetness and Light!—resort to violence. Anyway, Lieutenant, you will find him either at his offices in the Empire State Building where the rotter cowers under the alias of the Double-Action Kettlesnatcher Manufacturing Corporation or in his upstate plant where he is busy turning out not only weapons and defenses but also his ridiculous Kettlesnatcher, a device to remove kettles from the stove in case of hurricane or typhoon."

Battle completed his notes and stowed away his memo book. "Thank you, sir," he said. "Where shall I deliver the body?"

"Hello!" whispered a voice.

"Spike!" Battle whispered back. "What are you doing here?" He jerked a thumb at the illuminated ground glass of the door and the legend, *Double-Action Kettlesnatcher Manufacturing Corp., Lenninger Underbottam, Pres.*

"They told me where to find you."

"They?"

"Mr. Breen, of course. Who did you think?"

"But," expostulated the lieutenant, "I thought you hated him and his movement."

"Oh, that," said the girl casually. "It was just a whim. Are you going to knock him off?"

"Of course. But how did you get here?"

"Climbed one of the elevator shafts. The night watchman never saw me. How did you make it?"

"I slugged the guard and used a service lift. Let's go."

Battle applied a clamp to the doorknob and wrenched it out like a turnip from muddy ground. The door swung open as his two Colts leaped into his hands. The fat man at the ornate desk rose with a cry of alarm and began to pump blood as Battle drilled him between the eyes.

"Okay. That's enough," said a voice. The lieutenant's guns were snatched from his hands with a jerk that left them stinging, and he gaped in alarm as he saw, standing across the room, an exact duplicate of the bleeding corpse on the floor.

"You Battle?" asked the duplicate, who was holding a big, elaborate sort of radio tube in his hand.

"Yes," said the lieutenant feebly. "My card—"

"Never mind that. Who's the dame?"

"Miss McSweeney. And you, sir, are—?"

"I'm Underbottam, Chief of Devil Take the Hindmost. You from Breen?"

"I was engaged by the doctor for a brief period," admitted Battle. "However, our services were terminated—"

"Liar," snapped Underbottam. "And if they weren't, they will be in a minute or two. Lamp this!" He rattled the radio tube, and from its grid leaped a fiery radiance that impinged momentarily on the still-bleeding thing that Battle had shot down. The thing was consumed in one awful blast of heat. "End of a robot," said Underbottam, shaking the tube again. The flame died down, and there was nothing left of the corpse but a little fused lump of metal.

"Now, you going to work for me, Battle?"

"Why not?" shrugged the lieutenant.

"Okay. Your duties are as follows: Get Breen. I don't care how you get him, but get him soon. He posed for twenty years as a scientist without ever being apprehended.

Well, I'm going to do some apprehending that'll make all previous apprehending look like no apprehension at all. You with me?"

"Yes," said Battle, very much confused. "What's that thing you have?"

"Piggy-back heat ray. You transpose the air in its path into an unstable isotope which tends to carry all energy as heat. Then you shoot your juice, light or whatever along the isotopic path and you burn whatever's on the receiving end. You want a few?"

"No," said Battle. "I have my gats. What else have you got for offense and defense?"

Underbottam opened a cabinet and proudly waved an arm. "Everything," he said. "Disintegrators, heat rays, bombs of every type. And impenetrable shields of energy, massive and portable. What more do I need?"

"Just as I thought," mused the lieutenant. "You've solved half the problem. How about tactics? Who's going to use your weapons?"

"Nothing to that," declaimed Underbottam airily. "I just announce that I have the perfect social system. My army will sweep all before it. Consider: Devil Take the Hindmost promises what every persons wants—pleasure, pure and simple. Or vicious and complex, if necessary. Pleasure will be compulsory; people will be so happy that they won't have time to fight or oppress or any of the other things that make the present world a caricature of a madhouse."

"What about hangovers?" unexpectedly asked Spike McSweeney.

Underbottam grunted. "My dear young lady," he said. "If you had a hangover, would you want to do anything except die? It's utterly automatic. Only puritans—damn them!—have time enough on their hands to make war. You see?"

"It sounds reasonable," confessed the girl.

"Now, Battle," said Underbottam. "What are your rates?"

"Twen—" began the lieutenant automatically. Then, remembering the ease with which he had made his last twenty thousand, he paused. "Thir—" he began again. "Forty thousand," he said firmly, holding out his hand.

"Right," said Underbottam, handing him two bills.

Battle scanned them hastily and stowed them away. "Come on," he said to Spike. "We have a job to do."

The lieutenant courteously showed Spike a chair. "Sit down," he said firmly. "I'm going to unburden myself." Agitatedly Battle paced his room. "I don't know where in hell I'm at!" he yelled frantically. "All my life I've been a soldier. I know military science forward and backward, but I'm damned if I can make head or tail of this bloody mess. Two scientists, each at the other's throat, me hired by both of them to knock off the other—and incidentally, where do you stand?" He glared at the girl.

"Me?" she asked mildly. "I just got into this by accident. Breen manufactured me originally, but I got out of order and gave you that fantastic story about me being a steno at his office—I can hardly believe it was me!"

"What do you mean, manufactured you?" demanded Battle.

"I'm a robot, Lieutenant. Look." Calmly she took off her left arm and put it on again.

Battle collapsed into a chair. "Why didn't you tell me?" he groaned.

"You didn't ask me," she retorted with spirit. "And what's wrong with robots? I'm a very superior model, by the way—the Seduction Special, designed for diplomats, army officers (that must be why I sought you out), and legislators. Part of Sweetness and Light. Breen put a lot of work into me himself. I'm only good for about three years, but Breen expects the world to be his by then."

Battle sprang from his chair. "Well, this pretty much decides me, Spike. I'm washed up. I'm through with Devil Take the Hindmost and Sweetness and Light both. I'm going back to Tannu-Tuva for the counterrevolution. Damn Breen, Underbottam and the rest of them!"

"That isn't right, Lieutenant," said the robot thoughtfully. "Undeterred, one or the other of them is bound to succeed. And that won't be nice for you. A world without war?"

"Awk!" grunted Battle. "You're right, Spike. Something has to be done. But not by me. That heat ray—ugh!" He shuddered.

"Got any friends?" asked Spike.

"Yes," said Battle, looking at her hard. "How did you know?"

"I just guessed—" began the robot artlessly.

"Oh no you didn't," gritted the lieutenant. "I was just going to mention them. Can you read minds?"

"Yes," said the robot in a small voice. "I was built that way. Governor Burly—faugh! It was a mess."

"And—and you know all about me?" demanded Battle.

"Yes," she said. "I know you're forty-seven and not thirty-two. I know that you were busted from the Marines. And I know that your real name is—"

"That's enough," he said, white-faced.

"But," said the robot softly, "I love you anyway."

"What?" sputtered the lieutenant.

"And I know that you love me, too, even if I am—what I am."

Battle stared at her neat little body and her sweet little face. "Can you be kissed?" he asked at length.

"Of course, Lieutenant," she said. Then, demurely, "I told you I was a very superior model."

To expect a full meeting of the Saber Club would be to expect too much. In the memory of the oldest living member, Major Breughel, who had been to the Netherlands Empire what Clive and Warren Hastings had been to the British, two thirds—nearly—had gathered from the far corners of the earth to observe the funeral services for a member who had been embroiled in a gang war and shot in the back. The then mayor of New York had been reelected for that reason.

At the present meeting, called by First Class Member Battle, about a quarter of the membership appeared.

There was Peasely, blooded in Tonkin, 1899. He had lost his left leg to the thigh with Kolchak in Siberia. Peasely was the bombardier of the Saber Club. With his curious half-lob he could place a Mills or potato masher or nitro bottle on a dime.

Vaughn, he of the thick Yorkshire drawl, had the unique honor of hopping on an Axis submarine and cleaning it out with a Lewis gun from stem to stern, then, single-

handed, piloting it to Liverpool, torpedoing a German mine layer on the way.

The little Espera had left a trail of bloody revolution through the whole of South America; he had a weakness for lost causes. It was worth his life to cross the Panama Canal; therefore he made it a point to do so punctually, once a year. He never had his bullets removed. By latest tally three of his ninety-seven pounds were lead.

"When," demanded Peasely fretfully, "is that lug going to show up? I had an appointment with a cabinetmaker for a new leg. Had to call it off for Battle's summons. Bloody shame—he doesn't give a hang for my anatomy."

"Ye'll coom when 'e wish, bate's un," drawled Vaughn unintelligibly. Peasely snarled at him.

Espera sprang to his feet. "Miss Millicent," he said effusively.

"Don't bother to rise, gentlemen," announced the tall, crisp woman who had entered. "As if you would anyway. I just collected on that Fiorenza deal, Manuel," she informed Espera. "Three gees. How do you like that?"

"I could have done a cleaner job," said Peasely snappishly. He had cast the only blackball when this first woman to enter the Saber Club had been voted a member. "What did you use?"

"Lyddite," she said, putting on a pale lipstick.

"Thot's pawky explaw-seeve," commented Vaughn. "I'd noat risk such."

She was going to reply tartly when Battle strode in. They greeted him with a muffled chorus of sighs and curses.

"Hi," he said briefly. "I'd like your permission to introduce a person waiting outside. Rules do not apply in her case for—for certain reasons. May I?"

There was a chorus of assent. He summoned Spike, who entered. "Now," said Battle, "I'd like your help in a certain matter of great importance to us all."

"Yon's t' keenin' tool," said the Yorkshireman.

"Okay, then. We have to storm and take a plant in New Jersey. This plant is stocked with new weapons—dangerous weapons—weapons that, worst of all, are intended to effect a world revolution which will bring an absolute and complete peace within a couple of years, thus depriving us of our occupations without compensation. Out of self-

defense we must take this measure. Who is with me?"

All hands shot up in approval. "Good. Further complications are as follows: This is only one world revolution; there's another movement which is in rivalry to it, and which will surely dominate if the first does not. So we will have to split our forces—"

"No you won't," said the voice of Underbottam.

"Where are you?" asked Battle, looking around the room.

"In my office, you traitor. I'm using a wire screen in your clubroom for a receiver and loudspeaker in a manner you couldn't possibly understand."

"I don't like that traitor talk," said Battle evenly. "I mailed back your money—and Breen's. Now what was that you said?"

"We'll be waiting for you together in Rockefeller Center. Breen and I have pooled our interests. After we've worked our revolution we're going to flip a coin. That worm doesn't approve of gambling, of course, but he'll make this exception."

"And if I know you, Underbottam," said Battle heavily, "it won't be gambling. What time in Rockefeller Center?"

"Four in the morning. Bring your friends—nothing like a showdown. By heaven, I'm going to save the world whether you like it or not!"

The wire screen from which the voice had been coming suddenly fused in a flare of light and heat.

Miss Millicent broke the silence. "Scientist!" she said in a voice heavy with scorn. Suddenly there was a gun in her palm. "If he's human I can drill him," she declared.

"Yeah," said Battle gloomily. "That was what I thought."

The whole length of Sixth Avenue not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse, as the six crept through the early morning darkness under the colossal shadow of the RCA building. The vertical architecture of the Center was lost in the sky as they hugged the wall of the Music Hall.

"When do you suppose they'll finish it?" asked Peasely, jerking a thumb at the boarding over the Sixth Avenue subway under construction.*

* When last I saw this area, 28 years almost to the day after publication of Cyril's story, the boarding was there still—or again. —Ed.

"What do you care?" grunted Battle. "We need a scout to take a look at the plaza. How about you, Manuel? You're small and quick."

"Right," grinned Espera. "I could use a little more weight." He sped across the street on silent soles, no more than a shadow in the dark. But he had been spotted, for a pale beam of light hissed for a moment on the pavement beside him. He flattened and gestured.

"Come on—he says," muttered Miss Millicent. They shot across the street and flattened against the building. "Where are they, Manuel?" demanded Battle.

"Right there in the Plaza beside the fountain. They have a mess of equipment. Tripods and things. A small generator."

"Shall I try a masher?" asked Peasely.

"Do," said Miss Millicent. "Nothing would be neater."

The man with the wooden leg unshipped a bomb from his belt and bit out the pin. He held it to his ear for just a moment to hear it sizzle. "I love the noise," he explained apologetically to Spike. Then he flung it with a curious twist of his arm.

Crash!

Battle looked around the corner of the building. "They haven't been touched. And that racket's going to draw the authorities," he said. "They have some kind of screen, I guess."

"Darling," whispered Spike.

"What it is?" asked Battle, sensing something in her tone.

"Nothing," she said, as women will.

"Close in under heavy fire, maybe?" suggested the little Espera.

"Yep," snapped Battle. "Ooops! There goes a police whistle."

Pumping lead from both hips, the six of them advanced down the steps to the Plaza, where Breen and Underbottam were waiting behind a kind of shimmering illumination.

The six ducked behind the waist-high stone wall of the Danish restaurant, one of the eateries which rimmed the Plaza. Hastily, as the others kept up their fire, Vaughn set up a machine gun.

"Doon, a' fu' leef!" he ordered. They dropped behind

the masking stone. "Cae oot, yon cawbies," yelled Vaughn.

His only answer was a sudden dropping of the green curtain and a thunderbolt or something like it that winged at him and went way over his head, smashing into the RCA building and shattering three stories.

"Haw!" laughed Peasely. "They can't aim! Watch this." He bit another grenade and bowled it underhand against the curtain. The ground heaved and bucked as the crash of the bomb sounded. In rapid succession he rolled over enough to make the once-immaculate Plaza as broken a bit of terrain as was ever seen, bare pipes and wires exposed underneath. Underbottam's face was distorted with rage.

