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Night Monsters

FRITZ LEIBER — MASTER OF THE MACABRE

An Introductory Comment by the Author
Suitable for this New Selection of his Stories:

I was leafing through an issue of *The Journal of the A.M.A.* when I ran across an article about emergencies that arise in treating people for allergies. The good doctor was explaining about those one-in-a-million mishaps that occur despite the most careful precautions, and how the alert physician meets the danger successfully.

But I found myself wondering, what if the efficient, white-coated physician came up against an emergency that he didn't know how to meet, that made even *his* competent fingers tremble, because it was part of the black, shivery outside?

There's still a black, shivery outside, you know—a weird realm from which men shrink in terror. Science hasn't done away with it. Nothing will ever do away with it.

(continued on next page)

The cold goose-flesh has always risen pricklingly on man's neck when he thinks he glimpses something out of the corner of his eye, something standing a little behind him, something that vanishes when he whirls around—but returns later in the evening.

All that science has done is given man a dozen new sets of eyes—and that makes it a great deal worse. For instance, there's the germ (if it is a germ) that is always swimming just outside the edge of the brightly lighted field of the microscope, that eludes even the electronic microscope. There's the planet (if it is a planet and not some vast black sentient thing poised above the earth) that is seen out of the corner of the telescope's eye. There's the radar echo that doesn't seem to be coming quite from the moon, but somewhere else. There are the atomic glows that aren't just what the nuclear physicist expected. There's the buried thought that the psychologist can never quite reach, not even when he employs the hypno-analytic technique which can dredge up memories of events that occurred when the patient was six months old. (And is the buried thought a human thought, or a demon's?). . . .

(From *Weird Tales,* Sept. '46)

FRITZ LEIBER

Night Monsters

AN ACE BOOK

Ace Publishing Corporation
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10036

NIGHT MONSTERS

Cover by Jack Gaughan.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Printed in U.S.A.

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THE BLACK GONDOLIER

DALOWAY LIVED ALONE in a broken-down trailer beside an oil well on the bank of a canal in Venice near the cafe La Gondola Negra on the Grand Canal not five blocks from St. Mark's Plaza.

I mean, he lived there until after the fashion of intellectual lone wolves he got the wander-urge and took himself off, abruptly and irresponsibly, to parts unknown. That is the theory of the police, who refuse to take seriously my story of Daloway's strange dreads and my hints at the weird world-spanning power which was menacing him. The police even make light of the very material clues which I pointed out to them.

Or else Daloway was taken off, grimly and against his will, to parts utterly unknown and blackly horrible. That is my own theory, especially on lonely nights when I remember the dreams he told me of the Black Gondolier.

Of course the canal is a rather small one, showing much of its rough gravel bottom strewn with rusted cans and blackened paper, except when it is briefly filled by one of our big winter rains. But gondolas did travel it in the illusion-packed old days and it is still spanned by a little sharply humped concrete bridge wide enough for only one car. I used to cross that bridge coming to visit Daloway and I remember how I'd slow down and tap my horn to warn a possible car coming the other way, and the momentary roller-coaster illusion I'd get as my car heaved to the top and poised there and then hurtled down the opposite dusty slope for all of a breathless second. From the top of the little bridge I'd get my first glimpse of the crowded bungalows and Daloway's weed-footed trailer and close beside it the black hunch-shouldered oil well

which figured so strangely in his dreads. "*Their* closest listening post," he sometimes called it during the final week, when he felt positively besieged.

And of course the Grand Canal is pretty dismal these days, with its several gracefully arching Bridges of Sighs raddled with holes showing their cement-shell construction and blocked off at either end by heavy wire barricades to keep off small boys, and with both its banks lined with oil wells, some still with their towering derricks and some —mostly those next to beachside houses—with their derricks dismantled, but all of them wearily pumping twenty-four hours a day with a soft slow syncopated thumping that the residents don't hear for its monotony, interminably sucking up the black petroleum that underlies Venice, lazily ducking and lifting their angularly oval metal heads like so many iron dinosaurs or donkeys forever drinking—donkeys moving in the somnambulistic rhythm of Ferde Grofe's Grand-Canyon donkey when it does its sleepy *hee . . . haw*. Daloway had a very weird theory about that —about the crude oil, I mean—a theory which became the core of his dreads and which for all its utter black wildness may still best explain his disappearance.

And La Gondola Negra is only a beatnik coffee house, successor to the fabulous Gashouse, though it did boast a rather interesting dirty drunken guitarist, whose face always had blacker smears on it than those of his stubbly beard and who wore a sweatshirt that looked like the working garment of a coal miner and whom Daloway and I would hear trailing off (I won't venture to say home) in the small hours of the morning, picking out on his twangy instrument his dinky "Texas Oilman Suite," which he'd composed very much in imitation of Ferde Grofe's one about the Grand Canyon, or raucously wailing his eerie beatnik ballad of the Black Gondola. He got very much on Daloway's nerves, especially towards the end, though I was rather amused by him and at the same time saw no harm in his caterwauling, except to would-be sleepers. Well, he's gone now, like Daloway, though not by the same route . . . I think. At least Daloway never suggested that the guitarist was one of *their* agents. No, as it turned out, *their* agent was a rather more formidable figure.

And they don't call the plaza St. Mark's, but it was obviously laid out to approximate that Adriatic-lapped area when it was created a half century ago. The porticos still shade the sidewalks in front of the two blocks of bars and grimy shops and there are still authentic Venetian pillars, now painted salmon pink and turquoise blue—you may have seen them in a horror movie called *Delirium* where a beautiful crazy slim Mexican girl is chased round and round the deserted porticos by a car flashing its headlights between the pillars.

And of course the Venice isn't Venice, Italy, but Venice, USA—Venice, California—now just another district and postal address in the sprawling metropolis of Los Angeles, but once a proud little beachside city embodying the laughably charming if grotesque dream of creating Venice, Italy, scaled down but complete with canals and arched bridges and porticos, on the shores of the Pacific.

Yet for all the childish innocence of its bizarre glamor, Venice developed an atmosphere, or became the outpost of a sinister deep-rooted power, that did in Daloway. It is a place of dreams, not only the tinseled ones, but also the darker sort such as tormented and terrified my friend at the end.

For a while toward the beginning of this century the movie folk and real estate agents and retired farmers and the sailors from San Pedro went to spanking-new Venice to ride the gondolas—they had authentic ones poled by Italian types possibly hired from Central Casting—and eat exotic spaghetti and gambol romantically a bit with their wide-hatted long-skirted lady friends who also wore daring bathing suits with bare arms and rather short skirts and long black stockings—and gamble too with piled big yellow-backed green bills—and, with their caps turned front to rear, roar their wooden-spoked or wire-wheeled open touring cars along the Speedway, which is now a cramped one-way street that changes direction every block.

But then Redondo and Laguna and Malibu called away the film folk and the other people with fat pocketbooks, but as if to compensate for that they struck oil in Venice and built wells almost everywhere, yet despite this influx of money the gambling never regained its éclat, it became

just bingo for housewives, and the Los Angeles police fought that homely extramural vice for a weary decade, until sprawling LA reached out a pseudopod one day and swallowed Venice up. Then the bingo stopped and Venice became very crowded indeed with a beach home or a beach apartment or a beach shack on every square yard that wasn't sidewalk or street—or oil well!—and with establishments as disparate as Bible Tabernacle and Colonic Irrigation Clinic and Mother Goldberg's Home for the Aged. It would have been going too far to have called Venice a beach slum, but it was trending in that direction.

And then, much later, the beats came, the gutter geniuses, the holy barbarians, migrating south in driblets from Big Sur and from North Beach in Frisco and from Disillusion, USA, everywhere, bringing their ratty art galleries and meager *avant garde* bookstalls and their black-trousered insolent women and their Zen and their guitars, including the one on which was strummed the Ballad of the Black Gondola.

And with the beats, but emphatically not of them, came the solitary oddballs and lone-wolf intellectuals like Daloway.

I met Daloway at a check-out desk of the excellent Los Angeles downtown public library, where our two stacks of books demonstrated so many shared interests—world history, geology, abnormal psychology, and psychic phenomena were some of them—that we paused outside to remark on it. This led to a conversation, in which I got some first intimations of his astonishing mentality, and eventually to my driving him home to save him a circuitous bus-trip, or, more likely, as I learned later, a weary hitch-hike.

Our conversation continued excitingly throughout most of the long drive, though even in that first exploratory confabulation Daloway made so many guarded references to a malefic power menacing us all and perhaps him in particular, that I wondered if he mightn't have a bee in his bonnet about World Communism or the Syndicate or the John Birch Society. But despite this possible paranoid obsession, he was clearly a most worthy partner for intellectual disputation and discourse.

Toward the end of the drive Daloway suddenly got nervous and didn't want me to take him the last few

blocks. However, I overcame his reluctance. I remarked on the oil well next to his trailer—not to have done so would have implied I thought he was embarrassed by it—and he retorted sardonically, "My mechanical watchdog! Innocent-looking ugly beast, isn't it? But you've got to keep in mind that much more of it or of its domain is below the surface, like an iceberg. Which reminds me that I once ran across a seemingly well-authenticated report of a black iceberg—"

Thereafter I visited Daloway regularly in his trailer, often late at night, and we made our library trips together and even occasional brief expeditions to sleazily stimulating spots like La Gondola Negra. At first I thought he had merely been ashamed of his battered aluminum-walled home, though it was neat enough inside, almost austere, but then I discovered that he hated to reveal to anyone where he lived, in part because he hesitated to expose anyone else to the great if shadowy danger he believed overhung him.

Daloway was a spare man yet muscular, with the watchful analytic gaze of an intellectual, but the hands of a mechanic. Like too many men of our times, he was amazingly learned and knowledgeable, yet unable to apply his abilities to his own advancement—for lack of connections and college degrees and because of nervous instabilities and emotional blockages. He had more facts at his fingertips than a Ph.D. candidate, but he used them to buttress off-trail theories and he dressed with the austere cleanly neatness and simplicity of a factory hand or a man newly released from prison.

He'd work for a while in a machine shop or garage and then live very thriftily on his savings while he fed his mind and pondered all the problems of the universe, or sometimes—this was before our meeting and the period of his dreads—organized maverick mental-therapy or parapsychology groups.

This unworldly and monetarily unprofitable pattern of existence at least made Daloway an exciting thinker. For him the world was a great conundrum or a series of puzzle boxes and he a disinterested yet childishly sensitive and enthusiastic observer trying to unriddle them. A scientist, or natural philosopher, rather, without the blinkered conformity of thought which sometimes characterizes men

with professional or academic standing to lose, but rather with a fiercely romantic yet clear-headed and at times even cynical drive toward knowledge. Atoms, molecules, the stars, the unconscious mind, bizarre drugs and their effects (he'd tried out LSD and mescaline), the play of consciousness, the insidious interweaving of reality and dream (as climatically in his dreams of the Black Gondola), the bafflingly twisted and folded strata of Earth's crust and man's cerebrum and all history, the subtle mysterious swings of world events and literature and subliterature and politics—he was interested in all of them, and forever searching for some unifying purposeful power behind them, and sensitive to them to a preternatural degree.

Well, in the end he did discover the power, or at least convinced himself he did, and convinced me too for a time—and still does convince me, on lonely nights—but he got little enough satisfaction from his knowledge, that I know of, and it proved to be as deadly a discovery, to the discoverer, as finding out who is really back of Organized Crime or the Dope Traffic or American Fascism. Gunmen and poisoners and scientifically-coached bombers would be loosed against anyone making any of the last three discoveries; the agent who did away with Daloway was murkier-minded and deadlier even than the man who shot Kennedy.

But I mentioned sensitivity. In many ways it was the hallmark of Daloway. He'd start at sounds I couldn't hear, or that were blanked out for me by the ceaseless ponderous low throb of the oil wells, especially the one a few yards beyond the thin wall of his trailer. He'd narrow his eyes at changes in illumination that didn't register on my retinas, or dart them at little movements I usually missed. He'd twitch his nostrils for special taints that to me were blanketed, at least in Venice, by the stench of the petroleum and the salt-fishy reek of the ocean. And he'd read meanings in newspaper articles and in paragraphs of books that I would never have seen except for his pointing them out, and I am not exactly unsubtle.

His sensitivity was almost invariably tinged with apprehension. For example, my arrivals seemed always to startle and briefly upset him, no matter how quiet or deliberately

noisy I made them, and regardless of how much he seemed afterwards to enjoy my company—or at the very least the audience-of-one with which I provided him. Indeed this symptom—this jitteriness or jumpiness—was so strong in him that, taken together with his solitary fugitive mode of life and his unwillingness to have his dwelling known, it led me to speculate early in our relationship whether he might not be in flight from the law, or the criminal underworld, or some fearsomely ruthless political or sub-political organization, or from some less tangible mafia.

Well, considering the nature of the power Daloway really feared, its utter black inhumanity, its near-omnipresence and almost timeless antiquity, his great apprehension was most understandable—provided of course that you accepted his ideas, or at least were willing to consider them.

It was a long time before he would unequivocally identify the power to me—give me a specific name to his *They*. Perhaps he dreaded my disbelief, my skeptical laughter, even feared I would cut him off from me as a hopeless crank. Perhaps—and this I credit—he honestly believed that he would subject me to a very real danger by telling me, the same danger he was darkly shadowed by, or at least put me into its fringes—and only took the risk of doing so when the urge to share his suspicions, or rather convictions, with someone capable of comprehending them, became an overpowering compulsion.

He made several false starts and retreats. Once he began, "When you consider the source of the chemical fuels which alone make modern civilization possible, and modern warfare too, and the hope—or horror—of reaching other planets—" and then broke off.

Another time he launched off with, "If there is one single substance that has in it all of life and the potentiality for life, all past life by reason of its sources and all future life by the innumerable infinitely subtle compounds it provides—" and then shut tight his lips and opened them only to change the subject.

Another of these abortive revelations began with, "I firmly believe that there is no validity whatever in the distinction between the organic and the inorganic—I think it's

every bit as false as that between the artificial and the natural. It's my absolute conviction that consciousness goes down to the level of the electrons—yes, and below that to the strata of the yet-undiscovered sub-particles. The substance which before all others convinces me that this is so, is—"

And once when I asked him without warning, "Daloway, what *is* it you're afraid of, anyhow?" he replied, "Why, the oil, of course," and then immediately insisted he was thinking of the possible role of hydrocarbons and coal tars—and their combustion products—in producing cancer.

I had better state as simply as possible Daloway's ideas about the power, as he finally revealed them to me.

Daloway's theory, based on his wide readings in world history, geology, and the occult, was that crude oil—petroleum—was more than figuratively the life-blood of industry and the modern world and modern lightning-war, that it truly had a dim life and will of its own, an inorganic consciousness or sub-consciousness, that we were all its puppets or creatures, and that its chemical mind had guided and even enforced the development of modern technological civilization. Created from the lush vegetation and animal fats of the Carboniferous and adjoining periods, holding in itself the black essence of all life that had ever been, constituting in fact a great deep-digged black graveyard of the ultimate eldritch past with blackest ghosts, oil had waited for hundreds of millions of years, dreaming its black dreams, sluggishly pulsing beneath Earth's stony skin, quivering in lightless pools roofed with marsh gas and in top-filled rocky tanks and coursing through myriad channels and through spongy rocky bone, until a being evolved on the surface with whom it could live symbiotically and through whom it could realize and expend itself. When man had appeared and had attained the requisite sensitivity and technical sophistication, then oil—like some black collective unconscious—had begun sending him its telepathic messages.

"Daloway, this is beyond belief!" I burst out here the first time he revealed to me his theory *in toto*. "Telepathy by itself is dubious enough, but telepathic communication between a lifeless substance and man—"

"Do you know that many companies hunting oil spend more money for dowsers than they do for geologists?" he shot back at me instantly. "For dowsers and for those psionic-electronic gadgets they call doodlebugs. The people whose money's at stake and who know the oil lands in a practical way believe in dowsing, even if most scientists don't. And what is dowsing but a man moving about on the surface until he gets a telepathic signal from . . . something below."

