

OFF THE BEATEN ORBIT

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(Original title:
GALAXY OF GHOULS)

Sixteen startling stories
of science, fantasy
and the unknown

by

Anthony Boucher

Ray Bradbury

Theodore Sturgeon

Robert Sheckley

Fredric Brown

Leslie Charteris

and
ten others

Edited by Judith Merril

***Slickie Millane found a dame he couldn't
shoot***

***Thomis' teacher turned him into a
wheelbarrow***

***Sam Weber got a Bild-a-man set for
Christmas***

Werewolves were discovered on Mars

Those are not, to put it mildly, the themes of ordinary fiction—or even of ordinary science-fiction. They're a sample of the stories in this book—free-wheeling explorations—grim, hilarious, baffling—of the wilder worlds of the mind, of the misty border between logic and madness.

Top anthologist Judith Merrill has selected sixteen top-flight stories to enchant, thrill and horrify readers with a yen for the offbeat.

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(Original title: Galaxy of Ghouls)

edited by JUDITH MERRIL



PYRAMID BOOKS
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OFF THE BEATEN ORBIT

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Of all the legends and stories connected with witchcraft, perhaps the most persistently terrifying are those involving the werewolf concept: the idea that certain human beings live under a Devil-given curse that transforms them involuntarily, at certain appropriately sinister times and places, into murderous beasts. The old tales, from different parts of the world, tell of weretigers, wereapes, and a dozen other varieties, but the most familiar to us is the European werewolf.

This story approaches the idea from a completely novel viewpoint. The reader should be warned, before starting, that Mr. Elliott, when not occupied with writing science-fantasy, radio and television plays, and comics, is a fully accredited professional magician—and knows, perhaps, whereof he speaks.

WOLVES DON'T CRY

by Bruce Elliott

THE NAKED MAN behind the bars was sound asleep. In the cage next to him a bear rolled over on its back, and peered sleepily at the rising sun. Not far away a jackal paced springily back and forth as though essaying the impossible, trying to leave its own stench far behind.

Flies were gathered around the big bone that rested near the man's sleeping head. Little bits of decaying flesh attracted the insects and their hungry buzzing made the man stir uneasily. Accustomed to instant awakening, his eyes flickered and simultaneously his right hand darted out and smashed down at the irritating flies.

They left in a swarm, but the naked man stayed frozen in the position he had assumed. His eyes were on his hand.

He was still that way when the zoo attendant came close to the cage. The attendant, a pail of food in one hand, a pail of water in the other, said, "Hi Lobo, up and at 'em, the customers'll be here soon." Then he too froze.

Inside the naked man's head strange ideas were stirring. His paw, what had happened to it? Where was the stiff gray hair? The jet-black steel-strong nails? And what was the

odd fifth thing that jutted out from his paw at right angles? He moved it experimentally. It rotated. He'd never been able to move his dewclaw, and the fact that he could move this fifth extension was somehow more baffling than the other oddities that were puzzling him.

"You goddamn drunks!" the attendant raved. "Wasn't bad enough the night a flock of you came in here, and a girl bothered the bear and lost an arm for her trouble, no, that wasn't bad enough. Now you have to sleep in my cages! And where's Lobo? What have you done with him?"

The naked figure wished the two-legged would stop barking. It was enough trouble trying to figure out what had happened without the angry short barks of the two-legged who fed him interfering with his thoughts.

Then there were many more of the two-leggeds and a lot of barking, and the naked one wished they'd all go away and let him think. Finally the cage was opened and the two-leggeds tried to make him come out of his cage. He retreated hurriedly on all fours to the back of his cage towards his den.

"Let him alone," the two-legged who fed him barked. "Let him go into Lobo's den. He'll be sorry!"

Inside the den, inside the hollowed-out rock that so cleverly approximated his home before he had been captured, he paced back and forth, finding it bafflingly uncomfortable to walk on his naked feet. His paws did not grip the ground the way they should and the rock hurt his new soft pads.

The two-legged ones were getting angry, he could smell the emotion as it poured from them, but even that was puzzling, for he had to flare his nostrils wide to get the scent, and it was blurred, not crisp and clear the way he ordinarily smelled things. Throwing back his head, he howled in frustration and anger. But the sound was wrong. It did not ululate as was its wont. Instead he found to his horror that he sounded like a cub, or a female.

What had happened to him?

Cutting one of his soft pads on a stone, he lifted his foot and licked at the blood.

His pounding heart almost stopped.

This was no wolf blood.

Then the two-legged ones came in after him and the fight was one that ordinarily he would have enjoyed, but now his heart was not in it. Dismay filled him, for the taste of his

own blood had put fear in him. Fear unlike any he had ever known, even when he was trapped that time, and put in a box, and thrown onto a wheeled thing that had rocked back and forth, and smelled so badly of two-legged things.

This was a new fear, and a horrible one.

Their barking got louder when they found that he was alone in his den. Over and over they barked, not that he could understand them, "What have you done with Lobo? Where is he? Have you turned him loose?"

It was only after a long time, when the sun was riding high in the summer sky, that he was wrapped in a foul-smelling thing and put in a four-wheeled object and taken away from his den.

He would never have thought, when he was captured, that he would ever miss the new home that the two-leggeds had given him, but he found that he did, and most of all, as the four-wheeled thing rolled through the city streets, he found himself worrying about his mate in the next cage. What would she think when she found him gone, and she just about to have a litter? He knew that most males did not worry about their young, but wolves were different. No mother wolf ever had to worry, the way female bears did, about a male wolf eating his young. No indeed; wolves were different.

And being different, he found that worse than being tied up in a cloth and thrown in the back of a long, wheeled thing was the worry he felt about his mate, and her-young-to-be.

But worse was to come: when he was carried out of the moving thing, the two-legged ones carried him into a big building and the smells that surged in on his outraged nostrils literally made him cringe. There was sickness, and stench worse than he had ever smelled, and above and beyond all other smells the odor of death was heavy in the long white corridors through which he was carried.

Seeing around him as he did ordinarily in grays and blacks and whites, he found that the new sensations that crashed against his smarting eyeballs were not to be explained by anything he knew. Not having the words for red, and green, and yellow, for pink and orange and all the other colors in a polychromatic world, not having any idea of what they were, just served to confuse him even more miserably.

He moaned.

The smells, the discomfort, the horror of being handled, were as nothing against the hurt his eyes were enduring.

Lying on a flat hard thing he found that it helped just to stare directly upwards. At least the flat covering ten feet above him was white, and he could cope with that.

The two-legged thing sitting next to him had a gentle bark, but that didn't help much.

The two-legged said patiently over and over again, "Who are you? Have you any idea? Do you know where you are? What day is this?"

After a while the barks became soothing, and nude no longer, wrapped now in a long wet sheet that held him cocoonlike in its embrace, he found that his eyes were closing. It was all too much for him.

He slept.

The next awakening was if anything worse than the first.

First he thought that he was back in his cage in the zoo, for directly ahead of him he could see bars. Heaving a sigh of vast relief, he wondered what had made an adult wolf have such an absurd dream. He could still remember his puppyhood when sleep had been made peculiar by a life unlike the one he enjoyed when awake. The twitchings, the growls, the sleepy murmurs—he had seen his own sons and daughters go through them and they had reminded him of his youth.

But now the bars were in front of him and all was well.

Except that he must have slept in a peculiar position. He was stiff, and when he went to roll over he fell off the hard thing he had been on and crashed to the floor.

Bars or no bars, this was not his cage.

That was what made the second awakening so difficult. For, once he had fallen off the hospital bed, he found that his limbs were encumbered by a long garment that flapped around him as he rolled to all fours and began to pace fearfully back and forth inside the narrow confines of the cell that he now inhabited.

Worse yet, when the sound of his fall reached the ears of a two-legged one, he found that some more two-legs hurried to his side and he was forced, literally forced into an odd garment that covered his lower limbs.

Then they made him sit on the end of his spine and it hurt cruelly, and they put a metal thing in his right paw,

and wrapped the soft flesh of his paw around the metal object and holding both, they made him lift some kind of slop from a round thing on the flat surface in front of him.

That was bad, but the taste of the mush they forced into his mouth was grotesque.

Where was his meat? Where was his bone? How could he sharpen his fangs on such food as this? What were they trying to do? Make him lose his teeth?

He gagged and regurgitated the slops. That didn't do the slightest bit of good. The two-leggeds kept right on forcing the mush into his aching jaws. Finally, in despair, he kept some of it down.

Then they made him balance on his hind legs.

He'd often seen the bear in the next cage doing this trick and sneered at the big fat oaf for pandering to the two-leggeds by aping them. Now he found that it was harder than he would have thought. But finally, after the two-leggeds had worked with him for a long time, he found that he could, by much teetering, stand erect.

But he didn't like it.

His nose was too far from the floor, and with whatever it was wrong with his smelling, he found that he had trouble sniffing the ground under him. From this distance he could not track anything. Not even a rabbit. If one had run right by him, he thought, feeling terribly sorry for himself, he'd never be able to smell it, or if he did, be able to track it down, no matter how fat and juicy, for how could a wolf run on two legs?

They did many things to him in the new big zoo, and in time he found that, dislike it as much as he did, they could force him by painful expedients to do many of the tasks they set him.

That, of course, did not help him to understand why they wanted him to do such absurd things as encumber his legs with cloth that flapped and got in the way, or balance precariously on his hind legs, or any of the other absurdities they made him perform. But somehow he surmounted everything and in time even learned to bark a little the way they did. He found that he could bark *hello* and *I'm hungry* and, after months of effort, ask *why can't I go back to the zoo?*

But that didn't do much good, because all they ever barked back was *because you're a man*.

Now of many things he was unsure since that terrible morning, but of one thing he was sure: he *was* a wolf.

Other people knew it too.

He found this out on the day some outsiders were let into the place where he was being kept. He had been sitting, painful as it was, on the tip of his spine, in what he had found the two-leggeds called a chair, when some shes passed by.

His nostrils closed at the sweet smell that they had poured on themselves, but through it he could detect the real smell, the female smell, and his nostrils had flared, and he had run to the door of his cell, and his eyes had become red as he looked at them. Not so attractive as his mate, but at least they were covered with fur, not like the peeled ones that he sometimes saw dressed in stiff white crackling things.

The fur-covered ones had giggled just like ripening she-cubs, and his paws had ached to grasp them, and his jaws ached to bite into their fur-covered necks.

One of the fur-covered two-leggeds had giggled, "Look at that wolf!"

So some of the two-leggeds had perception and could tell that the ones who held him in this big strange zoo were wrong, that he was not a man, but a wolf.

Inflating his now puny lungs to the utmost he had thrown back his head and roared out a challenge that in the old days, in the forest, would have sent a thrill of pleasure through every female for miles around. But instead of that blood-curdling, stomach-wrenching roar, a little barking, choking sound came from his throat. If he had still had a tail it would have curled down under his belly as he slunk away.

The first time they let him see himself in what they called a mirror he had moaned like a cub. Where was his long snout, the bristling whiskers, the flat head, the pointed ears? What was this thing that stared with dilated eyes out of the flat shiny surface? White-faced, almost hairless save for a jet-black bar of eyebrows that made a straight line across his high round forehead, small-jawed, small-toothed—he knew with a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach that even a year-old would not hesitate to challenge him in the mating fights.

Not only challenge him but beat him, for how could he

fight with those little canines, those feeble white hairless paws?

Another thing that irritated him, as it would any wolf, was that they kept moving him around. He would no sooner get used to one den and make it his own but what they'd move him to another one.

The last one that contained him had no bars.

If he had been able to read his chart he would have known that he was considered on the way to recovery, that the authorities thought him almost "cured" of his aberration. The den with no bars was one that was used for limited liberty patients. They were on a kind of parole basis. But he had no idea of what the word meant and the first time he was released on his own cognizance, allowed to make a trip out into the "real" world, he put out of his mind the curious forms of "occupational therapy" with which the authorities were deviling him.

His daytime liberty was unreal and dragged by in a way that made him almost anxious to get back home to the new den.

He had all but made up his mind to do so, when the setting sun conjured up visions which he could not resist. In the dark he could get down on all fours!

Leaving the crowded city streets behind him he hurried out into the suburbs where the spring smells were making the night air exciting.

He had looked forward so to dropping on all fours and racing through the velvet spring night that when he did so, only to find that all the months of standing upright had made him too stiff to run, he could have howled. Then too the clumsy leather things on his back paws got in the way, and he would have ripped them off, but he remembered how soft his new pads were, and he was afraid of what would happen to them.

Forcing himself upright, keeping the curve in his back that he had found helped him to stand on his hind legs, he made his way cautiously along a flat thing that stretched off into the distance.

The four-wheeler that stopped near him would ordinarily have frightened him. But even his new weak nose could sniff through the rank acrid smells of the four-wheeler and find, under the too sweet something on the two-legged female, the

real smell, so that when she said, "Hop in, I'll give you a lift," he did not run away. Instead he joined the she.

Her bark was nice, at first.

Later, while he was doing to her what her scent had told him she wanted done, her bark became shrill, and it hurt even his new dull ears. That, of course, did not stop him from doing what had to be done in the spring.

The sounds that still came from her got fainter as he tried to run off on his hind legs. It was not much faster than a walk, but he had to get some of the good feeling of the air against his face, of his lungs panting; he had to run.

Regret was in him that he would not be able to get food for the she and be near her when she whelped, for that was the way of a wolf; but he knew too that he would always know her by her scent, and if possible when her time came he would be at her side.

Not even the spring running was as it should be, for without the excitement of being on all fours, without the nimbleness that had been his, he found that he stumbled too much, there was no thrill.

Besides, around him, the manifold smells told him that many of the two-leggeds were all jammed together. The odor was like a miasma and not even the all-pervading stench that came from the four-wheelers could drown it out.

Coming to a halt, he sat on his haunches, and for the first time he wondered if he were really, as he knew he was, a wolf, for a salty wetness was making itself felt at the corners of his eyes.

Wolves don't cry.

But if he were not a wolf, what then was he? What *were* all the memories that crowded his sick brain?

Tears or no, he knew that he was a wolf. And being a wolf, he must rid himself of this soft pelt, this hairlessness that made him sick at his stomach just to touch it with his too soft pads.

This was his dream, to become again as he had been. To be what was his only reality, a wolf, with a wolf's life and a wolf's loves.

That was his first venture into the reality of the world at large. His second day and night of "limited liberty" sent him hurrying back to his den. Nothing in his wolf life had prepared him for what he found in the midnight streets of the

big city. For he found that bears were not the only males from whom the shes had to protect their young. . . .

And no animal of which he had ever heard could have moaned, as he heard a man moan, "If only pain didn't hurt so much . . ." And the strangled cries, the thrashing of limbs, the violence, and the sound of a whip. He had never known that humans used whips on themselves too. . . .

The third time out, he tried to drug himself the way the two-leggeds did by going to a big place where, on a screen, black and white shadows went through imitations of reality. He didn't go to a show that advertised it was in full glorious color, for he found the other shadows in neutral grays and blacks and whites gave a picture of life the way his wolf eyes were used to looking at it.

It was in this big place where the shadows acted that he found that perhaps he was not unique. His eyes glued to the screen, he watched as a man slowly fell to all fours, threw his head back, bayed at the moon, and then, right before everyone, turned into a wolf!

A *werewolf*, the man was called in the shadow play. And if there were werewolves, he thought, as he sat frozen in the middle of all the seated two-leggeds, then of course there must be *weremen* (would that be the word?) . . . and he was one of them. . . .

On the screen the melodrama came to its quick, bloody, foreordained end and the werewolf died when shot by a silver bullet. . . . He saw the fur disappear from the skin, and the paws change into hands and feet.

All he had to do, he thought as he left the theatre, his mind full of his dream, was to find out how to become a wolf again, without dying. Meanwhile, on every trip out without fail he went to the zoo. The keepers had become used to seeing him. They no longer objected when he threw little bits of meat into the cage to his pups. At first his she had snarled when he came near the bars, but after a while, although still puzzled, and even though she flattened her ears and sniffed constantly at him, she seemed to become resigned to having him stand as near the cage as he possibly could.

His pups were coming along nicely, almost full-grown. He was sorry, in a way, that they had to come to wolfhood behind bars, for now they'd never know the thrill of the spring

running, but it was good to know they were safe, and had full bellies, and a den to call their own.

It was when his cubs were almost ready to leave their mother that he found the two-leggeds had a place of books. It was called a *library*, and he had been sent there by the woman in the hospital who was teaching him and some of the other aphasics how to read and write and speak.

Remembering the shadow play about the werewolf, he forced his puzzled eyes to read all that he could find on the baffling subject of lycanthropy.

In every time, in every clime, he found that there were references to two-leggeds who had become four-leggeds, wolves, tigers, panthers . . . but never a reference to an animal that had become a two-legged.

• In the course of his reading he found directions whereby a two-legged could change himself. They were complicated and meaningless to him. They involved curious things like a belt made of human skin, with a certain odd number of nail heads arranged in a quaint pattern on the body of the belt. The buckle had to be made under peculiar circumstances, and there were many chants that had to be sung.

It was essential, he read in the crabbed old books, that the two-legged desirous of making the change go to a place where two roads intersected at a specific angle. Then, standing at the intersection, chanting the peculiar words, feeling the human skin belt, the two-legged was told to divest himself of all clothing, and then to relieve his bladder.

Only then, the old books said, could the change take place.

He found that his heart was beating madly when he finished the last of the old books.

For if a two-legged could become a four-legged, surely . . .

After due thought, which was painful, he decided that a human skin belt would be wrong for him. The man in the fur store looked at him oddly when he asked for a length of wolf fur long and narrow, capable of being made into a belt. . . .

But he got the fur, and he made the pattern of nail heads, and he did the things the books had described.

It was lucky, he thought as he stood in the deserted zoo, that not far from the cages he had found two roads that cut into each other in just the manner that the books said they should.

Standing where they crossed, his clothes piled on the grass nearby, the belt around his narrow waist, his fingers caressing its fur, his human throat chanting the meaningless words, he found that standing naked was a cold business, and that it was easy to void his bladder as the books had said he must.

Then it was all over.

He had done everything just as he should.

At first nothing happened, and the cold white moon looked down at him, and fear rode up and down his spine that he would be seen by one of the two-leggeds who always wore blue clothes, and he would be taken and put back into that other zoo that was not a zoo even though it had bars on the windows.

But then an aching began in his erect back, and he fell to all fours, and the agony began, and the pain blinded him to everything, to all the strange functional changes that were going on, and it was a long, long time before he dared open his eyes.

Even before he opened them, he could sense that it had happened, for crisp and clear through the night wind he could smell as he knew he should be able to smell. The odors came and they told him old stories.