The curtain dropped abruptly and the two embattled scientists and would-be saviors of the world squirted wildly with everything they had—rays in every color of the spectrum, thunderbolts and lightning flashes, some uncomfortably near.

The six couldn't face up to it; what they saw nearly blinded them. They flattened themselves to the ground and prayed mutely in the electric clash and spatter of science unleashed.

"Darling," whispered Spike, her head close to Battle's.

"Yes?"

"Have you got a match?" she asked tremulously. "No—don't say a word." She took the match pack and kissed him awkwardly and abruptly. "Stay under cover," she said. "Don't try to follow. When my fuel tank catches it'll be pretty violent."

Suddenly she was out from behind the shelter and plastered against one of the tumbled rocks, to leeward of the worldsavers' armory. A timid bullet or two was coming from the Danish restaurant.

In one long, staggering run she made nearly seven yards, then dropped, winged by a heat ray that cauterized her arm. Cursing, Spike held the matches in her mouth and tried to strike one with her remaining hand. It lit, and she applied it to the match pack, dropping it to the ground. Removing what remained of her right arm, she lit it at the flaring pack. It blazed like a torch; her cellulose skin was highly inflammable.

She used the arm to ignite her body at strategic points and then, a blazing, vengeful figure of flame, hurled herself on the two scientists in the Plaza.

From the restaurant Battle could see, through tear-wet eyes, the features of the fly-by-night worldsavers. Then Spike's fuel tank exploded and everything blotted out in one vivid sheet of flame.

"Come on! The cops!" hissed Miss Millicent. She dragged him, sobbing as he was, into the Independent subway station that let out into the Center. Aimlessly he let her lead him onto an express, the first of the morning.

"Miss Millicent, I loved her," he complained.

"Why don't you join the Foreign Legion to forget?" she suggested amiably.

"What?" he said, making a wry face. "Again?"

THE CITY IN THE SOFA

LIEUTENANT J. C. BATTLE tweaked the ends of his trim little military moustache and smiled brilliantly at the cashier.

"Dear lady," he said, "there seems to have been some mistake. I could have sworn I'd put my wallet in this suit—"

The superblond young lady looked bored and crooked a finger at the manager of the cafeteria. The manager crooked a finger at three muscular busboys, who shambled over to the exit.

"Now," said the manager, "what seems to be the trouble?"

The lieutenant bowed. "My name," he said, "is Battle. My card, sir." He presented it.

"A phony," said the manager with the wickedest of smiles. "A deadbeat. The check says thirty cents, Major—do you cough up or wash dishes?" He flung the card aside, and an innocent-appearing old man, white-haired, wrinkled of face and shabbily dressed, who had been patiently waiting to pay his ten-cent check, courteously stooped and tapped the manager on the shoulder.

"You dropped this," he said politely, extending the card.

"Keep it," snarled the manager. The innocent old man scanned the card and stiffened as though he had been shot.

"If you will allow me," he said, interrupting Battle's impassioned plea for justice, "I shall be glad to pay this young man's check." He fished out an ancient wallet and dropped a half dollar into the superblond's hand.

"May I have your address, sir?" asked Battle when they were outside. "I shall mail you the money as soon as I get back to my club."

The old man raised a protesting hand. "Don't mention it," he smiled toothlessly. "It was a pleasure. In fact I should

like you to come with me to *my* club." He looked cautiously around. "I think," he half-whispered, "that I have a job for you, Lieutenant—if you're available."

"Revolution?" asked Battle, skeptically surveying the old man, taking in every wrinkle in the suit he wore. "I'm rather busy at the moment, sir, but I can recommend some very able persons who might suit you as well. They do what might be called a cut-rate business. My price is high, sir—very high."

"Be that as it may, Lieutenant. My club is just around the corner. Will you follow me, please?"

Only in New York could you find a two-bit cafeteria on a brightly lit avenue around the corner from the homes of the wealthy on one side and the poor on the other. Battle fully expected the old man to cross the street and head riverwards; instead he led the soldier of fortune toward Central Park.

Battle gasped as the old man stopped and courteously gestured him to enter a simple door in an old-style marble-faced building. Disbelievingly he read the house number.

"But this is—" said Battle, stuttering a little in awe.

"Yes," said the old man simply. "This is the Billionaire's Club."

In the smoking room, Battle eased himself dazedly into a chair upholstered with a priceless Gobelin tapestry shot through by wires of pure gold. Across the room he saw a man with a vast stomach and a nose like a pickled beet whom he recognized as Old Jay. He was shaking an admonishing finger at the stock-market plunger known as The Cobra of Wall Street.

"Where you should put your money—" Old Jay rumbled. As Battle leaned forward eagerly, the rumble dropped to a whisper. The Cobra jotted down a few notes in a solid-silver memo pad and smiled gratefully. As he left the room he nodded at a suave young man whom the lieutenant knew to be the youngest son of the Atlantis Plastic and Explosives Dynasty.

"I didn't," said Battle breathlessly, "I didn't catch the name, sir."

"Cromleigh," snapped the old man who had brought him through the fabulous portals. "Ole Cromleigh, 'Shutter-shy,' they call me. I've never been photographed, and for a

very good reason. All will be plain in a moment. Watch this." He pressed a button.

"Yessir?" snapped a page, appearing through a concealed door as if by magic.

Cromleigh pointed at a rather shabby mohair sofa. "I want that fumigated, sonny," he said. "I'm afraid it's crummy."

"Certainly, sir," said the page. "I'll have it attended to right away, sir." He marched through the door after a smart salute.

"Now study that sofa," said Cromleigh meditatively. "Look at it carefully and tell me what you think of it."

The lieutenant looked at it carefully. "Nothing," he said at length, and quite frankly. "I can't see a thing wrong with it, except that beside all this period furniture it looks damned shabby."

"Yes," said Ole Cromleigh. "I see." He rubbed his hands meditatively. "You heard me order that page to fumigate it, eh? Well—he's going to forget all about those orders as completely as if I'd never delivered them."

"I don't get it," confessed Battle. "But I'd like you to check—for my benefit."

Cromleigh shrugged and pressed the button again. To the page who appeared, he said irascibly, "I told you to have that sofa fumigated—didn't I?"

The boy looked honestly baffled. "No, sir," he said, wrinkling his brows. "I don't think so, sir."

"All right, sonny. Scat." The boy disappeared with evident relief.

"That's quite a trick," said Battle. "How do you do it?" He was absolutely convinced that it was the same boy and that he had forgotten all about the incident.

"You hit the nail on the head, young man," said Cromleigh, leaning forward. "I didn't do it. I don't know who did, but it happens regularly." He looked about him sharply and continued, "I'm owing-gay oo-tay eek-spay in ig-pay atin-lay. Isten-lay."

And then, in the smoking room of the Billionaire's Club, the strangest story ever told was unreeled—in pig-Latin!—for the willing ears of Lieutenant J. C. Battle, Soldier of Fortune. And it was the prelude to his strangest job—the strangest job any soldier of fortune was ever

hired for throughout the whole history of the ancient profession.

Battle was bewildered. He stared about himself with the curious feeling of terrified uncertainty that is felt in nightmares. At his immediate left arose a monstrous spiral mountain, seemingly of metal-bearing ore, pitted on the surface and crusted with red rust.

From unimaginable heights above him filtered a dim, sickly light . . . beneath his feet was a coarse stuff with great ridges and interstices running into the distance. Had he not known, he would never have believed that he was standing on wood.

"So this," said Battle, "is what the inside of a mohair sofa is like."

Compressed into a smallness that would have made a louse seem mastodonic, he warily trod his way across huge plains of that incredible worm's-eye wood, struggled over monstrous tubes that he knew were the hairy padding of the sofa.

From somewhere far off in the dusk of this world of near night, there was a trampling of feet, many feet. Battle drew himself on the alert, snapped out miniature revolvers, one in each hand. He thought briskly that these elephant-pistols had been, half an hour ago, the most dangerous handguns on Earth, whereas here—well?

The trampling of feet attached itself to the legs of a centipede, a very small centipede that was only about two hundred times the length of the lieutenant. Its many sharp eyes sighted him, and rashly the creature headed his way.

The flat crash of his guns echoing strangely in the unorthodox construction of this world, Battle stood his ground, streaming smoke from both pistols. The centipede kept on going.

He drew a smoke bomb and hurled it delicately into the creature's face. The arthropod reared up and thrashed for a full second before dying. As Battle went a long way around it, it switched its tail, nearly crushing the diminished soldier of fortune.

After the equivalent of a two-mile walk he saw before him a light that was not the GE's filtering down from the

smoking room of the Billionaire's Club, but a bright, chemical flare of illumination.

"It's them," breathed the lieutenant. "In person!" He crouched behind a towering wood shaving and inspected the weird scene. It was a city that spread out before him, but a city the like of which man's eyes had never seen before.

A good, swift kick would have sent most of it crashing to the ground, but to the tiny lieutenant it was impressive and somehow beautiful. It was built mostly of wood splinters quarried from the two-by-fours which braced the sofa; the base of the city was more of the same, masticated into a sort of papier-mâché platform. As the soldier of fortune looked down on it from the dizzy height of two feet, he felt his arms being very firmly seized.

"What do we do about this?" demanded a voice, thin and querulous. "I never saw one this size."

"Take him to the Central Committee, stupid," snapped another. Battle felt his guns being hoisted from their holsters and snickered quietly. They didn't know—

Yes they did. A blindfold was whipped about his eyes and his pockets and person were given a thorough going-over. They even took the fulminate of mercury that he kept behind his molars.

"Now what?" asked the first voice. Battle could picture its owner gingerly handling the arsenal that he habitually carried with him.

"Now," said the second voice, "now freedom slowly broadens down." *Clunk!* Battle felt something—with his last fighting vestige of consciousness, he realized that it was one of his own gun butts—contact his head, then went down for the count.

The next thing he knew a dulcet voice was cooing at him. The lieutenant had never heard a dulcet voice before, he decided. There had been, during his hitch with the Foreign Legion, one Messoua whose voice he now immediately classified as a sort of hoarse cackle. The blond Hedvig, the Norwegian spy he had encountered in service with Los Invincibles de Bolivia, had seemed at the time capable of a dulcet coo; Battle reallocated the Norse girl's tones as somewhere between a rasp and a metallic gurgle.

The voice cooed at him, "Get up, stupid. You're conscious."

He opened his eyes and looked for the voice as he struggled to his feet. As he found the source of the coo he fell right flat on his back again. J. C. Battle, soldier of fortune extraordinary, highest-priced insurrectionnaire in the world, had seen many women in the course of his life. Many women had looked on him and found him good, and he had followed the lead with persistence and ingenuity. His rep as a Lothario stretched over most of the Earth's surface. Yet never, he swore fervently to himself, never had he seen anything to match this little one with the unfriendly stare.

She was somewhat shorter than the lieutenant and her coloring was the palest, most delicate shade of apple green imaginable. Her eyes were emerald and her hair was a glorious lushness like the hue of a high-priced golf club's putting green on a summer morning. And she was staring at him angrily, tapping one tiny foot.

"Excuse me, madame," said Battle as he rose with a new self-possession in his bearing. He noted that she was wearing what seemed to be a neat little paper frock of shell pink. "Excuse me—I had no notion that it was a lady whom I was keeping waiting."

"Indeed," said the lady coldly. "We'll dispense with introductions, whoever you are. Just tell your story. Are you a renegade?" She frowned. "No, you couldn't be that. Begin talking."

Battle bowed. "My card," he said, tendering it. "I presume you to be in a position of authority over the—?" He looked around and saw that he was in a room of wood, quite unfurnished.

"Oh, sit down if you wish," snapped the woman. She folded herself up on the floor and scrutinized the card.

"What I am doesn't concern you," she said broodingly. "But since you seem to know something about our plans, know that I am the supreme commander of the—" She made a curious, clicking noise. "That's the name of my people. You can call us the Invaders."

"I shall," began Battle. "To begin at the beginning, it is known that your—Invaders—plan to take over this world of ours. I congratulate you on your location of your

people in a mohair sofa; it is the most ingenious place of concealment imaginable. However, so that the sofa will not be fumigated, you must perform operations at long range—posthypnotic suggestion, I imagine—on the minds of the servants at the Billionaire's Club. Can you explain to me why you cannot perform these operations on the club members themselves?"

"Very simple," said the woman sternly, with the ghost of a smile. "Since all the billionaire members are self-made men, they insist that even the lowest busboys have advanced degrees and be Phi Beta Kappas. This betokens a certain type of academic mind which is very easy to hypnotize. But even if we worked in twenty-four-hour relays on Old Jay we couldn't put a dent in him. The psychic insensitivity of a billionaire is staggering.

"And," she added, looking at Battle through narrowed eyes, "there was one member who noticed that the busboys never fumigated the sofa. We tried to work on him while he slept, but he fought us back. He even subconsciously acquired knowledge of our plans. Thought he'd dreamed it and forgot most of the details."

Battle sighed. "You're right," he admitted. "Cromleigh was his name, and he tipped me off. Where are you Invaders from?"

"None of your business," she tartly retorted. "And where, precisely, do *you* come from?"

"This Cromleigh," said Battle, "was—and is—no fool. He went to a psychologist friend and had his mind probed. The result was a complete outline of your civilization and plans—including that ingenious device of yours, the minifier. He had one built in his lab and paid me very highly to go into it. Then I was dropped by him personally into this sofa with a pair of tweezers."