In brief, Daloway's theory was that man hadn't discovered oil, but that oil had found man. Venice hadn't struck oil; oil had thrust up its vicious feelers like some vast blind monster, and finally made contact with Venice.

Everyone admits that oil is the lifeblood of modern technological culture—its automobiles and trucks and airplanes, its battleships and military tanks, its ballistic missiles and reekingly fueled space vehicles. In a sense Daloway only carried the argument one step further, positing behind the blood a heart—and behind the heart, a brain.

Surely in a great age-old oil pool with all its complex hydrocarbons—the paraffin series, the asphalt series, and many others—and with its subtle gradients of heat, viscosity, and electric charge, and with all its multiform microscopic vibrations echoing and re-echoing endlessly from its lightless walls, there can be the chemical and physical equivalent of nerves and brain-cells; and if of brain-cells, then of thought. Some computers use pools of mercury for their memory units. The human brain is fantastically isolated, guarded by bony walls and by what they call the blood-brain barrier; how much more so subterranean oil, within its thick stony skull and earthen flesh.

Or consider it from another viewpoint. According to scientific materialism and anthropologic determinism, man's will is an illusion, his consciousness but an epiphenomenon—a useless mirroring of the atomic swirlings and molecular churnings that constitute ultimate reality. In any such world-picture, oil is a far more appropriate primal power than man.

Daloway even discovered the chief purpose animating oil's mentality, or thought he did. Once when we were discussing spaceflight, he said suddenly, "I've got it! Oil wants to get to other planets so that it can make contact with the oil there, converse with extraterrestrial pools—fatten

on *their* millennial strength, absorb *their* graveyard wisdom . . ."

Of course a theory like that is something to laugh at or tell a psychiatrist. And of course Daloway may have been crazy or seeking a dark sort of laughter himself. I mean it is quite possible that Daloway was deceiving and mystifying me for his own amusement, that he elaborated his whole theory and repeatedly simulated his dreads simply as part of a long-drawn-out practical joke, that he noted a vein of credulity in me and found cruel delight in fooling me to the top of my bent, and that—as the police insist—even the starkly material evidence for the horror of his disappearance which I pointed out to them was only a final crude hoax on his part, a farewell jest.

Yet I knew the man for months, knew his dreads, saw him start and shiver and shake, heard him rehearse his arguments with fierce sincerity, witnessed the birth-quivers of many of his ideas—and I do not think so.

Oh, there were many times when I doubted Daloway, doubted his every word, but in the end his grotesque theory about the oil did not elicit from me the skepticism it might have from another hearing it elsewhere—perhaps, it occurs to me now, because it was advanced in a metropolis that is such a strange confirmation of it.

To the average tourist or the reader of travel brochures, Los Angeles is a gleaming city or vast glamorous suburb of movie studios and orange groves and ornate stucco homes and green-tiled long swimming pools and beaches and now great curving freeways and vast white civic centers and sleekly modern plants—aviation, missile, computer, research and development. What is overlooked here is that the City of the Angels, especially in its southern reaches stretching toward Long Beach, is almost half oil-field. These odorous grim industrial barrens interweave elaborately with airfields and showy tract housing developments—with an effect of savage irony. There is hardly a point from which one cannot see in the middle or farther distance, looming through the faintly bluish haze of the acrid smog, a hill densely studded with tall oil derricks. Long Beach herself is dominated by Signal Hill with oil towers thick as an army's spears

and cruel as the murders which have been committed on its lonely slopes.

The first time I ever saw one of those hills—that near Culver City—I instantly thought of H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* and of his brain-heavy Martians on their lofty metal tripods wherewith they strode ruthlessly about the British countryside. It seemed to me that I was seeing a congeries of such tower-high beings and that the next moment they might begin to stride lurchingly toward me, with something of the feeling, modernistically distorted, of Macbeth's Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane.

And here and there along with the oil derricks, like their allies or reinforcements, one sees the gleaming distillation towers and the monstrous angular-shouldered cracking plants with muscles of knotted pipe, and the fields of dull silver oil tanks, livid in the smog, and the vaster gas tanks and the marching files of high-tension-wire towers, which look at a distance like oil derricks.

And as for Venice herself, with the oil's omnipresent reek, faint or heavy, and with her oil wells cheek-by-jowl with houses and shacks and eternally throbbing, as if pulsing the beat of a vast subterranean chemic heart—well, it was only too easy to believe something like Daloway's theory there. It was from the beach by Venice, in 1926, that Aimee Semple McPherson was mysteriously vanished, perhaps teleported, to the sinisterly-named Mexican town of Black Water—Agua Prieta. The coming of the illusioneers to Venice, and of the beatniks—and of the black oil, *aceite prieto*—all seemed alike mindless mechanic movements, or compulsive unconscious movements, whether of molecules or people, and in either case a buttressing of Daloway's wild theory—and at the very least an ironic picture of modern man's industrial predicament.

At all events the black savage sardonicism of that picture, along with Daloway's extreme sensitivity, made it easy to understand why his nerves were rasped acutely by the ballad of the Black Gondola, as the black-smeared lurching beatnik guitarist came wailing it past the thin-walled trailer in the small hours of the night. I heard it only two or three times and the fellow's voice was thick to unintelligibility, though abominably raucous, so it was mostly

from Daloway that I got the words of the few scattered lines I remember. They were a half-plagiarized melange of ill-fitted cadences, but with a certain garishly eerie power:

Oh, the Black Gondola's gonna take you for a ride
With a cargo of atom bombs and Atlases and
nightmares . . .
The Black Gondola's gonna stop at your door
With a bow-wave of asphalt and a gravel spray . . .
The Black Gondola'll . . . get . . . you . . . yet!

Even of those five lines, the second comes—with a few changes of word—from a short poem by Yeats, the fifth derives from Vachel Lindsay's *The Congo,* while the Black Gondola itself sounds suspiciously like the nihilism-symbolizing Black Freighter in Brecht's and Weill's *The Three-Penny Opera.* Nevertheless, this crude artificial ballad, in which the Black Gondola seems to stand for our modern industrial civilization—and so, very easily, for petroleum too—may well have shaped or at least touched off Daloway's dreams, though his Black Gondola was of a rather different sort.

But before I describe Daloway's dreams, I had better round out his picture of the power which he believed dominated the modern world and, because he was coming to know too much about it, menaced his own existence.

According to Daloway, oil had intelligence, it had purpose . . . and it also had its agents. These beings, Daloway speculated, might be parts of itself, able to move independently, man-shaped and man-sized for purposes of camouflage, composed of a sort of infernal black ectoplasm or something more material than that—a darkly oleaginous humanoid spawn. Or they might be, at least to begin with, living men who had become oil's worshippers and slaves, who had taken the Black Baptism or the Sable Consecration—as he put it with a strange facetiousness.

"The Black Man in the Witch-cult!" he once said to me abruptly. "I think he was a forerunner—spying out the ground, as it were. We have to remember too that oil was first discovered, so far as the modern world is concerned, in Pennsylvania, the hexing state, though in another corner than the Dutch territory—at Titusville, in fact, in 1859, just on the eve of a great and tragic war that made fullest

use of new industrial technologies. It's important to keep in mind, incidentally, that the Black Man wasn't a Negro, which would have made him brown, but simply a man of Caucasian features with a dead-black complexion. Though there are dark brown petroleums, for that matter, and greenish ones. Of course many people used to equate the Black Man with the Devil, but Margaret Murray pretty well refuted that in her *God of the Witches* and elsewhere.

"Which is not to say that the Negro's not mixed up in it," Daloway continued on that occasion, his thoughts darting and twisting and back-tracking as rapidly as they always did. "I think that the racial question and—as with space-flight—the fact that it's come to the front today, is of crucial significance. Oil's using the black as another sort of camouflage."

"What about atomic energy? You haven't brought that in yet," I demanded a little crossly, or more likely nervously.

Daloway gave me a strange penetrating look. "Nuclear energy is, I believe, an entirely separate subterranean mentality," he informed me. "Helium instead of marsh gas. Pitchblende instead of pitch. It's more introspective than oil, but it may soon become more active. Perhaps the conflict of these two vampiristic mentalities will be man's salvation! —though more likely, I'm afraid, only a further insurance of his immediate destruction."

Oil's dark agents not only spied, according to Daloway, but also dispersed clues leading to the discovery of new oil fields and new uses for oil, and on occasion removed interfering and overly perceptive human beings.

"There was Rudolf Diesel for one, inventor of the all-important engine," Daloway asserted. "What snatched him off that little North Sea steamer back in 1913?—just before the first war to prove the supremacy of petrol-powered tanks and armored cars and zeppelins and planes. No one has ever begun to explain that mystery. People didn't realize so well then that oil is as much a thing of the salt water—especially the shallows above the continental shelves—as it is of the shores. I say that Diesel knew too much—and was snatched because he did! The same may have been true of Ambrose Bierce, who disappeared at almost the same

time down in the oil lands between Mexico and Texas, though I don't insist on that. The history of the oil industry is studded with what some call legends, but I believe are mostly true accounts, of men who invented new fuels, or made other key discoveries, and then dropped out of existence without another word spoken. And the oil millionaires aren't exactly famous for humanitarianism and civilized cosmopolitan outlook. And every oil field has its tales of savagery and its black ghosts—the fields of Southern California as much as the rest."

I found it difficult—or, more truthfully, uncomfortable—to adjust to Daloway's new mood of piled revelations and wild sudden guesses, in contrast to his previous tight-lipped secrecy, and especially to these last assertions about a black lurking infernal host—here, in the ultramodern, garishly new American Southwest. But not too difficult. I have never been one to be dogmatically skeptical about preternatural agencies, or to say that Southern California cannot have ghosts because its cities are young and philistine and raw that sprawl across so much of the inhospitable desert coast and because the preceding Amerind and Mission cultures were rather meagre—the Indians dull and submissive, the padres austere and cruel. Ghostliness is a matter of atmosphere, not age. I have seen an unsuccessful subdivision in Hollywood that was to me more ghostly than the hoariest building I ever viewed in New England. Only thirty years ago they had scythed and sawed down the underbrush and laid out a few streets and put in sidewalks and a water pipe and a few hydrants. But then the lot-buyers and home-builders never materialized and now the place is a wilderness of towering weeds and brush, with the thin-topped streets eroded so that at some points they are a dozen feet below the hanging under-eaten sidewalks, and the water pipe is exposed and rusting and each hydrant is in the midst of a yellow thicket and the only living things to be seen are the tiny darting lizards and an occasional swift sinuous snake or velvet dark shifty tarantula and whatever else it is that rustles the dry near-impassable vegetation.

Southern California is full of such ghost-districts and ghost-towns despite the spate of new building and hill-chopping

and swamp-draining that has come with the rocket plants and television and the oil refineries and the sanatoria and the think-factories and all the other institutions contributing to the area's exploding population.

Or I could let you look down into Potrero Canyon, an eroded earthquake crack which cuts through populous Pacific Palisades, another postal address in Los Angeles. But I could hardly lead you down into it, because its sides are everywhere too steep and choked with manzanita and sumac and scrub oak, where they don't fall away altogether to the clay notch of its bottom. Trackless and almost impenetrable, Potrero Canyon dreams there mysteriously, the home of black foxes and coyotes and silently-soaring sinister hawks, oblivious to the bright costly modern dwellings at its top—"that deep romantic chasm . . . a savage place . . . holy and enchanted," to borrow the words of Coleridge.

Or I could invite you on any clear day to look out across the Pacific at the mysterious, romantically crested Santa Barbara Islands—all of their 218,000 acres, save for Santa Catalina's 55,000, forbidden territory by Government ukase or private whim.

Even the earth of Southern California, sedimentary, lacking a strongly knit rocky skeleton, seems instinct with strange energies hardly known in geologically stabler areas and lending a weird plausibility to Daloway's theory of sentient, seeking, secretive oil. Every year there are unforeseen earth-falls—and falls of houses too—and mud-slides that drown dwellings and engulf cars. Only in 1958 one of them sent half of a hundred-foot-high hill slumping forward to bury the Pacific Coast Highway; they were more than six months filling in beach, trucks running rock night and day, to get a bed on which to lay the road around it.

Once, not too long ago, they called that road Roosevelt Highway, but now it is Cabrillo Highway or even El Camino Real. Just as the street names, straining for glamor, have progressed from Spanish to British to Italian and back to Spanish again, and the favorite subdivision names from Palisades to Heights to Knolls to Acres to Rivieras to Mesas to Condominiums. In Southern California, seemingly,

history can run backwards, with an unconscious fierce sardonicism.

And then there are all the theosophists and mystics and occultists, genuine and sham, who came swarming to Southern California in the early decades of the century. A good many of those were sensitive to the uncanny forces here, I think, and were drawn by them—as well as by the lavish gypsy camp of the movie-makers, the bankrolls of the retired and the elderly, and a health-addict's climate, the last somewhat marred by chilly damp western winds and by burningly dry Santa Anas, threatening vast brush fires, and now by smog. And the occultists keep swarming here—the I Am folk with their mysterious mountain saints and glittering meetings in evening dress; the barefoot followers of Krishna Venta and the mysterious errand-of-mercy appearances they made at local disasters and finally their own great Box Canyon mystery-explosion of December 7, 1958, which claimed ten lives, including—possibly—their leader's; the Rosicrucians and Theosophists; Katherine Tingley and Annie Besant; the latter's World Master, Krishnamurti, still living quietly in Ojai Valley; the high-minded Self-Realization movement, the dead body of whose founder Paramhansa Yogananda resisted corruption for at least twenty days, as testified by Forest Lawn morticians; Edgar Rice Burroughs, who fictionalized the fabulous worlds of theosophy on Mars and is immortalized in Tarzana; the flying-saucer cultists with their great desert conventions; beautiful Gloria Lee listening raptly to her man on Jupiter—there is no end to them.

So when Daloway began to rehearse to me his fearful suspicions, or beliefs rather, about oil's black ghosts—or acolytes, or agents, or budded-off black ameboid humanoid creatures, or whatever they exactly might be—I was uneasily sympathetic to the idea if not consciously credulous. Good Lord, if there could be such things as ghosts, it would be easy to imagine them in Venice—ghosts of the Channel Indians and those whom the Indians called "the Ancient Ones," ghosts of Cabrillo's men when he discovered this coast in 1592 before he died on windswept forbidden San Miguel, westernmost of the Santa Barbara Islands; ghosts from the harsh theocratic Mission days and the lawless Mexican years that fol-

lowed, ghosts of the Spanish and Yankee Dons, ghosts of gold-seekers and vigilantes, anarchists and strike-breakers, and ghosts of the gamblers and gondoliers and the other folk from the illusion-packed years. Especially now that the illusions are edging back again: in the swampy south end of Venice they've just built a great marina or small-boat harbor, with fingers of sea interlocking fingers of low-lying land and with all sorts of facilities for luxurious dockside apartments and homes—if the buyers materialize and if they fully subdue the strange tidal waves which first troubled the marina. There is even talk of linking the marina to the old canal system and cleaning that up and filling it all year round and perhaps bringing back the gondolas. Though at the same time, by a cackling irony, a battle goes on in the courts as to whether or not industry may be licensed to drill for offshore oil, setting up its derricks in the shallows of the Pacific, just beyond the breakers that beat against the beaches of Venice—Wells' Martians submerged to their chests in waves. In our modern world, illusion and greed generally walk hand in hand.

So it was by no means with complete skepticism about his wild theory of black buried oil and its creatures that I listened to Daloway's accounts of his dreams of the Black Gondola, or rather his dream, since it was always basically the same, with minor variations. I will tell it one time in his words, as he most fully told it, remembering too how I heard it—in his cramped trailer, late at night, perhaps just after the passing of the wailing drunken guitarist, no other sound but the faint distant rattle of the breaking waves and the slow throb of the oil pump a few yards beyond the thin metal wall with the small half-curtained window in it, the edges of my mind crawling with thoughts of the black preternatural creatures that might be on watch outside that same wall and pressing even closer.