Getting up on all fours, paying no attention to the clothes that now smelled foully of the two-leggeds, he began to run. His strong claws scrabbled at the cement and he hurried to the grass and it was wonderful and exciting to feel the good feel of the growing things under his pads. Throwing his long head back he closed his eyes and from deep deep inside he sang a song to the wolves' god, the moon.

His baying excited the animals in the cages near him, and they began to roar, and scream, and those sounds were good too.

Running through the night, aimlessly, but running, feeling the ground beneath his paws was good . . . so good . . .

And then through the sounds, through all the baying and roaring and screaming from the animals, he heard his she's voice, and he forgot about freedom and the night wind and the cool white moon, and he ran back to the cage where she was.

The zoo attendants were just as baffled when they found the wolf curled up outside the cage near the feeding trough

as they had been when they had found the man in the wolf's cage.

The two-legged who was his keeper recognized him and he was allowed to go back into his cage and then the ecstasy, the spring-and-fall-time ecstasy of being with his she . . .

Slowly, as he became used to his wolfhood again, he forgot about the life outside the cage, and soon it was all a matter that only arose in troubled dreams. And even then his she was there to nuzzle him and wake him if the nightmares got too bad.

Only once after the first few days did any waking memory of his two-legged life return, and that was when a two-legged she passed by his cage pushing a small four-wheeler in front of her.

Her scent was familiar.

So too was the scent of the two-legged cub.

Darting to the front of his cage, he sniffed long and hard.

And for just a moment the woman who was pushing the perambulator that contained her bastard looked deep into his yellow eyes and she knew, as he did, who and what he was.

And the very, very last thought he had about the matter was one of infinite pity for his poor cub, who some white moonlit night was going to drop down on all fours and become furred . . . and go prowling through the dark—in search of what, he would never know. . . .



For a long time, fictional treatment of the werewolf idea was limited to the medieval horror story. Anthony Boucher was a pioneer in what might be called the Liberation of Lycanthropy. His Compleat Werewolf, which appeared in "Unknown Worlds" a dozen years ago, helped to open a whole new field of speculation to science-fantasy writers.

Mr. Boucher followed up that story with The Ambassa-

dors, in which the focus is neither on the past nor the present, but rather on the future possibilities of the whole idea.

THE AMBASSADORS

by Anthony Boucher

NOTHING SO MUCH amazed the First Martian Expedition—no, not even the answer, which should have been so obvious from the first, to the riddle of the canals—as the biological nature of the Martians themselves.

Popular fiction and scientific thought alike had conditioned the members of the expedition to expect either of two possibilities: a race more or less like ourselves, if possibly high-domed and bulge-chested; or a swarm of tentacled and pulpy horrors.

With either the familiar or the monstrously unfamiliar we were prepared to make contact; we had given no thought to the likeness-with-a-difference which we encountered.

It was on the night of the Expedition's official welcome to Mars, after that exchange of geometrical and astronomical diagrams which had established for each race the intelligence of the other, that the zoölogist Professor Hunyadi classified his observations.

That the Martians were mammals was self-evident. Certain points concerning their teeth, their toes and the characteristic tufts of hair on their cheekbones led Professor Hunyadi to place them, somewhat to the bewilderment of his non-zoölogical colleagues, as fissipede arctoids. Further technicalities involving such matters as the shape of the nozzle and the number and distribution of the nipples led him from the family *Canidae* through the genus *Canis* to the species *Lupus*.

"My ultimate classification, gentlemen," he asserted, "must be *Canis lupus sapiens*. In other words, as man may be said to be an intelligent ape, we are here confronted with a race of intelligent wolves."

Some Martian zoölogist was undoubtedly reaching and expounding analogous conclusions at that same moment; and the results were evident when the First Interplanetary

Conference resumed its wordless and symbolic deliberations on the following day.

For if it was difficult for our representatives to take seriously the actions of what seemed a pack of amazingly clever and well-trained dogs, it was all but impossible for the Martians to find anything save amusement in the antics of a troupe of space-touring monkeys.

An Earthman, in those days, would use "You curl!" as an indication of contempt; to a Martian, anyone addressed as "You primate!" was not only contemptible but utterly ridiculous.

By the time the First Conference was over, and the more brilliant linguists of each group had managed to master something of the verbal language of the other, traces of a reluctant mutual respect had begun to dawn. This was particularly true of the Earthmen, who had at heart a genuine, if somewhat patronizing, fondness for dogs (and even wolves), whereas the Martians had never possessed any warmth of feeling for monkeys (and certainly not for great apes).

Possibly because he had first put his finger on the cause, it was Professor Hunyadi who was especially preoccupied, on the return voyage, with the nagging thought that some fresh device must be found if the two races were to establish their interplanetary intercourse on a solid footing. It is fortunate indeed that the Professor had, as he tells us in his *Memoirs*, spent so many happy hours at the feet of his Transylvanian grandmother; for thus he alone, of that crew of superb specialists, was capable of conceiving the solution that was to revolutionize the history of two planets.

The world press alternated between roars of laughter and screams of rage when the returned zoölogist issued his eloquent plea, on a world-wide video hookup, for volunteer werewolves as ambassadors to the wolves of Mars.

Barbarous though it may seem to us now, mankind was at that time divided into three groups: those who disbelieved in werewolves; those who hated and feared werewolves; and, of course, those who were werewolves.

The fortunate position of three hitherto unsuspected individuals of this last category served to still both the laughter and the rage of the press.

Professor Garou of Duke University received from Hunyadi's impassioned plea the courage at last to publish his

monumental thesis (based on the earlier researches of Williamson) proving once and for all that the lycanthropic metamorphosis involves nothing supernatural, but a strictly scientific exercise of psychokinetic powers in the rearrangement of molecular structure—an exercise at which, Garou admitted, he was himself adept.

This revelation in turn emboldened Cardinal Mezzoluppo, a direct descendant of the much misinterpreted Wolf of Gubbio, to confess the sting of the flesh which had long buffeted him, and taking his text from II Corinthians 11:30, *pro me autem nihil gloriabor nisi in infirmitatibus meis*, magnificently to proclaim the infinite wisdom of God in establishing on Earth a long misunderstood and persecuted race which could now at last serve man in his first great need beyond Earth.

But it was neither the scientific demonstration that one need not disbelieve nor the religious exhortation that one need not hate and fear that converted the great masses of mankind. That conversion came when Streak, the Kanine King of the Kinescope, the most beloved quadruped in the history of show business, announced that he had chosen an acting career as a wolf-dog only because the competition was less intense than among human video-actors (“and besides,” he is rumored to have added privately, “you meet fewer bitches . . . and their sons”).

The documentary which Streak commissioned for his special use, *A day in the life of the average werewolf*, removed the last traces of disbelief and fear, and finally brought forth the needed volunteers, no longer hesitant to declare themselves lest they be shot down with silver bullets or even forced to submit to psychoanalysis.

As a matter of fact, this new possibility of public frankness cured immediately many of the analysts' most stubborn cases, hitherto driven to complex escapes by the necessity of either frustrating their very nature by never changing or practising metamorphosis as a solitary vice.

The problem now became one, not of finding volunteers, but of winnowing them. Fortunately, a retired agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (whose exploits as a werewolf of good will have been recounted elsewhere) undertook the task of cleaning out the criminal element, which statistico-psychology has since established as running no higher (allowing for the inevitable historical effects of repression

and discrimination) than in other groups; and Professor Garou devised the requisite aptitude tests.

One minor misfortune of the winnowing process may be mentioned: A beautiful Australian actress, whose clarity of diction (in either form) and linguistic talent strongly recommended her, proved to metamorphose not into the European wolf (*Canis lupus*) but into the Tasmanian (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*); and Professor Garou, no doubt rightly, questioned the effect upon the Martians of her marsupial pouch, highly esteemed though it was by connoisseurs of such matters.

The rest is history. There is no need to detail here the communicative triumphs of that embassy and its successors; the very age of interplanetary amity in which we live is their monument.

Nor should we neglect to pay tribute to the brilliant and charming wereapes who so ably represent their mother planet in the Martian embassies here on Earth.

For once the Martians had recognized the perfection of the Hunyadi solution, their folklorists realized that they too had long suffered a minority problem of which the majority had never suspected the existence; and Cardinal Mezzoluppo's tribute to divine wisdom was echoed by the High *Vrakh* himself as that monster of legend, the were-primate, took his rightful place among the valued citizens of Mars.

It would be only fitting if this brief sketch could end with a touching picture of the contented old age of Professor Hunyadi, to whom two worlds owe so infinitely much. But that restless and unfulfilled genius has once more departed on an interplanetary expedition, trusting ever that the God of the Cardinal and the *Vrakh* has somewhere designed a planet peopled by a bat-like race (*Vampyrus sapiens*) to which he will be the ideal first ambassador.



The vampire, like the werewolf, is one of the oldest embodiments of human fear. The flying cloak, the gleaming fangs, the moldy coffin—all are symbols of pure terror. But the modern vampire has discarded this telltale apparatus and, being more subtle, is infinitely more deadly. . . .

SHARE ALIKE

*by Jerome Bixby
and Joe E. Dean*

THEY SPREAD-EAGLED themselves in the lifeboat, bracing hands and feet against the gunwales.

Above them, the pitted and barnacled stern of the *S. S. Luciano*, two days out of Palermo and now headed for hell, reared up hugely into the overcast of oily black smoke that boiled from ports and superstructure. Craig had time to note that the screws were still slowly turning, and that a woman was screaming from the crazily-tilted afterdeck. Then the smoke intervened—a dark pall that lowered about the lifeboat as the wind shifted, blotting out the sky, the ship.

Fire met water. One roared; the other hissed. Gouts of blazing gasoline flared through the smoke like flame demons dancing on the waves.

Groaning, shuddering, complaining with extreme bitterness, the ship plunged.

Sky and smoke became a sickening whirl, as the lifeboat tore into the churning water in a suicidal effort to follow the parent ship to the bottom. Spray flew; waves loomed, broke, fell away; the lifeboat shipped water. Craig cursed aloud, making rage a substitute for terror. Facing him, Hofmanstahal grinned sourly.

The small boat righted itself. It was still in violent motion, lurching aimlessly across a sea jagged with whitecaps; but Craig knew that the crisis was past. He lifted his face into the cold wind, pulling himself up from the water-sloping bottom of the boat until his chin rested on the gunwale.

A wide patch of brownish foam and oil-scum spread

slowly from the vortex of exploding bubbles that rose from the vanished ship.

The sea quieted. A gull swooped down and lit on an orange crate that had bobbed to the surface.

"Well," said Craig. "Well. That's that."

Hofmanstahal peeled off his shirt, wrung it out over the side. The hair that matted his thick chest and peeped from his armpits had a golden sheen that was highlighted by the sun. A small cut was under his left eye, a streak of oil across his forehead.

"You were of the crew?" he asked.

"Yes."

"But not an A. B. You are too spindly for that."

"I was navigator."

Hofmanstahal chuckled, a deep sound that told of large lungs. "Do you think you can navigate us out of this, my friend?"

"I won't have to. We're in a well-travelled shipping lane. We'll be picked up soon enough."

"How soon might that be?"

"I don't know. I don't even know if we got an SOS out; it all happened so fast." Craig sighed, rolled over so that he sat with his back curved against the side of the boat. "I doubt if we did, though. The tanks right under the radio shack were the first to go. I wonder who got careless with a cigarette."

"M'm. So we'll eventually be picked up. And in the meantime, do we starve?"

Craig got up tiredly. "You underestimate the Merchant Marine." He sloshed to the stern of the lifeboat, threw open the food locker. They saw kegs of water, tins of biscuits and salt meat, canned juices, a first-aid kit.

"More than enough," Craig said. He turned, searched the surrounding swells. "I wonder if any others survived . . ."

Hofmanstahal shook his head. "I have been looking too. No others. All were sucked down with the ship."

Craig kept looking. Smoke, heaving stained water, débris, a few dying gasoline-flames—that was all.

Hofmanstahal said, "At least we shall be well fed. Did you have any close friends aboard?"

"No." Craig sat down, pushed wet hair back from his forehead, let his hands fall to his lap. "And you?"

"Me? No one. I have outlived all my friends. I content

myself with being a man of the crowd. A select group of *bon vivants* for drinking and conversation . . . it is enough."

Sitting with a seat between them, as if each somehow wanted to be alone, the men exchanged backgrounds. By his own account, Hofmanstahal was an adventurer. No locality could hold him for long, and he seldom revisited a place he already knew. He had been secretary to a former Resident in Malaya, and concerned himself with gems in Borneo, with teak in China; a few of his paintings had been displayed in the *Galerie des Arts* in Paris. He had been en route to Damascus to examine some old manuscripts which he believed might contain references to one of his ancestors.

"Although I was born in Brashov," he said, "family records indicate that we had our beginnings elsewhere. You may think it snobbish, this delving into my background, but it is a hobby which has absorbed me for many years. I am not looking for glory; only for facts."

"Nothing wrong with that," Craig said. "I envy you your colorful past."

"Is yours so dull, then?"

"Not dull . . . the colors just aren't so nice. I grew up in the Atlanta slums. Things were pretty rough when I was a kid—"

"You weren't big enough to be tough."

Craig nodded, wondering why he didn't resent this second reference to his small size. He decided that it was because he liked the big man. Hofmanstahal wasn't insolent, just candid and direct.

"I read a lot," Craig went on. "My interest in astronomy led me into navigation while I was in the Navy. After I was mustered out I stayed at sea rather than go back to what I'd left."

They continued to converse in low, earnest voices for the remainder of the afternoon. Always above them the white gulls circled.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" asked Craig.

Hofmanstahal looked up. His pale eyes narrowed. "Scavengers! See the wicked eyes, the cruel beaks! Pah!"

Craig shrugged. "Let's eat. And hadn't you better do something for that cut under your eye?"

Hofmanstahal shook his massive head. "You eat, if you wish. I am not hungry." He touched his tongue to the dribble of blood that ran down his cheek.

They kept track of the days by cutting notches in the gunwale. There were two notches when Craig first began to wonder about Hofmanstahal.

They had arranged a system of rationing for food and water. It was far from being a strict ration, for there was plenty for both of them.

But Craig never saw Hofmanstahal eat.

The Rumanian, Craig thought, was a big man, he should certainly have an equally big appetite.

"I prefer," said Hofmanstahal, when Craig asked about it, "to take my meals at night."

Craig let it pass, assuming that the big man had a digestive disorder, or perhaps was one of those unfortunates who possess inhibitions about eating in front of others. Not that the latter seemed likely, considering Hofmanstahal's amiably aggressive personality and the present unusual circumstances but, on the other hand, what did it matter? Let him eat standing on his head if he wanted to.

Next morning, when Craig opened the food locker to get his share, the food supply was apparently undiminished.

The morning after that, the same thing.

Another notch. Five days, now. And Craig found something else to puzzle about. He was eating well; yet he felt himself sinking deeper and deeper into a strange, uncaring lethargy, as if he were well on his way toward starvation.

He took advantage of the abundance of food to eat more than was his wont. It didn't help.

Hofmanstahal, on the other hand, greeted each day with a sparkling eye and a spate of good-humored talk.

Both men by now had beards. Craig detested his, for it itched. Hofmanstahal was favoring his, combing it with his fingers, already training the mustache with insistent twiddlings of thumb and forefinger.

Craig lay wearily in the bow and watched.

"Hofmanstahal," he said. "You're not starving yourself on my account, are you? It isn't necessary, you know."

"No, my friend. I have never eaten better."

"But you've hardly touched the stores."

"Ah!" Hofmanstahal flexed his big muscles. Sunlight flickered along the golden hair that fuzzed his torso. "It is the inactivity. My appetite suffers."

Another notch. Craig continued to wonder. Each day, each hour, found him weaker, more listless. He lay in the

bow of the boat, soaking in the warmth of the sun, his eyes opaque, his body limp. Sometimes he let one hand dangle in the cool water; but the appearance of ugly, triangular shark fins put a stop to that.

"They are like all of nature, the sharks," Hofmanstahal said. "They rend and kill, and give nothing in return for the food they so brutally take. They can offer only their very bodies, which are in turn devoured by larger creatures. And on and on. The world is not a pretty place, my friend."

"Are men so different?"

"Men are the worst of all."

Seven notches, now. Craig was growing weaker. He was positive by now that Hofmanstahal was simply not eating.

There were nine notches on the gunwale when Craig found that Hofmanstahal *was* eating, after all.

It was night, and the sea was rougher than it had been. The *slap-slap* of waves against the hull wakened Craig from a deep, trancelike sleep. That, and the oppressive feeling of a nearby presence.

He stirred, felt the presence withdraw. Through half-shut eyes he saw Hofmanstahal, darkly silhouetted against a sky ablaze with stars.

"You were crying out in your sleep, my friend." The big man's voice was solicitous. "Nightmare?"

"My throat . . . stinging, burning. I . . ."

"The salt air. You will be all right in the morning."

Craig's face felt like a numb mask of clay. It was an effort to move his lips. "I think—I think I'm going—to die."

"No. You are not going to die. You must not. If you die, I die."

Craig thought about that. The rocking of the boat was gentle, soothing. A warmth stole over him, though the night was cool. He was weak, but comfortable; fearful, yet content. Head back, breathing easily, he let himself become aware of the glory of the heavens.

The constellation Perseus was slanting toward the western horizon, and Craig noted almost unconsciously, with the skill of long practice, that the variable star Algol was at its maximum brilliancy. Algol—the ghoul.

The thought lingered. It turned over and over in his mind, as his unconscious seemed to examine it for some hidden meaning.

Then, abruptly, the thought surged up into his conscious mind.

And he knew.

He lifted himself up to his elbows, supporting himself weakly.

"Hofmanstahal," he said, "you're a vampire. Aren't you?"

The other's chuckle was deep and melodious in the darkness.

"Answer me, Hofmanstahal. Aren't you a vampire?"

"Yes."

Craig had fainted. Now it was as if layer after layer of blackness were being removed, bringing him closer to the light with every moment. A tiny sullen orange disk glowed in the darkness, expanding, increasing in brightness until it filled the world.

The blackness was gone, and he was staring up into the blinding, brassy heart of the sun.

He gasped and turned his head away.

There was music. Someone whistling a German folk tune.

Hofmanstahal . . .

Hofmanstahal sat in the stern, his brawny gold-fuzzed forearms resting on his knees.

The whistling stopped.

"Good morning, my friend. You have had a good, long rest."

Craig stared, his lips working.

Far above a gull called harshly, and was answered by one skimming at water level.

Hofmanstahal smiled. "You mustn't look at me that way. I'm almost harmless, I assure you." He laughed gently. "Things could be much worse, you know. Suppose, for example, I had been a werewolf. Eh?"

He waited a moment.