"How much does he know?" snapped the woman.

"Not much. Only what one of your more feeble-minded citizens let him know. He doesn't know the final invasion plans and he doesn't know the time schedule—if there is any as yet."

"There isn't," she said with furrowed brow. "And if there were, you imbecile monsters would never learn it from *us*." Suddenly she blazed at him, "Why must you die the hard way? Why don't you make room for the super-

race while you have the chance? But no! We'd never be able to live in peace with you—you—cretins!" Then her lip trembled. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't mean to be harsh—but there are so few of us and so many of you—" The dam broke, and the little lady dissolved in a flood of tears.

Battle leaped into the breach like a veteran. He scored 99.9807 on the firing range consistently and that was pretty good, but when it came to comforting weeping female soldiers of fortune Battle *really* shone.

Some minutes later they were chummily propped up against the wall of the wooden room. Her weeps over, the little lady—who had identified herself as Miss Aktying *click!* Byam—began:

"We came—you could have guessed this from our size—from an asteroid near Jupiter. Don't ask me why my people are so much like yours except for size; after all, why shouldn't they be? Spores of life, you know.

"Our spaceship's somewhere in your New Jersey; we landed there two years ago and sized up the situation. We'd been driven from our own planet by nasty creatures from Ceres who had the damndest war machines you ever saw—flame guns, disintegrator rays—and they're going to mop up the universe when they get around to it. By your standards they were three inches tall; to us they were twenty-foot horrors.

"We sent out a few agents who learned the language in two or three days; we could live on the spaceship and keep out of sight. The agents came back to us all steamed up. They'd been riding in coat pockets and things, listening in on private wires. They found out that most of the wealth in the world is concentrated in the Billionaire's Club, right here where we are. So we moved en masse, all three hundred of us, into this sofa and built our city.

"It isn't as easy as it sounds, of course. To listen in on a conversation means that you have to weigh yourself down with almost an ounce of equipment for raising the octaves of the voice and scaling it down to fit our ears. But now we have our listening posts and we eavesdrop in relays to every word that's spoken. If you knew what I know about Atlantis Plastic and Explosive—

"Anyway, Battle, we have our fingers on the economic pulse of the planet. We could release information through dreams and hunches that would wreck the market, as you call it, and create the most staggering panic of all times. Once that happens, Battle. . . ."

"Go on," snapped the lieutenant.

"Once that happens, Battle," she said in a small, tense voice, "we turn on a little machine we have and every human being that walks the Earth turns into pocket fuzz."

She faced his horrified stare with a pitying smile. "It's true," she said. "We can do it. When we're ready, when we're convinced that science and research are so disorganized that they can't possibly do anything about it, we turn on the machine, technically known as a protoplasmo high carbon proteidic discellular converter, and *it* happens."

"Not," grated Battle, "if I can stop it."

"That's the rub, my dear," she said with a frown. "You can't. You're my prisoner." And she smiled exquisitely, baring apple-green teeth, so that Battle was constrained to agree with the little lady.

"It seems fitting," he brooded absently. "A superrace indeed is come to humble man."

"Darling," said Battle, "it's the strange mixture of ruthlessness and sentimentality that makes your people perpetually amazing to me. It's a pitched battle in the dark on our part; my people have no notion of what's going on behind their backs, and you see nothing evil or dark in the situation."

Busily Miss Aktying *click!* Byam kissed him and returned to her desk. "My sweet," she said, "if you trouble your head over our alien morality you'll never get to the end of it. Enough that you are accepted into our midst as a noncombatant worker and the very special charge of the Expediter-in-Chief—that's me. Now, go away, please. I'll see you tonight."

Battle pocketed the seal he had lifted from her desk and blew a kiss at her back as he closed the door behind him.

The week he had been imprisoned had been no great hardship; he had been privileged to roam within the limits

of the city and examine the marvelously complicated life these tiny invaders had made for themselves. There had been other privileges as well. . . .

The lieutenant, professional and romanticized killer, could not get over the appalling technique of the invaders. It was not inefficient, it was not cold-blooded; somehow to him it was worse. Like all right-minded military men of the old school, he deplored the occasional necessity of spying. What then could he think of a campaign that was spying and nothing else but?

He had been allowed to see—under guard—the wonderful listening posts of the tiny people. From little speakers boomed the voices of Old Jay and the other titans of finance who worked off steam in the smoking room of the Billionaire's Club. And nobody ever sat on the sofa or moved it; it simply would never occur to a member to do so, and in the minds of the servants there had been built up a myth that it was the very first sofa that the celebrated and deceased founder of the club, Nicholas van Bhoomenbergen, had installed and that it would be a breach of the club's rules to move it. The fact was that it had been brought in by two men from Airways Express who had had their minds taken over for the nonce by the invaders. A Mrs. Pinsky, for whom it had been originally consigned, never did find out what happened to it.

Battle ascertained by judicious inquiry that the pocket-fuzz machine actually did exist. It had been a swipe from the war science of the invaders from Ceres. The thing was broken down at the moment, but when they got it into shape again—!

He had uneasy pictures of a vast number of speculators all waking up with the same hunch on which way the market would jump. All bidding simultaneously for the same securities would make a ticklish situation that could be touched off by judicious inspiration of an investment banker—any investment banker—who could be dreamed into thinking his bank was without assets.

Bank closes and banker commits suicide. Panic on the market; the vast number of speculators find themselves with securities at fantastically high prices and worth fantastically near nothing at all. Vast numbers of speculators sell out and are ruined, for then three more banks close

and three more bankers commit suicide. President declares bank holiday; the great public withdraws savings as soon as the banks open again; therefore the banks close again. The great public holes up for a long, hard winter. With loose cash lying around crime is on the upswing and martial law is declared, at which Leftist organizations explode and start minor insurrections in industrial cities.

Mexico attacks across the Rio Grande; the invaders from the asteroid have a contingent of expert hypnotists ready to leave for Chihauhau, where the southern republic's army is stationed.

And then the protoplasmo high carbon proteidic discellular converter would be turned on. The population of Manhattan would turn into pocket fuzz—or at least separate large-molecule units resembling very closely the stuff you find in pockets or handbags after two or three weeks of use.

Manhattan is fortified by the wee folk from the asteroid, who build several more of the flug machines, aiming them at the other boroughs and moving their twenty-mile field of effectiveness at the rate of a state each day. The North American continent would be clear of any and all protoplasmic life at the end of two months, they estimated.

And the hell of it was that they were right. But Battle was whistling cheerily as he forged a pass with the aid of the seal from his lady's desk.

He had crept out into the open, been perceived by the eagle eye of Ole Cromleigh, lifted on a pair of tweezers and whisked into a waiting Rolls.

Once again his natural size in the New Jersey lab, he stretched comfortably. "Thanks for being so prompt," he yawned. "Thanks a lot. They were coming after me, by the sound of the footsteps in the distance."

"Now you see why I had to be quiet and do this thing on the sly?" demanded the financier. "If I'd told all I know they'd have called me mad and locked me up the way his family treated poor old John D.—but don't let that get out, Lieutenant. Now tell me what you found there—begin at the beginning. How much do they know about finance and manipulation? Have they got their records in a safe place?"

Battle lit a cigarette; he hadn't taken any with him for fear of firing the sofa. Luxuriously he drew in a draft of the smoke clear down to his toenails and let it trickle from the corners of his mouth. "One question at a time," he said. "And I'll ask the first few of them. Mr. Cromleigh, why won't you let me bomb the sofa?"

The old man twisted his hands nervously together. "Because a bomb in the smoking room would kill Old Jay when he hears about it; the man always goes to Lhasa in Tibet when July Fourth rolls around. He's been that way since the Wall Street Massacre in '24 or '25. Because I'm not cold-blooded. And because, dammit, those little people I saw were *cute.*"

"Yeah," agreed Battle reminiscently. "That she was. To begin at the beginning, your dream was substantially correct. They're little people from an asteroid. They have war machinery and no hearts whatsoever. They're listening twenty-four hours a day. Not a word spoken in the room escapes them and it all goes onto records."

"Good—good God!" whispered Cromleigh, cracking his freckled knuckles. "What that information must be worth!" He rose. "Let's get back to Manhattan for a drink, Lieutenant," he said shakily. "And there's another aspect I want to discuss with you. Your first trip was a sort of foray. It was mostly to convince me that I wasn't mad. And to size up the ground as well. Now can we discuss planting a permanent spy in the sofa? To keep tabs on them and move only when necessary?"

"Delightful," said Battle thoughtfully. "I have friends. My own club you probably do not know of, but it is the best of its kind."

Cromleigh, nervously tapping his desk with a pencil, was alone in the great New Jersey lab as far as could be seen. Grotesque machinery lined the walls; during the day there would be eight score technicians working, checking and double-checking their results, bringing new honor and glory to the Cromleigh Vacumaxic Sweeper and the rest of the string of electric products. His sugar plants and labs were far away in Pasadena; the Cromleigh Ironworks were going full blast in the ore basin of the continent. He looked like a very worried man.

From the shadows, with completely noiseless tread, stole a figure. "Good evening, sir," said Battle. "I've brought all of the Saber Club that's available on two hours' notice.

"Miss Millicent, this is Mr. Cromleigh," he announced, leading forth from the shadows a tall, crisp woman.

When she spoke it was with a faint Southern drawl. "Pleased t'know you. Any frien' of Lieutenant Battle's. . . ." She trailed back into the darkness and vanished completely.

"Dr. Mogilov, former Professor of Philosophy at the University of Kazan."

A slight, smiling man bowed out from the darkness; he was smooth-shaven and looked very un-Russian. In a pronounced Cambridge dialect he said, "Delighted," and put one hand on the butt of a revolver slung from his slender waist.

"And Alex Vaughn, Yorkshire born and bred."

The Englishman said thickly, in the peculiar speech that makes the clear-headed, big-boned men of York sound always a little intoxicated, "Ah coom wi' russi-*veh*-shins, soor. Lut thawt bay oondair-stud."

"He says," interpreted the lieutenant, "that he comes with reservations; let that be understood. And that completes the present roster of the Saber Club present in New York."

"Only three?" complained Cromleigh. "And one a woman? You gave me to understand that they could completely smash the invaders."

"Yes," said the lieutenant, his voice heavy with added meaning. "*Any* invaders."

"No doubt—" said Cromleigh. Then some message in Battle's eyes alarmed him unaccountably; his hand trembled on the desk top and gripped the edge to steady itself.

"That did it!" snapped Battle. He swung on Ole Cromleigh. "How long have we?" he grated, pulling a gun and aiming it for the financier's throat.

In a voice hoarse with hatred Cromleigh yelled, "Just two minutes more, you meddling scum! Then—"

"Lights!" yelled Battle. "Turn the damned lights on, Miss Millicent!" As the overhead indirects flared up, bathing the huge lab in a lambent, flaming radiance, the four figures of the Saber Club members, the Billionaire Clubman and one other leaped into sharp reality.

It was the figure of the sofa. "We took the liberty," said Battle, his gun swerving not an inch, "of removing this object from the smoking room. It's going lock, stock and barrel into the enlarging machine you have here."

"You fool!" roared Cromleigh. "Don't you know—" The descending gun butt cut off any further conversation.

"Hurry up!" grated the lieutenant. He hefted the sofa to his broad shoulders. "That trembling hand was a signal if ever I saw one. His friends'll be here any minute. Open that damned machine and plug in the power!"

The Russian philosopher, muttering wildly to himself, swung wide the gates of the boxlike magnifier through which Battle had come only a few hours before.

"Thank God there's plenty of room!" groaned Battle. "And if this doesn't work, prepare for Heaven, friends!" He turned on the machine full power and speed, took Miss Millicent by the arm, and dragged her to the far end of the vast lab.

During the incredibly long three minutes that ensued, they made ready their weapons for what might prove to be a siege, while Battle explained in rapid-fire undertones what he had had no time for during the plane ride from Manhattan.

As he checked the load of his quick firers he snapped, "Invaders—phooey! Anybody could tell that those women were fresh from an office. They had the clerical air about them. The only invader—as a carefully logical process of deduction demonstrated—was the gruesome creature who's been posing as Cromleigh. Just murdered the old guy—I suppose—and took over his body. He and his friends whom he just signaled. He's the only baby who hypnotized the Phi Beta Kappas they use for busboys.

"Why did he risk sending me in there? The inevitable mark of a louse. Doesn't trust anybody, not even his own office staff dyed a pale green and reduced to half-gnat size. So he sent me in to spy on them. The whole cock-and-bull story of the creatures from an asteroid was so that there'd be no suspicion directed at him in case some bright waiter should find the louse people. Wouldn't be surprised if he's from an asteroid himself. Crazy business! Craziest damned business!"

"How about the financial angle?" asked Vaughn, who

could be intelligible when money was involved.

"I picked that bird's pocket slick as a whistle just after I conked him. Feels like a hundred grand."

"Here they come!" snapped Miss Millicent.

"They" were creatures of all sizes and shapes who were streaming through the only door to the lab, at the other end of the room.

"Awk!" gulped the lady involuntarily. "They" were pretty awful. There were a hundred or so of them, many much like men, a few in an indescribable liquid-solid state that sometimes was gaseous. The luminous insides of these churned wildly about; there were teeth inside them two feet long. Others were gigantic birds, still others snakes, still others winged dragons.