"I'm always sitting in the Black Gondola when the dream begins," Daloway said. "I'm facing the prow and my hands grip the gunwales to either side. Apparently I've just left the trailer and got aboard her, though I never remember that part, for we're in the canal outside, which is full to the top of its banks, and we're headed down the middle of

it toward the Grand Canal. There's oil on my clothes, I can feel it, but I don't know how it got there.

"It's night, of course, dark night. The street lights are all out. There's just enough glow in the sky to silhouette the houses. No light shows in any of their windows, only the glimmer coming between them—a glimmer no brighter than the phosphorescence that paints the breakers some summer nights when the sewage breeds too big an algae crop and there's a fish-kill. Yet the glimmer and glow are enough to show the tiny ripples angling out from the gondola's prow as we move along.

"It's a conventional gondola, narrow and with a high prow, but it's black—sooty black—no highlights reflect from it. You know, gondola also means coal car, those black open-topped cars on the railroads. I've ridden the freights often enough—perhaps there's a connection there.

"I can hear the swish and the faint fluid-muffled thump of the gondolier's pole against the bottom as he drives us along. It's thudding in the same slow rhythm as the pumping of the oil wells. But I cannot look around at him—I daren't! The fact is, I'm frozen with terror, both of the voiceless gondolier standing behind me and of our destination, though I cannot yet conceive or name that. My grip on the gunwales tightens convulsively.

"Sometimes I try to visualize what the gondolier looks like—never in my dreams, but at times like this—what his appearance would be if I had the courage to turn my head, or if the dream changed so that I was forced to look at him. And then I get a glimpse of a thin figure about seven feet tall. His shoulders are twisted and his head, bent forward, is hooded. The rest of his clothing is tight-fitting, down to his long narrow sharply pointed shoes. His big long-fingered hands grip the black pole strongly. And everywhere he himself is black, not dull black like the gondola, but gleaming black as if he were thickly coated with black oil which has just the faintest greenish sheen to it—as if he were some infernal merman newly swum up from the depths of a great oil ocean.

"But in my dream I dare not look or even think of him. We turn into the Grand Canal and head toward the Marina, but there are no lights there or on the heights

of Playa del Rey beyond. There are no stars in the sky, only that exceedingly faint distant shimmer. I watch for the lights of a plane mounting from the International Airport. Even one tiny red-green pair moving across the sky out to sea so far away would be a great comfort to me. But none comes.

"The reek of the oil is strong. (In how many dreams do we experience odors? This is the only one where it's happened to me.) We pass under two of the bridges. The glimmer shows me their curving ruin-notched outlines and one or two ragged fragments of cement dangling by the wires imbedded in them.

"The reek grows stronger. And now at last I notice a change in our movement, although the bow ripples have the same angles and the muffled thud of the pole has the same slow rhythm. The change is simply that the gondola has settled a little deeper in the water, not more than two or three inches.

"I ponder the problem. Nothing has entered the boat—nothing before me that I have seen or behind me that I have felt. I scrape my feet against the bottom—it is dry, no water has entered. Yet the gondola is riding deeper. Why?

"The reek grows stronger still—suffocatingly so, almost. The gondola settles still deeper in the water, so deep that the ends of my fingers on the outside of the gunwales are immersed. And now the problem is solved. Touch tells me that the gondola is riding not in water, but in oil. Or rather in an ever-thickening layer of oil floating on top of the water. The thicker the layer gets, the deeper the boat sinks."

Daloway stared at me sharply. "That would actually be true, you know," he interjected. "A boat would ride very high in a sea of mercury, because the stuff is heavier than lead, but low in a sea of gasoline or petroleum—sink, in fact, if it hadn't enough freeboard—because the stuff is light. Petroleum may have as little as seven-tenths the weight of water. Which is odd considering the thick greases we get out of it. Yet thick greases like vaseline float.

"And it would be true, too, that a boat riding in a layer of oil floating atop water—an oil-layer thinner than the boat's draught—would sink proportionately deeper as the

layer got thicker, until it was riding wholly in oil. Then it would steady—or sink for good.

"The layer of oil in which my gondola is riding is getting thicker, at all events," he went on, resuming the narration of his dream.

"I get the impression that we are reaching a length of the Grand Canal in which there is nothing but oil. The black stuff begins to pour over the gunwales in a thin sleek waterfall. Yet the Black Gondola is moving ahead as steadily and strongly as ever and even more swiftly. We are like an airplane taking off—downward. Or like a submarine diving.

"I nerve myself to loosen my grip on the gunwales and make a wild plunge toward the bank, though I fear I will drown in even that short distance. But at that instant the gondolier's pole comes down firmly on my right shoulder, projecting perhaps a yard ahead of me and pinning me to my seat. Though its injunction not to move is more hypnotic, or magical, than physical, it is absolute. I cannot stir, or break my grip on the submerging gondola.

"I know this is Death. I peer yearningly one last time for the lights of a mounting airplane. Then as the oil, moving past me in an unending sleep caress, mounts to my face, I shut my lips, I hold my breath, I close my eyes.

"The oil covers me. I am aware in those last paralyzed seconds that we are moving still more swiftly through the black stuff. Yet the solid oil rushing past does not unseat me from the gondola, or even tug at me. The effect is always of a great unending caress.

"Death and Agony do not come. I wait for the urge to breathe to become overpowering. There is no urge. The straining muscles of my chest and jaw and face relax.

"I open my eyes. I can see through the oil. It has become my medium of vision. By a darkly green shimmering I can see that, still descending and even more swiftly now, we are traversing a great rocky cavern filled with oil. Evidently we plunged into it from the Grand Canal, by way of some unsuspected gate or lock, while I waited with closed eyes for my death-spasm.

"During the same period of blindness, the Black Gondolier has moved from behind me and taken up a position

below and a little ahead of the Black Gondola, dragging it along like some mythic slim long dolphin or infernal merman. Now and again past the forward gunwales I glimpse, greenly outlined in midkick, the black soles of his long narrow sharply pointed feet—or bifid narrow tail-fin.

"I say to myself, 'I have received the Black Baptism. I have partaken of the Black Communion.'

"Our speed ever increasing, we pass through weird grottos, we twist and turn through narrow passageways whose irregular walls flash with precious gems and nuggets of gold and copper, we soar across great vaults domed with crusty salt crystals glittering like thick-packed diamonds.

"I know, even in my dream, that this picture of underground oil in vast interconnected lakes and tanks is false by all geology—that untapped oil is mixed with earth and porous rocks and shales and sand, not free—but the picture and experience remain the same and exquisitely real. Perhaps I have suffered a size-change, become microscopic. Perhaps I have suffered a sense-change and see things symbolically. Perhaps geology is false.

"Our speed becomes impossible. We flash about like a single black corpuscle in the oil plasma of the great world-creature. I know, intuitively, that one instant we are beneath Caracas; the next Ploesti; then Baku, Iraq, Iran, India, Indonesia, Argentina, Colombia, Oklahoma, Algeria, Antarctica, Atlantis . . .

"It is more as if we were flashing through black outer space, softly gleaming with galaxies, than through earth's depths.

"There is a feeling of nightmare-ride now . . . wild whirlings and spiralings . . . a blurred glitter . . . a blessed sense of fatigue . . .

"Yet at the same time I become aware that the white-green sinuous gleamings I see are the nerves of oil, which stretch everywhere, to every tiniest well; that I am approaching the great brain; that I will soon see God.

"And I never, even in this nightmare phase, lose the awareness of the close presence of my conductor. From time to time I still glimpse, in frozen instants, standing out sharply against the glistening green, the black shapes of his long narrow sharply pointed lower extremities.

"There the dream ends. I can no longer endure its flashing transitions. I am outwearied. I awake sweating and groaning or fall into a deeper dreamless sleep from which I slowly arouse hours later, lethargic and spent."

As he finished his narrative he would generally give me a tired questioning look, smiling thinly as if at the extravagance of it all, but with a loneliness in his eyes that made me think of him looking hopelessly in his dream for the lights of a distant plane as the Black Gondola went under.

That was Daloway's dream. To describe my reactions to it is more difficult. Remember that he did not tell it to me all at once, but only sketchily at first with an air of, "Here's a ridiculous dream;" later much more seriously, putting in the details, building the picture. Also remember that he dreamed it about six times during the period of our friendship, and that each time the dream was somewhat fuller and he told me more of it—and between times revealed to me more of his wild theory of world oil, bit by bit, and revealed, bit by bit, too, how deeply he believed or at least felt this theory. Remember finally that his nerves were in pretty good shape when he first told me the dream, but pretty bad toward the last.

I seem to recall that the first time or two, we both poked at the dream psychoanalytically. There were obvious birth and death and sex symbols in it: trips through fluid, return to the womb, the caress of oil, the gondolier's punting pole, passage under bridges, twisting tunnels, difficulties in breathing, flying sensations, all the usual stuff. I think he advanced the rather farfetched notion that his disappearing into strangling darkness with an unknown menacing male indicated unconscious fears of homosexuality, while I championed the prosier explanation that the whole horror of oil might merely stand for his resentment at having to work as a mechanic to earn a living. We speculated as to whether the racial question might not be tied up in it—Daloway had a touch of Indian blood—and tried to identify the person in his early life whom the Black Gondolier might represent.

But the last time he told it to me, we just looked at each other for a long while and I went over stoopingly

and drew the curtain fully across the little window in the side of the low-ceilinged trailer toward the oil well and the night, and we began to talk about something else, something trivial.

By that time, you see, he'd had the first of his outbursts of more active fear. It had been touched off by a rumor or report that petroleum was leaking into the Grand Canal through some underground fissure, perhaps from a defective well. He wanted us to walk over to the spot and have a look, but the sun set before we got there and we couldn't see any lights indicating men at work or hunting for the leak, and he suddenly decided it would be too much trouble and we turned back. The dark comes quite quickly in Venice—Los Angeles is near enough to the Tropic of Cancer so you can see all of Scorpius and the Southern Crown too, while Fomalhaut rides high in the southern sky. And Venice's narrow streets, half of them only pedestrian passageways blocked off to cars, swiftly grow gloomy. I remember that going back we hurried a bit, stumbling through sand and around rubbish, but hardly enough to account for the way Daloway was gasping by the time we reached his trailer.

Once during that unconfessed flight, while we were crossing an empty lot by the Grand Canal, he stopped me by catching hold of my elbow and then he led us in a circle around a slightly darker stretch of ground—almost as if he feared it were a scummed-over dust-camouflaged oil pool which might engulf us. You do run into such things in oil fields, though I've never heard of them in Venice.

And two or three times, later that night, Daloway made excuses to go out and scan the light-patched darkness toward the Grand Canal, almost as if he expected to see tongues of petroleum runneling toward us across the low ground, or other shapes approaching.

To quiet his nerves and put the thing on a more rational basis, I pointed out that, as he himself had told me, natural oil leakages are by no means uncommon in the Pacific Southland. Ocean bathers are apt to get bits of tar on their feet and they usually blame it on modern industry and its poorly-disposed wastes, seldom discover-

ing that it is asphalt from undersea leakages which were recurring regularly long before Cabrillo's time. Another example, this one in the heart of western Los Angeles, is La Brea tar pits, which trapped many saber-toothed tigers and their prey, as the asphalt-impregnated bones testify. (There's a tautology there: *brea* means tar. Other glamorous-sounding old Los Angeles street names have equally ugly or homely meanings: Las Pulgas means "the fleas," Temescal means "sweat house," while La Ciénega, street of the wonder-restaurants, means "the swamp.")

My effort was ill-considered. Daloway's nerves were not quieted. He muttered, "Damned oil killing animals too! Well, at least it got the exploiters as well as the exploited," and he stepped out again to scan the night, the growl of the pump growing suddenly louder as he opened the door.

The report of the petroleum leakage turned out to have been much exaggerated. I don't recall hearing how they fixed it up, if they ever did. But it gave me an uncomfortable insight into the state of Daloway's nerves—and didn't do my own any good, either.

Then there was the disastrous business of Daloway's car. He bought an old jalopy for almost nothing at about this time and put it in good shape, expending most of his dwindling cash-reserve buying essential replacements at second hand. I inwardly applauded—I thought the manual work would be therapeutic. Incidentally, Daloway repeatedly refused my offers of a small loan.

Then one evening I dropped over to find the car gone and Daloway just returned from a long, half hitch-hiked trudge and pitifully strained and shaky. It seemed he'd been driving the car along the San Bernadino Freeway when a huge kerosene truck just ahead of him had jackknifed in an underpass and split its tank and spilled its load and caught afire. I'd heard about the accident on the radio a few hours earlier—it tied up the freeway for almost half a day. Daloway had managed to bring his car to a swerving stop in the swift-shooting oil. Two other cars, also skidding askew, crashed him lightly from behind, preventing his car's escape. He managed to leap out and run away before the fire got to it—the truck driver escaped too, mirac-

ulously—but Daloway's car, uninsured of course, was burned to a shriveled black ruin along with several others.

Daloway never admitted to me straight out that he had been escaping from Venice and LA, leaving them for good, when that catastrophe on the San Bernadino Freeway thwarted him. I suppose he was ashamed to admit he would go away without telling me his plans or even saying goodby. (I would have understood, I think: some partings have to be made with ruthless suddenness, before the fire of decision burns out.) But a big old suitcase that had used to stand inside the door of the trailer was gone and I imagine it burned with the car.

Later the police neatly turned all this into an argument for their theory that Daloway's ultimate departure from Venice was voluntary. He'd once started to leave without informing me, they pointed out—and would have, except for the accident. His money was running out. (There was a month's rent owing on the trailer at the end.) He had a history of briefly-held jobs alternating with periods of roving or dropping out of sight—or so they claimed. What more natural than that he should have seized on some sudden opportunity or inspiration to decamp?

I had to admit they had a point, of sorts. It turned out that the police had an old grudge against Daloway: they'd once suspected him of being mixed up in the marijuana traffic. Well, that may have been true, I suppose; he admitted to me having smoked hemp a few times, years before.

I used to carp at horror stories in which the protagonist could at any time have departed from the focus of horror—generally some lonely dismal spot, like Daloway's trailer—but instead insisted on staying there, though shaking with fear, until he was engulfed. Since my experience with Daloway, I've changed my mind. Daloway did try to leave. He made that one big effort with the car and it was foiled. He lacked the energy to make another. He became fatalistic. And perhaps the urge to stay and see what would happen—always strong, I imagine, curiosity being a fundamental human trait—at that point became somewhat stronger than the opposing urge to flee.

That evening after the freeway accident I stayed with him

a long time, trying to cheer him up and get him to look at the accident as a chance occurrence, not some cat-and-mousing malignancy aimed directly and solely at him. After a while I thought I was succeeding.

"You know, I hung back of that truck for fully ten minutes, afraid to pass, though I had enough speed," he admitted. "I kept thinking something would happen while I was passing it."

"You see," I said. "If you'd passed it right off, you wouldn't have been involved in the accident. You courted danger by sticking close behind a vehicle that you probably knew, at least subconsciously, was behaving dangerously. We can all have accidents that way."

"No," Daloway replied, shaking his head. "Then the accident would have come earlier. Don't you understand?—it was an *oil* truck! And if I had got by it, the oil would have stopped me some way, I'm convinced of that now—even if it had had to burst out in a spontaneous gusher beside the highway and skid my car into a wreck! Remember how the oil burst out of Signal Hill in the 1933 Long Beach earthquake and flowed inches thick down the streets?"

"Well, at any rate you escaped with your life," I pointed out, trying to salvage a little of my imagined advantage.

"It didn't want to kill me there," Daloway countered gloomily. "It just wanted to herd me back. It's got something else in store for me."

"Now look here, Daloway," I burst out, a little angry and trying to sound more so, "if we all argued that way, there wouldn't be any trifling mischance that couldn't be twisted into a murder-attempt by some weird power. Just this morning I found a little gas-leak in my kitchen. Am I to suppose—?"