"Oh, yes, Lycanthropy is real—as real as those gulls out there. Or—more fitting, perhaps—as real as those sharks. Once, in Paris, I lived for three months with a young woman who was a public bath attendant by day and a werewolf by night. She would choose her victims by their—"

Craig listened numbly, aware that Hofmanstahal was merely making idle talk. The story of the female werewolf turned into an anecdote, patently untrue. Hofmanstahal chuckled at it, and seemed disappointed when Craig did not. There was a certain sensitive shyness about the big Ruma-

nian, Craig thought . . . a sensitive vampire! Aware of Craig's revulsion, he was camouflaging the situation with a flood of words.

"—And when the gendarme saw that the bullet which had killed her was an ordinary lead one, he said, 'Messieurs, you have done this *pauvre jeune fille* a grave injustice.' Ha! The moment was a sad one for me, but—"

"Stop it!" Craig gasped. "Go turn yourself into a bat or something and fly away. Just get out of my sight . . . my blood in your stomach. . ."

He tried to turn away, and his elbows slipped. His shoulderblades thumped the bottom of the boat. He lay there, eyes closed, and his throat thickened as if he wanted to laugh and vomit at the same time.

"I cannot turn myself into a bat, my friend. Ugly little creatures—" Hofmanstahal sighed heavily. "Nor do I sleep in a coffin. Nor does daylight kill me, as you can see. All that is superstition. Superstition! Do you know that my grandfather died with a white ash stake through his heart?" His beard tilted angrily. "Believe me, we variants have more to fear from the ignorant and superstitious than they from us. There are so many of them, and so few of us."

Craig said, "You won't touch me again!"

"Ah, but I must."

"I'm still strong enough to fight you off."

"But not strong enough to get at the food if I choose to prevent you."

Craig shook his head. "I'll throw myself overboard!"

"That I cannot permit. Now, why not submit to the inevitable. Each day, I will supply you with your ration of food; each night, you will supply me with mine. A symbiotic relationship. What could be fairer?"

"Beast! Monster! *I will not*—"

Hofmanstahal sighed, and looked out over the tossing sea. "Monster. Always they say that of us; they, who feed off the burned flesh of living creatures."

It was the face of his father, stern and reproving, that Craig always saw before him during those long nights in the lifeboat. His father, who had been a Baptist minister. When the lifeboat drifted on a sea that was like glass, reflecting the stars with such clarity that the boat might have been suspended in a vast star-filled sphere, and Craig felt

the warm, moist lips of the vampire at his throat—then conscience arose in the form of his father.

Well . . . he wasn't submitting willingly. Not at first. But the food had been withheld until his belly twisted with hunger and he cried out with parched lips for water. Then, shudderingly, he had allowed the vampire to feed.

It was not as bad as he had expected. An acute, stinging sensation as the sharp canines pricked the flesh (strange, that he had not noticed before how *sharp* they were); then numbness as the anesthetic venom did its work. The venom must have been a hypnotic. As the numbness spread toward his face, and his lips and cheeks became chill, strange colors danced before his eyes, blending and twining in cloudy patterns that sent his thoughts wandering down incomprehensible byways. He was part of Hofmanstahal. Hofmanstahal was part of him. The feeling was almost lascivious.

And each time it was less painful, less shocking, till finally it was mere routine.

Strangely, his conscience did not torment him during the day. The comfortable warmth and lassitude that before had only touched him now enveloped him completely. His thoughts were vague; memory tended to slip away from what had gone before, and to evade what was to come. The sea, the sky, the wheeling gulls were beautiful. And Hofmanstahal, vampire or not, was an interesting conversationalist.

"You are pale, friend Craig," he would say. "Perhaps I have been too greedy. Do you know, with that wan face and the beard, you remind me of a poet I knew in Austria. For a long time he was one of my favorite companions. But perhaps you did not know that we prefer certain donors to others. Believe me, we are not the indiscriminate gluttons that literature would have you think."

"How—did you become as you are?"

"How did I, Eric Hofmanstahal, become a vampire? That is a question with broad implications. I can tell you that my people were vampires, but that leaves unanswered the question of our origin. This I cannot tell you, though I have searched deeply into the matter. There are legends, of course, but they are contradictory." Hofmanstahal stroked his beard and seemed lost in thought.

"Some say," he went on, after a moment, "that when *homo sapiens* and the ape branched from a common ances-

tor, there was a third strain which was so despised by both that it was driven into obscurity. Others maintain that we came to Earth from another planet, in prehistoric times. There is even mention of a species which was quite different from man but which, because of man's dominance over the earth, imitated him until it developed a physical likeness to him. Then there is the fanciful notion that we are servants of the Devil—one battalion among his legions, created by him to spread sorrow and misery throughout the ages of the world.

"Legends! We have been persecuted, imprisoned, burned alive; we have been classified as maniacs and perverts—all because our body chemistry is unlike that of man. We drink from the fountain of life while man feasts at the fleshpots of the dead; yet we are called monsters." He crumpled a biscuit in his powerful hand and cast the pieces upon the water, which immediately boiled with sharks.

"Man!" he said softly.

Life went on. Craig ate. Hofmanstahal fed. And horror diminished with familiarity.

There were only the two of them, under the vast sky, rising and falling gently to the whim of the sea. The horizon was the edge of their world. No other existed. Night and day merged into gray sameness. Sea and sky were vague, warm reflections; the motion of the boat soothed. This was peace. There was no thought of resistance left in Craig. Hofmanstahal's "symbiosis" became a way of life; then life itself.

There was time in plenty to gaze up at the stars, a pleasure which everyday exigencies had so often denied him. And there was strange, dark companionship; lips that sought his throat and drained away all thoughts of urgency or violent action, leaving him exhausted and somehow thrilled. It was peace. It was satisfaction. It was fulfilment.

Fear was lost in stupor; revulsion, in a certain sensuality. Hofmanstahal's nightly visit was no longer a thing of horror, but the soft arrival of a friend whom he wanted to help with all his being, and who was in turn helping him. Night and day they exchanged life; and the life they nurtured became a single flow and purpose between them. Craig was the quiescent vessel of life, which Hofmanstahal filled every day, so that life might build itself against the coming of night and the return of its essence to Hofmanstahal.

Day and night marched above them toward the pale horizon that circumscribed their world. In their world values had changed, and the fact of change been forgotten.

Still, deep in his mind, Craig's conscience wailed. Legend, history, the church, all at one time or another had said that vampires were evil. He was submitting to a vampire; therefore, he was submitting to evil. Food or no food, the Reverend Craig would never have submitted. He would have sharpened a stake or cast a silver bullet—

But there were no such things here. His father's face rose before him to tell him that this did not matter. He sought to drive it away, but it remained. During the moments of nightly meeting, of warmth and strange intimacy, it glared down upon them brighter than the moon. But Hofmanstahal's back was always turned to it; and Craig, in all his weakness and agony and ecstasy and indecision, did not mention it.

They had forgotten to carve the notches on the gunwale. Neither was certain now how long they had been adrift.

There came a day, however, when Hofmanstahal was forced to cut down Craig's ration of food.

"I am sorry," he said, "but you can see for yourself that it is necessary."

"We're so near the end of our supplies, then?"

"I am sorry," Hofmanstahal repeated. "Yes, we are nearing the end of your supplies . . . and if yours end, so will mine eventually."

"I don't really mind," Craig whispered. "I'm seldom really hungry now. At first, even the full rations left me unsatisfied, but now I don't even like the taste of the food. I suppose it's because I'm getting no exercise."

Hofmanstahal's smile was gentle. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. We must keep a sharp lookout for ships. If one does not come soon, we will starve, though, of course, I will now cut down my own rations as well as yours."

"I don't care."

"My poor Craig, when you regain your strength you will care very much. Like me, you will want to live and go on living."

"Maybe. But now I feel that dying would be easy and pleasant. Better, maybe, than going back to the world."

"The world is evil, yes; but the will to live in it drives all of us."

Craig lay motionless and wondered, with a clarity of mind he had not experienced in many, many days, whether he dreaded going back to the world because the world was evil, or whether it was because he felt that he himself was tainted, unfit to mix with human beings again.

. . . And Hofmanstahal might be a problem. Should he be reported to the authorities? No, for then they would know about Craig.

But was all that had happened so disgraceful, so reprehensible? Had Craig had any other choice but to do what he had done?

None.

His conscience, in the form of his father, screamed agony.

Well, then perhaps Hofmanstahal would try to force him to continue the relationship. Had he—*pleased* the Rumanian? He felt that he had . . .

But surely gentle, considerate Hofmanstahal, the sensitive vampire, would not try to force—

Craig's mind rebelled against such practical thoughts. They required too much effort. It was easier not to think at all—to lie as he had lain for so many days, peaceful, relaxed, uncaring.

Clarity of mind faded into the gray sameness of day and night. He ate. Hofmanstahal fed.

He was scarcely conscious when Hofmanstahal spotted the smoke on the horizon. The big man lifted him up so that he could see it. It was a ship, and it was coming in their direction.

"So—now it is over." Hofmanstahal's voice was soft; his hands were warm on Craig's shoulders. "So it ends—our little idyll." The hands tightened. "My friend . . . my friend, before the ship comes, the men and the noise, the work and the worry and all that goes with it, let us for the last time—"

His head bent, his lips found Craig's throat with their almost sexual avidity.

Craig shivered. Over the Rumanian's shoulder he could see the ship approaching, a dot on the horizon. There would be men aboard.

Men! Normalcy and sanity, cities and machines and half-forgotten values, coming nearer and nearer over the tossing sea, beneath the brassy sky, from the real world of men that lay somewhere beyond the horizon . . .

Men! Like himself, like his father, who hovered shouting his disgust.

And he, lying in the arms of—

God, God, *what if they should see him!*

He kicked. He threw his arms about. He found strength he hadn't known he had, and threshed and flailed and shrieked with it.

The lifeboat rocked. A foot caught Hofmanstahal in the midriff. The vampire's arms flew wide and he staggered back with a cry:

"Craig—"

The backs of his knees struck the gunwale—the one with meaningless notches carved in it. His arms lashed as he strove to regain his balance. His eyes locked with Craig's, shock in them. Then he plunged backward into the sea.

The sharks rejected him as food, but not before they had killed him.

Craig found himself weeping in the bottom of the boat, his face in slime. And saying hoarsely again and again, "Eric, I'm sorry—"

It seemed a very long time before the ship came close enough for him to make out the moving figures on the deck. It seemed so long because of the thoughts and half-formed images that were racing through his brain.

A new awareness was coming over him in a hot flood, an awareness of—

Of the one thing popularly believed about vampires that must have solid foundation in fact.

Had the venom done it? He didn't know. He didn't care.

He lay weakly, watching the steamer through half-closed eyes. Sailors lined the rails, their field glasses trained on him.

He wondered if they could see his father. No, of course not—that had all been hallucination. Besides, a moment ago his father had fled.

It was a Navy ship, a destroyer. He was glad of that. He knew the Navy. The men would be healthy. Strenuous duty would make them sleep soundly.

And at the end of its voyage lay the whole pulsing world.

Craig licked his lips.

The vampire has also been subjected to fastidious dissection by science-fantasy writers. Now, the irrepressible Fred Brown takes the idea from here to (practically) eternity in the briefest possible progression ad absurdum.

BLOOD

by Fredric Brown

IN THEIR TIME MACHINE, Vron and Dreena, last two survivors of the race of vampires, fled into the future to escape annihilation. They held hands and consoled one another in their terror and their hunger.

In the twenty-second century mankind had found them out, had discovered that the legend of vampires living secretly among humans was not a legend at all, but fact. There had been a pogrom that had found and killed every vampire but these two, who had already been working on a time machine and who had finished in time to escape in it. Into the future, far enough into the future that the very word *vampire* would be forgotten so they could again live unsuspected—and from their loins regenerate their race.

"I'm hungry, Vron. Awfully hungry."

"I too, Dreena dear. We'll stop again soon."

They had stopped four times already and had narrowly escaped dying each time. They had *not* been forgotten. The last stop, half a million years back, had shown them a world gone to the dogs—quite literally: human beings were extinct and dogs had become civilized and man-like. Still they had been recognized for what they were. They'd managed to feed once, on the blood of a tender young bitch, but then they'd been hounded back to their time machine and into flight again.

"Thanks for stopping," Dreena said. She sighed.

"Don't thank me," said Vron grimly. "This is the end of the line. We're out of fuel and we'll find none here—by now all radioactives will have turned to lead. We live here . . . or else."

They went out to scout. "Look," said Dreena excitedly, pointing to something walking toward them. "A new crea-

ture! The dogs are gone and something else has taken over. And surely we're forgotten."

The approaching creature was telepathic. "I have heard your thoughts," said a voice inside their brains. "You wonder whether we know 'vampires,' whatever they are. We do not."

Dreena clutched Vron's arm in ecstasy. "Freedom!" she murmured hungrily. "And *food!*"

"You also wonder," said the voice, "about my origin and evolution. All life today is vegetable. I—" He bowed low to them. "I, a member of the dominant race, was once what you called a turnip."



The wax or clay image, the voodoo doll, a rag, a bone, a hank of (the right person's) hair—all these are accessories of the most powerful magic of all: the witch's (or more frequently, witch doctor's) ability to control, from a distance, the life and death of his chosen victim.

"Sympathetic magic," it's called in the light of today's advanced knowledge of human psychology, apparently in the same class with faith-healing and hysterical paralysis and psychogenic stigmata.

Ted Sturgeon does not dispute the theories, but he toys with their sober-faced validity as he uses his unique talent for molding the bizarre into a figure of fascination, and then breathing into it the most convincing sort of life.

A WAY OF THINKING

by Theodore Sturgeon

I'LL HAVE TO START with an anecdote or two that you may have heard from me before, but they'll bear repeating, since it's Kelley we're talking about.

I shipped out with Kelley when I was a kid. Tankships, mostly coastwise: load somewhere in the oil country—New Orleans, Aransas Pass, Port Arthur, or some such, and unload at ports north of Hatteras. Eight days out, eighteen hours in, give or take a day or six hours. Kelley was ordinary seaman on my watch, which was a laugh; he knew more about the sea than anyone aft of the bridge. But he never ribbed me, stumbling around the place with my blue A.B. ticket. He had a sense of humor in his peculiar quiet way, but he never gratified it by proofs of the obvious—that he was twice the seaman I could ever be.

There were a lot of unusual things about Kelley, the way he looked, the way he moved; but most unusual was the way he thought. He was like one of those extra-terrestrials you read about, who can think as well as a human being but not *like* a human being. Just for example, there was that night in Port Arthur. I was sitting in a honkytonk up over a bar with a red-headed girl called Red, trying to mind my own business while watching a chick known as Boots, who sat alone over by the jukebox. This girl Boots was watching the door and grinding her teeth, and I knew why, and I was worried. See, Kelley had been seeing her pretty regularly, but this trip he'd made the break and word was around that he was romancing a girl in Pete's place—a very unpopular kind of rumor for Boots to be chewing on. I also knew that Kelley would be along any minute because he'd promised to meet me here.

And in he came, running up that long straight flight of steps easy as a cat, and when he got in the door everybody just hushed, except the juke-box, and it sounded scared.

Now, just over Boots's shoulder on a little shelf was an electric fan. It had sixteen-inch blades and no guard. The very second Kelley's face showed in the doorway Boots rose up like a snake out of a basket, reached behind her, snatched that fan off the shelf and threw it.

It might as well have been done with a slow-motion camera as far as Kelley was concerned. He didn't move his feet at all. He bent sideways, just a little, from the waist, and turned his wide shoulders. Very clearly I heard three of those whining blade-tips touch a button on his shirt *bip-bip-bip!* and then the fan hit the doorpost.

Even the juke-box shut up then. It was *so* quiet. Kelley didn't say anything and neither did anyone else.

Now, if you believe in do-as-you-get-done-to, and someone heaves an infernal machine at you, you'll pick it right up and heave it back. But Kelley doesn't think like you. He didn't even look at the fan.

He just watched Boots, and she was white and crazed-looking, waiting for whatever he might have in mind.

He went across the room to her, fast but not really hurrying, and he picked her out from behind that table, and he threw her.

He threw her at the fan.

She hit the floor and slid, sweeping up the fan where it lay, hitting the doorjamb with her head, spinning out into the stairway. Kelley walked after her, stepped over her, went on downstairs and back to the ship.

And there was the time we shipped a new main spur gear for the starboard winch. The deck engineer used up the whole morning watch trying to get the old gear-wheel off its shaft. He heated the hub. He pounded it. He put in wedges. He hooked on with a handybilly—that's a four-sheave block-and-tackle to you—and all he did with that was break a U-bolt.

Then Kelley came on deck, rubbing sleep out of his eyes, and took one brief look. He walked over to the winch, snatched up a crescent wrench, and relieved the four bolts that held the housing tight around the shaft. He then picked up a twelve-pound maul, hefted it, and swung it just once. The maul hit the end of the shaft and the shaft shot out of the other side of the machine like a torpedo out of its tube. The gearwheel fell down on the deck. Kelley went forward to take the helm and thought no more about it, while the deck crew stared after him, wall-eyed. You see what I mean? Problem: Get a wheel off a shaft. But in Kelley's book it's: Get the shaft out of the wheel.

I kibitzed him at poker one time and saw him discard two pair and draw a winning straight flush. Why that discard? Because he'd just realized the deck was stacked. Why the flush? God knows. All Kelley did was pick up the pot—a big one—grin at the sharper, and quit the game.

I have plenty more yarns like that, but you get the idea. The guy had a special way of thinking, that's all, and it never failed him.

I lost track of Kelley. I came to regret that now and

then; he made a huge impression on me, and sometimes I used to think about him when I had a tough problem to solve. What would Kelley do? And sometimes it helped, and sometimes it didn't; and when it didn't, I guess it was because I'm not Kelley.

I came ashore and got married and did all sorts of other things, and the years went by, and a war came and went, and one warm spring evening I went into a place I know on West 48th St. because I felt like drinking *tequila* and I could always get it there. And who should be sitting in a booth finishing up a big Mexican dinner but—no, not Kelley.

It was Milton. He looks like a college sophomore with money. His suits are always cut just so, but quiet; and when he's relaxed he looks as if he's just been tagged and it matters to him, and when he's worried you want to ask him has he been cutting classes again. It happens he's a damn good doctor.

He was worried, but he gave me a good hello and waved me into the booth while he finished up. We had small talk and I tried to buy him a drink. He looked real wistful and then shook his head. "Patient in ten minutes," he said, looking at his watch.

"Then it's nearby. Come back afterward."

"Better yet," he said, getting up, "come with me. This might interest you, come to think of it."

He got his hat and paid Rudy, and I said "*Luego*," and Rudy grinned and slapped the *tequila* bottle. Nice place, Rudy's.

"What about the patient?" I asked as we turned up the avenue. I thought for a while he hadn't heard me, but at last he said, "Four busted ribs and a compound femoral. Minor internal haemorrhage which might or might not be a ruptured spleen. Necrosis of the oral frenum—or was while there was any frenum left."

"What's a frenum?"

"That little strip of tissue under your tongue."