"That settles it," grunted the Russian philosopher as he flicked his gun into and out of its holster faster than the eye could follow. "That settles it. They are amoebic, capable of assuming any shape at all. One is changing now—awk!" He persevered. "Indubitably possessed of vast hypnotic powers over unsuspecting minds only. Otherwise they would be working on us."

"They" were rolling in a flood of shifting, slimy flesh down the floor of the lab.

"The machine! The sofa!" cried Miss Millicent. Battle breathed a long sigh of relief as the cabinetlike expander exploded outward and the sofa it held kept on growing—and growing—and *growing!* It stopped just as it filled the segment of the lab that it occupied.

With a squeaking of tortured timbers the laws of cross-sectional sufferance power asserted themselves and the hundred-yard-high sofa collapsed in a monstrous pile of rubble.

"Sit very still," said the lieutenant. "Be quite quiet and blow the head off any hundred-foot centipede that wanders our way."

There were agonized yells from the other side of the couch's ruins. "That couch," Battle informed them, "was just plain lousy. Full of centipedes, lice, what have you. Naturally; never been fumigated. And when a louse smells blood—God help any invaders around, be they flesh, fish, fowl or amoebic!"

After ten minutes there was complete quiet.

"What abaht th' boogs?" asked Vaughn.

"They're dead," said Battle, rising and stretching. "Their respiratory systems can't keep up with the growth. They were good for about ten minutes, then they keeled over. Their tracheae can't take in enough oxygen to keep them going, which is a very good thing for the New Jersey countryside."

He strolled over to the vast pile of rubble and began turning over timbers, Miss Millicent assisting him.

"Ah!" he grunted. "Here it is!" He had found the body of an apple-green young lady whose paint was beginning to peel, revealing a healthy pink beneath. With many endearing terms he brought her out of her swoon as Miss Millicent's eyebrows went higher and higher.

Finally she exploded, as the two were cosily settled on a mountainous upholstery needle that had, at some time, got lost in the sofa.

"Just *when*, Lieutenant, did you find out that these people weren't invaders from an asteroid?"

Battle raised his eyebrows and kissed the girl.

"Have no fear, darling," he said. "A gentleman never—er—kisses—and tells."

THE GOLDEN ROAD

OUT OF THE myth of night and language there come strange tales told over wine. There is a man known as The Three-Cornered Scar who frequents a village spot famed for its wine and raconteurs, both of which are above the average.

The Three-Cornered Scar favored us by a visit to my table and ordering, during the course of his story, five half-bottles of house red to my account. The wine is drunk up and the story told.

1

Colt was tired. He was so bone-broke weary that he came near to wishing he was dead. It would have been easy to die in the snow; heaps in the way seemed to beg for the print of his body. He skirted crevasses that were like wide and hungry mouths.

This was Central Asia, High Pamir, a good thousand miles from any permanent habitation of the human race. The nomadic Kirghiz population had been drained away to the Eastern front, civil and military authorities likewise. Colt himself was the tragic, far-strayed end of the First Kuen-Lung Oil Prospecting Expedition, undertaken by a handful of American volunteers on behalf of the Chungking government.

Estimating generously, his assets were five more days of scanty eating. And an eternity of sleep under the glaring stars of the plateau? . . .

He had struck, somehow, an easier way across the snow-covered, rocky wastes. There was a route to follow, a winding, mazy route that skirted the Alai Range's jagged foothills and slipped through Tengis-Bai Pass. Old mem-

ories of maps and trails swirled through Colt's tired head; he bore north for no better reason than that he could guide himself by Polaris, low on the horizon. Colt was headed, with a laugh and a curse, for Bokhara.

Colt marched through the first watch of the night, before the smiting cold of space descended on this roof of the world; then he would sleep, twitching with frost. He would wake eight hours later, a stone, a block of wood, to unkink his wretched muscles, shoulder his pack, and march under the naked, brassy sun.

The Parsees said that this High Pamir was the cradle of human life, that from here had sprung the primals who proliferated into white, yellow, black and brown. To the southwest, at the same thirteen-thousand elevation, was the Valley of the Oxus, a green ribbon in the steel gray and bone white of the plateau. To the northeast were the great peaks—Everest, Kinchinjunga, K-4—that started where other mountains ended, shooting from seventeen thousand up to unthinkable heights, sky-piercing.

Night and day scarcely interrupted the flow of his thoughts. His waking fantasies and his dreams alike were brutish, longing for warmth and comfort, bespelled remembrance of palmier days. He woke to find an ear frostbitten, dead, marble white, without sensation, killed by cold.

It came to him slowly, the idea forcing its way through the numbed machinery of his brain, that he was following a path. This easier way across the plateau could be nothing but one of the historic caravan routes. Over this trail had gone a billion feet of beasts and men, and his own had found their way into the ancient grooves. Colt was content with that; going by the sun and stars was good, compass better, but best of all were the ways that men had taken and found well suited.

There were animal droppings before him now and then, once a fragment of broken crockery. He doubled his pace, from a slow plod to a loping, long-strided walk that took much of his husbanded wind. Finally he saw the print in a snowbank that spelled *man*. It was a shod foot's mark, light and side-stepping. As he watched, a puff of wind drifted it over with dry, gleaming snow.

Colt found a splash of milk against a rock, then the smell of camel clinging about a wiry shrub.

He saw them at last, the tail of a great caravan, and fell fainting into the arms of tall, curious Kirghiz camel drivers.

They carried him in a litter until he awoke and could eat, for nothing was so important or unexpected that it could be allowed to break the schedule of the march. Colt opened his eyes to grunts of satisfaction from his bearers. He accepted the hunks of dried meat and bottle of warm tea they gave him, trying to catch enough of the language to offer thanks.

Coming down the line of the caravan was a large Hindu on one of the small Mongolian ponies. He reined beside Colt and asked in French, "How are you? They passed me word. Can you march with us?"

"But yes! It's like life out of death to find you people here. What can I do to help?"

The Hindu dismounted to walk the pony beside him. "Keep up spirits. Our few Europeans are tired of each other's company. In case of bandit raiding—highly improbable, of course—you'll fight. I'm Raisuli Batar, merchant of the Punjab. I'm caravan master, whose word is law. Not that it's necessary—the boys are well behaved and we have enough food."

"Where are we headed?" asked Colt, gnawing on the hunk of meat.

"We started for Bokhara. Come up the line to meet the better sort with me. They're agog with excitement, of course, don't dare break line without my permission, which I don't choose to grant. By way of payload we have crates of soap on the camels and drums of flavoring essence on the ponies."

Colt sniffed, finding wintergreen and peppermint on the air. "May you find a good price," he said respectfully.

Raisuli smiled and the American was pleased. The caravan master was big and solid, with a grim, handsome face. It was good to please a man like that, Colt thought.

They quickened their pace, overtaking a hundred plodding bearers and a herd of sheep. Colt was introduced to a pale, thoughtful man named McNaughton, a reader in history at the University of Glasgow, who said he had been doing field work in Asia for three years.

Farther on were Lodz and wife, two young Poles from Galicia who were hoping for government work in Bokhara. The man was quiet, his English heavily accented. The wife spoke French only, but with the vivid dash of a Parisienne. Her lips were touched with scarlet; here in the wilderness of the High Pamir she wore a freshly pressed riding habit. Colt was enchanted.

Raisuli cast a glance at the sky. "Bedding down," he snapped. "Excuse me—*c'est l'heure.*"

He left Colt with the Poles, mounting his pony again to gallop down the line barking orders to the various Hindus, Tajiks, Chinese, Abyssinians, Kirghiz and Kroomen who made up the crew. It took no more than a quarter hour to bring the unwieldy line to a halt; in another quarter hour a thousand felt tents were pitched and pegged, fires lighted and animals staked out.

"He times well, that one," smiled M. Lodz. Colt looked up and saw the sky already deepening into black. He shuddered a little and drew nearer to the fire.

"I think," said McNaughton absently, "that I could take a little refreshment." Lodz looked up from under his brows, then clapped his hands. A native boy came running.

"Bring food—some of that cold joint, wallah."

"Yes, sahib."

"Such a night this will be, perhaps," said M. Lodz softly, "as it was in August."

"Just such a night," said McNaughton. "Will you join us, Mr. Colt?"

"Not I," said the American with a sense of guilt. "I was fed when I came to after fainting. Is it safe—may I look about?"

He got no answer. The boy had returned with a great haunch of meat; silently the Occidentals gathered about it, taking out knives. Colt watched in amazement as the dainty Frenchwoman hacked out a great slab of beef and tore at it, crammed it down her throat. Before it was swallowed she was cutting away again.

"Ah—I asked if I ought to look about. . . ."

Lodz shot him a sidewise glance, his mouth crammed with meat, his jaws working busily. Then, as though Colt had never spoken, he returned to the serious business of

feeding, with the same animal quality as his wife and McNaughton showed.

"I'll look about then," said Colt forlornly. He wandered away from the fire in the direction of a yellow felt tent. There he was delighted to catch words of Cantonese.

"Greetings, son of Han," he said to the venerable speaker.

The fine old Mongol head turned; Colt felt himself subjected to a piercing, kindly scrutiny by two twinkling little black eyes. The ruddy little mouth smiled. "Sit down, son. It's a long time between new friends."

Colt squatted by the fire obediently; the venerable one took a long pull from a bottle of *suntori,* a vile synthetic Japanese whisky. Wiping his mouth with the back of a wrinkled, yellow hand, he announced, "I'm Grandfather T'ang. This is my son, T'ang Gaw Yat. If you let him he'll talk you deaf about the time he was on the long march with the Eighth Route Army. He claims General Chuh Teh once ate rice with him."

T'ang Gaw Yat smiled obediently and a little tolerantly at his father's whimsy. He was a fine-looking Chinese, big-headed and straight-faced, with little wrinkles of laughter playing about his mouth. "What my father says," he confided, "is strictly true. It was a full thousand miles from—"

"What did I tell you?" broke in the old man. "The slave is his wife, and the smartest one of the lot." He indicated a small Chinese woman of the indeterminate age between twenty and fifty.

She said in English hardly accented, "Hello. You do speak English, don't you? These barbarians don't know anything but their village jargon and Canton talk." The smile took the edge from her harsh words.

Colt introduced himself, and answered endless questions on the state of China, military, political and economic.

"Hold off," ordered the woman at last. "Let him have his turn. Want to know anything, Mr. Colt?"

"Wouldn't mind knowing how long you've been traveling."

"Stupid question," broke in Grandfather Han. "Just what one expects from a foreign devil. The splendor of the night

closes about him and he would know how long we've been on the march! Have a drink—a small one." He passed the bottle; Colt politely refused.

"Then maybe you'd like a little game—" There clicked in his palm two ivory cubes.

"Please, Father," said T'ang Gaw Yat. "Put those away."

"Pattern of ancient virtue!" sneered the old man. "O you child of purity!"

"Grandfather is very lucky," said the woman quietly. "He started on the caravan with nothing but those dice and many years of gambling experience. He is now one of the richest men on the line of march. He owns two herds of sheep, a riding camel of his own and the best food there is to be had."

"And drink," said the son somberly.

"Tell you what," said the old man. "You can have some of my V.S.O. stock—stuff I won from a Spaniard a month back." He rummaged for a moment in one of the tent pockets, finally emerged with a slender bottle which caught the firelight like auriferous quartz. "Danziger Goldwasser—*le véritable,*" he gloated. "But I can't drink the stuff. Doesn't bite like this Nipponese hellbroth." He upended the bottle of *suntori* again; passed the brandy to Colt.

The American took it, studied it curiously against the fire. It was a thin, amber liquid, at whose bottom settled little flakes. He shook them up into the neck of the bottle; it was like one of the little globular paperweights that hold a mimic snowstorm. But instead of snow there were bits of purest beaten gold to tickle the palate and fancy of the drinker.

"Thanks," he said inadequately. "Very kind of you."

"Curious, isn't it," said the woman, "how much the caravan life resembles a village? Though the wealth, of course, is not in land but in mercantile prospects—" She stopped as Colt caught her eye. Why, he wondered, had she been rattling on like that?

"The wisdom of the slave is the folly of the master," said Grandfather T'ang amiably. "He is happy who learns to discount the words of a woman."

"Suppose," said the woman slowly and quietly, "you

learn to mind your own business, you poisonous old serpent?"

"They can't stand common sense," confided the old man.

Colt felt, painfully, that he had wandered into a family quarrel. He bolted with a mumbled excuse, hanging onto the bottle of brandy. He stood for a moment away from the trail and stared down the long line of fires. There were more than a thousand, snaking nearly out of sight. The spectacle was restful; the fires were a little blue, being kindled largely out of night-soil briquettes.

The sky was quite black; something had overcast the deep-ranked stars of the plateau. No moon shone.

Colt settled against the lee of a rock in a trance. He heard winds and the hiss of voices, soft in the distance. It was the quiet and complaining Tajiki dialect. He could hear it and understand it. It was absurdly simple, he thought abstractedly, to pick out the meanings of words and phrases.

"Such a night," one was saying, "as in August. You remember?"

"I remember." Then, dark and passionate, "The limping, bloody demon! Let him come near and I'll tear his vitals!"

"Surely you will not. He is the tearer in his evil work. We are the torn—"

Colt sat up with a start. What the hell! He couldn't understand Tajiki, not one little word of it! He had been dreaming, he thought. But it didn't melt away as a dream should. The memory of the overheard conversation was as sharp and distinct as it could be, something concrete and mysterious, like a joke that hadn't been explained to him.