"It's after you too now!" he interrupted me, paling and starting to his feet. "Natural gas—petroleum—the same thing—siblings. Keep off me, it's not safe! I've warned you before. You better get out now."

I wouldn't agree to that, of course, but the couple hours more I stayed with Daloway didn't improve his mood, or mine either. He set himself to analyzing last year's Los Angeles catastrophe, when a three hundred million gallon water reservoir broke its thick earthen wall in the Baldwin

Hills and did tens of millions of dollars worth of damage, floating and tumbling cars and flooding thousands of homes and smashing hundreds of buildings with a deluge of water and mud—though only a few lives were lost because of efficient warning by motorcycle police and a helicopter cruising with a bullhorn.

"There were oil wells by the reservoir," he said. "Even the purblind officials admit that soil subsidence from oil drilling may have started the leaks. But do you remember the east-west bounds of the flood? From La Brea to La Ciénega—the tar to the swamp! And what was the substance lining the reservoir? What was the stuff that craftily weakened from point to point and then gave way at the crucial moment, triggering the thing? Asphalt!"

"Men did the drilling, Daloway," I argued wearily. "Asphalt is inert . . ."

"Inert!" he slmost snarled back at me. "Yes, like the uranium atom! What moves the dowsers' wands? Do you still think that men run things up here?"

By the time I left I was glad to be gone and disgusted with myself for wasting too much time, and very irked at Daloway too and glad I had an engagement the next evening that would prevent me from visiting him.

For the first time in weeks, going home that night, I wondered if Daloway mightn't be an all-out psychopath. At the same time I found myself so nervous about the very faint stench of oil in my car that I opened all the windows, though there was a chilly fog, and even then I kept worrying about the motor and the oil in it, as it heated. Damn it, the man was poisoning my life with his paranoid suspicions and dreads! He was right, I'd better keep off him.

But the next night a thunderstroke woke me about two, there was rain sizzling and rattling on the roof and gurgling loudly in the resonating metal drain pipes, and right away I was thinking how much louder it must be pounding on Daloway's trailer and wondering how apt lightning striking an oil well was to cause a fire—things like that. It was our first big downpour of the season, rather early in the fall too, and it kept on and on, a regular cloudburst, and the lightning too. I must have listened to them for a

couple of hours, thinking about Daloway and his wild ideas, which didn't seem so wild now with the storm going, and picturing Venice with its canals filling fast and with its low crowded houses and oil wells and derricks under the fist of the rain and the lightning's shining spear.

I think it was chiefly the thought of the canals being full that finally got me up and dressed around five and off in the dark to see how Daloway was faring. The rain had stopped by now and of course the thunder too, but there were signs of the storm everywhere—my headlights showed me falling branches, fans of eroded mud and gravel crossing the street, gutters still brimming, a few intersections still shallowly flooded, and a couple of wide buttons of water still pouring up from manholes whose heavy tops had been displaced by the pressure from brim-filled flumes.

Hardly any private automobiles were abroad yet, but I met a couple of fire trucks and light-and-power trucks and cars off on emergency errands, and when I got to Venice, Daloway's end was dark—there'd evidently been a major power failure there. I kept on, a bit cautious now that my headlights were just about the only illumination there was. Venice seemed like a battered city of the dead—a storm-bombed ruin—I hardly saw a soul or a light, only a candle back of a window here and there. But the streets weren't flooded too deep anywhere along my usual route and just as I sensed the eastern sky paling a little I crossed the narrow high-humped bridge—no need to tap my horn this time!—and swung into my usual parking place and stopped my car and switched off the lights and got out.

I must be very careful to get things right now.

My first impression, which the motor of my car had masked up to now, was of the great general silence. All the sounds of the storm were gone except for the tiny occasional drip of the last drop off a leaf or a roof.

The oil well by Daloway's trailer was still pumping, though. But there was an odd wheezy hiss in it I'd never heard before, and after each hiss a faint tinkly spatter, as of drops hitting sheet metal.

I walked over to the edge of the canal. There was just enough light for me to manage that safely. I stooped beside it. Just as I'd imagined, it was full to the brim.

Then I heard the other sounds: a faint rhythmic swish and, spaced about three seconds apart, the faint muffled thuds that would be made by a gondolier's pole.

I stared down the black canal, my heart suddenly pounding and my neck cold. For a moment I thought I saw, in murkiest silhouette, the outlines of a gondola, with gondolier and passenger, going away from me, but I simply couldn't be sure.

Fences blocked the canal for me that way, even if I'd had the courage to follow, and I ran back to my car for my flashlight. Halfway back with it, I hesitated, wondering if I shouldn't drive the car to the canal edge and use my high headlight beams, but I wasn't sure I could position it right.

I kept onto the canal and directed my flashlight beam down it.

In the first flare of light and vision, I again thought I saw the Black Gondola, much smaller now, near the turn into the Grand Canal.

But the beam wavered and when I got it properly directed again—a matter of a fraction of a second—the canal seemed empty. I kept swinging my flashlight a little, up and down, side to side, for quite a few seconds and studying the canal, but it stayed empty.

I was half inclined to jump into my car and take the long swing around to the road paralleling the Grand Canal. I did do that, somewhat later on, but now I decided to go to the trailer first. After all, I hadn't made any noise to speak of and Daloway might well be there asleep—it would take only seconds to check. Everything I had heard and seen so far might conceivably be imagination, the auditory and visual impressions had both been very faint, though they still seemed damnably real.

There was a hint of pink in the east now. I heard again that unfamiliar hissing wheeze from the oil well, with subsequent faint splatter, and I paused to direct my light at it and then, after a bit, at the wall of Daloway's trailer.

Something had gone wrong with the pump so that it had sprung a leak and with every groaning stroke a narrow stream of petroleum was sprayed against the wall of

Daloway's trailer, blotching it darkly, and through the little window, which stood open.

It was never afterwards established whether a lightning stroke had something to do with this failure of the valves of the pump, though several people living around there later assured me that two of the lightning strokes had been terrific, seeming to hit their roofs. Personally I've always had the feeling that the lightning unlocked *something.*

The door to the trailer was shut, but not locked. I opened it and flashed my light around the walls. Daloway wasn't anywhere there, nobody was.

The first thing I flashed my light steadily on was Daloway's bunk under the little open window. At that moment there came the hissing wheeze and oil rattled against the wall of the trailer and some came through the window, pattering softly on the rough brown blankets, adding a little to the great black stain on them. The oil stank.

Then I directed my flashlight another way. . . . and was frozen by horror.

What I'd heard and seen by the bank of the canal might have been imagination. One has to admit he can always be fooled along the faint borderlines of sensation.

But this that I saw now was starkly and incontrovertibly real and material.

The accident to the oil pump, no matter how sardonically grim and suggestive in view of Daloway's theories, could be . . . merely an accident.

But this that I saw now could be no accident. It was either evidence of a premeditated supernormal malignancy, or—as the police insist—of a carefully planned and executed hoax. Incidentally, the police looked at me speculatively as they made this last suggestion.

After a while I got control of myself to the point where I could trace what I saw to its ending and then back again, still using my flashlight to supplement the gathering dawn.

A little later I made the round-about car trip I mentioned earlier to the Grand Canal and searched furiously along it, running down to its bank at several spots and venturing out on a couple of the ruined bridges.

I saw no signs of any boat or body at all, or of any oil either, for that matter, though the odor is always strong there.

Then I went to the police. Almost at once, a little to my shame, I found myself resorting to the subterfuge of emphasizing the one point that my friend Daloway had an almost crazily obsessive fear of drowning in the Grand Canal and that this might be a clue to his disappearance.

I guess I had to take that line. The police were at least willing to give some serious attention to the possibility of a demented suicide, whereas they could hardly have been expected to give any to the hypothesis of a black, inanimate, ancient, almost ubiquitous liquid engineering a diabolical kidnapping.

Later they assured me that they had inspected the canal and found no evidence of bodies or sunken boats in it. They didn't drag it, at least not all of it.

That ended the investigation for them. As for the real and material evidence back at the trailer, well, as I've said at least twice before, the police insist that was a hoax, perpetuated either by Daloway or myself.

And now the investigation is ended for me too. I dare not torture my mind any longer with a theory that endows with purposeful life the deepest buried darkness, that makes man and his most vaunted technological achievements the sardonic whim of that darkness and invests it with a hellish light visible only to its servitors, or to those about to become its slaves. No, I dare no longer think in this direction, no matter how conclusive the evidence I saw with my own eyes. I almost flipped when I saw it, and I *will* flip if I go on thinking about it.

What that evidence was—what I saw back at the trailer when I directed my flash another way, froze in horror, and later traced the thing from end to end—was simply this: a yard-long black straight indentation in the bank of the canal by Daloway's trailer, as if cut by one end of the keel of an oil-drenched boat, and then, leading from that point to Daloway's oil-soaked bunk and back again—a little wider and more closely spaced on the way back, as if something were being carried—*the long narrow sharply pointed footprints, marked in blackest thickest oil, of the Black Gondolier.*

MIDNIGHT IN THE MIRROR WORLD

As THE clock downstairs began to clang out midnight's twelve strokes, Giles Nefandor glanced into one of the two big mirrors between which he was passing on his nightly trip, regular as clockwork, from the telescopes on the roof to the pianos and chessboards in the living room.

What he saw there made him stop and blink and stare.

He was two steps above the mid-stair landing, where the great wrought-iron chandelier with its freight of live and dead electric bulbs swung in the chill fierce gusts of wind coming through the broken, lead-webbed, diamond-paned windows. It swung like a pendulum—a wilder yet more ponderous pendulum than that in the tall clock twanging relentlessly downstairs. He stayed aware of its menace as he peered in the mirror.

Since there was a second mirror behind him, what he saw in the one he faced was not a single reflection of himself, but many, each smaller and dimmer than the one in front of it—a half-spread stack of reflections going off toward infinity. Each reflection, except the eighth, showed against a background of mirror-gloom only his dark lean aquiline face, or at least the edge of it—from bucket-size down to dime-size—peering back at him intently from under its sleek crown of black, silver-shot hair.

But in the eighth reflection his hair was wildly disordered and his face was leaden-green, gape-jawed, and bulging-eyed with horror.

Also, his eighth reflection was not alone. Beside it was a thin black figure from which a ribbony black arm reached out and lay on his reflected shoulder. He could see only the edge of the black figure—most of it was hidden by the

reflected gilt mirror frame—but he was sure it was thin.

The look of horror on his face in that reflection was so intense and so suggestive of strangulation that he clutched at his throat with both hands.

All his reflections, from the nearly life-size giants to the Lilliputians, copied this sudden gesture—except the eighth.

The eleventh stroke of midnight resounded brassily. An especially fierce gust of wind blew the chandelier closer to him so that one of its black hook-fingered arms approached his shoulder and he cringed away from it before he recognized it for the familiar object it was. It should have been hung higher, he was such a tall man, and he should have had the window repaired, but his head missed the chandelier except when the wind blew hard and after he'd been unable to find a craftsman who could work leaded glass, he had not bothered about either chore.

The twelfth stroke clanged.

When he looked into the mirror the next instant, all strangeness was gone. His eighth reflection was like the rest. All his reflections were alike, even the dimmest most distant ones that melted into mirror smoke. And there was no sign of a black figure in any one of them, although he peered until his vision blurred.

He continued downstairs, choosing a moment when the chandelier was swinging away from him. He went immediately to his Steinway and played Skriabin preludes and sonatas until dawn, fighting the wind with them until it slunk away, then analyzed chess positions in the latest Russian tournament until the oppressive daylight had wearied him enough for sleep. From time to time he thought about what he had glimpsed in the mirror, and each time it seemed to him more likely that the disordered eighth reflection had been an optical illusion. His eyes had been strained and weary with star-gazing when it had happened. There had been those rushing shadows from the swinging chandelier, or even his narrow black necktie blown by the wind, while the thin black figure might have been simply a partial second reflection of his own black clothes—imperfections in the mirror could explain why these things had stood out only in the eighth reflection. For that matter the

odd appearance of his face in that reflection might have been due to no more than a tarnished spot in the mirror's silvering. Like this whole vast house—and himself—the mirror was decaying.

He awoke when the first stars, winking on in the sky of deepening blue, signaled his personal dawn. He had almost forgotten the incident of the mirror by the time he went upstairs, donned stadium boots and a hooded long sheepskin coat in the cupola room, and went out on the widow's walk to uncap his telescopes and take up his star-gazing. He made, as he realized, a quite medieval figure, except that the intruders in his heavens were not comets mostly, but Earth satellites moving at their characteristic crawl of twenty-some minutes from zenith to horizon.

He resolved a difficult double in Canis Major and was almost certain he saw a pale gas front advancing across the blackness of the Horsehead Nebula.

Finally he capped and shrouded his instruments and went inside. Habit started him downstairs and put him between the mirrors above the landing at the same minute and second of the day as he had arrived at that spot last night. There was no wind and the black chandelier with its assymetric constellation of bulbs hung motionless on its black chain. No reeling shadows tonight. Otherwise everything was exactly the same.

And while the clock struck twelve, he saw in the mirror exactly what he had seen last night: tiny pale horrorstruck Nefandor-face, black ribbon-arm touching its shoulder or neck, as if arresting him or summoning him to some doom. Tonight perhaps a little more of the black figure showed, as if it peered with one indistinguishable eye around the tinied gold frame.

Only this time it was not the eighth reflection that showed these abnormalities, but the seventh.

And this time when the glassy aberration vanished with the twelfth brassy stroke, he found it less easy to keep his thoughts from dwelling obsessively on the event. He also found himself groping for an explanation in terms of an hallucination rather than an optical illusion: an optical illusion that came so pat two nights running was hardly credible.

And yet an hallucination that confined itself to only one in a stack of reflections was also most odd.

Most of all, the elusive malignity of the thin black figure struck him much more forcibly than it had the previous night. An hallucination—or ghost or demon—that met you face to face was one thing. You could strike out at it, hysterically claw at it, try to drive your fist through it. But a black ghost that lurked in a mirror, and not only that but in the deepest depths of a mirror, behind many panes of thick glass (somehow the reflected panes seemed as real as the actual ones), working its evil will on your powerless shrunken image there—that implied a craftiness and caution and horrid calculation which fitted very well with the figure's cat-and-mousing advance from the eighth reflection to the seventh. The implication was that here was a being who hated Giles Nefandor with demonic intensity.

This night and morning he avoided the eerie Skriabin while the chess games he analyzed were frolicsome attacking ones by Anderssen, Kieseritzky, and the youthful Steinitz.

He had decided to wait another twenty-four hours and then if the figure appeared a third time, systematically analyze the matter and decide on what steps to take.

Yet meanwhile he could not wholly keep himself from searching his memory for people whom he had injured to the degree that they would bear him a bitter and enduring hatred. But although he searched quite conscientiously, by snatches, through the five and a half decades over which his memory stretched, he found no very likely candidates for the position of Arch-Hater or Hater to the Death of Giles Nefandor. He was a gentle person and, cushioned by inherited wealth, had never had to commit a murder or steal a large sum of money. He had wived, begat, divorced—or rather, been divorced. His wife had remarried profitably, his children were successful in far places, he had enough money to maintain his long body and his tall house while both moldered and to indulge his mild passions for the most ethereal of the arts, the most coolly aloof of the sciences, and the most darkly profound of the games.

Professional rivals? He no longer played in chess tournaments, confining his activities in that direction to a few correspondence games. He gave no more piano recitals. While

his contributions to astronomical journals were of the fewest and involved no disputes.

Women? At the time of his divorce, he had hoped it would free him to find new relationships, but his lonely habits had proved too comfortable and strong and he had never taken up the search. Perhaps in his vanity he had dreaded failure—or merely the effort.

At this point he became aware of a memory buried in his mind, like a dark seed, but it refused to come clear. Something about chess? . . . no . . .

Really, he had done nothing much to anyone, for good or ill, he decided. Why should anyone hate him for doing nothing?—hate him enough to chase his image through mirrors?—he asked himself fruitlessly as he watched Kieseritzky's black queen implacably pursue Anderssen's white king.