"Ongk," I said, trying to reach it with the tip of my tongue. "What a healthy fellow."

"Pulmonary adhesions," Milton ruminated. "Not serious, certainly not tubercular. But they hurt and they bleed and I don't like 'em. And acne rosacea."

"That's the nose like a stoplight, isn't it?"

"It isn't as funny as that to the guy that has it."

I was quelled. "What was it—a goon-squad?"

He shook his head.

"A truck?"

"No."

"He fell off something?"

Milton stopped and turned and looked me straight in the eye. "No," he said. "Nothing like that. Nothing like anything. Nothing," he said, walking again, "at all."

I said nothing to that because there was nothing to say.

"He just went to bed," said Milton thoughtfully, "because he felt off his oats. And one by one these things happened to him."

"In *bed*?"

"Well," said Milton, in a to-be-absolutely-accurate tone, "when the ribs broke he was on his way back from the bathroom."

"You're kidding."

"No I'm not."

"He's lying."

Milton said, "I believe him."

I know Milton. There's no doubt that he believed the man. I said, "I keep reading things about psychosomatic disorders. But a broken—what did you say it was?"

"Femur. Thigh, that is. Compound. Oh, it's rare, all right. But it can happen, has happened. Those muscles are pretty powerful, you know. They deliver two-fifty, three hundred pound thrusts every time you walk up stairs. In certain spastic hysteriae, they'll break bones easily enough."

"What about all those other things?"

"Functional disorders, every one of 'em. No germ disease."

"Now this boy," I said, "*really* has something on his mind."

"Yes, I suppose he has."

But I didn't ask what. I could hear the discussion closing as if it had a spring latch on it.

We went into a door tucked between store-fronts and climbed three flights. Milton put out his hand to a bell-push and then dropped it without ringing. There was a paper tacked to the door.

DOC I WENT FOR SHOTS COME ON IN.

It was unsigned. Milton turned the knob and we went in.

The first thing that hit me was the smell. Not too strong, but not the kind of thing you ever forget if you ever had to dig a slit-trench through last week's burial pit. "That's the necrosis," muttered Milton. "Damn it." He gestured. "Hang your hat over there. Sit down. I'll be out soon." He went into an inner room, saying, "Hi, Hal," at the doorway. From inside came an answering rumble, and something twisted in my throat to hear it, for no voice which is that tired should sound that cheerful.

I sat watching the wallpaper and laboriously un-listening those clinical grunts and the gay-weary responses in the other room. The wallpaper was awful. I remember a nightclub act where Reginald Gardiner used to give sound-effect renditions of wallpaper designs. This one, I decided, would run "Body to *weep* . . . yawp yawp; body to *weep* . . . yawp, yawp;" very faintly, with the final syllable a straining retch. I had just reached a particularly clumsy join where the paper utterly demolished its own rhythm and went "Yawp yawpbody to *weep*" when the outer door opened and I leaped to my feet with the rush of utter guilt one feels when caught in an unlikely place with no curt and lucid explanation.

He was two long strides into the room, tall, and soft-footed, his face and long green eyes quite at rest, when he saw me. He stopped as if on leaf springs and shock absorbers, not suddenly, completely controlled, and asked, "Who are you?"

"I'll be damned," I answered. "Kelley!"

He peered at me with precisely the expression I had seen so many times when he watched the little square windows on the one-arm bandits we used to play together. I could almost hear the tumblers, see the drums stop; not lemon . . . cherry . . . cherry . . . and *click!* this time but tankship . . . Texas . . . him! . . . and *click!* "I be *goddam*," he drawled, to indicate that he was even more surprised than I was. He transferred the small package he carried from his right hand to his left and shook hands. His hand went once and a half times around mine with enough left over to tie a half-hitch. "Where in time you been keepin' yourse'f? How'd you smoke me out?"

"I never," I said. (Saying it, I was aware that I always fell into the idiom of people who impressed me, to the exact degree of that impression. So I always found myself talk-

ing more like Kelley than Kelley's shaving mirror.) I was grinning so wide my face hurt. "I'm glad to see you." I shook hands with him again, foolishly. "I came with the doctor."

"You a doctor now?" he said, his tone prepared for wonders.

"I'm a writer," I said deprecatingly.

"Yeah, I heard," he reminded himself. His eyes narrowed; as of old, it had the effect of sharp-focussing a searchlight beam. "I heard!" he repeated, with deeper interest. "Stories. Gremlins and flyin' saucers an' all like that." I nodded. He said, without insult, "Hell of a way to make a living."

"What about you?"

"Ships. Some drydock. Tank cleaning. Compass 'djustin'. For a while had a job holdin' a insurance inspector's head. You know."

I glanced at the big hands that could weld or steer or compute certainly with the excellence I used to know, and marvelled that he found himself so unremarkable. I pulled myself back to here-and-now and nodded toward the inner room. "I'm holding you up."

"No you ain't. Milton, he knows what he's doin'. He wants me, he'll holler."

"Who's sick?"

His face darkened like the sea in scud-weather, abruptly and deep down. "My brother." He looked at me searchingly. "He's . . ." Then he seemed to check himself. "He's sick," he said unnecessarily, and added quickly, "He's going to be all right, though."

"Sure," I said quickly.

I had the feeling that we were both lying and that neither of us knew why.

Milton came out, laughing a laugh that cut off as soon as he was out of range of the sick man. Kelley turned to him slowly, as if slowness were the only alternative to leaping on the doctor, pounding the news out of him. "Hello, Kelley. Heard you come in."

"How is he, Doc?"

Milton looked up quickly, his bright round eyes clashing with Kelley's slitted fierce ones. "You got to take it easy, Kelley. What'll happen to him if you crack up?"

"Nobody's cracking up. What do you want me to do?"

Milton saw the package on the table. He picked it up and

opened it. There was a leather case and two phials. "Ever use one of these before?"

"He was a pre-med before he went to sea," I said suddenly.

Milton stared at me. "You two know each other?"

I looked at Kelley. "Sometimes I think I invented him."

Kelley snorted and thumped my shoulder. Happily I had one hand on a built-in china shelf. His big hand continued the motion and took the hypodermic case from the doctor. "Sterilize the shaft and needle," he said sleepily, as if reading. "Assemble without touching needle with fingers. To fill, puncture diaphragm and withdraw plunger. Squirt upward to remove air an' prevent embolism. Locate major vein in —"

Milton laughed. "Okay, okay. But forget the vein. Any place will do—it's subcutaneous, that's all. I've written the exact amounts to be used for exactly the symptoms you can expect. Don't jump the gun, Kelley. And remember how you salt your stew. Just because a little is good, it doesn't figure that a lot has to be better."

Kelley was wearing that sleepy inattention which, I remembered, meant only that he was taking in every single word like a tape recorder. He tossed the leather case gently, caught it. "Now?" he said.

"Not now," the doctor said positively. "Only when you have to."

Kelley seemed frustrated. I suddenly understood that he wanted to do something, build something, fight something. Anything but sit and wait for therapy to bring results. I said, "Kelley, any brother of yours is a—well, you know. I'd like to say hello, if it's all—"

Immediately and together Kelley and the doctor said loudly, "Sure, when he's on his feet," and "Better not just now, I've just given him a sedat—" And together they stopped awkwardly.

"Let's get that drink," I said before they could flounder any more.

"Now you're talking. You too, Kelley. It'll do you good."

"Not me," said Kelley. "Hal—"

"I knocked him out," said the doctor bluntly. "You'll cluck around scratching for worms and looking for hawks till you wake him up, and he needs his sleep. Come on."

Painfully I had to add to my many mental images of Kelley the very first one in which he was indecisive. I hated it.

"Well," said Kelley, "let me go see."

He disappeared. I looked at Milton's face, and turned quickly away. I was sure he wouldn't want me to see that expression of sick pity and bafflement.

Kelley came out, moving silently as always. "Yeah, asleep," he said. "For how long?"

"I'd say four hours at least."

"Well all right." From the old-fashioned clothes-tree he took a battered black engineer's cap with a shiny, crazed patent-leather visor. I laughed. Both men turned to me, with annoyance, I thought.

On the landing outside I explained. "The hat," I said. "Remember? Tampico?"

"Oh," he grunted. He thwacked it against his forearm.

"He left it on the bar of this ginmill," I told Milton. "We got back to the gangplank and he missed it. Nothing would do but he has to go back for it, so I went with him."

"You was wearin' a *tequila* label on your face," Kelley said. "Kept tryin' to tell the taximan you was a bottle."

"He didn't speak English."

Kelley flashed something like his old grin. "He got the idea."

"Anyway," I told Milton, "the place was closed when we got there. We tried the front door and the side doors and they were locked like Alcatraz. We made so much racket I guess if anyone was inside they were afraid to open up. We could see Kelley's hat in there on the bar. Nobody's *about* to steal that hat."

"It's a good hat," he said in an injured tone.

"Kelley goes into action," I said. "Kelley don't think like other people, you know, Milt. He squints through the window at the other wall, goes around the building, sets one foot against the corner stud, gets his fingers under the edge of that corrugated iron siding they use. 'I'll pry this out a bit,' he says. 'You slide in and get my hat.'"

"Corrugated was only nailed on one-by-two's," said Kelley.

"He gives one almighty pull," I chuckled, "and the whole damn side falls out of the building. I mean the second

floor too. You never heard such a clap-o'-thunder in your life."

"I got my hat," said Kelley. He uttered two syllables of a laugh. "Whole second floor was a you-know-what, an' the one single stairway come out with the wall."

"Taxi driver just took off. But he left his taxi. Kelley drove back. I couldn't. I was laughing."

"You was drunk."

"Well, *some*," I said.

We walked together, quietly, happily. Out of Kelley's sight, Milton thumped me gently on the ribs. It was eloquent and it pleased me. It said that it was a long time since Kelley had laughed. It was a long time since he had thought about anything but Hal.

I guess we felt it equally when, with no trace of humor . . . more, as if he had let my episode just blow itself out until he could be heard . . . Kelley said, "Doc, what's with the hand?"

"It'll be all right," Milton said.

"You put splints."

Milton sighed. "All right, all right. Three fractures. Two on the middle finger and one on the ring."

Kelley said, "I saw they was swollen."

I looked at Kelley's face and I looked at Milton's, and I didn't like either, and I wished to God I were somewhere else, in a uranium mine maybe, or making out my income tax. I said, "Here we are. Ever been to Rudy's, Kelley?"

He looked up at the little yellow-and-red marquee. "No."

"Come on," I said. "*Tequila*."

We went in and got a booth. Kelley ordered beer. I got mad then and started to call him some things I'd picked up on waterfronts from here to Tierra del Fuego. Milton stared wall-eyed at me and Kelley stared at his hands. After a while Milton began to jot some of it down on a prescription pad he took from his pocket. I was pretty proud.

Kelley gradually got the idea. If I wanted to pick up the tab and he wouldn't let me, his habits were those of *uno puñeto sin cojones* (which a Spanish dictionary will reliably misinform you means "a weakling without eggs") and his affections for his forebears were powerful but irreverent. I won, and soon he was lapping up a huge combination plate of beef *tostadas*, chicken *enchiladas*, and pork *tacos*. He en-

deared himself to Rudy by demanding salt and lemon with his *tequila* and despatching same with flawless ritual: hold the lemon between left thumb and forefinger, lick the back of the left hand, sprinkle salt on the wet spot, lift the *tequila* with the right, lick the salt, drink the *tequila*, bite the lemon. Soon he was imitating the German second mate we shipped out of Puerto Barrios one night, who ate fourteen green bananas and lost them and all his teeth over the side, in gummed gutters which had us roaring.

But after that question about fractured fingers back there in the street, Milton and I weren't fooled any more, and though everyone tried hard and it was a fine try, none of the laughter went deep enough or stayed long enough, and I wanted to cry.

We all had a huge hunk of the nesselrode pie made by Rudy's beautiful blond wife—pie you could blow off your plate by flapping a napkin . . . sweet smoke with calories. And then Kelley demanded to know what time it was and cussed and stood up.

"It's only been two hours," Milton said.

"I just as soon head home all the same," said Kelley. "Thanks."

"Wait," I said. I got a scrap of paper out of my wallet and wrote on it. "Here's my phone. I want to see you some more. I'm working for myself these days; my time's my own. I don't sleep much, so call me any time you feel like it."

He took the paper. "You're no good," he said. "You never were no good." The way he said it, I felt fine.

"On the corner is a newsstand," I told him. "There's a magazine there called *Amazing* with one of my lousy stories in it."

"They print it on a roll?" he demanded. He waved at us, nodded to Rudy, and went out.

I swept up some spilled sugar on the table top and pushed it around until it was a perfect square. After a while I shoved in the sides until it was a lozenge. Milton didn't say anything either. Rudy, as is his way, had sense enough to stay away from us.

"Well, that did him some good," Milton said after a while.

"You know better than that," I said bitterly.

Milton said patiently, "Kelley thinks *we* think it did him

some good. And thinking that does him good."

I had to smile at that contortion, and after that it was easier to talk. "The kid going to live?"

Milton waited, as if another answer might spring from somewhere, but it didn't. He said, "No."

"Fine doctor."

"Don't!" he snapped. He looked up at me. "Look, if this was one of those—well, say pleurisy cases on the critical list, without the will to live, why I'd know what to do. Usually those depressed cases have such a violent desire to be reassured, down deep, that you can snap 'em right out of it if only you can think of the right thing to say. And you usually can. But Hal's not one of those. He wants to live. If he didn't want so much to live he'd've been dead three weeks ago. What's killing him is sheer somatic trauma—one broken bone after another, one failing or inflamed internal organ after another."

"Who's doing it?"

"Damn it, *nobody's* doing it!" He caught me biting my lip. "If either one of us should say Kelley's doing it, the other one will punch him in the mouth. Right?"

"Right."

"Just so that doesn't have to happen," said Milton carefully, "I'll tell you what you're bound to ask me in a minute: why isn't he in a hospital?"

"Okay, why?"

"He was. For weeks. And all the time he was there these things kept on happening to him, only worse. More, and more often. I got him home as soon as it was safe to get him out of traction for that broken thigh. He's much better off with Kelley. Kelley keeps him cheered up, cooks for him, medicates him—the works. It's all Kelley does these days."

"I figured. It must be getting pretty tough."

"It is. I wish I had your ability with invective. You can't lend that man anything, give him anything . . . proud? God!"

"Don't take this personally, but have you had consultation?"

He shrugged. "Six ways from the middle. And nine-tenths of it behind Kelley's back, which isn't easy. The lies I've told him! Hal's just *got* to have a special kind of Persian

melon that someone is receiving in a little store in Yonkers. Out Kelley goes, and in the meantime I have to corral two or three doctors and whip 'em in to see Hal and out again before Kelley gets back. Or Hal has to have a special prescription, and I fix up with the druggist to take a good two hours compounding it. Hal saw Grundage, the osteo man, that way, but poor old Ancelowicz the pharmacist got punched in the chops for the delay."

"Milton, you're all right."

He snarled at me, and then went on quietly, "None of it's done any good. I've learned a whole encyclopedia full of wise words and some therapeutic tricks I didn't know existed. But . . ." He shook his head. "Do you know why Kelley and I wouldn't let you meet Hal?" He wet his lips and cast about for an example. "Remember the pictures of Mussolini's corpse after the mob got through with it?"

I shuddered. "I saw 'em."

"Well, that's what he looks like, only he's alive, which doesn't make it any prettier. Hal doesn't know how bad it is, and neither Kelley nor I would run the risk of having him see it reflected in someone else's face. I wouldn't send a wooden Indian into that room."

I began to pound the table, barely touching it, hitting it harder and harder until Milton caught my wrist. I froze then, unhappily conscious of the eyes of everyone in the place looking at me. Gradually the normal sound of the restaurant resumed. "Sorry."

"It's all right."

"There's got to be some sort of reason!"

His lips twitched in a small acid smile. "That's what you get down to at last, isn't it? There's always been a reason for everything, and if we don't know it, we can find it out. But just one single example of real unreason is enough to shake our belief in everything. And then the fear gets bigger than the case at hand and extends to a whole universe of concepts labelled 'unproven'. Shows you how little we believe in anything, basically."

"That's a miserable piece of philosophy!"

"Sure. If you have another arrival point for a case like this, I'll buy it with a bonus. Meantime I'll just go on worrying at this one and feeling more scared than I ought to."

"Let's get drunk."

"A wonderful idea."

Neither of us ordered. We just sat there looking at the lozenge of sugar I'd made on the tabletop. After a while I said, "Hasn't Kelley any idea of what's wrong?"

"You know Kelley. If he had an idea he'd be working on it. All he's doing is sitting by watching his brother's body stew and swell like yeast in a vat."

"What about Hal?"

"He isn't lucid much any more. Not if I can help it."

"But maybe he—"

"Look," said Milton, "I don't want to sound cranky or anything, but I can't hold still for a lot of questions like . . ." He stopped, took out his display handkerchief, looked at it, put it away. "I'm sorry. You don't seem to understand that I didn't take this case yesterday afternoon. I've been sweating it out for nearly three months now. I've already thought of everything you're going to think of. Yes, I questioned Hal, back and forth and sideways. Nothing. N-n-nothing."

That last word trailed off in such a peculiar way that I looked up abruptly. "Tell me," I demanded.

"Tell you what?" Suddenly he looked at his watch. I covered it with my hand. "Come on, Milt."

"I don't know what you're—damn it, leave me alone, will you? If it was anything important, I'd've chased it down long ago."

"Tell me the unimportant something."

"No."

"Tell me why you won't tell me."

"Damn you, I'll do that. It's because you're a crackpot. You're a nice guy and I like you, but you're a crackpot." He laughed suddenly, and it hit me like the flare of a flashbulb. "I didn't know you could look so astonished!" he said. "Now take it easy and listen to me. A guy comes out of a steak house and steps on a rusty nail, and ups and dies of tetanus. But your crackpot vegetarian will swear up and down that the man would still be alive if he hadn't poisoned his system with meat, and use the death to prove his point. The perennial Dry will call the same casualty a victim of John Barleycorn if he knows the man had a beer with his steak. This one death can be ardently and wholeheartedly blamed on the man's divorce, his religion, his political affilia-

tions or on a hereditary taint from his great-great-grandfather who worked for Oliver Cromwell. You're a nice guy and I like you," he said again, "and I am not going to sit across from you and watch you do the crackpot act."

"I do not know," I said slowly and distinctly, "what the hell you are talking about. And now you *have* to tell me."

"I suppose so," he said sadly. He drew a deep breath. "You believe what you write. No," he said quickly, "I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. You grind out all this fantasy and horror stuff and you believe every word of it. More basically, you'd rather believe in the outré and the so-called 'unknowable' than in what I'd call *real* things. You think I'm talking through my hat."

"I do," I said, "but go ahead."