Then there was a sort of heavenly grumbling, like a megatherial word or more. Colt twisted and stared at the zenith; could see nothing at all. The rumbling ended. Colt saw black little fingers all down the line rise and attend, twisting and staring and buzzing to each other.

2

He hurried to the fire of his European friends. They were sprawled on blankets, their bodies a little swollen from the enormous meal they had eaten. Colt saw the

bare bone of the joint, scraped by knife edges. The Occidentals were unconcernedly smoking.

"What was that racket?" he asked, feeling a little silly. "What was it—do you know?"

"Thunder," said McNaughton noncommittally.

"Oui," agreed M. Lodz, puffing a long, tip-gilt cigarette. "Did it frighten you, the thunder?"

Colt pulled himself together. There was something evasive here, something that sought to elude him. "It was *peculiar* thunder," he said with glacial calm. "There was no lightning preceding it."

"The lightning will come soon," said Lodz furtively. "I tell you so you will not be alarmed."

"You have your lightning after your thunder here? Odd. In my country it's the other way around." He wasn't going to break—he *wasn't* going to swear—

"But how boring," drawled the Pole's wife. *"Never* a change?"

He *wasn't* going to break—

Then the peculiar lightning split the skies. Colt shot one staggered, incredulous glance at it, and was dazzled.

It was a word, perhaps a name, spelled out against the dead-black sky. He knew it. It was in some damned alphabet or other; fretfully he chided himself for not remembering which of the twenty-odd he could recognize it could be.

Colt realized that the Occidentals were staring at him with polite concern. He noticed a shred of meat between the teeth of Mme. Lodz as she smiled reassuringly—white, sharp teeth, they were. Colt rubbed his eyes dazedly. He knew he must be a haggard and unseemly figure to their cultured gaze—but they hadn't seen the words in the sky—*or had they—?*

Politely they stared at him, phrases bubbling from their lips:

"So frightfully sorry, old man—"

"Wouldn't upset you for the world—"

"Hate to see you lose your grip—"

Colt shook his head dazedly, as though he felt strands of sticky silk wind around his face and head. He turned and ran, hearing the voice of Raisuli Batar call after him, "Don't stray too far—"

He didn't know how long he ran or how far he strayed. Finally he fell flat, sprawled childishly, feeling sick and confused in his head. He looked up for a moment to see that the caravan fires were below some curve of rock or other—at any rate, well out of sight. They were such little lights, he thought. Good for a few feet of warm glow, then sucked into the black of High Pamir. They made not even a gleam in the night-heavy sky.

And there, on the other side of him and the caravan, he saw the tall figure of another human being. She stood on black rock between two drifts of snow.

Colt bit out the foil seal of the brandy bottle and pulled the cork with his fingers. After a warm gulp of the stuff, he rose.

"Have a drink?"

She turned. She was young in her body and face, Mongoloid. Her eyes were blue-black and shining like metal. Her nose was short, Chinese, yet her skin was quite white. She did not have the eyefold of the yellow people.

Silently she extended one hand for the bottle, tilted it high. Colt saw a shudder run through her body as she swallowed and passed him the tall flask with its gold-flecked liquor.

"You must have been cold."

"By choice. Do you think I'd warm myself at either fire?"

"Either?" he asked.

"There are two caravans. Didn't you know?"

"No. I'm just here—what's the other caravan?"

"Just here, are you? Did you know that you're dead?"

Colt thought the matter over slowly; finally declared, "I guess I did. And all those others—and you—?"

"All dead. We're the detritus of High Pamir. You'll find, if you look, men who fell to death from airplanes within the past few years walking by the side of Neanderthalers who somehow strayed very far from their tribes and died. The greatest part of the caravans comes, of course, from older caravans of the living who carried their goods from Asia to Europe for thousands of years."

Colt coughed nervously. "Have another drink," he said. "Then let's see this other caravan. I'm not too well pleased with the one I fell into."

She took his hand and guided him across the snow and

black rock to back within sight of his own caravan. He stared, eager and hungry to see. As she pointed with one tapering finger it seemed that many things were clearer than they ever had been before. He saw that the long line of lights was not his caravan but another in the opposite direction, paralleling his.

"There you will see *their* caravan master," she said, putting her face next to his. He looked and saw a pot-bellied monster whose turban was half as high as its wearer. Its silhouette, as it passed before a fire, was indescribably unpleasant.

"Evening prayer," said his guide, with a faint tone of mockery.

He studied them as they arranged flares before a platform flung together out of planks and trestles; he also saw them assemble a sort of idol, fitting the various parts together and bolting them securely. When the thing was perhaps two-thirds assembled he turned away and covered his face, repelled.

"I won't look at the rest of it now," he said. "Perhaps later, if you wish me to."

"That's right," she said. "It isn't a thing to look at calmly. But you will see the rest of it one time or another. This is a very long caravan."

She looked down and said, "Now they are worshiping."

Colt looked. "Yes," he said flatly. They were worshiping in their own fashion, dancing and leaping uglily while some dozen of them blew or saw fantastic discords from musical instruments. Others were arranged in a choir; as they began to sing Colt felt cold nausea stirring at the pit of his belly.

Their singing was markedly unpleasant; Colt, who enjoyed the discords of Ernest Bloch and Jean Sibelius, found them stimulatingly revolting. The choir droned out a minor melody, varying it again and again with what Colt construed to be quarter-tones and split-interval harmonies. He found he was listening intently, nearly fascinated by the ugly sounds.

"Why are they doing it?" he asked at length.

"It is their way," she said with a shrug. "I see you are interested. I, too, am interested. Perhaps I should not discuss this before you have had the opportunity of making

up your own mind. But as you may guess, the caravan below us there, where they make the noises, is Bad. It is a sort of marching gallery of demons and the black in heart. On the other hand, the caravan with which you found yourself previously is Good—basically kind and constructive, taking delight in order and precision."

Colt, half-listening, drew her down beside him on the rock. He uncorked the bottle. "You must tell me about yourself," he said earnestly. "It is becoming difficult for me to understand all this. So tell me about yourself, if you may."

She smiled slowly. "I am half-caste," she said. "The Russian Revolution—so many attractive and indigent female aristocrats, quite unable to work with their hands . . . many, as you must know, found their way to Shanghai.

"There was a Chinese merchant and my mother, a princess. Not *eine Fuerstin*—merely a hanger-on at court. I danced. When I was a small child already I was dancing. My price was high, very high at one time. I lost popularity, and with it income and much self-assurance. I was a very bad woman. Not bad as those people there are bad, but I was very bad in my own way.

"Somehow I learned mathematics—a British actuary who knew me for a while let me use his library, and I learned quickly. So I started for India, where nobody would hire me. I heard that there was a country to the north that wanted many people who knew building and mathematics and statistics. Railway took me through the Khaiber and Afghanistan—from there pony and litter—till I died of exposure seven months ago. That is why we meet on High Pamir."

"Listen," said Colt. "Listen to that."

It was again the megatherial voices, louder than before. He looked at the woman and saw that her throat cords were tight as she stared into the black-velvet heavens.

Colt squinted up between two fingers, snapped shut his eyelids after a moment of the glaring word across the sky that followed the voices. He cursed briefly, blinded. Burned into the backs of his eyes were the familiar characters of the lightning, silent and portentous.

"It doesn't do to stare into it that way," said the woman.

"Come with me." He felt for her hand and let her pull him to his feet. As sight returned he realized that again they were walking on rock.

"And there's the Good and holy caravan at evening devotions," said the woman, with the same note of bedrock cynicism in her voice. And they were. From his coign of vantage Colt could see Raisuli Batar solemnly prostrating himself before a modestly clad, well-proportioned idol whose face beamed kindly on the congregation through two blue-enameled eyes. There was a choir that sang the old German hymn "Ein Feste Burg."

"Shocking," said the woman, "yet strangely moving to the spirit. One feels a certain longing. . . ."

Bluntly Colt said, "I'd like to join them. You're holding me back, you know. I wouldn't see you as a comrade again if I sang with them." He hummed a few bars of the hymn. "On Earth is not His e-qual—"

"Girding their loins for the good fight," said the woman. She chuckled quietly for a moment. In a ribald tone that seemed barely to conceal heartbreak, she snapped, "Do you care to fall in with the ranks of the Almighty? Or may it be with the Lord of Nothing, Old Angra Mainyu of the sixteen plagues? Pick your sides in the divine sweepstakes! It's for you they do it and of a great love for the soul in you—

"They want you black and they want you white—

"How in blazes do you know who's right?"

"It *seems* clear," said Colt doubtfully.

"You think so?" she exploded. "You think so now? Wait and see—with them tearing at your heart two ways and you sure that it'll never hold out but it's going to rip in half, and it never doing that but you going on through the night thirteen thousand meters above the world and never a soft bed and never a bite of real food and never a moment of closing your eyes and sleeping in darkness and night—!"

She collapsed, weeping, into his arms.

3

The long, starless night had not lifted. Three times more the voices had spoken from the heavens and silent light-

ning scribbled across the sky. The two in-betweeners had chanted back and forth sacred writings of Asia, wretchedly seeking for answers:

"I will incline mine ears to a parable. I will open my dark sayings upon the harp. Wherefore should I fear in the days of evil when the iniquity of my heels shall compass me about?"

"O maker of the material world, thou holy one! When the good waters reach the left instep whereon does the Drukh Nasu rush?"

There was an explosion of cynical laughter above them, old and dry. Grandfather T'ang greeted them, "Be well, Valeska and Colt. And forget the insteps and the heels of the Upanishad. That is my counsel." He upended the *suntori* bottle and flushed his throat with a half-pint of the stuff.

In reply to Colt's surprised glance she said, "He often visits me. Gaw is a terrible old man who thinks nothing of lying and being untrue to himself."

"A little of that would do you no harm, daughter. I belong out here with you, of course. But out here are no likely candidates for the dice box, and this ethereal gullet refuses to do without alcohol. Though this ethereal brain could do with considerably less of the pious nonsense that invariably accompanies winning at dice."

He painfully squatted by them, keeping a death grip on the quart bottle. "They're going to be at it again," said the old man. "It's just such a night as in August. Tooth and nail, hammer and tongs, no holds barred." He spat on the rock. "Pah! These spectacles disgust a man of my mentality."

"You see?" asked the woman. "He lies and cheats at dice. Yet often he sings with the worshipers. And always he says he spits on them in his mind. He is terrible!"

Colt quoted slowly, "Judge me and my cause against the ungodly nation; O deliver me from the deceitful and the unjust man."

"Ah?" asked Grandfather T'ang. "Sacred books? Wisdom of the East? I join your symposium with the following, reverently excerpted from the Shuh King: 'The soil of the province was whitish and mellow. Its contribution of revenue was of the highest of the highest class, with some

proportion of the second. Its fields were of the average of the second class.' " He grinned savagely and drank deeply again.

"You can't be right," said Colt. "You *can't* be. There's something that forbids it being right to lie now that you're dead. It doesn't matter which side you choose—whether it's Raisuli's smiling idol or that thing the other side of the ridge. But you have to choose."

"I'm different," said T'ang smugly. "I'm different, and I'm drunk two thirds of the time, so what's the difference if I'm different?" He began raucously to sing, beating time with the bottle, the one and only Confucian hymn:

"Superiority in a person
Should better not
Nor should it worsen.

It should consider everything
From pussycat to honored king.

Inferior people
Need a steeple
To climb and shout
Their views about."

Colt drew a little aside with Valeska. "Should this matter?" he asked.

"He really ought to choose one caravan or another. It's very wrong of him to pretend to be with one when he's really with neither. Either the Good or the Bad. . . ." She stared quaintly into Colt's eyes. "Do you think I'm bad?"

"No," said Colt slowly. "I know you're not. And you aren't good either. Not by nature, practice or inclination. I'm the same as you. I want to sing their devil song and a Lutheran hymn at the same time. And it can't be done."

"And you aren't a liar like that lovable old drunk rolling on the rocks there," she said with a gesture. "At least you aren't a liar."

"I congratulate myself. I can appreciate it to the full. Have a drink, Valeska."

"Yes. There is, you know, going to be a holy war. Which side should we be on?"

"Who knows? Let's take another look at the Bad boys."

There was half a pang of terror in his heart—a formless

fear that he might find Badness less repugnant to him than Goodness. He knew the feeling: it was the trial of every human soul torn between one thing and another. Doubt was Hell—worse than Hell—and it had to be resolved, even at the risk of this magnificent creature by his side.

Silently he passed the bottle as the sky lightened and the silence spoke out of the heavens.

"As you wish," she said. Colt felt a sort of opening in his mind, as though unspoken words had passed between them. He had heard her think in sorrow and fear of losing him.

She led him over a ridge to the long line of fires of the Bad caravan, fires blue-tipped before the ugly altar. There was a disemboweled sacrifice in its lap. Colt stared his fill, trying to probe what was in his own heart. It was neither pleasure nor pain, neither pompous virtue nor cackling glee in destruction and death. There were techniques of self-searching now open to him that could never be those of a living man; he shuddered to think of how he had groped in darkness and ignorance before his death.

The caravan master, the squat monster in the mighty turban, greeted him warmly, "We've been watching your progress with considerable interest, my son. We have felt that you were warming to our ideas. How do you feel about our community?"

Colt rolled back his consciousness into the dark recesses of his mind, exploring a new stock of knowledge—things that it seemed he must always have known, but never recognized till now for what they were. "Community"—that meant the mutual practice of evil and destruction. One of the tidbits of wisdom newly in his mind was an awareness that the Bad worked together, sealed in a union that bore death as its bond. The Good practiced alone, rising very seldom to a community of any respectable proportions.