The next night he carefully timed his descent of the stairs, using his precision clocks in the cupola—with the result that (precision machinery proving less reliable than habit) the downstairs clock had already struck five strokes when he thrust himself breathlessly between the mirrors above the landing. But his greenish horrorstruck face was there—in the sixth reflection this time, as he'd fatalistically assumed it would be—and the slender black figure was there too with outstretched arm; this time he seemed to detect that it was wearing a veil or stocking-mask: he could distinguish none of its features, but there was a faint shimmering in the face area, rather like the pale gas front he had once again detected crossing the Horsehead Nebula.

This night he completely altered his routine, neither opening a piano nor setting out any of the chessmen. Instead he lay for an hour with eyes shut, to rest them, and then spent the rest of the night and morning investigating reflections of reflections in the mirrors on the stairs and in two somewhat smaller ones which he set up in the living room and tilted by the fractional inch to get the best effects.

By the end of that time he had made a number of interesting discoveries. He'd noted reflections of reflections before, especially on the stairs, and been amused by their oddity, but he'd never thought about them systematically and certainly never experimented with them. They turned out to be

a fascinating little field of study—vest-pocket optics—a science in miniature.

Vest-pocket wasn't such a bad designation, because you had to stick your vest and yourself between the two mirrors in order to observe the phenomena. Though come to think of it, you ought to be able to do the same thing with a periscope held sideways, by that means introducing your vision between the mirrors without introducing yourself. It might be worth trying.

But getting back to basics, when you stood between nearly parallel mirrors, looking at one, you saw first the direct reflection of your face, next the reflection of the back of your head in the mirror behind you; then, barely visible around those two, you saw the second reflection of your face, really just an edge of hair and cheek and hair; then the second reflection of the back of your head, and so on. As the heads grew smaller, you saw more of each, until the entire face became visible, quite tiny and dim.

This meant, for one thing, that the eighth reflection he'd seen the first midnight had really been the fifteenth, since he'd only counted reflections of his face, as far as he could remember, and between every two of those there was a reflection of the back of his head. Oh, this mirror world, he decided, was fascinating! Or worlds, rather—a series of shells around him, like the crystal globes of Ptolemaic astronomy in which the stars and planets were set, going out in theory to infinity, and in each shell himself staring at himself in the next shell.

The way the heads got tinier intrigued him. He measured the distance between the two mirrors on the stairs—eight feet almost to the inch—and calculated that the eighth reflection of his face was therefore 116 feet away, as if it were peering back at him from a little attic window down the street. He was almost tempted to go to the roof and scan with his binoculars for such windows.

But since it was himself he was seeing, the eighth reflection was sizewise 232 feet away. He would have to scan for dwarfs. Most interesting!

It was delightful to think of all the different things his reflections could be doing, if each had the power to move

around independently in the thin world of its crystal shell. Why, with all those shell-selves industriously occupied, Giles Nefandor could well become the world's most accomplished pianist, most knowledgeable field astronomer, and highest ranking of all chess grandmasters. The thought almost revived his dead ambitions—hadn't Lasker won the 1924 New York international tournament at 56!—while the charm of the speculation made him quite forget the menace of the black figure he'd now glimpsed three times.

Returning to reality somewhat reluctantly, he set himself to determine how many of his reflections he could see in practice rather than theory. He discovered that even with the best illumination, replacing all the dead bulbs in the wrought-iron chandelier, he could recognize at most only the ninth or perhaps the tenth reflection of his face. After that, his visage became a tiny indistinguishable ash-gray blank in the glass.

In reaching this conclusion, he also found that it was very difficult to count the reflections accurately. One or more would tend to get lost, or he'd lose count somewhere along the line. It was easiest to count the gilt mirror frames, since these stood in a close-packed row, like golden numeral ones—even though, for the tenth reflection of his face, say, this involved counting nineteen gilt ones, ten belonging to the mirror in front of him and nine to the mirror behind.

He wondered how he could have been so sure the first midnight that it was his eighth reflection which had shown the unpleasant alterations, and the seventh and sixth reflections on the two subsequent midnights. He decided that his shocked mind must have made a stabbing guess and that it very likely had been inaccurate—despite the instant uncertainty he'd felt. Next night he'd watch more carefully—and the fifth reflection would be easier to count.

He also discovered that although he could at most count ten reflections of his face, he could distinguish thirteen and perhaps fourteen reflections of a bright point of light—a pencil flashlight or even a candle-flame held close to his cheek. Those tinied candle-flames looked strangely like stars do in a cheap telescope. Odd.

He was eager to count more reflections than that—to break

his record, as it were—and he even fetched his best pair of binoculars and stared into the mirror with them, using for light-point an inch of brightly flaming candle affixed to the top of the right-hand binocular tube. But as he'd feared, this was no help at all, magnification fading out the more distant light-points to nothing, like using too powerful an eyepiece on a small telescope.

He thought of making and testing out a periscope—candle attachment—but that seemed a touch over-elaborate. And in any case it was high time he got to bed—almost noon. He felt in remarkably good spirits—for the first time in years he had discovered a new thing in which to be interested. Reflectology mightn't be quite up to astronomy, musicology, or chess, but it was an elegant little science all the same. And the Mirror World was fascinating!—he looked forward excitedly to what he'd next see in it. If only the phenomena didn't stop!

It was perhaps his eagerness which got him between the stairway mirrors next night several seconds before the clock began to strike twelve. His early arrival, however, didn't inhibit the phenomena, as he suddenly feared might happen. They began on the clock's first twanging stroke and whatever may have happened on previous evenings, it was certainly the fifth reflection which was altered tonight. The figures were only about 70 feet away now, as he'd earlier calculated, and so considerably larger. His fifth reflected face was pale as ever, yet he fancied its expression was changing—but because it had gone more than halfway into eclipse behind the massed heads in front of it, he couldn't be sure.

And the black figure definitely was wearing a veil, although he still couldn't make out the features behind it. Yes, a veil . . . and long black gloves, one of which sleekly cased the slender arm outstretched to his shoulder—for he suddenly realized that despite its height almost equal to his own, the figure was feminine.

A gust of fear hard to understand went through him at that discovery. As on the second night he wanted to strike out at the figure to prove its insubstantiality—smash the glass! But could that affect a figure 70 feet away? Would smashing the single glass in front of him smash all the nine

panes he calculated still separated him from the figures in the Mirror World?

Perhaps it would—and then the black figure in the Mirror World could come straight out at him . . . now.

In any case the veiled figure, if she continued her approach, would be with him in five more nights.

Perhaps smashing the glass now would simply end the horrifying, fascinating phenomena—foil the figure for good. But did he want to do that?

As he asked himself that last question, the twelfth stroke came and the Black Lady in the fifth reflection vanished.

The rest of the night, while he played Tchaikovsky and studied the chess games of Vera Menchik, Lisa Lane, and Mrs. Piatigorsky, searching for hidden depths in them, he reviewed the Lives and Loves of Giles Nefandor. He discovered that the women in his life had been few, and those with whom he had become seriously entangled, or to whom he had done possible injury, fewer still. The half dozen candidates were all, so far as he knew, happily married and/or otherwise successful. This of course included his divorced wife, although she had often complained of him and his "hobbies."

On the whole, though romanticizing women, he had tended to run away from them, he concluded wryly. Perhaps the Dark Lady was a generalized woman, emblematic of the entire sex, come to be revenged on him for his faintheartedness. His smile grew wryer. Perhaps her funeral costume was, anticipatorily, for him.

He thought, oh the human infatuation with guilt and retribution! The dread of and perhaps the desire for punishment! How ready we are to think others hate us!

During this search of his memory, the dark seed stirred several times—he seemed to be forgetting some one woman. But the seed refused to come clear of its burial until the clock struck its twelfth stroke next midnight, when just as the now clearly feminine figure in the fourth reflection vanished, he spoke the name, "Nina Fasinera."

That brought the buried incident—or rather all of it but one crucial part—back to him at once. It came back with that tigerish rush with which memory-lost small incidents

and encounters will—one moment nonexistent, the next recalled with almost dizzying suddenness.

It had happened all of ten years ago, six years at least before his divorce, and he had only once met Miss Fasinera—a tall slender woman with black hair, bold hawklike features, slightly protuberant eyes, and rather narrow long mobile lips which the slim tip of her tongue was forever wetting. Her voice had been husky yet rapid and she had moved with a nervous pantherine grace, so that her heavy silk dress had hissed on her gaunt yet challenging figure.

Nina Fasinera had come to him, here at this house, on the pretext of asking his advice about starting a school of piano in a distant suburb across the city. She was an actress too, she had told him, but he had gathered she had not worked much in recent years—just as he had soon been guessing that her age was not much less than his own, the jet of her hair a dye, the taut smoothness of her facial skin astringents and an ivory foundation make-up, her youthful energy a product of will power—in short, that she was something of a fake (her knowledge of piano rudimentary, her acting a couple of seasons of summer stock and a few bit parts on Broadway), but a brave and gallant fake nonetheless.

Quite soon she had made it clear that she was somewhat more interested in himself than in his advice and that she was ready—alert, on guard, dangerous, yet responsive—for any encounter with him, whether at a luncheon date a week in the future or here and now, on the instant.

It had been, he recalled, as if a duelist had lightly yet briskly brushed his cheek and lips with a thin leather glove. And yes, she *had* been wearing gloves, he remembered now of a sudden!—dark green ones edged with yellow, the same colors as her heavy silken dress.

He had been mightily attracted to her—strange how he had forgotten that taut nervous hour!—but he had just become re-reconciled with his wife for perhaps the dozenth time and there was about Nina Fasinera an avidity and a recklessness and especially an almost psychotic-seeming desperation which had frightened him or at least put

him very much on guard. He recalled wondering if she took drugs.

So he had courteously yet most coolly and with infinite stubborness refused all her challenges, which in the end had grown quite mocking, and he had shown her to the door and closed it on her.

And then the next day he had read in the paper of her suicide.

That was why he had forgotten the incident, he decided now—he had felt sharply guilty about it. Not that he thought that he possessed any fatal glamor, so that a woman would die at his rebuff, but that conceivably he had represented Nina Fasinera's last cast of the dice with destiny and he, not consciously knowing what was at stake, had coldly told her, "You lose."

But there was something else he was forgetting—something about her death which his mind had suppressed even more tightly—he was certain of that. Glancing about uneasily, he stepped down onto the landing beneath the low-dipping chandelier and hurried down the rest of the stairs. He had just recalled that he had torn out the story of her death from a cheap tabloid and now he spent the rest of the night hunting for it among his haphazardly-filed papers. Toward dawn he discovered it, a ragged-edged browning thing tucked inside one of his additional copies of the Chopin nocturnes.

FORMER BROADWAY ACTRESS
DRESSES FOR OWN FUNERAL

Last night the glamorous Nina Fasinera, who was playing on Broadway as recently as three years ago, committed suicide by hanging, according to police Lieutenant Ben Davidow, in the room she rented at 1738 Waverly Place, Edgemont.

A purse with 87 cents in it lay on top of her dresser. She left no note or diary, however, though police are still searching. Despondency was the probable cause of Miss Fasinera's act, according to her landlady Elvira Winters, who discovered the body at 3 A.M.

"She was a charming tenant, always the lady, and very beautiful," Mrs. Winters said, "but lately she'd seemed rest-

less and unhappy. I'd let her get five weeks behind on her rent. Now who'll pay it?"

Before taking her life, the 39-year-old Miss Fasinera had dressed herself in a black silk cocktail gown with black accessories including a veil and long gloves. She had also pulled down the shades and turned on all the lights in the room. It was the glare of these lights through the transom which caused Mrs. Winters to enter the actress' small, high-ceilinged room by a duplicate key when there was no answer to her knocking.

There she saw Miss Fasinera's body hanging by a short length of clothesline from the ceiling light-fixture. A chair lay overturned nearby. In its plastic seat-cover Lieutenant Davidow later found impressions which matched the actress' spike heels. Dr. Leonard Belstrom estimated she had been dead for four hours when he examined the body at 4 A.M.

Mrs. Winters said, "She was hanging between the tall mirror on the closet door and the wide one on her dresser. She could almost have reached out and kicked them, if she could have kicked. I could see her in both of them, over and over, when I tried to lift her up, before I felt how cold she was. And then all those bright lights. It was horrible, but like the theater."

When Giles Nefandor finished reading the clipping, he nodded twice and stood frowning. Then he got out maps of the city and suburbs and measured the straight-line distance from the rooming house in Edgemont to his own place across the city, then used the scales on the maps to convert his measurements to miles.

Eleven and a half, it came out, as nearly as the limits of accuracy would make it.

Then he calculated the time that had elapsed since Nina Fasinera's death: ten years and one hundred and one days. From Mrs. Winters' statement, the distance between the mirrors between which she'd hanged herself had been about eight feet—the same distance as between the mirrors on his stairs. If she'd entered the Mirror World when she died and been advancing toward this house as she'd moved, the last five nights—two reflections, or sixteen feet, each time—

then in ten years and one hundred and one days she'd have traveled 60,058 feet.

That figured out to eleven miles and 1,978 feet.

Eleven and a half miles, or close to it.

He puzzled, almost idly, as to why a person could travel only such a short distance in the Mirror World each twenty-four hours. It must depend on the distance between the two mirrors of your departure and also on the two mirrors of your arrival. Perhaps you traveled one reflection for each day and one for each night. Perhaps his theory of shells like the Ptolemaic ones was true and in any shell there was only one door and you had to search to find it, as if you were traversing a maze; to find the right two doors in the crystal maze in twenty-four hours could be a most difficult task. And there must be all sorts of interlocking dimensions in the Mirror World—slow paths and fast ones: if you traveled between mirrors set on different stars, you might travel faster than light.

He wondered, again almost idly, why he had been chosen for this visitation and why of all women it should have been Nina Fasinera who had had the strength and the will to thread purposefully the glassy labyrinth for ten years. He was not so much frightened as awed—that an hour's meeting should lead to all these consequences. Could undying love grow in an hour? Or was it undying hate that had flowered? Had Nina Fasinera known about the Mirror World when she'd hanged herself?—he recalled now that one of the things she'd said lightly when she'd tried to storm his interest had been that she was a witch. And she would have known about the mirrors on his stairs matching those in her room—she'd seen them.

Next midnight when he saw the black figure in the third reflection, he instantly recognized Nina's pale gauntly lovely face behind the veil and wondered why he had not recognized it at least four nights before. Rather anxiously he glanced down toward her black-stockinged ankles, which were slender and unswollen, then quickly back to her face again. She was gazing at him gravely, perhaps with the ghost of a smile.

By now his own reflection was almost wholly eclipsed

behind the ones in front of it. He could not even guess at his expression, nor did he want to. He had eyes only for Nina Fasinera. The impact of his years of unfelt loneliness shook him. He realized how desperately he had been wishing someone would search him out. The clock twanged on, swiftly marking time forever gone. Now he knew that he loved Nina Fasinera, had loved her since the one only hour they'd met. That was why he'd never stirred from this rotting house, why he'd prepared his mind for the Mirror World with chess-squares and singing wires and the stars. Since the hour they'd met . . . Except for color and the veil, her costume was the same she'd worn that fateful sixty minutes. If she'd only move, he thought, he'd faintly hear the hiss of the heavy silk through the five thick panes of glass remaining. If she'd only make that smile more certain . . .

The twelfth stroke twanged. This time he felt a terrible pang of loss as her figure vanished, but it was swiftly replaced with a feeling of surety and faith.

For the next three of his nocturnal days, Giles Nefandor was happy and light-hearted. He played the piano music he loved best: Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, Skriabin, Domenico Scarlatti. He played over the classic chess games of Nimzowitch, Alekhine, Capablanca, Emanuel Lasker, and Steinitz. He lovingly scanned his favorite celestial objects: the Beehive in Cancer, the Pleiades and Hyades, the Great Nebula in Orion's sword; he noticed new telescopic constellations and thought he saw the faintest crystal paths . . .