"If I called you up tomorrow and told you with great joy that they'd isolated a virus for Hal's condition and a serum was on the way, you'd be just as happy about it as I would be, but way down deep you'd wonder if that was what was really wrong with him, or if the serum is what really cured him. If on the other hand I admitted to you that I'd found two small punctures on Hal's throat and a wisp of fog slipping out of the room—by God! see what I mean? You have a gleam in your eye already!"

I covered my eyes. "Don't let me stop you now," I said coldly. "Since you are not going to admit Dracula's punctures, what are you going to admit?"

"A year ago Kelley gave his brother a present. An ugly little brute of a Haitian doll. Hal kept it around to make faces at for a while and then gave it to a girl. He had had trouble with the girl. She hates him—really hates him. As far as anyone knows she still has the doll. Are you happy now?"

"Happy," I said disgustedly. "But Milt—you're not just ignoring this doll thing. Why, that could easily be the whole basis of . . . hey, sit down! Where are you going?"

"I told you I wouldn't sit across from a damn lobbyist. Enter hobbies, exit reason." He recoiled. "Wait—you sit down now."

I gathered up a handful of his well-cut lapels. "We'll both sit down," I said gently, "or I'll prove to your heart's desire that I've reached the end of reason."

"Yessir," he said good-naturedly, and sat down. I felt like a damn fool. The twinkle left his eyes and he leaned

forward. "Perhaps now you'll listen instead of riding off like that. I suppose you know that in many cases the voodoo doll does work, and you know why?"

"Well, yes. I didn't think you'd admit it." I got no response from his stony gaze, and at last realized that a fantasist's pose of authority on such matters is bound to sit ill with a serious and progressive physician. A lot less positively, I said, "It comes down to a matter of subjective reality, or what some people call faith. If you believe firmly that the mutilation of a doll with which you identify yourself will result in your own mutilation, well, that's what will happen."

"That, and a lot of things even a horror-story writer could find out if he researched anywhere except in his projective imagination. For example, there are Arabs in North Africa today whom you dare not insult in any way really important to them. If they feel injured, they'll threaten to die, and if you call the bluff they'll sit down, cover their heads, and damn well *die*. There are psychosomatic phenomena like the stigmata, or wounds of the cross, which appear from time to time on the hands, feet and breasts of exceptionally devout people. I know you know a lot of this," he added abruptly, apparently reading something in my expression, "but I'm not going to get my knee off your chest until you'll admit that I'm at least capable of taking a thing like this into consideration and tracking it down."

"I never saw you before in my life," I said, and in an important way I meant it.

"Good," he said, with considerable relief. "Now I'll tell you what I did. I jumped at this doll episode almost as wildly as you did. It came late in the questioning because apparently it *really didn't matter* to Hal."

"Oh, well, but the subconscious—"

"Shaddup!" He stuck a surprisingly sharp forefinger into my collarbone. "I'm telling you; you're not telling me. I won't disallow that a deep belief in voodoo might be hidden in Hal's subconscious, but if it is, it's where sodium amytal and word association and light and profound hypnosis and a half-dozen other therapies give not a smidgin of evidence. I'll take that as proof that he carries no such conviction. I guess from the looks of you I'll have to remind you again that I've dug into this thing in more ways for longer and

with more tools than you have—and I doubt that it means any less to me than it does to you.”

“You know, I’m just going to shut up,” I said plaintively.

“High time,” he said, and grinned. “Now, in every case of voodoo damage or death, there has to be that element of devout belief in the powers of the witch or wizard, and through it a complete sense of identification with the doll. In addition, it helps if the victim knows what sort of damage the doll is sustaining—crushing, or pins sticking into it, or what. And you can take my word for it that no such news has reached Hal.”

“What about the doll? Just to be absolutely sure, shouldn’t we get it back?”

“I thought of that. But there’s no way I know of of getting it back without making it look valuable to the woman. And if she thinks it’s valuable to Hal, we’ll *never* see it.”

“Hm. Who is she, and what’s her royal gripe?”

“She’s as nasty a piece of fluff as they come. She got involved with Hal for a little while—nothing serious, certainly not on his part. He was . . . he’s a big good-natured kid who thinks the only evil people around are the ones who get killed at the end of the movie. Kelley was at sea at the time and he blew in to find this little vampire taking Hal for everything she could, first by sympathy, then by threats. The old badger game. Hal was just bewildered. Kelley got his word that nothing had occurred between them, and then forced Hal to lower the boom. She called his bluff and it went to court. They forced a physical examination on her and she got laughed out of court. She wasn’t the mother of anyone’s unborn child. She never will be. She swore to get even with him. She’s without brains or education or resources, but that doesn’t stop her from being pathological. She sure can hate.”

“Oh. You’ve seen her.”

Milton shuddered. “I’ve seen her. I tried to get all Hal’s gifts back from her. I had to say all because I didn’t dare itemize. All I wanted, it might surprise you to know, was that damned doll. Just in case, you know . . . although I’m morally convinced that the thing has nothing to do with it. Now do you see what I mean about a single example of unreason?”

“Fraid I do.” I felt upset and sat upon and I wasn’t fond of the feeling. I’ve read just too many stories where the sci-

entist just hasn't the imagination to solve a haunt. It had been great, feeling superior to a bright guy like Milton.

We walked out of there and for the first time I felt the mood of a night without feeling that an author was ramming it down my throat for story purposes. I looked at the clean-swept, star-reaching cubism of the Radio City area and its living snakes of neon, and I suddenly thought of an Evelyn Smith story the general idea of which was "After they found out the atom bomb was magic, the rest of the magicians who enchanted refrigerators and washing machines and the telephone system came out into the open." I felt a breath of wind and wondered what it was that had breathed. I heard the snoring of the city and for an awesome second felt it would roll over, open its eyes, and . . . *speak*.

On the corner I said to Milton, "Thanks. You've given me a thumping around. I guess I needed it." I looked at him. "By the Lord I'd like to find some place where you've been stupid in this thing."

"I'd be happy if you could," he said seriously.

I whacked him on the shoulder. "See? You take all the fun out of it."

He got a cab and I started to walk. I walked a whole lot that night, just anywhere. I thought about a lot of things. When I got home the phone was ringing. It was Kelley.

I'm not going to give you a blow-by-blow of that talk with Kelley. It was in that small front room of his place—an apartment he'd rented after Hal got sick, and not the one Hal used to have—and he talked the night away. All I'm withholding is Kelley's expression of things you already know: that he was deeply attached to his brother, that he had no hope left for him, that he would find who or what was responsible and deal with it his way. It is a strong man's right to break down if he must, with whom and where he chooses, and such an occasion is only an expression of strength. But when it happens in a quiet place, with the command of hope strongly in the air; when a chest heaves and a throat must be held wide open to sob silently so that the dying one shall not know; these things are not pleasant to describe in detail. Whatever my ultimate feelings for Kelley, his emotions and the expressions of them are for him to keep.

He did, however, know the name of the girl and where she was. He did not hold her responsible. I thought he might have a suspicion, but it turned out to be only a certainty that this was no disease, no subjective internal disorder. If a great hate and a great determination could solve the problem, Kelley would solve it. If research and logic could solve it, Milton would do it. If I could do it, I would.

She was checking hats in a sleazy club out where Brooklyn and Queens, in a remote meeting, agree to be known as Long Island. The contact was easy to make. I gave her my spring coat with the label outward. It's a good label. When she turned away with it I called her back and drunkenly asked her for the bill in the right-hand pocket. She found it and handed it to me. It was a hundred. "Damn taxis never got change," I mumbled and took it before her astonishment turned to sleight-of-hand. I got out my wallet, crowded the crumpled note into it clumsily enough to display the two other C-notes there, shoved it into the front of my jacket so that it missed the pocket and fell to the floor, and walked off. I walked back before she could lift the hinged counter and skin out after it. I picked it up and smiled foolishly at her. "Lose more business cards that way," I said. Then I brought her into focus. "Hey, you know, you're cute."

I suppose "cute" is one of the four-letter words that describe her. "What's your name?"

"Charity," she said. "But don't get ideas." She was wearing so much pancake makeup that I couldn't tell what her complexion was. She leaned so far over the counter that I could see lipstick stains on her brassiere.

"I don't have a favorite charity yet," I said. "You work here all time?"

"I go home once in a while," she said.

"What time?"

"One o'clock."

"Tell you what," I confided, "let's both be in front of this place at a quarter after and see who stands who up, okay?" Without waiting for an answer I stuck the wallet into my back pocket so that my jacket hung on it. All the way into the dining room I could feel her eyes on it like two hot glistening broiled mushrooms. I came within an ace of losing it to the head waiter when he collided with me, too.

She was there all right, with a yellowish fur around her

neck and heels you could have driven into a pine plank. She was up to the elbows in jangly brass and chrome, and when we got into a cab she threw herself on me with her mouth open. I don't know where I got the reflexes, but I threw my head down and cracked her in the cheekbone with my forehead, and when she squeaked indignantly I said I'd dropped the wallet again and she went about helping me find it quietly as you please. We went to a place and another place and an after-hours place, all her choice. They served her sherry in her whiskey-ponies and doubled all my orders, and tilted the checks something outrageous. Once I tipped a waiter eight dollars and she palmed the five. Once she wormed my leather notebook out of my breast pocket thinking it was the wallet, which by this time was safely tucked away in my knit shorts. She did get one enamel cuff link with a rhinestone in it, and my fountain pen. All in all it was quite a duel. I was loaded to the eyeballs with thiamin hydrochloride and caffeine citrate, but a most respectable amount of alcohol soaked through them, and it was all I could do to play it through. I made it, though, and blocked her at every turn until she had no further choice but to take me home. She was furious and made only the barest attempts to hide it.

We got each other up the dim dawnlit stairs, shushing each other drunkenly, both much soberer than we acted, each promising what we expected not to deliver. She negotiated her lock successfully and waved me inside.

I hadn't expected it to be so neat. Or so cold. "I didn't leave that window open," she said complainingly. She crossed the room and closed it. She pulled her fur around her throat. "This is awful."

It was a long low room with three windows. At one end, covered by a Venetian blind, was a kitchenette. A door at one side of it was probably a bathroom.

She went to the Venetian blind and raised it. "Have it warmed up in a jiffy," she said.

I looked at the kitchenette. "Hey," I said as she lit the little oven, "coffee. How's about coffee?"

"Oh, all right," she said glumly. "But talk quietly, huh?"

"Sh-h-h-h." I pushed my lips around with a forefinger. I circled the room. Cheap phonograph and records. Small-screen TV. A big double studio-couch. A bookcase with no

books in it, just china dogs. It occurred to me that her un-subtle approach was probably not successful as often as she might wish.

But where was the thing I was looking for?

"Hey, I wanna powder my noses," I announced.

"In there," she said. "Can't you talk quiet?"

I went into the bathroom. It was tiny. There was a fore-shortened tub with a circular frame over it from which hung a horribly cheerful shower curtain, with big red roses. I closed the door behind me and carefully opened the medicine chest. Just the usual. I closed it carefully so it wouldn't click. A built-in shelf held towels.

Must be a closet in the main room, I thought. Hatbox, trunk, suitcase, maybe. Where would I put a devil-doll if I were hexing someone?

I wouldn't hide it away, I answered myself. I don't know why, but I'd sort of have it out in the open somehow . . .

I opened the shower curtain and let it close. Round curtain, square tub.

"Yup!"

I pushed the whole round curtain back, and there in the corner, just at eye level, was a triangular shelf. Grouped on it were four figurines, made apparently from kneaded wax. Three had wisps of hair fastened by candle-droppings. The fourth was hairless, but had slivers of a horny substance pressed into the ends of the arms. Fingernail parings.

I stood for a moment thinking. Then I picked up the hairless doll, turned to the door. I checked myself, flushed the toilet, took a towel, shook it out, dropped it over the edge of the tub. Then I reeled out. "Hey honey, look what I got, ain't it *cute*?"

"Shh!" she said. "Oh for crying out loud. Put that back, will you?"

"Well, what is it?"

"It's none of your business, that's what it is. Come on, put it back."

I wagged my finger at her. "You're not being nice to me," I complained.

She pulled some shreds of patience together with an obvious effort. "It's just some sort of toys I have around. Here."

I snatched it away. "All right, you don't wanna be nice!"

I whipped my coat together and began to button it clumsily, still holding the figurine.

She sighed, rolled her eyes, and came to me. "Come on, Dadsy. Have a nice cup of coffee and let's not fight." She reached for the doll and I snatched it away again.

"You got to tell me," I pouted.

"It's pers'nal."

"I wanna be personal," I pointed out.

"Oh all right," she said. "I had a roommate one time, she used to make these things. She said you make one, and s'pose I decide I don't like you, I get something of yours, hair or toenails or something. Say your name is George. What is your name?"

"George," I said.

"All right, I call the doll George. Then I stick pins in it. That's all. Give it to me."

"Who's this one?"

"That's Al."

"Hal?"

"Al. I got one called Hal. He's in there. I hate him the most."

"Yeah, huh. Well, what happens to Al and George and all when you stick pins in 'em?"

"They're s'posed to get sick. Even die."

"Do they?"

"Nah," she said with immediate and complete candor. "I told you, it's just a game, sort of. If it worked believe me old Al would bleed to death. He runs the delicatessen." I handed her the doll, and she looked at it pensively. "I wish it did work, sometimes. Sometimes I almost believe in it. I stick 'em and they just yell."

"Introduce me," I demanded.

"What?"

"Introduce me," I said. I pulled her toward the bathroom. She made a small irritated "oh-h," and came along.

"This is Fritz and this is Bruno and—where's the other one?"

"What other one?"

"Maybe he fell behind the— Down back of—" She knelt on the edge of the tub and leaned over to the wall, to peer behind it. She regained her feet, her face red from effort and anger. "What are you trying to pull? You kidding around or something?"

I spread my arms. "What do you mean?"

"Come on," she said between her teeth. She felt my coat, my jacket. "You hid it some place."

"No I didn't. There was only four." I pointed. "Al and Fritz and Bruno and Hal. Which one's Hal?"

"That's Freddie. He give me twenny bucks and took twenny-three out of my purse, the dirty—. But Hal's gone. He was the best one of all. You *sure* you didn't hide him?"

"The window!" she said, and ran into the other room. I was on my four bones peering under the tub when I understood what she meant. I took a last good look around and then followed her. She was standing at the window, shading her eyes and peering out. "What do you know? Imagine somebody would swipe a thing like that!"

A sick sense of loss was born in my solar plexus.

"Aw, forget it. I'll make another one for that Hal. But I'll never make another one that ugly," she added wistfully. "Come on, the coffee's—what's the matter? You sick? You look bad, Hal."

"Yeah," I said, "I'm sick."

"Of all the things to steal," she said from the kitchenette. "Who do you suppose would do such a thing?"

Suddenly I knew who would. I cracked my fist into my palm and laughed.

"What's the matter, you crazy?"

"Yes," I said. "You got a phone?"

"No. Where you going?"

"Out. Goodbye, Charity."

"Hey, now wait, honey. Just when I got coffee for you."

I snatched the door open. She caught my sleeve. "You can't go away like this. How's about a little something for Charity?"

"You'll get yours when you make the rounds tomorrow, if you don't have a hangover from those sherry highballs," I said cheerfully. "And don't forget the five you swiped from the tip-plate. Better watch out for that waiter, by the way. I think he saw you do it."

"You're not drunk!" she gasped.

"You're not a witch," I grinned. I blew her a kiss and ran out.

I shall always remember her like that, round-eyed, a little more astonished than she was resentful, the beloved dollar-signs fading from her hot brown eyes, the pathetic, useless

little twitch of her hips she summoned up as a last plea.

Ever try to find a phone booth at five a.m.? I half-trotted nine blocks before I found a cab, and I was on the Queens side of the Triboro Bridge before I found a gas station open.

I dialed. The phone said, "Hello?"

"Kelley!" I roared happily. "Why didn't you tell me? You'd'a saved me sixty bucks worth of the most dismal fun I ever—"

"This is Milton," said the telephone. "Hal just died."

My mouth was still open and I guess it just stayed that way. Anyway it was cold inside when I closed it. "I'll be right over."

"Better not," said Milton. His voice was shaking with incomplete control. "Unless you really want to . . . there's nothing you can do, and I'm going to be . . . busy."

"Where's Kelley?" I whispered.

"I don't know."

"Well," I said. "Call me."

I got back into my taxi and went home. I don't remember the trip.

Sometimes I think I dreamed I saw Kelley that morning.

A lot of alcohol and enough emotion to kill it, mixed with no sleep for thirty hours, makes for blackout. I came up out of it reluctantly, feeling that this was no kind of world to be aware of. Not today.

I lay looking at the bookcase. It was very quiet. I closed my eyes, turned over, burrowed into the pillow, opened my eyes again and saw Kelley sitting in the easy chair, poured out in his relaxed feline fashion, legs too long, arms too long, eyes too long and only partly open.

I didn't ask him how he got in because he was already in, and welcome. I didn't say anything because I didn't want to be the one to tell him about Hal. And besides I wasn't awake yet. I just lay there.

"Milton told me," he said. "It's all right."

I nodded.

Kelley said, "I read your story. I found some more and read them too. You got a lot of imagination."

He hung a cigarette on his lower lip and lit it. "Milton, he's got a lot of knowledge . . . now, both of you think real good up to a point. Then too much knowledge presses him

off to the no'theast. And too much imagination squeezes you off to the no'thwest."

He smoked a while.

"Me, I think straight through but it takes me a while."

I palmed my eyeballs. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"That's okay," he said quietly. "Look, I'm goin' after what killed Hal."

I closed my eyes and saw a vicious, pretty, empty little face. I said, "I was most of the night with Charity."

"Were you now?"

"Kelley," I said, "if it's her you're after, forget it. She's a sleazy little tramp but she's also a little kid who never had a chance. She didn't kill Hal."

"I know she didn't. I don't feel about her one way or the other. I know what killed Hal, though, and I'm goin' after it the only way I know for sure."

"All right then," I said. I let my head dig back into the pillow. "What did kill him?"

"Milton told you about that doll Hal give her."

"He told me. There's nothing in that, Kelley. For a man to be a voodoo victim, he's got to believe that—"

"Yeh, yeh, yeh. Milt told me. For hours he told me."

"Well, all right."

"You got imagination," Kelley said sleepily. "Now just imagine along with me a while. Milt tell you how some folks, if you point a gun at 'em and go bang, they drop dead, even if there was only blanks in the gun?"

"He didn't, but I read it somewhere. Same general idea."

"Now imagine all the shootings you ever heard of was like that, with blanks."

"Go ahead."

"You got a lot of evidence, a lot of experts, to prove about this believing business, ever' time anyone gets shot."

"Got it."

"Now imagine somebody shows up with live ammunition in his gun. Do you think those bullets going to give a damn who believes what?"

I didn't say anything.