"May I enter the bond tentatively?" he asked.

The master looked pained. "My son of abomination," he said kindly, "I'll have to ask you to be very careful. The balance is beautifully precise; it would be a shame to throw them out of kilter. But since you wish to go ahead, very well. Enter!"

Colt squatted on the ground with numerous others of the Bad people. He sent out a consoling line of thought to

Valeska, who stood somberly by, fearing to lose her solitary ally. He smiled a little and ran back a signal of reassurance.

He trembled a little with the effort, then threw back his mind like a door. The inverging flood of black, glistening stuff gave him a warm feeling of comradeship with the others; he yielded and allowed himself to drift with them.

He inspected the attitude of which he was a part, found it consisted of a series of aesthetic balances among eye, ear, touch, smell and taste. The viewpoint was multiplex, dirigible, able to rise, enlarge, focus from infinity to zero, split to examine an object from all vantages.

The viewpoint inspected a rock from about a dozen feet in the air, saw it as a smoothly prolate spheroid. There was a moment of dwelling on the seeming fact of its perfection, a painful moment, then the viewpoint descended slowly and with little waves of pleasure as chips and scars became apparent in the rock. The viewpoint split, correlated its observations and registered the fact that the rock was of an eccentric shape, awkward and unbeautiful.

The viewpoint coalesced again and shrank microscopically, then smaller still. For an ecstatic moment it perceived a welter of crashing, blundering molecules, beetling about in blindness.

It shifted again, swiftly, far away to a point in Hong Kong where a lady was entertaining a gentleman. The viewpoint let the two humans' love, hate, disgust, affection and lust slide beneath its gaze. There was a gorgeous magenta jealousy from the man, overlaying the woman's dull-brown, egg-shaped avarice, both swept away in a rushing tide of fluxing, thick-textured, ductile, crimson-black passion.

The viewpoint passed somewhere over a battlefield, dwelt lovingly on the nightmare scene below. There were dim flares of vitality radiating from every crawling figure below; a massing of infantry was like a beacon. From the machinery of war there came a steely radiance which waxed as it discharged its shell or tripped its bomb, then dimmed to a quiet glow of satisfaction.

A file of tanks crawled over a hill, emitting a purplish radiance which sent out thin cobwebs of illumination. They swung into battle formation, crept down the slope at the infantry mass. Behind the infantry antitank guns were

hurrying up—too late. The tanks opened fire, their cobwebs whitening to a demon's flare of death as soldiers, scurrying for cover, one by one, keeled over. As they fell there was a brittle little tingle, the snapping of a thread or wire, and the light of vitality was extinguished, being replaced by a sallow, corpsey glow.

The viewpoint gorged, gloated, bloated on the scene, then seemed to swell immeasurably.

Suddenly, after a wringing transition feeling, it was in a mighty hall, approaching a lightless apse where two little points of radiance gleamed.

There was music, harmonizing ear, eye, taste, touch and smell in a twilit blend of sensations. Colt struggled involuntarily, felt himself bathed in rhythmic complications, subtly off-pleasure, spoiled by the minute introduction of some unharmonious element. With dismay he felt there creeping into his own consciousness, his segment of the viewpoint, a simple little flicker of a theme in C major. He was conscious of a gnat's wing beat of disapproval in response to his untoward disturbance. The viewpoint continued its drift toward the darkened apse.

It lovingly picked out the inhabitant of the lightless space and greeted it, even Colt, even though it was a monster of five legs and incredible teeth which opened wide. Damnably, irritatingly, the little C-major motif persisted; he tried to drive it from his mind, then, in a fatal moment, recognized it as one Oliver's "Flower Song," a sweet little thing suitable for small hands on the pianoforte.

"—lilies, roses, flowers of every hue—"

He couldn't lose it after having recognized it that far; the theme spread and orchestrated through the viewpoint. The whole polysensual off-pleasure matrix broke up, tore wide open as it was about to pass down the gullet of the monster in the apse.

"I'm sorry," he said, rising. "I simply couldn't help—"

"I know," said the caravan master sadly. "I know what it was. But you wrecked a full communion all the same. Go in torment, my son of abomination. May your ways be woeful."

Colt thanked him and left with Valeska.

"How was it?" she asked.

"Indescribable," he exploded. "Loathsome—glorious—

terrible. I found myself gloating over—" He went into details.

"So did I," she said absently. "I went through it, too. It has a gorgeous kick to it, no doubt. But it isn't right for us. Me, I broke up their communion with a line from Pushkin: *The aged sorcerer in anger said,/ This queen is evil from toe to head.* You know it?"

The sound of singing came from over the ridge, blurred by the megatherial voices. Colt stared abstractedly at the sky as the words were scribbled again in light.

"Their turn," he said. "The Good boys."

4

They stepped over ridges of snowy rock and stood for a moment surveying the other caravan. There was a semicircle of faces, gleaming benevolently in the firelight, handsome smiling faces. They were singing, under the pleasant aspect of the blue-eyed idol, a lusty slab from the great Bach's great Mass in B minor. While Valeska smiled a little cynically, Colt sidestepped into the baritone choir and sounded back tentatively for the words and music. They came easily; he was experiencing again, for the first time in many years, the delights of close harmony that move men to form barbershop quartets and Philharmonic Societies.

He sang the hearty, solid language, the crashing chords, from his chest, standing straight, bouncing the tones from his palate like the old glee-clubber that he was. Beside him he saw Lodz, a beatific smile on his face, chanting sonorously. Why were so many small men bassos?

Colt forgot himself and sang, let his voice swim out into the pool of sound and melt into harmony; when need was, he sang up, playing off against M. Lodz's basso and McNaughton's ringing tenor. And then he sang a sinister quarter-tone. It ended the bar on a gorgeously askew chord and got him very severely looked at. Raisuli Batar, baton in hand, frowned. Colt signaled wildly back that he couldn't help it.

It might have been lack of control, but it wasn't. It seemed that musical virtuosity was a gift to the dead. He had no choice in the matter—it was his nature that had

dictated the quarter-tone. Raisuli Batar tapped a rock twice with the baton, then swept down, his left hand signaling volume, cuing in the bassos with his eyes.

The brilliant, crashing unison passage rang out. Damn! As though he had no control over his own voice, Colt sang not in unison but sharping and flatting around the line, botching the grand melody completely.

He strode angrily from the semicircle of singers, back to Valeska. She passed the bottle with a twisted smile on her face.

"You tried to compromise," she said. "It can't be done. They didn't thank you for Stravinskying their Bach."

"Right," he said. *"But what do we do?"*

"It doesn't seem right," she brooded. "We shouldn't be the only in-betweeners. Five thousand years—more—they must appear more often. Then something happens to them. And they go away somewhere."

"Right," crowed Grandfather T'ang, drunker than ever. "Right, m'lass. And I know what happens to them. And I'll tell you what to do."

"Why?" asked Colt practically.

"Because I'm not as far outside as you think, children. Once I was as far in-between as you. I had my chance and I missed it—passed it up for the *suntori* and the dice games around the fires. Grandfather was a fool. I can't tell you any more than this: Get into the battle and observe rather closely. When you discover a very important secret, you will ascend to the Eighteenth Orbit and dwell forever, dancing and singing on the rings of Saturn. Or, to discard the gibberish, your psychic tissues so alter that you recognize a plane of existence more tenuous than ours; a plane, one suspects, more delectable. The mythological name for it is Heaven." He hugged his bottle and crooned affectionately to it:

"Superiority in a person
Should better not
Nor should it—"

"Does he know?" asked Colt, looking out into the long night.

"He wasn't lying this time. Shall we do it?"

"We shall. This waiting blasts my ethereal soul."

"You're an impatient cuss," she smiled at him. "You haven't seen me dance yet. I was a well-paid dancer once. It should be worth your while."

"Dance, then," he said, settling himself against a rock. "You make the music. You know how."

He thought for a moment, then uncovered another bit of technique known to the dead. He began to send out mentally Debussy's *Claire de Lune*. She heard it, smiled at him as she caught the music, and began to dance.

Her body was not very good; certainly not as good as it had been. But as he studied the dancing, sometimes with eyes closed so that he could hear only the rustle of her feet on the snow and sometimes so abstracted that he could hear only the displacement of air as she moved, Colt was deeply stirred.

He tuned in on her thoughts, picking out the swiftly running stream, the skittering little point of consciousness that danced over them.

"Now I am a swan," said her thoughts while she danced to the music. "Now I am a swan, dying for love of the young prince who has wandered through the courtyard. And now I am the prince, very pretty and as dumb as a prince could be. Now I am his father the King, very wrathy and pompous. And now, and through it all, I was really the great stone gargoyle on the square top tower who saw all and grinned to himself."

She pirouetted to an end with the music, bowing with a stylized, satirically cloying grace. He applauded lustily.

"Unless you have other ideas," she said, "I would like to dance again." Her face was rosy and fresh-looking.

He began to construct music in his mind while she listened in and took little tentative steps. Colt started with a split-log-drum's beat, pulse speed, low and penetrating. He built up another rhythm overlaying it, a little slower, with wood-block timbre. It was louder than the first. Rapidly he constructed a series of seven polyrhythmic layers, from the bottom split-log pulse to a small, incessant snare-drum beat.

"I'm an animal now, a small, very arboreal animal. I can prick up my ears; my toes are opposed, so I can grasp a branch."

He added a bone-xylophone melody, very crude, of only three tones.

"My eyes are both in front of my face. My vision has become stereoscopic. I can sit up and handle leaves. I can pick insects from the branches I live in."

Colt augmented the xylophone melody with a loud, crude brass.

Valeska thought, "I'm bigger—my arms are longer. And I often walk little distances on the ground, on my feet and my arm knuckles."

Colt added a see-sawing, gutty-sounding string timbre, in a melody opposed to the xylophone and the brass.

"I'm bigger—bigger—too big for trees. And I eat grubs as well as leaves—and I walk almost straight up—see me walk!"

He watched her swinging along the ground, apish, with the memory of brachiation stamped in every limb. He modified the bone-xylophone's timbre to a woody ring, increased the melodic range to a full octave.

With tremendous effort Valeska heaved over an imaginary rock, chipped at it. "I'm making flint hand-axes. They kill animals bigger than I am—tigers and bears—see my kitchen heap, high as a mountain, full of their bones!"

He augumented with a unison choir of woodwinds and a jangling ten-string harp.

"I eat bread and drink beer and I pray to the Nile—I sing and I dance, I farm and I bake—see me spin rope! See me paint pictures on plaster!"

A wailing clarinet mourned through the rhythmic sea.

Valeska danced statelily. "Yes—now I'm a man's woman —now I'm on top of the heap of the ages—now I'm a human—now I'm a woman. . . ."

Colt stopped short the whole accumulation of percussion, melody and harmony in a score of timbres, cutting in precisely a single blues piano that carried in its minor, sobbing-sad left hand all the sorrow of ages; in the serpentine-stabbing chords splashed gold by the right sang the triumph of man in his glory of metal and stone.

Valeska danced, sending out no words of what the dance was, for it was she, what she dreamed, what she had been, and what she was to be. The dance and the music were Valeska, and they ended when she was in Colt's arms. The

brandy bottle dropped from his grip and smashed on the rock.

Their long, wordless communion was broken by a disjointed yell from the two sides of the ridge as fighting forces streamed to battle. From the Bad caravan came the yell, "Kill and maim! Destroy! Destroy!" And the Good caravan cried, "In the name of the right! For sanctity and peace on Earth! Defend the right!"

Colt and Valeska found themselves torn apart in the rush to attack, swept into the thick of the fighting. The thundering voices from above, and the lightning, were almost continuous. The blinding radiance rather than the night hampered the fighting.

They were battling with queer, outlandish things—frying pans, camp stools, table forks. One embattled defender of the right had picked up a piteously bleating kid and was laying about him with it, holding its tiny hooves in a bunch.

Colt saw skulls crack, but nobody gave way or even fell. The dead were immortal. Then what in blazes was this all about? There was something excruciatingly wrong somewhere, and he couldn't fathom what it was.

He saw the righteous and amiable Raisuli Batar clubbing away with a table leg; minutes later he saw the fiendish and amiable chief of the Bad men swinging about him with another.

Vaguely sensing that he ought perhaps to be on the side of the right, he picked up a kettle by the handle and looked about for someone to bean with it. He saw a face that might be that of a fiend strayed from Hell, eyes rolling hideously, teeth locked and grinding with rage as its owner carved away at a small-sized somebody with a broken-bladed axe.

He was on the verge of cracking the fiend out of Hell when it considered itself finished with its victim, temporarily at least, and turned to Colt. "Hello, there," snapped the fiend. "Show some life, will you?"

Colt started as he saw that the fiend was Lodz, one of the Good men. Bewildered, he strayed off, nearly being gouged in the face by Grandfather T'ang, who was happily swinging away with a jagged hunk of *suntori* bottle, not bothering to discriminate.

But how *did* one discriminate? It came over him very

suddenly that one didn't and couldn't. The caravaneers were attacking each other. At that moment there came through a mental call from Valeska, who had just made the same discovery on her own. They joined and mounted a table, inspecting the sea of struggling human beings.

"It's all in the way you look at them," said Valeska softly.

Colt nodded. "There was only one caravan," he said in somber tones.