Occasionally his thoughts strayed eagerly yet guiltily, as if to forbidden fruit, to the mazy crystal corridors of the Mirror World, that secret diamond universe, and to his thousand wonderings about it: endless rooms and halls ceilinged and floored by transparency, and all the curious mirror-lost folk who lived adrift in them; piercingly sweet music; games of glass; revels and routs at a thousand levels; the tinkling of a million glittering chandeliers; diamond pathways to the farthest stars—

But he would always check these thoughts. There would be time enough for them, he felt certain. Experienced reality is always more satisfactory than imagination and illusion.

And often he would think of Nina and of the strangeness of their relationship: two atoms marked by one encounter and now drawn together among all the trillions of trillions of like atoms in the universe. Did it take ten years for love to grow, or only ten seconds? Both. But he checked these thoughts too and struck the keys, or moved the men, or re-focused the 'scope.

There were moments of doubt and fear. Nina might be the incarnation of hate, the jet-black spider in the crystal web. Certainly she was the unknown, though he felt he knew her so well. There had been those early intimations of psychosis, of a pantherine restlessness. And there had been that first glimpse of his face, sick with horror . . . But they were moments only.

Before each of the three remaining midnights he dressed with unusual care: the black suit newly brushed, the white shirt fresh, the narrow black necktie carefully knotted. It pleased him to think that he had not had to change the color of his suit to match that of her dress.

The first of the three midnights he was almost certain of her smile.

The next midnight he was sure of it. Now both figures were in the first reflection and he could see his own face again, scarce four feet away. He too was smiling gravely —the horror was gone.

Nina's black-gloved hand resting on his shoulder, the black fingertips touching his white collar, now seemed a lover's gesture.

The night after that the wind came back at last, blowing with more and more violence, although there were no clouds, so that the stars flickered and streamed impossibly in his 'scopes. The gale seemed to fasten on and shake their beams like crystal stalks. The sky was granular with wind. He could not remember such a blow. By eleven it had almost driven him from the roof, but he stuck it out although the wind increased in frenzy.

Instead of daunting, it filled him with a terrific excitement. He felt he could leap into the air and be blown light-swift anywhere he willed in the diamond-dazzling cosmos—except that he had another rendezvous.

When he finally went inside, shaking with the cold, and took off his fleece-lined coat, he became aware of a rhythmic crunching and crashing below, with rather long intervals between.

When he went down the stairs, they were dark and the crashes were louder. He realized that the great chandelier above the landing must be swinging so far that it was hitting the lead-webbed windows beyond, breaking their remaining panes—and had long since burst all the electric globes it carried.

He felt his way down by the wall, keeping close to it to avoid the chandelier's murderous swings. His fingers touched absolute smoothness—glass. Then the glass *rippled* for an instant, tingling his fingers, and he heard husky irregular breathing and the hissing of heavy silk. Then slender arms were around him and a woman's slim body was pressed against his and hungry lips met his lips, first through a faintly astringent, dryish, tormenting tantalizing veil, then flesh to flesh. He could feel under his hands the ribbed smoothness of heavy silk and of pliant, lightly fleshed ribs under that.

All in utter darkness and pandemonium. Almost drowned in the latter, midnight's last strokes were twanging.

A hand moved up his back and suede-cased fingers lightly brushed his neck. As the last stroke twanged, one of the fingers turned hard and stiff and cruel and dug under his collar so that it caught him like a hook by the collar and the tightly-knotted tie the collar covered. It wrenched him into the air. A terrible pain stabbed at the base of his skull, then filled it to bursting.

It was four days before the policeman who nightly patrolled beyond the gate discovered by a stab of his flashlight the body of Giles Nefandor—whom he knew by sight, though never a sight like this!—hanging from the wrought-iron chandelier above the landing strewn with glassy shards. It might have been longer than four days, except that a chessplayer across the city, contesting a correspondence game with the well-known recluse, spurred the police into action when the move on his last post-

card had gone ten days unanswered. His first queries were ignored, but an evening phone call got action.

The policeman reported back the unpleasant condition of the body, the black, hooked, wrought-iron chandelier-finger thrust under the noose of collar and tie, and the glass shards, and several other matters.

He never did report what he saw in one of the two mirrors on the stairs when he looked at it closely, his powerful flash beside his chest as his wristwatch signaled midnight. There was a stack of reflections of his own shocked, sharply shadowed face. But in the fourth reflection there were momentarily two figures, hand in hand, looking back toward him over their shoulders—and smiling impishly at him, he thought. The one figure was that of Giles Nefandor, though looking more youthful than he recalled seeing him in recent years. The other was that of a lady in black, the upper half of her face veiled.

I'M LOOKING FOR JEFF

At six-thirty that afternoon, Martin Bellows was sitting at the bar of the Tomtoms. In front of him was a tall glass of beer and behind the bar were two men in white aprons. The two men, one of them so old he was past caring about it, were discussing a matter—and while Martin wasn't really listening, much of the discussion seemed to be for his entertainment.

"If that girl comes in again I won't serve her. And if she starts to get funny I'll give her some real eye-shadow!"

"Regular fire eater, aren't you, Pops?"

"All this week, ever since she started to come in here, there's been trouble."

"Listen to him, will you? Aw, Pops, there's always trouble at a bar. Either somebody makes a play for somebody's girl, or else it's two life-long buddies—"

"I mean nasty trouble. What about those two girls Monday night? What about what the big guy did to Jack? What about Jake and Janice picking the Tomtoms to break up, and the way they did it? *She* was behind it every time. What about the broken glass in the cracked ice?"

"Shut up! Pops is nuts, friend. He gets wild ideas."

Martin Bellows looked up from his beer at Sol, the young working owner of the Tomtoms, and at the other man behind the bar. Then he glanced down the empty stretch of polished mahogany and over his shoulder at the dim, silent stretches of the booths, where the lights from behind the bar hardly picked up the silver and gilt. He grimaced faintly.

"Anything for a little life."

"Life!" Pops snorted. "That isn't what she'd give you, Mister."

There's no lonelier place in the world than a nightspot in the early hours of evening. It makes one think of all the guys who are alone—without a girl or a friend—restlessly searching. Its noiseless gloom is a sounding board for the faintest fears and aches of the heart. Its atmosphere, used to being pushed around by the loud mouths of happy drunks, is stagnant. The dark corners that should be filled with laughter and desire are ghostly. The bandstand, with the empty chairs sitting around in lifelike positions.

Martin felt it and hitched his stool an inch closer to the old man and the anxious, sharp-eyed Sol.

"Tell me about her, Pops," he said to the old man. "No, let him, Sol."

"All right, but I'm warning you it's a pipe dream."

Pops ignored his boss's remark. He spun the glass he was polishing in a slower rhythm. His face, puffed by beer and thumbed into odd hills and gullies by a lifetime of evanescent but illuminating experiences, grew thoughtful. Outside, traffic moaned and a distant train hooted. Pops pressed his lips together, bringing out a new set of hummocks in his cheeks.

"Name's Bobby," he began abruptly. "Blonde. About twenty. Always orders brandies. Smooth, kid face, except for the faintest scar that goes all the way across it. Black dress that splits down to her belly-button."

A car slammed to a stop outside. The three men looked up. But after a moment they heard the car go on.

"Never set eyes on her till last Sunday night," Pops continued. "Says she's from Michigan City. Always asking for a guy named Jeff. Always waiting to start her particular kind of hell."

"Who's this Jeff?" Martin asked.

Pops shrugged.

"And what's her particular kind of hell?"

Pops shrugged again, this time in Sol's direction. "He don't believe in her," he said gruffly.

"I'd like to meet her, Pops," Martin said smilingly. "Like some excitement. Beginning to feel a big evening coming on. And Bobby sounds like my kind of girl."

"I wouldn't introduce her to my last year's best friend!"

Sol laughed lightly but conclusively. He leaned across

the bar, confidentially, glancing back at the older man with secretive humor. He touched Martin's sleeve. "You've heard Pops' big story. Now get this: I've never been able to notice this girl, and I'm always here until I close. So far as I know, nobody's ever been able to notice her except Pops. I think she's just one of his pipe dreams. You know, the guy's a little weak in the head." He leaned a bit closer and spoke in a loud and mocking stage-whisper. *"Used weed when he was a boy."*

Pops' face grew a bit red, and the new set of hummocks stood out more sharply. "All right, Mr. Wise," he said. "I got something for you."

He put the glass down in the shining ranks, hung up the towel, fished a cigar box from under the bar.

"Last night she forgot her lighter," he explained. "It's covered with a dull, shiny black stuff, same as her dress. Look!"

The other two men leaned forward, but when Pops flipped up the cover there was nothing inside but the white paper lining.

Sol looked around at Martin with a slow grin. "You see?"

Pops swore and ripped out the lining. "One of the band must have swiped it!"

Sol laid his hand gently on the older man's arm. "Our musicians are nice, honest boys, Pops."

"But I tell you I put it there last thing last night."

"No, Pops, you just thought you did." He turned to Martin. "Not that strange things don't sometimes happen in bars. Why, just these last few days—"

A door slammed. The three men looked around. But it must have been a car outside, for nothing came in.

"Just these last few days," Sol repeated, "I've been noticing the damndest thing."

"What?" Martin asked.

Sol shot another of his secretively humorous glances toward Pops. "I'd like to tell you," he explained to Martin, "but I can't in front of Pops. He gets ideas."

Martin got off his stool, grinning. "I got to go anyhow. I'll see you later."

Not five minutes later, Pops smelled the perfume. A rotten, sickly smell. And his ears caught the mouse-faint creaking of the midmost barstool, and the tiny, ghostly sigh. And the awful feel of it went deep down inside him and grated on his bones like chalk. He began to tremble.

Then the creaking and the sigh came again through the gloom of the Tomtoms, a little impatiently, and he had to turn, although it was the last thing he wanted to do, and he had to look at the emptiness of the bar. And there, at the midmost stool, he saw it.

It was terribly indistinct, just a shadowy image superimposed on the silvers and gilts and midnight blues of the far wall, but he knew every part of it. The gleaming blackness of the dress, like the sheerest black silk stocking held up in near darkness. The pale gold of the hair, like motes in the beam of an amber spotlight. The paleness of face and hands, like puffs of powder floating up from a spilled compact. The eyes, like two tiny dark moths, hovering.

"What's the matter, Pops?" Sol asked sharply.

He didn't hear the question. Although he'd have given anything not to have to do it, he was edging shakily down the bar, hand grasping the inner margin for support, until he stood before the midmost stool.

Then he heard it, the faint clear voice that seemed to ride a mosquito's whine, as they say the human voice rides a radio wave. The voice that knifed deep, deep into his head.

"Been talking about me, Pops?"

He just trembled.

"Seen Jeff tonight, Pops?"

He shook his head.

"What's the matter, Pops? What if I'm dead and rotting? Don't shake so, Pops, you've got the wrong build for a shimmy dancer. You should be complimented I show myself to you. You know, Pops, at heart every woman's a stripper. But most of them just show themselves to the guy they like, or need. I'm that way. I don't show myself to the bums. And now give me a drink."

His trembling only increased.

The twin moths veered toward him. "Got polio, Pops?"

In a spasm of haste he jerked around, stooping. By

blind fumbling he found the brandy bottle under the ranked glasses, poured a shaky shot, set it down on the bar and stepped back.

"What the hell are you up to!"

He didn't even hear the angry question, or realize that Sol was moving toward him. Instead, he stood pressed back as far as he could, and watched the powdercloud fingers wind around the shot glass like tendrils of smoke, and heard the bat-shrill voice laugh ruefully and say, "Can't manage it that way, haven't got strength enough yet," and watched the twin moths, and something red and white-edged just below them, dip toward the brandy.

Then for a moment a feeling reached out and touched Sol, for though no hand was on the bar, the shot glass shook, and a little rill of brandy snaked down its side and pooled on the mahogany.

"What the . . ." Sol began, and then finished, "Those damn trucks, they shake the whole neighborhood."

And all the while Pops was listening to the bat-shrill voice: "That helped, Pops," and then, with a wheedling restlessness, "What's on tonight, Pops? Where can a girl get herself some fun? Who was the tall, dark and handsome that left a while ago? You called him Martin?"

Sol, finally fed up, came striding toward Pops. "And now you'll please explain just what the—"

"Wait!" Pops' hand snapped out and clamped on Sol's arm so that the younger man winced. "She's getting up," he gasped. "She's going after him. We got to warn him."

Sol's sharp gaze quickly flashed where Pops was looking. Then, with a little snarl, he shook off Pops' hand and gripped him in turn. "Look here, Pops, are you really smoking weed?"

The older man struggled to free himself. "We got to warn him, I tell you, before she drinks herself strong enough to make him notice her, and starts butting her broken-bottle ideas into his head."

"Pops!" The shout in the ear stiffened the older man, so that he stood there quietly, though rigid, while Sol said, "They probably have some nut bars out on West Madison Street they don't mind having nuts behind. Probably. I don't know. But you're going to have to start looking for

one of them if you pull any more of these goofy acts, or start talking about any Bobby and broken glass." His fingers kneaded the old man's biceps. "Get it?"

Pops' eyes were still wild. But he nodded twice, stiffly.

The evening started out feeling heavy and indigestible for Martin Bellows, but after a while it began to float like the diamond-dusted clouds of light around the street lamps. The session with Pops and Sol had given him a funny sort of edge, but he rode out the mood, drifting from tavern to tavern, occasionally treating a decent-looking guy to a drink and letting himself be treated in turn, sharing that courtesy silently, not talking very much, kidding a bit with the girls behind the bars while he covertly eyed the ones in front. After about five taverns and eight drinks he found he'd picked up one of them.

She was a small willowy girl with hair like a winter sunrise and a sleekly-fitting black dress, high-necked but occasionally revealing a narrow ribbon of sweet flesh. Her eyes were dark and friendly, and not exactly law-abiding, and her face had the smooth, matte quality of pale doeskin. He was aware of a faint gardenia perfume. He put his arm around her and kissed her lightly, under the street lamp, not closing his eyes, and as he did so he noticed that her face had a blemish. The tiniest line of paler flesh, like a single strand of spiderweb, began at her left temple and went straight across the lids of her left eye and the bridge of her nose and back across the right cheek. It enhanced her beauty, he thought.

"Where'll we go?" he asked.

"How about the Tomtoms?"

"A little too early." Then, "Say! Your name is Bobby. That's the name Pops . . . I'll bet you're . . ."

She shrugged. "Pops likes to talk."

"Sure you are! Pops was spieling about you at a great rate." He smiled at her fondly. "Claims you're an evil influence."

"Yes?"

"But don't worry about that. Pops is stark, raving nuts. Why, only this evening—"

"Well, let's go some place else," she interrupted. "I need a drink, lover."

And they were off, Martin with his heart singing, because what you always look for and never find had actually happened to him: he had found a girl that set his imagination and his thirst aflame. Every minute made him more desirous and prouder of her. Bobby was the perfect girl, he decided. She didn't get loud, or quarrelsome, or complaining, or soul-baring, or full of supposedly cute, deliberately exasperating whims. Instead, she was gay and smooth and beautiful, fitting his mood like a glove, yet with that hint of danger and savagery that can never be divorced from the dizzy fumes of alcohol and the dark streets of cities. He found himself growing very foolish about her. He even came to dote on her spiderlike scar, as if it were an expert repair job done on an expensive French doll.

They went to three or four delightful taverns, one where a gray-haired woman sang meltingly, one that showed silent comedies on a small screen instead of television, one full of framed pencil portraits of unknown, unimportant people. Martin got through all the early stages of intoxication—the eager, the uneasy, the dreamily blissful—and emerged safely into that crystal world where time almost stands still, where nothing is surer than your movements and nothing realer than your feelings, where the tight shell of personality is shattered and even dark walls and smoky sky and gray cement underfoot are sentient parts of you.

But after a while he kissed Bobby again, in the street, holding her longer and closer this time, plunging his lips to her neck, drowning in the autumn-garden sweetness of gardenia perfume, murmuring unsteadily, "You've got a place around here?"

"Yes."