"For a long time people been makin' dolls and stickin' pins in 'em. Wherever somebody believes it can happen, they get it. Now suppose somebody shows up with the doll all those dolls was copied from. The real one."

I lay still.

"You don't have to know nothin' about it," said Kelley lazily. "You don't have to be anybody special. You don't have to understand how it works. Nobody has to believe nothing. All you do, you just point it where you want it to work."

"Point it how?" I whispered.

He shrugged. "Call the doll by a name. Hate it, maybe."

"For God's sake's, Kelley, you're crazy! Why, there can't be anything like that!"

"You eat a steak," Kelley said. "How your gut know what to take and what to pass? Do *you* know?"

"Some people know."

"You don't. But your gut does. So there's lots of natural laws that are goin' to work whether anyone understands 'em or not. Lots of sailors take a trick at the wheel without knowin' how a steering engine works. Well, that's me. I know where I'm goin' and I know I'll get there. What do I care how does it work, or who believes what?"

"Fine, so what are you going to do?"

"Get what got Hal." His tone was just as lazy but his voice was very deep, and I knew when not to ask any more questions. Instead I said, with a certain amount of annoyance, "Why tell me?"

"Want you to do something for me."

"What?"

"Don't tell no one what I just said for a while. And keep something for me."

"What? And for how long?"

"You'll know."

I'd have risen up and roared at him if he had not chosen just that second to get up and drift out of the bedroom. "What gets me," he said quietly from the other room, "is I could have figured this out six months ago."

I fell asleep straining to hear him go out. He moves quieter than any big man I ever saw.

It was afternoon when I woke. The doll was sitting on the mantelpiece glaring at me. Ugliest thing ever happened.

I saw Kelley at Hal's funeral. He and Milt and I had a somber drink afterward. We didn't talk about dolls. Far as I know Kelley shipped out right afterward. You assume that seamen do, when they drop out of sight. Milton was as busy

as a doctor, which is very. I left the doll where it was for a week or two, wondering when Kelley was going to get around to his project. He'd probably call for it when he was ready. Meanwhile I respected his request and told no one about it. One day when some people were coming over I shoved it in the top shelf of the closet, and somehow it just got left there.

About a month afterward I began to notice the smell. I couldn't identify it right away; it was too faint; but whatever it was, I didn't like it. I traced it to the closet, and then to the doll. I took it down and sniffed it. My breath exploded out. It was that same smell a lot of people wish they could forget—what Milton called necrotic flesh. I came within an inch of pitching the filthy thing down the incinerator, but a promise is a promise. I put it down on the table, where it slumped repulsively. One of the legs was broken above the knee. I mean it seemed to have two knee joints. And it was somehow puffy, sick-looking.

I had an old bell-jar somewhere that once had a clock in it. I found it and a piece of inlaid linoleum, and put the doll under the jar so I could at least live with it.

I worked and saw people—dinner with Milton, once—and the days went by the way they do, and then one night it occurred to me to look at the doll again.

It was in pretty sorry shape. I'd tried to keep it fairly cool, but it seemed to be melting and running all over. For a moment I worried about what Kelley might say, and then I heartily damned Kelley and put the whole mess down in the cellar.

And I guess it was altogether two months after Hal's death that I wondered why I'd assumed Kelley would have to call for the little horror before he did what he had to do. He said he was going to get what got Hal, and he intimated that the doll was that something.

Well, that doll was being got, but good. I brought it up and put it under the light. It was still a figurine, but it was one unholy mess. "Attaboy, Kelley," I gloated. "Go get 'em, kid."

Milton called me up and asked me to meet him at Rudy's. He sounded pretty bad. We had the shortest drink yet.

He was sitting in the back booth chewing on the insides of his cheeks. His lips were gray and he slopped his drink.

"What in time happened to you?" I gasped.

He gave me a ghastly smile. "I'm famous," he said. I heard his glass chatter against his teeth. He said, "I called in so many consultants on Hal Kelley that I'm supposed to be an expert on that—on that . . . condition." He forced his glass back to the table with both hands and held it down. He tried to smile and I wished he wouldn't. He stopped trying and almost whimpered, "I can't nurse one of 'em like that again."

"You going to tell me what happened?" I asked harshly. That works sometimes.

"Oh, oh yes. Well they brought in a . . . another one. At General. They called me in. Just like Hal. I mean *exactly* like Hal. Only I won't have to nurse this one, no I won't, I won't have to. She died six hours after she arrived."

"*She?*"

"She just said the same thing over and over every time anyone talked to her. They'd say, 'What happened?' or 'Who did this to you?' or 'What's your name?' and she'd say 'He called me Dolly.' That's all she'd say, just 'He called me Dolly.'"

I got up. "'Bye, Milt."

He looked stricken. "Don't go, will you, you just got—"

"I got to go," I said. I didn't look back. I had to get out and asked myself some questions. Think.

Who's guilty of murder, I asked myself, the one who pulls the trigger, or the gun?

I thought of a poor damn pretty empty little face with greedy hot brown eyes, and what Kelley said, "I don't care about her."

I thought, when she was twisting and breaking and sticking, how did it look to the doll? Bet she never even wondered about that.

I thought, action: A girl throws a fan at a man. Reaction: The man throws the girl at the fan. Action: A wheel sticks on a shaft. Reaction: Knock the shaft out of the wheel. Situation: We can't get inside. Resolution: Take the outside off it.

How do you kill a doll?

Who's guilty, the one who pulls the trigger, or the gun?

"*He called me Dolly.*"

When I got home the phone was ringing.

"Hi," said Kelley.

I said, "It's all gone. The doll's all gone."

"All right," said Kelley.



The doll-image is powerful; how much more so its living, breathing double—the doppelganger? Child's Play is an unusual example of the use of the basic principles of witchcraft—this time with a futuristic twist. Warning: like most of Tenn's work, and like all great comedy, this story is funny on the surface, but below the surface there may lurk things sinister, dangerous . . . and deadly.

CHILD'S PLAY

by William Tenn

AFTER THE MAN from the express company had given the door an untipped slam, Sam Weber decided to move the huge crate under the one light bulb in his room. It was all very well for the messenger to drawl, "I dunno. We don't send 'em; we just deliver 'em, mister"—but there must be some mildly lucid explanation.

With a grunt that began as an anticipatory reflex and ended on a note of surprised annoyance, Sam shoved the box forward the few feet necessary. It was heavy enough; he wondered how the messenger had carried it up the three flights of stairs.

He straightened and frowned down at the garish card which contained his name and address as well as the legend—"Merry Christmas, 2161."

A joke? He didn't know anyone who'd think it funny to send a card dated over two hundred years in the future. Unless one of the comedians in his law school graduating class meant to record his opinion as to when Weber would be trying his first case. Even so—

The letters were shaped strangely, come to think of it, sort of green streaks instead of lines. And the card was a sheet of gold!

Sam decided he was really interested. He ripped the card aside, tore off the flimsy wrapping material—and stopped. He whistled. Then he gulped.

“Well clip my ears and call me streamlined!”

There was no top to the box, no slit in its side, no handle anywhere in sight. It seemed to be a solid, cubical mass of brown stuff. Yet he was positive something had rattled inside when it was moved.

He seized the corners and strained and grunted till it lifted. The underside was as smooth and innocent of opening as the rest. He let it thump back to the floor.

“Ah, well,” he said, philosophically, “it’s not the gift; it’s the principle involved.”

Many of his gifts still required appreciative notes. He’d have to work up something special for Aunt Maggie. Her neckties were things of cubistic horror, but he hadn’t even sent her a lone handkerchief this Christmas. Every cent had gone into buying that brooch for Tina. Not quite a ring, but maybe she’d consider that under the circumstances—

He turned to walk to his bed which he had drafted into the additional service of desk and chair. He kicked at the great box disconsolately. “Well, if you won’t open, you won’t open.”

As if smarting under the kick, the box opened. A cut appeared on the upper surface, widened rapidly and folded the top back and down on either side like a valise. Sam clapped his forehead and addressed a rapid prayer to every god from Set to Father Divine. Then he remembered what he’d said.

“Close,” he suggested.

The box closed, once more as smooth as a baby’s anatomy.

“Open.”

The box opened.

So much for the sideshow, Sam decided. He bent down and peered into the container.

The interior was a crazy mass of shelving on which rested vials filled with blue liquids, jars filled with red solids, transparent tubes showing yellow and green and orange and mauve and other colors which Sam’s eyes didn’t quite remember. There were seven pieces of intricate apparatus on

the bottom which looked as if tube-happy radio hams had assembled them. There was also a book.

Sam picked the book off the bottom and noted numbly that while all its pages were metallic, it was lighter than any paper book he'd ever held.

He carried the book over to the bed and sat down. Then he took a long, deep breath and turned to the first page. "Gug," he said, exhaling his long, deep breath.

In mad, green streaks of letters:

Bild-A-Man Set #3. This set is intended solely for the use of children between the ages of eleven and thirteen. The equipment, much more advanced than Bild-A-Man Sets 1 and 2, will enable the child of this age-group to build and assemble complete adult humans in perfect working order. The retarded child may also construct the babies and mannikins of the earlier kits. Two disassembleators are provided so that the set can be used again and again with profit. As with Sets 1 and 2, the aid of a Census Keeper in all disassembling is advised. Refills and additional parts may be acquired from The Bild-A-Man Company, 928 Diagonal Level, Glunt City, Ohio. Remember—only with a Bild-A-Man can you build a man!

Weber slammed his eyes shut. What was that gag in the movie he'd seen last night? Terrific gag. Terrific picture, too. Nice technicolor. Wonder how much the director made a week? The cameraman? Five hundred? A thousand?

He opened his eyes warily. The box was still a squat cube in the center of his room. The book was still in his shaking hand. And the page read the same.

"Only with a Bild-A-Man can you build a man!" Heaven help a neurotic young lawyer at a time like this!

There was a price list on the next page for "refills and additional parts." Things like one liter of hemoglobin and three grams of assorted enzymes were offered for sale in terms of one slunk fifty and three slunks forty-five. A note on the bottom advertised Set #4: "The thrill of building your first live Martian!"

Fine print announced *pat. pending 2158*.

The third page was a table of contents. Sam gripped the edge of the mattress with one sweating hand and read:

- | | |
|---------|--|
| Chapter | I—A child's garden of biochemistry. |
| " | II—Making simple living things indoors and out. |
| " | III—Mannikins and what makes them do the world's work. |

- " IV—Babies and other small humans.
- " V—Twins for every purpose, twinning yourself and your friends.
- " VI—What you need to build a man.
- " VII—Completing the man.
- " VIII—Disassembling the man.
- " IX—New kinds of life for your leisure moments.

Sam dropped the book back into the box and ran for the mirror. His face was still the same, somewhat like bleached chalk, but fundamentally the same. He hadn't twinned or grown himself a mannikin or devised a new kind of life for his leisure moments. Everything was snug as a bug in a bug-house.

Very carefully he pushed his eyes back into their proper position in their sockets.

"Dear Aunt Maggie," he began writing feverishly. "Your ties made the most beautiful gift of my Christmas. My only regret is—"

My only regret is that I have but one life to give for my Christmas present. Who could have gone to such fantastic lengths for a practical joke? Lew Knight? Even Lew must have some reverence in his insensitive body for the institution of Christmas. And Lew didn't have the brains or the patience for a job so involved.

Tina? Tina had the fine talent for complication, all right. But Tina, while possessing a delightful abundance of all other physical attributes, was sadly lacking in funnybone.

Sam drew the leather envelope forth and caressed it. Tina's perfume seemed to cling to the surface and move the world back into focus.

The metallic greeting card glinted at him from the floor. Maybe the reverse side contained the sender's name. He picked it up, turned it over.

Nothing but blank gold surface. He was sure of the gold; his father had been a jeweler. The very value of the sheet was rebuttal to the possibility of a practical joke. Besides, again, what was the point?

"Merry Christmas, 2161." Where would humanity be in two hundred years? Traveling to the stars, or beyond—to unimaginable destinations? Using little mannikins to perform the work of machines and robots? Providing children with—

There might be another card or note inside the box. Weber

bent down to remove its contents. His eye noted a large grayish jar and the label etched onto its surface: *Dehydrated Neurone Preparation, for human construction only.*

He backed away and glared. "Close!"

The thing melted shut. Weber sighed his relief at it and decided to go to bed.

He regretted while undressing that he hadn't thought to ask the messenger the name of his firm. Knowing the delivery service involved would be useful in tracing the origin of this gruesome gift.

"But then," he repeated as he fell asleep, "it's not the gift—it's the principle! Merry Christmas, me."

The next morning when Lew Knight breezed in with his "Good morning, counselor," Sam waited for the first sly ribbing to start. Lew wasn't the man to hide his humor behind a bushel. But Lew buried his nose in "The New York State Supplement" and kept it there all morning. The other five young lawyers in the communal office appeared either too bored or too busy to have Bild-A-Man sets on their conscience. There were no sly grins, no covert glances, no leading questions.

Tina walked in at ten o'clock, looking like a pin-up girl caught with her clothes on.

"Good morning, counselors," she said.

Each in his own way, according to the peculiar gland secretions he was enjoying at the moment, beamed, drooled or nodded a reply. Lew Knight drooled. Sam Weber beamed.

Tina took it all in and analyzed the situation while she fluffed her hair about. Her conclusions evidently involved leaning markedly against Lew Knight's desk and asking what he had for her to do this morning.

Sam bit savagely into Hackleworth "On Torts." Theoretically, Tina was employed by all seven of them as secretary, switchboard operator and receptionist. Actually, the most faithful performance of her duties entailed nothing more daily than the typing and addressing of two envelopes with an occasional letter to be sealed inside. Once a week there might be a wistful little brief which was never to attain judicial scrutiny. Tina therefore had a fair library of fashion magazines in the first drawer of her desk and a complete cosmetics laboratory in the other two; she spent one third of her working day in the ladies' room swapping stocking

prices and sources with other secretaries; she devoted the other two thirds religiously to that one of her employers who as of her arrival seemed to be in the most masculine mood. Her pay was small but her life was full.

Just before lunch, she approached casually with the morning's mail. "Didn't think we'd be too busy this morning, counselor—" she began.

"You thought incorrectly, Miss Hill," he informed her with a brisk irritation that he hoped became him well; "I've been waiting for you to terminate your social engagements so that we could get down to what occasionally passes for business."

She was as startled as an uncushioned kitten. "But—but this isn't Monday. Somerset & Ojack only send you stuff on Mondays."

Sam winced at the reminder that if it weren't for the legal drudge-work he received once a week from Somerset & Ojack he would be a lawyer in name only, if not in spirit only. "I have a letter, Miss Hill," he replied steadily. "Whenever you assemble the necessary materials, we can get on with it."

Tina returned in a head-shaking moment with stenographic pad and pencils.

"Regular heading, today's date," Sam began. "Address it to Chamber of Commerce, Glunt City, Ohio. Gentlemen: Would you inform me if you have registered currently with you a firm bearing the name of the Bild-A-Man Company or a firm with any name at all similar? I am also interested in whether a firm bearing the above or related name has recently made known its intention of joining your community. This inquiry is being made informally on behalf of a client who is interested in a product of this organization whose address he has mislaid. Signature and then this P.S. —My client is also curious as to the business possibilities of a street known as Diagonal Avenue or Diagonal Level. Any data on this address and the organizations presently located there will be greatly appreciated."

Tina batted wide blue eyes at him. "Oh, Sam," she breathed, ignoring the formality he had introduced, "Oh, Sam, you have another client. I'm so glad. He looked a little sinister, but in *such* a distinguished manner that I was certain—"

"Who? Who looked a little sinister?"

"Why your new client." Sam had the uncomfortable feeling that she had almost added "stupid." "When I came in this morning, there was this terribly tall old man in a long black overcoat talking to the elevator operator. He turned to me—the elevator operator, I mean—and said, 'This is Mr. Weber's secretary. She'll be able to tell you anything you want to know.' Then he sort of winked which I thought was sort of impolite, you know, considering. Then this old man looked at me hard and I felt distinctly uncomfortable and he walked away muttering, 'Either disjointed or predatory personalities. Never normal. Never balanced.' Which I didn't think was very polite, either, I'll have you know, if he is your new client!" She sat back and began breathing again.

Tall, sinister old men in long, black overcoats pumping the elevator operator about him. Hardly a matter of business. He had no skeletons in his personal closet. Could it be connected with his unusual Christmas present? Sam hummed mentally.

"—but she is my favorite aunt, you know," Tina was saying. "And she came in so unexpectedly."

The girl was explaining about their Christmas date. Sam felt a rush of affection for her as she leaned forward.

"Don't bother," he told her. "I knew you couldn't help breaking the date. I was a little sore when you called me, but I got over it; never-hold-a-grudge-against-a-pretty-girl Sam, I'm known as. How about lunch?"

"Lunch?" She flew distress signals. "I promised Lew, Mr. Knight, that is— But he wouldn't mind if you came along."

"Fine. Let's go." This would be helping Lew to a spoonful of his own annoying medicine.

Lew Knight took the business of having a crowd instead of a party for lunch as badly as Sam hoped he would. Unfortunately, Lew was able to describe details of his forthcoming case, the probable fees and possible distinction to be reaped thereof. After one or two attempts to bring an interesting will he was rephrasing for Somerset & Ojack into the conversation, Sam subsided into daydreams. Lew immediately dropped Rosenthal vs. Rosenthal and leered at Tina conversationally.

Outside the restaurant, snow discolored into slush. Most of the stores were removing Christmas displays. Sam no-

ticed construction sets for children, haloed by tinsel and glittering with artificial snow. Build a radio, a skyscraper, an airplane. But "Only with a Bild-A-Man can you—"

"I'm going home," he announced suddenly. "Something important I just remembered. If anything comes up, call me there."

He was leaving Lew a clear field, he told himself, as he found a seat on the subway. But the bitter truth was that the field was almost as clear when he was around as when he wasn't. Lupine Lew Knight, he had been called in law school; since the day when he had noticed that Tina had the correct proportions of dress-filling substance, Sam's chances had been worth a crowbar at Fort Knox.

Tina hadn't been wearing his brooch today. Her little finger, right hand, however, had sported an unfamiliar and garish little ring. "Some got it," Sam philosophized. "Some don't got it. I don't got it."

But it would have been nice, with Tina, to have "got" it.

As he unlocked the door of his room he was surprised by an unmade bed telling with rumpled stoicism of a chambermaid who'd never come. This hadn't happened before— Of course! He'd never locked his room before. The girl must have thought he wanted privacy.

Maybe he had.

Aunt Maggie's ties glittered obscenely at the foot of the bed. He chucked them into the closet as he removed his hat and coat. Then he went over to the washstand and washed his hands, slowly. He turned around.

This was it. At last the great cubical bulk that had been lurking quietly in the corner of his vision was squarely before him. It was there and it undoubtedly contained all the outlandish collection he remembered.