He experimented silently a bit, discovering that by a twiddle of the eyes he could convert Raisuli Batar into the Bad caravan leader, turban and all. And the same went for the Bad idol—a reverse twiddle converted it into the smiling, blue-eyed guardian of the Good caravan. It was like the optical illusion of the three shaded cubes that point one way or the other, depending on how you decide to see them.

"That was what Grandfather T'ang meant," said the woman. Her eyes drifted to the old man. He had just drained another bottle; with a businesslike swing against a rock he shattered the bottom into a splendid cutting tool and set to work again.

"There's no logic to it," Colt said forlornly. "None at all." Valeska smiled happily and hugged him.

Colt felt his cheek laid open.

"Bon soir. Guten Tag. Buon giorno. Buenos dias. Bon soir. Guten Tag. Buon—"

"You can stop that," said Colt, struggling to his feet. He cracked his head against a strut, hung on dazedly. "Where's—"

He inspected the two men standing before him with healthy grins. They wore the Red Army uniform under half-buttoned flying suits. The strut that had got in his way belonged to a big, black helicopter; amidships was blazoned the crimson star of the Soviet Union.

"You're well and all that, I fawncy?" asked one of the flyers. "We spotted you and landed—bunged up your cheek a bit—Volanov heah *would* try to overshoot."

"I'm fine," said Colt, feeling his bandage. "Why'n hell can't you Russians learn to speak American?"

The two soldiers exchanged smiles and glances. They

obviously considered Colt too quaint for words. "Pile in, old chap. We can take you as far as Bokhara—we fuel at Samarkand. I—ah—suppose you have papers?"

Colt leaned against the strut and wearily shoved over his credentials. Everything would be all right. Chungking was in solid with the Reds at the moment. Everything would be all right.

"I fawncy," said Volanov, making conversation while his partner handled the helicopter vanes, "youah glad to see the lawst of all that."

Colt looked down, remembered, and wept.

"I find," I said as dryly as possible, "a certain familiarity—a nostalgic ring, as it were—toward the end of your tale." I was just drunk enough to get fancy with The Three-Cornered Scar.

"You do?" he asked. He leaned forward across the table. *"You do?"*

"I've read widely in such matters," I hastily assured him, pouring another glass of red wine.

He grinned glumly, sipping. "If I hadn't left half my spirit with Valeska that night I was dead," he remarked conversationally, "I'd smash your face in."

"That may be," I assented gracefully.

But I should say that he drank less like half a spirit than half a dozen.

MS. FOUND IN A CHINESE FORTUNE COOKIE

THEY SAY I am mad, but I am not mad—damn it, I've written and sold two million words of fiction and I know better than to start a story like that, but this isn't a story and they *do* say I'm mad—catatonic schizophrenia with assaultive episodes—and I'm *not.* [*This is clearly the first of the Corwin Papers. Like all the others it is written on a Riz-La cigarette paper with a ball-point pen. Like all the others it is headed:* Urgent. Finder please send to C. M. Kornbluth, Wantagh, N.Y. Reward! *I might comment that this is typical of Corwin's generosity with his friends' time and money, though his attitude is at least this once justified by his desperate plight. As his longtime friend and, indeed, literary executor, I was clearly the person to turn to. CMK*] I have to convince you, Cyril, that I am both sane and the victim of an enormous conspiracy—and that you are, too, and that everybody is. A tall order, but I am going to try to fill it by writing an orderly account of the events leading up to my present situation. [*Here ends the first paper. To keep the record clear I should state that it was forwarded to me by a Mr. L. Wilmot Shaw, who found it in a fortune cookie he ordered for dessert at the Great China Republic Restaurant in San Francisco. Mr. Shaw suspected that it was "a publicity gag" but sent it to me nonetheless, and received by return mail my thanks and my check for one dollar. I had not realized that Corwin and his wife had disappeared from their home at Painted Post; I was merely aware that it had been weeks since I'd heard from him. We visited infrequently. To be blunt, he was easier to take via mail than face to face. For the balance of this account I shall attempt to avoid tedium by omitting the provenance of each paper, except when noteworthy, and its length. The first is typical—a little over a hundred words. I have, of*

course, kept on file all correspondence relating to the papers, and am eager to display them to the authorities. It is hoped that publication of this account will nudge them out of the apathy with which they have so far greeted my attempts to engage them. CMK]

On Sunday, May 13, 1956, at about 12:30 P.M., I learned The Answer. I was stiff and aching because all Saturday my wife and I had been putting in young fruit trees. I like to dig, but I was badly out of condition from an unusually long and idle winter. Creatively, I felt fine. I'd been stale for months, but when spring came the sap began to run in me, too. I was bursting with story ideas; scenes and stretches of dialogue were jostling one another in my mind; all I had to do was let them flow onto paper.

When The Answer popped into my head I thought at first it was an idea for a story—a very good story. I was going to go downstairs and bounce it off my wife a few times to test it, but I heard the sewing machine buzzing and remembered she had said she was way behind on her mending. Instead, I put my feet up, stared blankly through the window at the pasture-and-wooded-hills view we'd bought the old place for, and fondled the idea.

What about, I thought, using the idea to develop a messy little local situation, the case of Mrs. Clonford? Mrs. C. is a neighbor, animal-happy, land-poor and unintentionally a fearsome oppressor of her husband and children. Mr. C. is a retired brakeman with a pension, and his wife insists on his making like a farmer in all weathers and every year he gets pneumonia and is pulled through with antibiotics. All he wants is to sell the damned farm and retire with his wife to a little apartment in town. All *she* wants is to mess around with her cows and horses and submarginal acreage.

I got to thinking that if you noised the story around *with* a comment based on The Answer, the situation would automatically untangle. They'd get their apartment, sell the farm, and everybody would be happy, including Mrs. C. It would be interesting to write, I thought idly, and then I thought not so idly that it would be interesting to *try*—and then I sat up sharply with a dry mouth and a system full of adrenalin. *It would work.* The Answer would work.

I ran rapidly down a list of other problems, ranging from the town drunk to the guided-missile race. The Answer worked. Every time.

I was quite sure I had turned paranoid, because I've seen so much of that kind of thing in science fiction. Anybody can name a dozen writers, editors and fans who have suddenly seen the light and determined to lead the human race onward and upward out of the old slough. Of course The Answer looked logical and unassailable, but so no doubt did poor Charlie McGandress' project to unite mankind through science-fiction fandom, at least to him. So, no doubt, did. . . . [*I have here omitted several briefly sketched case histories of science-fiction personalities as yet uncommitted. The reason will be obvious to anyone familiar with the law of libel. Suffice it to say that Corwin argues that science fiction attracts an unstable type of mind and sometimes insidiously undermines its foundations on reality. CMK*]

But I couldn't just throw it away without a test. I considered the wording carefully, picked up the extension phone on my desk and dialed Jim Howlett, the appliance dealer in town. He answered.

"Corwin, Jim," I told him. "I have an idea—oops! The samovar's boiling over. Call me back in a minute, will you?" I hung up.

He called me back in a minute; I let our combination—two shorts and a long—ring three times before I picked up the phone. "What was that about a samovar?" he asked, baffled.

"Just kidding," I said. "Listen Jim, why don't you try a short story for a change of pace? Knock off the novel for a while—" He's hopefully writing a big historical about the Sullivan Campaign of 1779, which is our local chunk of the Revolutionary War; I'm helping him a little with advice. Anyone who wants as badly as he does to get out of the appliance business is entitled to some help.

"Gee, I don't know," he said. As he spoke, the volume of his voice dropped slightly, but definitely, three times. That meant we had an average quota of party-line snoopers listening in. "What would I write about?"

"Well, we have this situation with a neighbor, Mrs.

Clonford," I began. I went through the problem and made my comment based on The Answer. I heard one of the snoopers gasp.

Jim said when I was finished, "I don't really think it's for me, Cecil. Of course it was nice of you to call, but—" Eventually a customer came into the store and he had to break off.

I went through an anxious, crabby twenty-four hours.

On Monday afternoon the paper woman drove past our place and shot the rolled-up copy of the Pott Hill *Evening Times* into the orange-painted tube beside our mailbox. I raced for it, yanked it open to the seventh page, and read:

> FARM SALE
>
> Owing to ill health and age Mr. & Mrs. Ronald Clonford will sell their entire farm, all machinery and furnishings and all livestock at auction Saturday, May 19, 12:30 P.M. rain or shine, terms cash day of sale. George Pfennig, Auctioneer.

[*This is one of the few things in the Corwin Papers which can be independently verified. I looked up the paper and found that the ad was run about as quoted. Further, I interviewed Mrs. Clonford in her town apartment. She told me she "just got tired of farmin', I guess. Kind of hated to give up my ponies, but people was beginning to say it was too hard of a life for Ronnie and I guess they was right." CMK*]

Coincidence? Perhaps. I went upstairs with the paper and put my feet up again. I could try a hundred more piddling tests if I wished, but why waste time? If there was anything to it, I could type out The Answer in about two hundred words, drive to town, tack it on the bulletin board outside the firehouse and—snowball. Avalanche!

I didn't do it, of course—for the same reason I haven't put down the two hundred words of The Answer yet on a couple of these cigarette papers. It's rather dreadful—isn't it?—that I haven't done so, that a simple feasible plan to ensure peace, progress and equality of opportunity among all mankind may be lost to the world if, say, a big meteorite hits the asylum in the next couple of minutes. But—I'm a writer. There's a touch of intellectual sadism

in us. We like to dominate the reader as a matador dominates the bull; we like to tease and mystify and at last show what great souls we are by generously flipping up the shade and letting the sunshine in. Don't worry. Read on. You will come to The Answer in the proper artistic place for it. [*At this point I wish fervently to dissociate myself from the attitudes Corwin attributes to our profession. He had—has, I hope—his eccentricities, and I consider it inexcusable of him to tar us all with his personal brush. I could point out, for example, that he once laboriously cultivated a 16th-century handwriting which was utterly illegible to the modern reader. The only reason apparent for this, as for so many of his traits, seemed to be a wish to annoy as many people as possible. CMK*]

Yes, I am a writer. A matador does not show up in the bull ring with a tommy gun and a writer doesn't do things the simple, direct way. He makes the people writhe a little first. So I called Fred Greenwald. Fred had been after me for a while to speak at one of the Thursday Rotary meetings and I'd been reluctant to set a date. I have a little speech for such occasions, "The Business of Being a Writer"—all about the archaic royalty system of payment, the difficulty of proving business expenses, the Margaret Mitchell tax law and how it badly needs improvement, what copyright is and isn't. I pass a few galley sheets down the table and generally get a good laugh by holding up a Doubleday book contract, silently turning it over so they can see how the fine print goes on and on, and then flipping it open so they see there's twice as much fine print as they thought there was. I had done my stuff for Oswego Rotary, Horseheads Rotary and Cannon Hole Rotary; now Fred wanted me to do it for Painted Post Rotary.

So I phoned him and said I'd be willing to speak this coming Thursday. "Good," he said. "On a discovery I'd made about the philosophy and technique of administration and interpersonal relationships," I said. He sort of choked up and said, "Well, we're broad-minded here."

I've got to start cutting this. I have several packs of cigarette papers left but not to cover the high spots if I'm to do them justice. Let's just say the announcement of my speech was run in the Tuesday paper [*It was. CMK*] and skip to Wednesday, my place, about 7:30 P.M. Dinner was

just over, and my wife and I were going to walk out and see how [*At this point I wish to insert a special note concerning some difficulty I had in obtaining the next four papers. They got somehow into the hands of a certain literary agent who is famous for a sort of "finders-keepers" attitude more appropriate to the eighth grade than to the law of literary property. In disregard of the fact that Corwin retained physical ownership of the papers and literary rights thereto, and that I as the addressee possessed all other rights, he was blandly endeavoring to sell them to various magazines as "curious fragments from Corwin's desk." Like most people, I abhor lawsuits; that's the fact this agent lives on. I met his outrageous price of five cents a word "plus postage"(!). I should add that I have not heard of any attempt by this gentleman to locate Corwin or his heirs in order to turn over the proceeds of the sale, less commission. CMK*] the new fruit trees were doing, when a car came bumping down our road and stopped at our garden fence gate.

"See what they want and shove them on their way," said my wife. "We haven't got much daylight left." She peered through the kitchen window at the car, blinked, rubbed her eyes, and peered again. She said uncertainly, "It looks like—no! Can't be." I went out to the car.

"Anything I can do for you?" I asked the two men in the front seat. Then I recognized them. One of them was about my age, a wiry lad in a T shirt. The other man was plump and graying and ministerial, but jolly. They were unmistakable; they had looked out at me—one scowling, the other smiling—from a hundred book ads. It was almost incredible that they knew each other, but there they were sharing a car.

I greeted them by name and said, "This is odd. I happen to be a writer myself. I've never shared the best-seller list with you two, but—"

The plump ministerial man tut-tutted. "You are thinking negatively," he chided me. "Think of what you *have* accomplished. You own this lovely home, the valuation of which has just been raised two thousand dollars due entirely to the hard work and frugality of you and your lovely wife; you give innocent pleasure to thousands with your clever novels; you help to keep the good local merchants going

with your patronage. Not least, you have fought for your country in the wars and you support it with your taxes."

The man in the T shirt said raspily, "Even if you didn't have the dough to settle in full on April 15 and will have to pay six percent per month interest on the unpaid balance when and if you ever do pay it, you poor schnook."

The plump man said, distressed, "Please, Michael—you are not thinking positively. This is neither the time nor the place—"

"What's going on?" I demanded. Because I hadn't even told my *wife* I'd been a little short on the '55 Federal tax.