"Well . . ."

"Not now, lover," she breathed. "First let's go to the Tomtoms."

He nodded and drew a bit back from her, not angrily. "Who's Jeff?" he asked.

She looked up at him. "Do you want to know?"

"Yes."

"Look, lover," she said softly, "I don't think you'll ever meet Jeff. But if you do, I want you to promise me one thing—I won't ever ask for anything else." She paused, and all the latent savagery glowed in the pale mask of her features. "I want you to promise me that you'll break the bottom off a beer bottle and jam it into his fat face."

"What'd he do to you?"

The pale mask was enigmatic. "Something much worse than you're thinking," she told him.

Looking down at Bobby's still, expectant face, Martin felt a thrill of murderous excitement go through him.

"Promise?" she asked.

"Promise," he said huskily.

Sol was content only during the busy hours when life ran high in the Tomtoms. Lovers for an evening or forever, touching knees under the tables, meant money in the register.

Sol and Pops had had a busy two hours, but now there was a lull between jazz sessions and Sol had time to chew the rag a bit with a burly and interesting-looking stranger.

"Talk about funny things, friend, here's one for you," he said, leaning across the bar with a confidential smile. "See that stool second on your left? Every night this week, after one A.M., nobody sits on it."

"It's empty now," the burly man told him.

"Sure, and the one next you. But I'm talking about after one A.M.—that's a couple of minutes yet—when our business hits its peak. No matter how big the crowd is—they could be standing two deep other places—nobody ever occupies that one stool. Why? I don't know. Maybe it's just chance. Maybe there's something funny I haven't figured out yet makes them sheer off from it."

"Just chance," the burly man opined stolidly. He had a fighter's jaw and a hooded gaze.

Sol smiled. Across the room the musicians were climbing back onto the bandstand, leisurely settling themselves. "Maybe, friend. But I got a feeling it's something else. Maybe something very obvious, like that it's got a leg that's a teensy bit loose. But I'm willing to bet it'll stay empty tonight. You watch. Six nights in a row is too good for

just chance. And I'd swear on a stack of Bibles it's been empty six nights straight."

"That just ain't so, Sol."

Sol turned. Pops was standing behind him, eyes scared and angry like they'd been earlier, lips working a little.

"What do you mean, Pops?" Sol asked him, trying not to show irritation in front of his new customer.

Pops walked off muttering.

"Got to see that the girls are taking care of the tables," Sol excused himself to the burly man and went after Pops. When he caught up with him he said in an undertone, not looking at him, "Damn it, Pops, are you just trying to make yourself unpleasant?" Across the room the bandleader stood up and smiled around at his boys. "If you think I'm going to take that kind of stuff from you, you're crazy."

"But, Sol," Pops' voice was quavery now, almost as if he were looking for protection, "there ain't ever been an empty place at the bar after one A.M. this week. And as for that particular stool—"

The humorous trumpet-bray opening the first number, spraying a ridicule of all pomp and circumstance across every square inch of the Tomtoms, cut him short.

"Yes?" Sol prompted.

But now Pops was no longer aware of him. It was one A.M. and across the smoky distance of the Tomtoms he was watching her come, materializing from the gloom of the entry, no longer a thing of smoke but strong with the night and the night's secret powers, solidly blocking off the first booths and the green of the dice-table as she passed them.

He noted without surprise or regret that she'd caught the nice boy she'd gone after, as she caught everything she went after. And now nearer and nearer—the towel dropped from Pops' fingers—past the bandstand, past the short, chromium-fenced stretch of bar where the girls got the drinks for the tables, until she spun herself up onto the midmost barstool and smiled cruelly at him. " 'Lo, Pops."

The nice boy sat down next to her and said, "Two brandies, Pops. Soda chasers." Then he took out a pack of cigarettes, began to battle through his pockets for matches.

She touched his arm. "Get me my lighter, Pops," she said.

Pops shook.

She leaned forward a little. The smile left her face. "I said get me my lighter, Pops."

He ducked like a man being shot at. His numb hands found the cigar box under the bar. There was something small and black inside. He grabbed it up as if it were a spider and thrust it down blindly on the bar, jerked back his hand. Bobby picked it up and flicked her thumb and lifted a small yellow flame to the nice boy's cigarette. The nice boy smiled at her lovingly and then asked, "Hey, Pops, what about our drinks?"

For Martin, the crystal world was getting to be something of a china shop. Stronger and stronger, slowly and pleasurably working toward a climax like the jazz, he could feel the urge toward wild and happy action. Masculine action, straight-armed, knife-edged, dramatic, destroying or loving half to death everything around him. Waiting for the inevitable—whatever it was would be—he almost gloated.

The old man half spilled their drinks, he was in such a hurry setting them down. Pops really did seem a bit nuts, just like Sol had said, and Martin stopped the remark he'd half intended to make about finding Pops' girl. Instead, he looked at Bobby.

"You drink mine, lover," she said, leaning close to be heard over the loud music, and again he saw the scar. "I've had enough."

Martin didn't mind. The double brandy burned icily along his nerves, building higher the cool flame of savagery that was fanned by the band blaring derision at the haughty heads and high towers of civilization.

A burly man, who was taking up a little too much room beside Martin, caught Sol's attention as the latter passed inside the bar, and said, "So far you're winning. It's still empty." Sol nodded, smiled, and whispered some witticism. The burly man laughed, and in appreciation said a dirty word.

Martin tapped his shoulder. "I'll trouble you not to use that sort of language in front of my girl."

The burly man looked at him and beyond him, said, "You're drunk, Joe," and turned away.

Martin tapped his shoulder again. "I said I'd trouble you—"

"You will, Joe, if you keep it up," the burly man told him, keeping a poker face. "Where is this girl you're talking about? In the washroom? I tell you, Joe, you're drunk."

"She's sitting right beside me," Martin said, enunciating each word with care and staring grimly into the eyes of the poker face.

The burly man smiled. He seemed suddenly amused. "Okay, Joe," he said, "let's investigate this girl of yours. What's she like? Describe her to me."

"Why, you—" Martin began, drawing back his arm.

Bobby caught hold of it. "No, lover," she said in a curiously intent voice. "Do as he says."

"Why the devil—"

"Please, lover," she told him. She was smiling tightly. Her eyes were gleaming. "Do just as he says."

Martin shrugged. His own smile was tight as he turned back to the burly man. "She's about twenty. She's got hair like pale gold. She looks a bit like Veronica Lake. She's dressed in black and she's got a black cigarette lighter."

Martin paused. Something in the poker face had changed. Perhaps it was a shade less ruddy. Bobby was tugging at his arm.

"You haven't told him about the scar," she said excitedly.

He looked at her, frowning.

"Tell him about the scar too."

"Oh, yes," he said, "and she's got the faintest scar running down from her left temple over her left eyelid and the bridge of her nose, and across her right cheek to the lobe of her—"

He stopped abruptly. The poker face was ashen, its lips were working. Then a red tide started to flood up into it, the eyes began to look murder.

Martin could feel Bobby's warm breath in his ear, the flick of her wet tongue. "Now, lover. Get him now. That's Jeff."

Swiftly, yet very deliberately, Martin shattered the rim of his chaser glass against the shot glass and jammed it into the burly man's flushing face.

A shriek that wasn't in the score came out of the clarinet. Someone in the booths screamed hysterically. A bar stool went over as someone else cringed away. Pops screamed. Then everything was whirling movement and yells, grabbing hands and hurtling shoulders, scrambles and sprawls, crashes and thumps, flashes of darkness and light, hot breaths and cold drafts, until Martin realized that he was running with Bobby beside him through gray pools of street light, around a corner into a darker street, around another corner. . . .

Martin stopped, dragging Bobby to a stop by her wrist. Her dress had fallen open. He could glimpse her small breasts. He grabbed her in his arms and buried his face in her warm neck, sucking in the sweet, heavy reek of gardenia.

She pulled away from him convulsively. "Come on, lover," she gasped in an agony of impatience. "Hurry, lover, hurry."

And they were running again. Another block and she led him up some hollowed steps and past a glass door and tarnished brass mailboxes and up a worn-carpeted stair. She fumbled at a door in a frenzy of haste, threw it open. He followed her into darkness.

"Oh, lover, hurry," she threw to him.

He slammed the door.

Then it came to him, and it stopped him in his tracks. The awful stench. There was gardenia in it, but that was the smallest part. It was an elaboration of all that is decayed and rotten in gardenia, swollen to an unbearable putrescence.

"Come to me, lover," he heard her cry. "Hurry, hurry, lover, hurry—what's the matter?"

The light went on. The room was small and dingy with table and chairs in the center and dark, overstuffed things back against the walls. Bobby dropped to the sagging sofa. Her face was white, taut, apprehensive.

"What did you say?" she asked him.

"That awful stink," he told her, involuntarily grimacing his distaste. "There must be something dead in here."

Suddenly her face turned to hate. "Get out!"

"Bobby," he pleaded, shocked. "Don't get angry. It's not your fault."

"Get out!"

"Bobby, what's the matter? Are you sick? You look green."

"*Get out!*"

"Bobby, what are you doing to your face? What's happening to you? *Bobby! BOBBY!*"

Pops spun the glass against the towel with practiced rhythm. He eyed the two girls on the opposite side of the bar with the fatherliness of an old and snub-nosed satyr. He drew out the moment as long as he could.

"Yep," he said finally, "it wasn't half an hour after he screwed the glass in that guy's face here that the police picked him up in the street outside her apartment, screaming and gibbering like a baboon. At first they were sure he was the one who killed her, and I guess they gave him a real going-over. But then it turned out he had an iron-clad alibi for the time of the crime."

"Really?" the redhead asked.

Pops nodded. "Sure thing. Know who really did it? They found out."

"Who?" the cute little brunette prompted.

"The same guy that got the glass in his face," Pops announced triumphantly. "This Jeff Cooper fellow. Seems he was some sort of a racketeer. Got to know this Bobby in Michigan City. They had a fight up there, don't know what, guess maybe she was two-timing him. Anyway, she thought he was over being mad, and he let her think so. He brought her down to Chicago, took her to this apartment he had, and beat her to death.

"That's right," the old man affirmed, rubbing it in when the cute little brunette winced. "Beat her to death with a beer bottle."

The redhead inquired curiously, "Did she ever come here, Pops? Did you ever see her?"

For a moment the glass in Pops' towel stopped twirling. Then he pursed his lips. "Nope," he said emphatically, "I couldn't have. 'Cause he murdered her the night he brought her down to Chicago. And that was a week before they found her." He chuckled. "A few days more and it would have been the sanitary inspectors who discovered the body —or the garbage man."

He leaned forward, smiling, waiting until the cute brunette had lifted her unwilling fascinated eyes. "Incidentally, that's why they couldn't pin it on this Martin Bellows kid. A week before—at the time she was killed—he was hundreds of miles away."

He twirled the gleaming glass. He noticed that the cute brunette was still intently watching him. "Yep," he said reflectively, "it was quite a job that other guy did on her. Beat her to death with a beer bottle. Broke the bottle doing it. One of the last swipes he gave her laid her face open all the way from her left temple to her right ear."

THE CASKET-DEMON

"THERE's nothing left for it—I've got to open the casket," said Vividy Sheer, glaring at the ugly thing on its square of jeweled and gold-worked altar cloth. The most photogenic face in the world was grim as a Valkyrie's this Malibu morning.

"No," shuddered Miss Bricker, her secretary. "Vividy, you once let me peek in through the little window and I didn't sleep for a week."

"It would make the wrong sort of publicity," said Maury Gender, the Nordic film-queen's press chief. "Besides that, I value my life." His gaze roved uneasily across the gray "Pains of the Damned" tapestries lining three walls of the conference room up to its black-beamed 20-foot ceiling.

"You forget, baroness, the runic rhymes of the Prussian Nostradamus," said Dr. Rumanescue, Vividy's astrologist and family magician. " *'Wenn der Kassette-Teufel . . .'*—or, to translate roughly, 'When the casket-demon is let out, The life of the Von Sheer is in doubt.' "

"My triple-great grandfather held out against the casket-demon for months," Vividy Sheer countered.

"Yes, with a demi-regiment of hussars for bodyguard, and in spite of their sabers and horse pistols he was found dead in bed at his Silesian hunting lodge within a year. Dead in bed and black as a beetle—and the eight hussars in the room with him as night-guard permanently out of their wits with fear."

"I'm stronger than he was—I've conquered Hollywood," Vividy said, her blue eyes sparkling and her face all Valkyrie. "But in any case if I'm to live weeks, let alone months, I *must* keep my name in the papers, as all three of you very well know."

"Hey, hey, what goes on here?" demanded Max Rath, Vividy Sheer's producer, for whom the medieval torture-tapestries had noiselessly parted and closed at the bidding of electric eyes. His own little shrewd ones scanned the casket, no bigger than a cigar box, with its tiny peep-hole of cloudy glass set in the top, and finally came to rest on the only really incongruous object in the monastically-appointed hall—a lavender-tinted bathroom scales.

Vividy glared at him, Dr. Rumanescue shrugged eloquently, Miss Bricker pressed her lips together, Maury Gender licked his own nervously and at last said, "Well, Vividy thinks she ought to have more publicity—every-day-without-skips publicity in the biggest papers and on the networks. Also, she's got a weight problem."

Max Rath surveyed in its flimsy dress of silk jersey the most voluptuous figure on six continents and any number of islands, including Ireland and Bali. "You got no weight-problem, Viv," he pronounced. "An ounce either way would be 480 grains away from pneumatic perfection." Vividy flicked at her bosom contemptuously. Rath's voice changed. "Now as for your name not being in the papers lately, that's a very wise idea—my own, in fact—and must be kept up. *Bride of God* is due to premiere in four months—the first picture about the life of a nun not to be thumbs-downed by any religious or non-religious group, even in the sticks. We want to keep it that way. When you toured the Florence nightclubs with Biff Parowan and took the gondola ride with that what's-his-name bellhop, the Pope slapped your wrist, but that's all he did—*Bride*'s still not on the Index. But the wrist-slap was a hint—and one more reason why for the next year there mustn't be one tiny smidgin of personal scandal or even-so-called harmless notoriety linked to the name of Vividy Sheer.

"Besides that, Viv," he added more familiarly, "the reporters and the reading public were on the verge of getting very sick of the way your name was turning up on the front page every day—and mostly because of chasing, at that. Film stars are like goddesses—they can't be seen too often, there's got to be a little reserve, a little mystery.

"Aw, cheer up, Viv. I know it's tough, but Liz and Jayne and Marilyn all learned to do without the daily headline

and so can you. Believe an old timer: euphoric pills are a safer and more lasting kick."

Vividy, who had been working her face angrily throughout Rath's lecture, now filled her cheeks and spat out her breath contemptuously, as her thrice-removed grandfather might have at the maunderings of an aged major domo.

"You're a fool, Max," she said harshly. "Kicks are for nervous virgins, the vanity of a spoilt child. *For me, being in the headlines every day is a matter of life or death.*"

Rath frowned uncomprehendingly.

"That's the literal truth she's telling you, Max," Maury Gender put in earnestly. "You see, this business happens to be tied up with what you might call the darker side of Vividy's aristocratic East Prussian heritage."

Miss Bricker stubbed out a cigarette and said, "Max, remember the trouble you had with that Spanish star, Marta Martinez, who turned out to be a *bruja*—a witch? Well, you picked something a little bit more out of the ordinary, Max, when you picked a Junker."

The highlights shifted on Dr. Rumanescue's thick glasses and shiny head as he nodded solemnly. He said, "There is a rune in the Doomsbook of the Von Sheers. I will translate." He paused. Then: " 'When the world has nothing more to say, The last of the Sheers will fade away.' "

As if thinking aloud, Rath said softly, "Funny, I'd forgotten totally about that East Prussian background. We always played it way down out of sight because of the Nazi association—and the Russian too." He chuckled, just a touch nervously. " '. . . fade away,' " he quoted. "Now why not just 'die?' Oh, to make the translation rhyme, I suppose." He shook himself, as if to come awake. "Hey," he demanded, "what is it actually? Is somebody blackmailing Vividy? Some fascist or East German commie group? Maybe with the dope on her addictions and private cures, or her affair with Geri Wilson?"