"Open," he said, and the box opened.

The book, still open to the metallic table of contents, was lying at the bottom of the box. Part of it had slipped into the chamber of a strange piece of apparatus. Sam picked both out gingerly.

He slipped the book out and noticed the apparatus consisted mostly of some sort of binoculars, supported by a coil and tube arrangement and bearing on a flat green plate. He turned it over. The underside was lettered in the same streaky way as the book. "Combination Electron Microscope and Workbench."

Very carefully he placed it on the floor. One by one, he removed the others, from the "Junior Biocalibrator" to the "Jiffy Vitalizer." Very respectfully he ranged against the box in five multi-colored rows the phials of lymph and the jars of basic cartilage. The walls of the chest were lined with indescribably thin and wrinkled sheets; a slight pressure along their edges expanded them into three-dimensional outlines of human organs whose shape and size could be varied with pinching any part of their surface—most indubitably molds.

Quite an assortment. If there was anything solidly scientific to it, that box might mean unimaginable wealth. Or some very useful publicity. Or—well, it should mean something!

If there was anything solidly scientific to it.

Sam flopped down to the bed and opened to "A Child's Garden of Biochemistry."

At nine that night he squatted next to the Combination Electron Microscope and Workbench and began opening certain small bottles. At nine forty-seven Sam Weber made his first simple living thing.

It wasn't much, if you used the first chapter of Genesis as your standard. Just a primitive brown mold that, in the field of the microscope, fed diffidently on a piece of pretzel, put forth a few spores and died in about twenty minutes. But *he* had made it. He had constructed a specific life-form to feed on the constituents of a specific pretzel; it could survive nowhere else.

He went out to supper with every intention of getting drunk. After just a little alcohol, however, the *deiish* feeling returned and he scurried back to his room.

Never again that evening did he recapture the exultation of the brown mold, though he constructed a giant protein molecule and a whole slew of filterable viruses.

He called the office from the little corner drugstore which was his breakfast nook. "I'll be home all day," he told Tina.

She was a little puzzled. So was Lew Knight who grabbed the phone. "Hey, counselor, you building up a neighborhood practice? Kid Blackstone is missing out on a lot of cases. Two ambulances have already clanged past the building."

"Yeah," said Sam. "I'll tell him when he comes in."

The week end was almost upon him, so he decided to take

the next day off as well. He wouldn't have any real work till Monday when the Somerset & Ojack basket would produce his lone egg.

Before he returned to his room, he purchased a copy of an advanced bacteriology. It was amusing to construct—with improvements!—uni-cellular creatures whose very place in the scheme of classification was a matter for argument among scientists of his own day. The Bild-A-Man manual, of course, merely gave a few examples and general rules; but with the descriptions in the bacteriology, the world was his oyster.

Which was an idea: he made a few oysters. The shells weren't hard enough, and he couldn't quite screw his courage up to the eating point, but they were most undeniably bivalves. If he cared to perfect his technique, his food problem would be solved.

The manual was fairly easy to follow and profusely illustrated with pictures that expanded into solidity as the page was opened. Very little was taken for granted; involved explanations followed simpler ones. Only the allusions were occasionally obscure—"This is the principle used in the phanphoplink toys," "When your teeth are next kokekkled or demortoned, think of the *Bacterium cyanogenum* and the humble part it plays," "If you have a ribicular mannikin around the house, you needn't bother with the chapter on mannikins."

After a brief search had convinced Sam that whatever else he now had in his apartment he didn't have a ribicular mannikin, he felt justified in turning to the chapter on mannikins. He had conquered completely this feeling of being Pop playing with Junior's toy train: already he had done more than the world's top biologists ever dreamed of for the next generation and what might not lie ahead—what problems might he not yet solve?

"Never forget that mannikins are constructed for one purpose and one purpose only." I won't, Sam promised. "Whether they are sanitary mannikins, tailoring mannikins, printing mannikins or even sunevviarry mannikins, they are each constructed with one operation of a given process in view. When you make a mannikin that is capable of more than one function, you are committing a crime so serious as to be punishable by public admonition."

"To construct an elementary mannikin—"

It was very difficult. Three times he tore down developing monstrosities and began anew. It wasn't till Sunday afternoon that the mannikin was complete—or rather, incomplete.

Long arms it had—although by an error, one was slightly longer than the other—a faceless head and a trunk. No legs. No eyes or ears, no organs of reproduction. It lay on his bed and gurgled out of the red rim of a mouth that was supposed to serve both for ingress and excretion of food. It waved the long arms, designed for some one simple operation not yet invented, in slow circles.

Sam, watching it, decided that life could be as ugly as an open field latrine in midsummer.

He had to disassemble it. Its length—three feet from almost boneless fingers to tapering, sealed-off trunk—precluded the use of the tiny disassembleator with which he had taken apart the oysters and miscellaneous small creations. There was a bright yellow notice on the large disassembleator, however—“To be used only under the direct supervision of a Census Keeper. Call formula A76 or unstable your *id*.”

“Formula A76” meant about as much as “sunevviarry,” and Sam decided his *id* was already sufficiently unstabled, thank you. He'd have to make out without a Census Keeper. The big disassembleator probably used the same general principles as the small one.

He clamped it to a bedpost and adjusted the focus. He snapped the switch set in the smooth underside.

Five minutes later the mannikin was a bright, gooey mess on his bed.

The large disassembleator, Sam was convinced as he tidied his room, did require the supervision of a Census Keeper. Some sort of keeper anyway. He rescued as many of the legless creature's constituents as he could, although he doubted he'd be using the set for the next fifty years or so. He certainly wouldn't ever use the disassembleator again; much less spectacular and disagreeable to shove the whole thing into a meat grinder and crank the handle as it squashed inside.

As he locked the door behind him on his way to a gentle binge, he made a mental note to purchase some fresh sheets the next morning. He'd have to sleep on the floor tonight.

Wrist-deep in Somerset & Ojack minutiae, Sam was conscious of Lew Knight's stares and Tina's puzzled glances. If they only knew, he exulted! But Tina would probably just think it "marr-vell-ouss!" and Lew Knight might make some crack like "Hey! Kid Frankenstein himself!" Come to think of it though Lew would probably have worked out some method of duplicating, to a limited extent, the contents of the Bild-A-Man set and marketing it commercially. Whereas he—well, there were other things you could do with the gadget. Plenty of other things.

"Hey, counselor," Lew Knight was perched on the corner of his desk, "what are these long week ends we're taking? You might not make as much money in the law, but does it look right for an associate of mine to sell magazine subscriptions on the side?"

Sam stuffed his ears mentally against the emery-wheel voice. "I've been writing a book."

"A law book? Weber 'On Bankruptcy'?"

"No, a juvenile. 'Lew Knight, The Neanderthal Nitwit.'"

"Won't sell. The title lacks punch. Something like 'Knights, Knaves and Knobheads' is what the public goes for these days. By the way, Tina tells me you two had some sort of understanding about New Year's Eve and she doesn't think you'd mind if I took her out instead. I don't think you'd mind either, but I may be prejudiced. Especially since I have a table reservation at Cigale's where there's usually less of a crowd of a New Year's Eve than at the Automat."

"I don't mind."

"Good," said Knight approvingly as he moved away. "By the way, I won that case. Nice juicy fee, too. Thanks for asking."

Tina also wanted to know if he objected to the new arrangements when she brought the mail. Again, he didn't. Where had he been for over two days? He had been busy, very busy. Something entirely new. Something important.

She stared down at him as he separated offers of used cars guaranteed not to have been driven over a quarter of a million miles from caressing reminders that he still owed half the tuition for the last year of law school and when was he going to pay it?

Came a letter that was neither bill nor ad. Sam's heart momentarily lost interest in the monotonous round of

pumping that was its lot as he stared at a strange postmark: Glunt City, Ohio.

Dear Sir:

There is no firm in Glunt City at the present time bearing any name similar to "Bild-A-Man Company" nor do we know of any such organization planning to join our little community. We also have no thoroughfare called "Diagonal"; our north-south streets are named after Indian tribes while our east-west avenues are listed numerically in multiples of five.

Glunt City is a restricted residential township; we intend to keep it that. Only small retailing and service establishments are permitted here. If you are interested in building a home in Glunt City and can furnish proof of white, Christian, Anglo-Saxon ancestry on both sides of your family for fifteen generations, we would be glad to furnish further information.

Thomas H. Plantagenet, Mayor

P.S. An airfield for privately owned jet- and propeller-driven aircraft is being built outside the city limits.

That was sort of that. He would get no refills on any of the vials and bottles even if he had a loose slunk or two with which to pay for the stuff. Better go easy on the material and conserve it as much as possible. But no disassembling!

Would the "Bild-A-Man Company" begin manufacturing at Glunt City some time in the future when it had developed into an industrial metropolis against the constricted wills of its restricted citizenry? Or had his package slid from some different track in the human time stream, some era to be born on another-dimensional earth? There would have to be a common origin to both, else why the English wordage? And could there be a purpose in his having received it, beneficial—or otherwise?

Tina had been asking him a question. Sam detached his mind from shapeless speculation and considered her quite-the-opposite features.

"So if you'd still like me to go out with you New Year's Eve, all I have to do is tell Lew that my mother expects to suffer from her gallstones and I have to stay home. Then I think you could buy the Cigale reservations from him cheap."

"Thanks a lot, Tina, but very honestly I don't have the loose cash right now. You and Lew make a much more logical couple anyhow."

Lew Knight wouldn't have done that. Lew cut throats

with carefree zest. But Tina did seem to go with Lew as a type.

Why? Until Lew had developed a raised eyebrow where Tina was concerned, it had been Sam all the way. The rest of the office had accepted the fact and moved out of their path. It wasn't only a question of Lew's greater success and financial well-being: just that Lew had decided he wanted Tina and had got her.

It hurt. Tina wasn't special; she was no cultural companion, no intellectual equal; but he wanted her. He liked being with her. She was the woman he desired, rightly or wrongly, whether or not there was a sound basis to their relationship. He remembered his parents before a railway accident had orphaned him: they were theoretically incompatible, but they had been terribly happy together.

He was still wondering about it the next night as he flipped the pages of "Twinning yourself and your friends." It would be interesting to twin Tina.

"One for me, one for Lew."

Only the horrible possibility of an error was there. His mannikin had not been perfect: its arms had been of unequal length. Think of a physically lopsided Tina, something he could never bring himself to disassemble, limping extraneously through life.

And then the book warned: "Your constructed twin, through resembling you in every obvious detail, has not had the slow and guarded maturity you have enjoyed. He or she will not be as stable mentally, much less able to cope with unusual situations, much more prone to neurosis. Only a professional carnuplicator, using the finest equipment, can make an exact copy of a human personality. Yours will be able to live and even reproduce, but never to be accepted as a valid and responsible member of society."

Well, he could chance that. A little less stability in Tina would hardly be noticeable; it might be more desirable.

There was a knock. He opened the door, guarding the box from view with his body. His landlady.

"Your door has been locked for the past week, Mr. Weber. That's why the chambermaid hasn't cleaned the room. We thought you didn't want anyone inside."

"Yes." He stepped into the hall and closed the door be-

hind him. "I've been doing some highly important legal work at home."

"Oh." He sensed a murderous curiosity and changed the subject.

"Why all the fine feathers, Mrs. Lipanti—New Year's Eve party?"

She smoothed her frilled black dress self-consciously. "Y-yes. My sister and her husband came in from Springfield today and we were going to make a night of it. Only . . . only the girl who was supposed to come over and mind their baby just phoned and she she isn't feeling well. So I guess we won't go unless somebody else, I mean unless we can get someone else to take care . . . I mean, somebody who doesn't have a previous engagement and who wouldn't—" Her voice trailed away in assumed embarrassment as she realized the favor was already asked.

Well, after all, he wasn't doing anything tonight. And she had been remarkably pleasant those times when he had had to operate on the basis of "Of course I'll have the rest of the rent in a day or so." But why did any one of the earth's two billion humans, when in the possession of an unpleasant buck, pass it automatically to Sam Weber?

Then he remembered Chapter IV on babies and other small humans. Since the night when he had separated the mannikin from its constituent parts, he'd been running through the manual as an intellectual exercise. He didn't feel quite up to making some weird error on a small human. But twinning wasn't supposed to be as difficult.

Only by Gog and by Magog, by Aesculapius the Physician and Kildare the Doctor, he would not disassemble this time. There must be other methods of disposal possible in a large city on a dark night. He'd think of something.

"I'd be glad to watch the baby for a few hours." He started down the hall to anticipate her polite protest. "Don't have a date tonight myself. No, don't mention it, Mrs. Lipanti. Glad to do it."

In the landlady's apartment her nervous sister briefed him doubtfully: "And that's the only time she cries in a low, steady way so if you move fast there won't be much damage done. Not much, anyway."

He saw them to the door. "I'll be fast enough," he assured the mother. "Just so I get a hint."

Mrs. Lipanti paused at the door. "Did I tell you about the man who was asking after you this afternoon?"

Again? "A sort of tall, old man in a long, black overcoat?"

"With the most frightening way of staring into your face and talking under his breath. Do you know him?"

"Not exactly. What did he want?"

"Well, he asked if there was a Sam Weaver living here who was a lawyer and had been spending most of his time in his room for the past week. I told him we had a Sam Weber—your first name is Sam?—who answered to that description, but that the last Weaver had moved out over a year ago. He just looked at me for a while and said, 'Weaver, Weber—they might have made an error,' and walked out without so much as a good-by or excuse me. Not what I call a polite gentleman."

Thoughtfully Sam walked back to the child. Strange how sharp a mental picture he had formed of this man! Possibly because the two women who had met him thus far had been very impressionable, although to hear their stories the impression was there to be received.

He doubted there was any mistake: the man had been looking for him on both occasions; his knowledge of Sam's vacation from foolscap this past week proved that. It did seem as if he weren't interested in meeting him until some moot point of identity should be established beyond the least shadow of a doubt. Something of a legal mind, that.

The whole affair centered around the "Bild-A-Man" set he was positive. This skulking investigation hadn't started until after the gift from 2161 had been delivered—and Sam had started using it.

But till the character in the long, black overcoat paddled up to Sam Weber personally and stated his business, there wasn't very much he could do about it.

Sam went upstairs for his Junior Biocalibrator.

He propped the manual open against the side of the bed and switched the instrument on to full scanning power. The infant gurgled thickly as the calibrator was rolled slowly over its fat body and a section of metal tape unwound from the slot with, according to the manual, a completely detailed physiological description.

It was detailed. Sam gasped as the tape, running through the enlarging viewer, gave information on the child for

which a pediatrician would have taken out at least three mortgages on his immortal soul. Thyroid capacity, chromosome quality, cerebral content. All broken down into neat subheads of data for construction purposes. Rate of skull expansion in minutes for the next ten hours; rate of cartilage transformation; changes in hormone secretions while active and at rest.

This was a blueprint; it was like taking canons from a baby.

Sam left the child to a puzzled contemplation of its navel and sped upstairs. With the tape as a guide, he clipped sections of the molds into the required smaller sizes. Then, almost before he knew it consciously, he was constructing a small human.

He was amazed at the ease with which he worked. Skill was evidently acquired in this game; the mannikin had been much harder to put together. The matter of duplication and working from an informational tape simplified his problems, though.

The child took form under his eyes.

He was finished just an hour and a half after he had taken his first measurements. All except the vitalizing.

A moment's pause, here. The ugly prospect of disassembling stopped him for a moment, but he shook it off. He had to see how well he had done the job. If this child could breathe, what was not possible to him! Besides he couldn't keep it suspended in an inanimate condition very long without running the risk of ruining his work and the materials.

He started the vitalizer.

The child shivered and began a low, steady cry. Sam tore down to the landlady's apartment again and scooped up a square of white linen left on the bed for emergencies. Oh well, some more clean sheets.

After he had made the necessary repairs, he stood back and took a good look at it. He was in a sense a papa. He felt as proud.

It was a perfect little creature, glowing and round with health.

"I have twinned," he said happily.

Every detail correct. The two sides of the face correctly unexact, the duplication of the original child's lunch at the very same point of digestion. Same hair, same eyes—or was it? Sam bent over the infant. He could have sworn the

other was a blonde. This child had dark hair which seemed to grow darker as he looked.

He grabbed it with one hand and picked up the junior biocalibrator with the other.

Downstairs, he placed the two babies side by side on the big bed. No doubt about it. One was blonde; the other, his plagiarism, was now a definite brunette.

The biocalibrator showed other differences: Slightly faster pulse for his model. Lower blood count. Minutely higher cerebral capacity, although the content was the same. Adrenalin and bile secretions entirely unlike.

It added up to error. His child might be the superior specimen, or the inferior one, but he had not made a true copy. He had no way of knowing at the moment whether or not the infant he had built could grow into a human maturity. The other could.

Why? He had followed directions faithfully, had consulted the calibrator tape at every step. And this had resulted. Had he waited too long before starting the vitalizer? Or was it just a matter of insufficient skill?

Close to midnight, his watch delicately pointed out. It would be necessary to remove evidences of baby-making before the Sisters Lipanti came home. Sam considered possibilities swiftly.

He came down in a few moments with an old tablecloth and a cardboard carton. He wrapped the child in the tablecloth, vaguely happy that the temperature had risen that night, then placed it in the carton.

The child gurgled at the adventure. Its original on the bed *goosed* in return. Sam slipped quietly out into the street.

Male and female drunks stumbled along tootling on tiny trumpets. People wished each other a *hic* happy new year as he strode down the necessary three blocks.

As he turned left, he saw the sign: "Urban Foundling Home." There was a light burning over a side door. Convenient, but that was a big city for you.

Sam shrank into the shadow of an alley for a moment as a new idea occurred to him. This had to look genuine. He pulled a pencil out of his breast pocket and scrawled on the side of the carton in as small handwriting as he could manage:

Please take good care of my darling little girl. I am not married.

Then he deposited the carton on the doorstep and held his finger on the bell until he heard movement inside. He was across the street and in the alley again by the time a nurse had opened the door.

It wasn't until he walked into the boarding house that he remembered about the navel. He stopped and tried to recall. No, he had built his little girl without a navel! Her belly had been perfectly smooth. That's what came of hurrying. Shoddy workmanship.

There might be a bit of to-do in the foundling home when they unwrapped the kid. How would they explain it?

Sam slapped his forehead. "Me and Michelangelo. He adds a navel, I forget one!"

Except for an occasional groan, the office was fairly quiet the second day of the New Year.

He was going through the last intriguing pages of the book when he was aware of two people teetering awkwardly near his desk. His eyes left the manual reluctantly: "New kinds of life for your leisure moments" was really stuff!

Tina and Lew Knight.

Sam digested the fact that neither of them were perched on his desk.

Tina wore the little ring she'd received for Christmas on the third finger of her left hand; Lew was experimenting with a sheepish look and finding it difficult.