"Let's go inna house," said the T-shirted man. He got out of the car, brushed my gate open, and walked coolly down the path to the kitchen door. The plump man followed, sniffing our rose-scented garden air appreciatively, and I came last of all, on wobbly legs.

When we filed in my wife said, "My God. It *is* them."

The man in the T shirt said, "Hiya, babe," and stared at her breasts.

The plump man said, "May I compliment you, my dear, for a splendid rose garden. Quite unusual for this altitude."

"Thanks," she said faintly, beginning to rally. "But it's quite easy when your neighbors keep horses."

"Haw!" snorted the man in the T shirt. "That's the stuff, babe. You grow roses like I write books. Give 'em plenty of—"

"Michael!" said the plump man.

"*Look,* you," my wife said to me. "Would you mind telling me what this is all about? I never knew you knew Dr.—"

"I don't," I said helplessly. "They seem to want to talk to me."

"Let us adjourn to your *sanctum sanctorum,*" said the plump man archly, and we went upstairs. The T-shirted man sat on the couch, the plump fellow sat in the club chair, and I collapsed on the swivel chair in front of the typewriter.

"Drink, anybody?" I asked, wanting one myself. "Sherry, brandy, rye, straight angostura?"

"Never touch the stinking stuff," grunted the man in the T shirt.

"I would enjoy a nip of brandy," said the big man. We

each had one straight, no chasers, and he got down to business with, "I suppose you have discovered The Diagonal Relationship?"

I thought about The Answer, and decided that The Diagonal Relationship would be a very good name for it, too. "Yes," I said. "I guess I have. Have you?"

"I have. So has Michael here. So have one thousand seven hundred and twenty-four writers. If you'd like to know who they are, pick the one thousand seven hundred and twenty-four top-income men of the ten thousand free-lance writers in this country and you have your men. The Diagonal Relationship is discovered on an average of three times a year by rising writers."

"Writers," I said. "Good God, why *writers?* Why not economists, psychologists, mathematicians—*real* thinkers?"

He said, "A writer's mind is an awesome thing, Corwin. What went into your discovery of The Diagonal Relationship?"

I thought a bit. "I'm doing a Civil War thing about Burnside's Bomb," I said, "and I realized that Grant could have sent in fresh troops but didn't because Halleck used to drive him crazy by telegraphic masterminding of his campaigns. That's a special case of The Answer—as I call it. Then I got some data on medieval attitudes toward personal astrology out of a book on ancient China I'm reading. Another special case. And there's a joke the monks used to write at the end of a long manuscript-copying job. Liddell Hart's theory of strategy is about half of the general military case of The Answer. The merchandising special case shows clearly in a catalog I have from a Chicago store that specializes in selling strange clothes to bop-crazed Negroes. They all add up to the general expression, and that's that."

He was nodding. "Many, many combinations add up to The Diagonal Relationship," he said. "But only a writer cuts across sufficient fields, exposes himself to sufficient apparently unrelated facts. Only a writer has wide-open associational channels capable of bridging the gap between astrology and, ah, 'bop.' We write in our different idioms"—he smiled at the T-shirted man—"but we are writers all. Wide-ranging, omnivorous for data, equipped with superior powers of association which we constantly exercise."

"Well," I asked logically enough, "why on earth haven't you published The Diagonal Relationship? Are you here to keep me from publishing it?"

"We're a power group," said the plump man apologetically. "We have a vested interest in things as they are. Think about what The Diagonal Relationship would do to writers, Corwin."

"Sure," I said, and thought about it. "Judas Priest!" I said after a couple of minutes.

He was nodding again. He said, "Yes. The Diagonal Relationship, if generally promulgated, would work out to approximate equality of income for all, with incentive pay only for really hard and dangerous work. Writing would be regarded as pretty much its own reward."

"That's the way it looks," I said. "One-year copyright, after all. . . ."

[*Here occurs the first hiatus in the Corwin Papers. I suspect that three or four are missing. The preceding and following papers, incidentally, come from a batch of six gross of fortune cookies which I purchased from the Hip Sing Restaurant Provision Company of New York City during the course of my investigations. The reader no doubt will wonder why I was unable to determine the source of the cookies themselves and was forced to buy them from middlemen. Apparently the reason is the fantastic one that by chance I was wearing a white shirt, dark tie and double-breasted blue serge suit when I attempted to question the proprietor of the Hip Sing Company. I learned too late that this is just about the unofficial uniform of U.S. Treasury and Justice Department agents and that I was immediately taken to be such an agent. "You T man," said Mr. Hip tolerantly, "you get cou't ohdah, I show you books. Keep ve'y nice books, all in Chinese cha'ctahs." After that gambit he would answer me only in Chinese. How he did it I have no idea, but apparently within days every Chinese produce dealer in the United States and Canada had been notified that there was a new T man named Kornbluth on the prowl. As a last resort I called on the New York City office of the Treasury Department Field Investigations Unit in an attempt to obtain what might be called un-identification papers. There I was assured by Mr. Gershon O'Brien, their Chinese specialist, that my errand was hopeless since*

the motto of Mr. Hip and his colleagues invariably was "safety first." To make matters worse, as I left his office I was greeted with a polite smile from a Chinese lad whom I recognized as Mr. Hip's bookkeeper. CMK]

"So you see," he went on as if he had just stated a major and a minor premise, "we watch the writers, the real ones, through private detective agencies which alert us when the first teaser appears in a newspaper or on a broadcast or in local gossip. There's always the teaser, Corwin, the rattle before the strike. We writers are like that. We've been watching you for three years now, and to be perfectly frank I've lost a few dollars wagered on you. In my opinion you're a year late."

"What's the proposition?" I asked numbly.

He shrugged. "You get to be a best seller. We review your books, you review ours. We tell your publisher: Corwin's hot—promote him. And he does, because we're good properties and he doesn't want to annoy us. You want Hollywood? It can be arranged. Lots of us out there. In short, you become rich like us and all you have to do is keep quiet about The Diagonal Relationship. You haven't told your wife, by the way?"

"I wanted to surprise her," I said.

He smiled. "They always do. Writers! Well, young man, what do you say?"

It had grown dark. From the couch came a raspy voice. "You heard what the doc said about the ones that throw in with us. I'm here to tell you that we got provisions for the ones that don't."

I laughed at him.

"One of those guys," he said flatly.

"Surely a borderline case, Michael," said the plump man. "So many of them are."

If I'd been thinking straight I would have realized that "borderline case" did not mean "undecided" to them; it meant "danger—immediate action!"

They took it. The plump man, who was also a fairly big man, flung his arms around me and the wiry one approached in the gloom. I yelled something when I felt a hypodermic stab my arm. Then I went numb and stupid.

My wife came running up the stairs. "What's going on?" she demanded. I saw her heading for the curtain behind which we keep an aged hair-trigger Marlin .38 rifle. There was nothing wrong with her guts, but they attacked her where courage doesn't count. I croaked her name a couple of times and heard the plump man say gently, with great concern, "I'm afraid your husband needs . . . help." She turned from the curtain, her eyes wide. He had struck subtly and knowingly; there is probably not one writer's wife who does not suspect her husband is a potential psychotic.

"Dear—" she said to me as I stood there paralyzed.

He went on, "Michael and I dropped in because we both admire your husband's work; we were surprised and distressed to find his conversation so . . . disconnected. My dear, as you must know I have some experience through my pastorate with psychotherapy. Have you ever—forgive my bluntness—had doubts about his sanity?"

"Dear, what's the matter?" she asked me anxiously. I just stood there, staring. God knows what they injected me with, but its effect was to cloud my mind, render all activity impossible, send my thoughts spinning after their tails. I was insane. [*This incident, seemingly the least plausible part of Corwin's story, actually stands up better than most of the narrative to one familiar with recent advances in biochemistry. Corwin could have been injected with lysergic acid, or with protein extracts from the blood of psychotics. It is a matter of cold laboratory fact that such injections produce temporary psychosis in the patient. Indeed, it is on such experimental psychoses that the new tranquilizer drugs are developed and tested. CMK*]

To herself she said aloud dully, "Well, it's finally come. Christmas when I burned the turkey and he wouldn't speak to me for a week. The way he drummed his fingers when I talked. All his little crackpot ways—how he has to stay at the Waldorf but I have to cut his hair and save a dollar. I hoped it was just the rotten weather and cabin fever. I hoped when spring came—" She began to sob. The plump man comforted her like a father. I just stood there staring and waiting. And eventually Mickey glided up in the dark and gave her a needleful, too, and. . . .

[*Here occurs an aggravating and important hiatus. One can only guess that Corwin and his wife were loaded into the car, driven somewhere, separated, and separately, under false names, committed to different mental institutions. I have recently learned to my dismay that there are states which require only the barest sort of licensing to operate such institutions. One State Inspector of Hospitals even wrote to me in these words: "No doubt there are some places in our State which are not even licensed, but we have never made any effort to close them and I cannot recall any statute making such operation illegal. We are not a wealthy state like you up North and some care for these unfortunates is better than none, is our viewpoint here. . . ." CMK*]

. . . three months. Their injections last a week. There's always somebody to give me another. You know what mental hospital attendants are like: an easy bribe. But they'd be better advised to bribe a higher type, like a male nurse, because my attendant with the special needle for me is off on a drunk. My insanity wore off this morning and I've been writing in my room ever since. A quick trip up and down the corridor collected the cigarette papers and a tiny ball-point pen from some breakfast-food premium gadget. I think my best bet is to slip these papers out in the batch of Chinese fortune cookies they're doing in the bakery. Occupational therapy, this is called. My own o.t. is shoveling coal when I'm under the needle. Well, enough of this. I shall write down The Answer, slip down to the bakery, deal out the cigarette papers into the waiting rounds of cookie dough, crimp them over and return to my room. Doubtless my attendant will be back by then and I'll get another shot from him. I shall not struggle; I can only wait.

THE ANSWER: HUMAN BEINGS RAISED TO SPEAK AN INDO-IRANIAN LANGUAGE SUCH AS ENGLISH HAVE THE FOLLOWING IN

[*That is the end of the last of the Corwin Papers I have been able to locate. It should be superfluous to urge all readers to examine carefully any fortune cookie slips they may encounter. The next one you break open may contain*

what my poor friend believed, or believes, to be a great message to mankind. He may be right. His tale is a wild one, but it is consistent. And it embodies the only reasonable explanation I have ever seen for the presence of certain books on the best-seller list. CMK]

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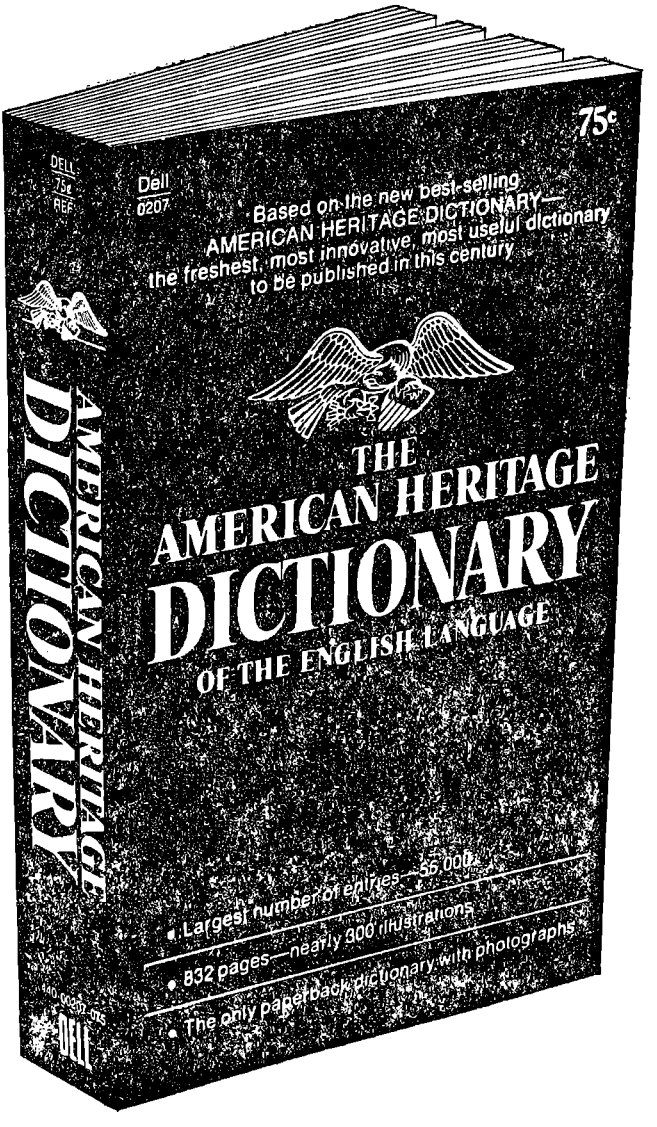
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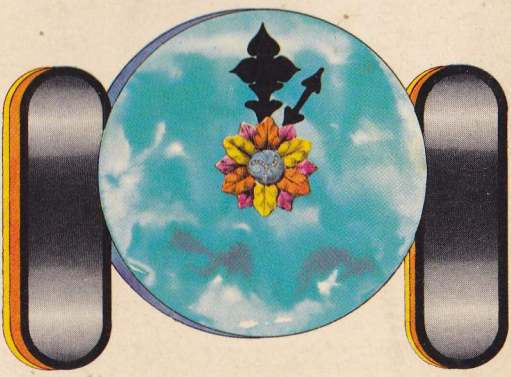

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