"Repeat: a fool!" Vividy's chest was heaving but her voice was icy. "For your information, Dr. 'Escue's translation was literal. *Day by day, ever since you first killed my news stories, I have been losing weight.*"

"It's a fact, Max," Maury Gender put in hurriedly. "The

news decline and the weight loss are matching curves. Believe it or not, she's down to a quarter normal."

Miss Bricker nodded with a shiver, disturbing the smoke wreathes around her. She said, "It's the business of an actress fading out from lack of publicity. But this time, so help me, *it's literal.*"

"I have been losing both *weight and mass,*" Vividy continued sharply. "Not by getting thinner, but *less substantial.* If I had my back to the window you'd notice it."

Rath stared at her, then looked penetratingly at the other three, as if to discover confirmation that it was all a gag. But they only looked back at him with uniformly solemn and unhappy—and vaguely frightened—expressions. "I don't get it," he said.

"The scales, Vividy," Miss Bricker suggested.

The film star stood up with an exaggerated carefulness and stepped onto the small rubber-topped violet platform. The white disk whirled under the glass window and came to rest at 37.

She said crisply, "I believe the word you used, Max, was 'pneumatic.' Did you happen to mean I'm inflated with hydrogen?"

"You've still got on your slippers," Miss Bricker pointed out.

With even greater carefulness, steadying herself a moment by the darkly gleaming table-edge, Vividy stepped out of her slippers and again onto the scales. This time the disk stopped at 27.

"The soles and heels are lead, fabric-covered," she rapped out to Rath. "I wear them so I won't blow over the edge when I take a walk on the terrace. Perhaps you now think I ought to be able to jump and touch the ceiling. Convincing, wouldn't it be? I rather wish I could, but my strength has decreased proportionately with my weight and mass."

"Those scales are gimmicked," Rath asserted with conviction. He stooped and grabbed at one of the slippers. His fingers slipped off it at the first try. Then he slowly raised and hefted it. "What sort of gag is this?" he demanded of Vividy. "Dammit, it does weigh five pounds."

She didn't look at him. "Maury, get the flashlight," she directed.

While the press chief rummaged in a tall Spanish cabinet, Miss Bricker moved to the view window that was the room's fourth wall and flicked an invisible beam. Rapidly the tapestry-lined drapes crawled together from either end, blotting out the steep, burnt-over, barely regrown Malibu hillside and briefly revealing in changing folds "The Torments of Beauty" until the drapes met, blotting out all light whatever.

Maury snapped on a flashlight long as his forearm. It lit their faces weirdly from below and dimly showed the lovely gray ladies in pain beyond them. Then he put it behind Vividy, who stood facing Rath, and moved it up and down.

As if no thicker anywhere than fingers, the lovely form of the German film star became a twin-stemmed flower in shades of dark pink. The arteries were a barely visible twining, the organs blue-edged, the skeleton deep cherry.

"That some kind of X-ray?" Rath asked, the words coming out in a breathy rush.

"You think they got technicolor, hand-size, screenless X-ray sets?" Maury retorted.

"I think they must have," Rath told him in a voice quiet but quite desperate.

"That's enough, Maury," Vividy directed. "Bricker, the drapes." Then as the harsh retangle of daylight swiftly reopened, she looked coldly at Rath and said, "You may take me by the shoulders and shake me. I give you permission."

The producer complied. Two seconds after he had grasped her he was shrinking back, his hands and arms violently trembling. It had been like shaking a woman stuffed with eiderdown. A woman warm and silky-skinned to the touch, but light almost as feathers. A pillow woman.

"I believe, Vividy," he gasped out. "I believe it all now." Then his voice went far away. "And to think I first cottoned to you because of that name Sheer. It sounded like silk stockings—luxurious, delicate . . . *insubstantial.* Oh my God!" His voice came part way back. "And you say this is all happening because of some old European witchcraft? Some crazy rhymes out of the past? How do you really think about it, how do you explain it?"

"Much of the past has no explanation at all," Dr. Rumanescue answered him. "And the further in the past, the less. The Von Sheers are a very old family, tracing back to pre-Roman times. The runes themselves—"

Vividy held up her palm to the astrologist to stop.

"Very well, you believe. Good," she said curtly to Rath, carefully sitting down at the table again behind the ugly black casket on its square of altar cloth. She continued in the same tones. "The question now is: how do I get the publicity I need to keep me from fading out altogether, the front-page publicity that will perhaps even restore me, build me up?"

Like a man in a dream Rath let himself down into a chair across the table from her and looked out the window over her shoulder. The three others watched them with mingled calculation and anxiety.

Vividy said sharply, "First, can the release date on *Bride of God* be advanced—to next Sunday week, say? I think I can last that long."

"Impossible, quite impossible," Rath muttered, still seeming to study something on the pale green hillside scrawled here and there with black.

"Then hear another plan. There is an unfrocked Irish clergyman named Kerrigan who is infatuated with me. A maniac but rather sweet. He's something of a poet—he'd like me light as a feather, find nothing horrible in it. Kerrigan and I will travel together to Monaco—"

"No, no!" Rath cried out in sudden anguish, looking at her at last. "No matter the other business, witchcraft or whatever, we can't have anything like that! It would ruin the picture, kill it dead. It would mean my money and all our jobs. Vividy, I haven't told you, but a majority committee of stockholders wants me to get rid of you and reshoot *Bride*, starring Alicia Killian. They're deathly afraid of a last-minute Sheer scandal. Vividy, you've always played square with me, even at your craziest. You wouldn't . . ."

"No, I wouldn't, even to save my life," she told him, her voice mixing pride and contempt with an exactitude that broke through Maury Gender's miseries and thrilled him with her genuine dramatic talent. He said, "Max, we've

been trying to convince Vividy that it might help to use some routine non-scandalous publicity."

"Yes," Miss Bricker chimed eagerly, "we have a jewel robbery planned for tonight, a kitchen fire for tomorrow."

Vividy laughed scornfully. "And I suppose the day after that I get lost in Griffith Park for three hours, next I rededicate an orphanage, autograph a Nike missile, and finally I have a poolside press interview and bust a brassiere strap. That's cheap stuff, the last resort of has-beens. Besides, I don't think it would work."

Rath, his eyes again on the hillside, said absently, "To be honest, I don't think it would either. After the hot stuff you've always shot them, the papers wouldn't play."

"Very well," Vividy said crisply, "that brings us back to where we started. There's nothing left for it—I've got to . . ."

"Hey wait a second!" Rath burst out with a roar of happy excitement. "We've got your physical condition to capitalize on! Your loss of weight is a scientific enigma, a miracle—and absolutely nonscandalous! It'll mean headlines for months, for years. Every woman will want to know your secret. So will the spacemen. We'll reveal you first to UCLA, or USC, then the Mayo Clinic and maybe Johns Hopkins . . . Hey, what's the matter, why aren't you all enthusiastic about this?"

Maury Gender and Miss Bricker looked toward Dr. Rumanescue, who coughed and said gently, "Unfortunately, there is a runic couplet in the Von Sheer Doomsbook that seems almost certainly to bear on that very point. Translated: 'If a Sheer be weighed in the market place, He'll vanish away without a trace.' "

"In any case, I refuse to exhibit myself as a freak," Vividy added hotly. "I don't mind how much publicity I get because of my individuality, my desires, *my will*—no matter how much it shocks and titillates the little people, the law-abiders, the virgins and eunuchs and moms—but to be confined to a hospital and pried over by doctors and physiologists . . . No!"

She fiercely brought her fist down on the table with a soft, insubstantial thud that made Rath draw back and set Miss Bricker shuddering once more. Then Vividy Sheer said,

"For the last time: There's nothing left for it—I've got to open the casket!"

"Now what's in the casket?" Rath asked with apprehension.

There was another uncomfortable silence. Then Dr. Rumanescue said softly, with a little shrug, "The casket-demon. The Doom of the Von Sheers." He hesitated. "Think of the genie in the bottle. A genie with black fangs."

Rath asked, "How's that going to give Vividy publicity?"

Vividy answered him. "It will attack me, try to destroy me. Every night, as long as I last. No scandal, only horror. But there will be headlines—oh yes, there will be headlines. And I'll stop fading."

She pushed out a hand toward the little wrought-iron box. All their eyes were on it. With its craggy, tortured surface, it looked as if it had been baked in Hell, the peephole of milky glass an eye blinded by heat.

Miss Bricker said, "Vividy, don't."

Dr. Rumanescue breathed, "I advise against it."

Maury Gender said, "Vividy, I don't think this is going to work out the way you think it will. Publicity's a tricky thing. I think—"

He broke off as Vividy clutched her hand back to her bosom. Her eyes stared as if she felt something happening inside her. Then, groping along the table, hanging onto its edge clumsily as though her fingers were numbed, she made her way to the scale and maneuvered herself onto it. This time the disk stopped at 19.

With a furious yet strengthless haste, like a scarecrow come alive and floating as much as walking, the beautiful woman fought her way back to the box and clutched it with both hands and jerked it towards her. It moved not at all at first, then a bare inch as she heaved. She gave up trying to pull it closer and leaned over it, her sharply bent waist against the table edge, and tugged and pried at the casket's top, pressing rough projections as if they were parts of an antique combination-lock.

Maury Gender took a step toward her, then stopped. None of the others moved even that far to help. They watched her as if she were themselves strengthless in a nightmare—a ghost woman as much tugged by the tiny box as she was

tugging at it. A ghost woman in full life colors—except that Max Rath, sitting just opposite, saw the hillside glowing very faintly through her.

With a whir and a clash the top of the box shot up on its hinges, there was a smoky puff and a stench that paled faces and set Miss Bricker gagging, then something small and intensely black and very fast dove out of the box and scuttled across the altar cloth and down a leg of the table and across the floor and under the tapestry and was gone.

Maury Gender had thrown himself out of its course, Miss Bricker had jerked her feet up under her, as if from a mouse, and so had Max Rath. But Vididy Sheer stood up straight and tall, no longer strengthless-seeming. There was icy sky in her blue eyes and a smile on her face—a smile of self-satisfaction that became tinged with scorn as she said, "You needn't be frightened. We won't see it again until after dark. Then—well, at least it will be interesting. Doubtless his hussars saw many interesting things during the seven months my military ancestor lasted."

"You mean you'll be attacked by a black rat?" Max Rath faltered.

"It will grow," said Dr. Rumanescue quietly.

Scanning the hillside again, Max Rath winced, as if it had occurred to him that one of the black flecks out there might now be *it*. He looked at his watch. "Eight hours to sunset," he said dully. "We got to get through eight hours."

Vividy laughed ripplingly. "We'll all jet to New York," she said with decision. "That way there'll be three hours' less agony for Max. Besides, I think Times Square would be a good spot for the first . . . appearance. Or maybe Radio City. Maury, call the airport! Bricker, pour me a brandy!"

Next day the New York tabloids carried half-column stories telling how the tempestuous film star Vividy Sheer had been attacked or at least menaced in front of the United Nations Building at 11:59 P.M. by a large black dog, whose teeth had bruised her without drawing blood, and which had disappeared, perhaps in company with a boy who had thrown a stink bomb, before the first police arrived. The *Times* and the *Herald Tribune* carried no stories whatever.

The item got on Associated Press but was not used by many papers.

The day after that *The News of the World* and *The London Daily Mirror* reported on inside pages that the German-American film actress Vividy Sheer had been momentarily mauled in the lobby of Claridge's Hotel by a black-cloaked and black-masked man who moved with a stoop and very quickly—as if, in fact, he were more interested in getting away fast than in doing any real damage to the Nordic beauty, who had made no appreciable effort to resist the attacker, whirling in his brief grip as if she were a weightless clay figure. *The News of the World* also reproduced in one-and-a-half columns a photograph of Vividy in a low-cut dress showing just below her neck an odd black clutch-mark left there by the attacker, or perhaps drawn beforehand in india ink, the caption suggested. In *The London Times* was a curt angry editorial crying shame at notoriety-mad actresses and conscienceless press agents who staged disgusting scenes in respectable places to win publicity for questionable films—even to the point of setting off stench bombs—and suggesting that the best way for all papers to handle such nauseous hoaxes was to ignore them utterly—and cooperate enthusiastically but privately with the police and the deportation authorities.

On the third day, as a few eyewitnesses noted but were quite unwilling to testify (what Frenchman wants to be laughed at?), Vividy Sheer was snatched off the top of the Eiffel Tower by a great ghostly black paw, or by a sinuous whirlwind laden with coal dust and then deposited under the Arc de Triomphe—or she and her confederates somehow created the illusion that this enormity had occurred. But when the Sheer woman, along with four of her film cohorts, reported the event to the Sureté, the French police refused to do anything more than smile knowingly and shrug, though one inspector was privately puzzled by something about the Boche film-bitch's movements—she seemed to be drawn along by her companions rather than walking on her own two feet. Perhaps drugs were involved, Inspector Gibaud decided—cocaine or mescalin. What an indecency though, that the woman should smear herself with shoeblacking to bolster her lewd fantasy!

Not one paper in the world would touch the story, not even one of the Paris dailies carried a humorous item about *Le bête noir et énorme*—some breeds of nonsense are unworthy even of humorous reporting. They are too silly (and perhaps in some silly way a shade too disturbing) for even silly-season items.

During the late afternoon of the fourth day, the air was very quiet in Rome—the quiet that betokens a coming storm—and Vividy insisted on taking a walk with Max Rath. She wore a coif and dress of white silk jersey, the only material her insubstantial body could tolerate. Panchromatic make-up covered her black splotches. She had recruited her strength by sniffing brandy—the only way in which her semi-porous flesh could now absorb the fierce liquid. Max was fretful, worried that a passerby would see through his companion, and he was continually maneuvering so that she would not be between them and the lowering sky. Vividy was tranquil, speculating without excitement about what the night might bring and whether a person who fades away dies doubly or not at all and what casket-demons do in the end to their victims and whether the Gods themselves depend for their existence on publicity.

As they were crossing a children's park somewhere near the Piazza dell' Esquilino, there was a breath of wind, Vividy moaned very quietly, her form grew faint, and she blew off Max's arm and down the path, traveling a few inches above it, indistinct as a camera image projected on dust motes. Children cried out softly and pointed. An eddy caught her, whirled her up, then back toward Max a little, then she was gone.

Immediately afterward mothers and priests came running and seven children swore they had been granted a vision of the Holy Virgin, while four children maintained they had seen the ghost or double of the film star Vividy Sheer. Certainly nothing material remained of the courageous East Prussian except a pair of lead slippers—size four-and-one-half—covered with white brocade.

Returning to the hotel suite and recounting his story, Max Rath was surprised to find that the news did not dispel his companions' nervous depression.

Miss Bricker, after merely shrugging at Max's story, was saying, "Maury, what do you suppose really happened to those eight hussars?" and Maury was replying, "I don't want to imagine, only you got to remember that that time the casket-demon wasn't balked of his victim."

Max interrupted loudly, "Look, cut the morbidity. It's too bad about Vividy, but what a break for *Bride of God!* Those kids' stories are perfect publicity—and absolutely non-scandalous. *Bride'll* gross forty million! Hey! Wake up! I know it's been a rough time, but now it's over."

Maury Gender and Miss Bricker slowly shook their heads. Dr. Rumanescue motioned Max to approach the window. While he came on with slow steps, the astrologist said, "Unfortunately, there is still another pertinent couplet. Roughly: 'If the demon be balked of a Von Sheer kill, On henchmen and vassals he'll work his will!" He glanced at his wrist. "It is three minutes to sunset." He pointed out the window. "Do you see, coming up the Appian Way, that tall black cloud with blue lightning streaking through it?"

"You mean the cloud with a head like a wolf?" Max faltered.

"Precisely," Dr. Rumanescue nodded. "Only, for us, it is not a cloud," he added resignedly and returned to his book.

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