"Oh, Sam. Last night, Lew . . . Sam, we wanted you to be the first—Such a surprise, like that I mean! Why I almost—Naturally we thought this would be a little difficult . . . Sam, we're going, I mean we expect—"

"—to be married," Lew Knight finished in what was almost an undertone. For the first time since Sam had known him he looked uncertain and suspicious of life, like a man who finds a newly-hatched octopus in his breakfast orange juice.

"You'd adore the way Lew proposed," Tina was gushing. "So roundabout. And so shy. I told him afterwards that I thought for a moment he was talking of something else entirely. I did have trouble understanding you, didn't I, dear?"

"Huh? Oh yeah, you had trouble understanding me." Lew stared at his former rival. "Much of a surprise?"

"Oh, no. No surprise at all. You two fit together so perfectly that I knew it right from the first." Sam mumbled his felicitations, conscious of Tina's searching glances. "And now, if you'll excuse me, there's something I have to take care of immediately. A special sort of wedding present."

Lew was disconcerted. "A wedding present. This early?"

"Why certainly," Tina told him. "It isn't very easy to get just the right thing. And a special friend like Sam naturally wants to get a very special gift."

Sam decided he had taken enough. He grabbed the manual and his coat and dodged through the door.

By the time he came to the red stone steps of the boarding-house, he had reached the conclusion that the wound, while painful, had definitely missed his heart. He was in fact chuckling at the memory of Lew Knight's face when his landlady plucked at his sleeve.

"That man was here again today, Mr. Weber. He said he wanted to see you."

"Which man? The tall, old fellow?"

Mrs. Lipanti nodded, her arms folded complacently across her chest. "Such an unpleasant person! When I told him you weren't in, he insisted I take him up to your room. I said I couldn't do that without your permission and he looked at me fit to kill. I've never believed in the evil eye myself—although I always say where there is smoke there must be fire—but if there is such a thing as an evil eye, he has it."

"Will he be back?"

"Yes. He asked me when you usually return and I said about eight o'clock, figuring that if you didn't want to meet him it would give you time to change your clothes and wash up and leave before he gets here. And, Mr. Weber, if you'll excuse me for saying this, I don't think you want to meet him."

"Thanks. But when he comes in at eight, show him up. If he's the right person, I'm in illegal possession of his property. I want to know where this property originates."

In his room, he put the manual away carefully and told the box to open. The Junior Biocalibrator was not too bulky and newspaper would suffice to cover it. He was on his way uptown in a few minutes with the strangely shaped parcel under his arm.

Did he still want to duplicate Tina, he pondered? Yes, in spite of everything. She was still the woman he desired more than any he had ever known; and with the original married to Lew, the replica would have no choice but himself. Only—the replica would have Tina's characteristics up to the moment the measurements were taken; she might insist on marrying Lew as well.

That would make for a bit of a sitcheeyshun. But he was still miles from that bridge. It might even be amusing—

The possibility of error was more annoying. The Tina he would make might be off-center in a number of ways: reds might overlap pinks like an imperfectly reproduced color photograph; she might, in time, come to digest her own stomach; there could very easily be a streak of strange and incurable insanity implicit in his model which would not assert itself until a deep mutual affection had flowered and borne fruit. As yet, he was no great shakes as a twinner and human mimeographer; the errors he had made on Mrs. Lipanti's niece demonstrated his amateur standing.

Sam knew he would never be able to dismantle Tina if she proved defective. Outside of the chivalrous concepts and almost superstitious reverence for womankind pressed into him by a small town boyhood, there was the unmitigated horror he felt at the idea of such a beloved object going through the same disintegrating process as—well, the mannikin. But if he overlooked an essential in his construction, what other recourse would there be?

Solution: nothing must be overlooked. Sam grinned bitterly as the ancient elevator swayed up to his office. If he only had time for a little more practice with a person whose reactions he knew so exactly that any deviation from the norm would be instantly obvious! But the strange, old man would be calling tonight, and, if his business concerned "Bild-A-Man" sets, Sam's experiments might be abruptly curtailed. And where would he find such a person—he had few real friends and no intimate ones. And, to be at all valuable, it would have to be someone he knew as well as himself.

Himself!

"Floor, sir." The elevator operator was looking at him reproachfully. Sam's exultant shout had caused him to bring the carrier to a spasmodic stop six inches under the floor level, something he had not done since that bygone day

when he had first nervously reached for the controls. He felt his craftsmanship was under a shadow as he morosely closed the door behind the lawyer.

And why not himself? He knew his own physical attributes better than he knew Tina's; any mental instability on the part of his reproduced self would be readily discernible long before it reached the point of psychosis or worse. And the beauty of it was that he would have no compunction in disassembling a superfluous Sam Weber. Quite the contrary: the horror in that situation would be the continued existence of a duplicate personality; its removal would be a relief.

Twinning himself would provide the necessary practice in a familiar medium. Ideal. He'd have to take careful notes so that if anything went wrong he'd know just where to avoid going off the track in making his own personal Tina.

And maybe the old geezer wasn't interested in the set at all. Even if he were, Sam could take his landlady's advice and not be at home when he called. Silver linings wherever he looked.

Lew Knight stared at the instrument in Sam's hands. "What in the sacred name of Blackstone and all his commentaries is that? Looks like a lawn mower for a window box!"

"It's uh, sort of a measuring gadget. Gives the right size for one thing and another and this and that. Won't be able to get you the wedding present I have in mind unless I know the right size. Or sizes. Tina, would you mind stepping out into the hall?"

"Nooo." She looked dubiously at the gadget. "It won't hurt?"

It wouldn't hurt a bit, Sam assured her. "I just want to keep this a secret from Lew till after the ceremony."

She brightened at that and preceded Sam through the door. "Hey counselor," one of the other young lawyers called at Lew as they left. "Hey counselor, don't let him do that. Possession is nine points, Sam always says. He'll never bring her back."

Lew chuckled weakly and bent over his work.

"Now I want you to go into the ladies' room," Sam explained to a bewildered Tina. "I'll stand guard outside and tell the other customers that the place is out of order. If

another woman is inside wait until she leaves. Then strip."

"Strip?" Tina squealed.

He nodded. Then very carefully, emphasizing every significant detail of operation, he told her how to use the Junior Biocalibrator. How she must be careful to kick the switch and set the tape running. How she must cover every external square inch of her body. "This little arm will enable you to lower it down your back. No questions now. Git." She gat.

She was back in fifteen minutes, fluffing her dress into place and studying the tape with a rapt frown. "This is the *strangest* thing— According to the spool, my iodine content—"

Sam snaffled the Biocalibrator hurriedly. "Don't give it another thought. It's a code, kind of. Tells me just what size and how many of what kind. You'll be crazy about the gift when you see it."

"I know I will." She bent over him as he kneeled and examined the tape to make certain she had applied the instrument correctly. "You know, Sam, I always felt your taste was perfect. I want you to come and visit us often after we're married. You can have such beautiful ideas! Lew is a bit too . . . too businesslike, isn't he? I mean it's necessary for success and all that, but success isn't everything. I mean you have to have culture, too. You'll help me keep cultured, won't you, Sam?"

"Sure," Sam said vaguely. The tape was complete. Now to get started! "Anything I can do—glad to help."

He rang for the elevator and noticed the forlorn uncertainty with which she watched him. "Don't worry, Tina. You and Lew will be very happy together. And you'll love this wedding present." But not as much as I will, he told himself as he stepped back into the elevator.

Back in his room, he emptied the machine and undressed. In a few moments he had another tape on himself. He would have liked to consider it for a while, but being this close to the goal made him impatient. He locked the door, cleaned his room hurriedly of accumulated junk—remembering to sniff in annoyance at Aunt Maggie's ties: the blue and red one almost lighted up the room—ordered the box to open—and he was ready to begin.

First the water. With the huge amount of water necessary to the human body, especially in the case of an adult,

he might as well start collecting it now. He had bought several pans and it would take his lone faucet some time to fill them all.

As he placed the first pot under the tap, Sam wondered suddenly if its chemical impurities might affect the end product. Of course it might! These children of 2161 would probably take absolutely pure H_2O as a matter of daily use; the manual hadn't mentioned the subject, but how did he know what kind of water they had available? Well, he'd boil this batch over his chemical stove; when he got to making Tina he could see about getting *aqua* completely *pura*.

Score another point for making a simulacrum of Sam first.

While waiting for the water to boil, he arranged his supplies to positions of maximum availability. They were getting low. That baby had taken up quite a bit of useful ingredients; too bad he hadn't seen his way clear to disassembling it. That meant if there were any argument in favor of allowing the replica of himself to go on living, it was now invalid. He'd have to take it apart in order to have enough for Tina II. Or Tina prime?

He leafed through Chapters VI, VII and VIII on the ingredients, completion and disassembling of a man. He'd been through this several times before but he'd passed more than one law exam on the strength of a last-minute review.

The constant reference to mental instability disturbed him. "The humans constructed with this set will, at the very best, show most of the superstitious tendencies and neurosis-compulsions of medieval mankind. In the long run they are not normal; take great care not to consider them such." Well, it wouldn't make too much difference in Tina's case—and that was all that was important.

When he had finished adjusting the molds to the correct sizes, he fastened the vitalizer to the bed. Then—very, very slowly and with repeated glances at the manual, he began to duplicate Sam Weber. He learned more of his physical limitations and capabilities in the next two hours than any man had ever known since the day when an inconspicuous primate had investigated the possibilities of ground locomotion upon the nether extremities alone.

Strangely enough, he felt neither awe nor exultation. It was like building a radio receiver for the first time. Child's play.

Most of the vials and jars were empty when he had fin-

ished. The damp molds were stacked inside the box, still in their three-dimensional outline. The manual lay neglected on the floor.

Sam Weber stood near the bed looking down at Sam Weber on the bed.

All that remained was vitalizing. He daren't wait too long or imperfections might set in and the errors of the baby be repeated. He shook off a nauseating feeling of unreality, made certain that the big disassembleator was within reach and set the Jiffy Vitalizer in motion.

The man on the bed coughed. He stirred. He sat up.

"Wow!" he said. "Pretty good, if I do say so myself!"

And then he had leaped off the bed and seized the disassembleator. He tore great chunks of wiring out of the center, threw it to the floor and kicked it into shapelessness. "No Sword of Damocles going to hang over *my* head," he informed an open-mouthed Sam Weber. "Although, I could have used it on you, come to think of it."

Sam eased himself to the mattress and sat down. His mind stopped rearing and whinnied to a halt. He had been so impressed with the helplessness of the baby and the mannikin that he had never dreamed of the possibility that his duplicate would enter upon life with such enthusiasm. He should have, though; this was a full-grown man, created at a moment of complete physical and mental activity.

"This is bad," he said at last in a hoarse voice. "You're unstable. You can't be admitted into normal society."

"I'm unstable?" his image asked. "Look who's talking! The guy who's been mooning his way through his adult life, who wants to marry an overdressed, conceited collection of biological impulses that would come crawling on her knees to any man sensible enough to push the right buttons—"

"You leave Tina's name out of this," Sam told him, feeling acutely uncomfortable at the theatrical phrase.

His double looked at him and grinned. "O.K., I will. But not her body! Now, look here, Sam or Weber or whatever you want me to call you, you can live your life and I'll live mine. I won't even be a lawyer if that'll make you happy. But as far as Tina is concerned, now that there are no ingredients to make a copy—that was a rotten escapist idea, by the way—I have enough of your likes and dislikes to

want her badly. And I can have her, whereas you can't. You don't have the gumption."

Sam leaped to his feet and doubled his fists. Then he saw the other's entirely equal size and slightly more assured twinkle. There was no point in fighting—that would end in a draw, at best. He went back to reason.

"According to the manual," he began, "you are prone to neurosis—"

"The manual! The manual was written for children of two centuries hence, with quite a bit of selective breeding and scientific education behind them. Personally, I think I'm a—"

There was a double knock on the door. "Mr. Weber."

"Yes," they both said simultaneously.

Outside, the landlady gasped and began speaking in an uncertain voice. "Th-that gentleman is downstairs. He'd like to see you. Shall I tell him you're in?"

"No, I'm not at home," said the double.

"Tell him I left an hour ago," said Sam at exactly the same moment.

There was another, longer gasp and the sound of footsteps receding hurriedly.

"That's one clever way to handle a situation," Sam's facsimile exploded. "Couldn't you keep your mouth shut? The poor woman's probably gone off to have a fit."

"You forget that this is my room and you are just an experiment that went wrong," Sam told him hotly. "I have just as much right, in fact more right . . . hey, what do you think you're doing?"

The other had thrown open the closet door and was stepping into a pair of pants. "Just getting dressed. You can wander around in the nude if you find it exciting, but I want to look a bit respectable."

"I undressed to take my measurements . . . or your measurements. Those are my clothes, this is my room—"

"Look, take it easy. You could never prove it in a court of law. Don't make me go into that cliché about what's yours is mine and so forth."

Heavy feet resounded through the hall. They stopped outside the room. Cymbals seemed to clash all around them and there was a panic-stricken sense of unendurable heat. Then

shrill echoes fled into the distance. The walls stopped shuddering.

Silence and a smell of burning wood.

They whirled in time to see a terribly tall, terribly old man in a long black overcoat walking through the smoldering remains of the door. Much too tall for the entrance, he did not stoop as he came in; rather he drew his head down into his garment and shot it up again. Instinctively, they moved closed together.

His eyes, all shiny black iris without any whites, were set back deep in the shadow of his head. They reminded Sam Weber of the scanners on the Biocalibrator: they tabulated, deduced, rather than saw.

"I was afraid I would be too late," he rumbled at last in weird, clipped tones. "You have already duplicated yourself, Mr. Weber, making necessary unpleasant rearrangements. And the duplicate has destroyed the disassembler. Too bad. I shall have to do it manually. An ugly job."

He came further into the room until they could almost breathe their fright upon him. "This affair has already dislocated four major programs, but we had to move in accepted cultural grooves and be absolutely certain of the recipient's identity before we could act to withdraw the set. Mrs. Lipanti's collapse naturally stimulated emergency measures."

The duplicate cleared his throat. "You are—?"

"Not exactly human. A humble civil servant of precision manufacture. I am Census Keeper for the entire twenty-ninth oblong. You see, your set was intended for the Thregander children who are on a field trip in this oblong. One of the Threganders who has a Weber chart requested the set through a chondromos which, in an attempt at the supernormal, unstabled without carnuplicating. You therefore received the package instead. Unfortunately, the unstabling was so complete that we were forced to locate you by indirect methods."

The Census Keeper paused and Sam's double hitched his pants nervously. Sam wished he had anything—even a fig leaf—to cover his nakedness. He felt like a character in the Garden of Eden trying to build up a logical case for apple eating. He appreciated glumly how much more than "Bild-A-Man" sets clothes had to do with the making of a man.

"We will have to recover the set, of course," the staccato

thunder continued, "and readjust any discrepancies it has caused. Once the matter has been cleared up, however, your life will be allowed to resume its normal progression. Meanwhile, the problem is which of you is the original Sam Weber?"

"I am," they both quavered—and turned to glare at each other.

"Difficulties," the old man rumbled. He sighed like an arctic wind. "I always have difficulties! Why can't I ever have a simple case like a carnuplicator?"

"Look here," the duplicate began. "The original will be—"

"Less unstable and of better emotional balance than the replica," Sam interrupted. "Now, it seems—"

"That you should be able to tell the difference," the other concluded breathlessly. "From what you see and have seen of us, can't you decide which is the more valid member of society?"

What a pathetic confidence, Sam thought, the fellow was trying to display! Didn't he know he was up against someone who could really discern mental differences? This was no fumbling psychiatrist of the present; here was a creature who could see through externals to the most coherent personality beneath.

"I can, naturally. Now, just a moment." He studied them carefully, his eyes traveling with judicious leisure up and down their bodies. They waited, fidgeting, in a silence that pounded.

"Yes," the old man said at last. "Yes. Quite."

He walked forward.

A long thin arm shot out.

He started to disassemble Sam Weber.

"But listennnnn—" began Weber in a yell that turned into a high scream and died in a liquid mumble.

"It would be better for your sanity if you didn't watch," the Census Keeper suggested.

The duplicate exhaled slowly, turned away and began to button a shirt. Behind him the mumbling continued, rising and falling in pitch.

"You see," came the clipped, rumbling accents, "it's not the gift we're afraid of letting you have—it's the principle involved. Your civilization isn't ready for it. You understand."

"Perfectly," replied the counterfeit Weber, knotting Aunt Maggie's blue and red tie.



Werewolves and vampires, voodoo-doers and dopple-gangers, are all inherent parts of the witchcraft concept. But in this country, the plain old-fashioned garden-variety rural witch has been most familiar: the evil old hag or sharp-faced hex-doctor who can ruin your crops, burn your barn, or make your prize bull go sterile.

O Ugly Bird! is an authentic and poetic story of traditional witchcraft in a part of the modern world where the old ideas still hold sway.

O UGLY BIRD!

by Manly Wade Wellman

I SWEAR I'M LICKED before I start, trying to tell you all what Mr. Onselm looked like. Words give out—for instance, you're frozen to death for fit words to tell the favor of the girl you love. And Mr. Onselm and I pure poison hated each other. That's how love and hate are alike.

He was what country folks call a low man, more than calling him short or small; a low man is low otherwise than by inches. Mr. Onselm's shoulders didn't wide out as far as his big ears, and they sank and sagged. His thin legs bowed in at the knee and out at the shank, like two sickles point to point. On his carrot-thin neck, his head looked like a swollen pale gourd. Thin, moss-gray hair. Loose mouth, a bit open to show long, even teeth. Not much chin. The right eye squinted, mean and dark, while the hike of his brow twitched

the left one wide. His good clothes fitted his mean body like they were cut to it. Those good clothes were almost as much out of match to the rest of him as his long, soft, pink hands, the hands of a man who never had to work a tap.

You see what I mean, I can't say how he looked, only he was hateful.

I first met him when I came down from the high mountain's comb, along an animal trail—maybe a deer made it. Through the trees I saw, here and there in the valley below, patch-places and cabins and yards. I hoped I'd get fed at one of them, for I'd run clear out of eating some spell back. I had no money. Only my hickory shirt and blue duckin pants and torn old army shoes, and my guitar on its sling cord. But I knew the mountain folks. If they've got ary thing to eat, a decent spoken stranger can get the half part of it. Towns aren't always the same way.

Downslope I picked, favoring the guitar in case I slipped and fell, and in an hour made it to the first patch. Early fall was browning the corn out of the green. The cabin was two-room, dog-trotted open in the middle. Beyond was a shed and a pigpen. In the yard the man of the house talked to who I found out later was Mr. Onselm.

"No meat at all?" said Mr. Onselm. His voice was the last you'd expect him to have, full of broad low music, like an organ in a town church. I decided against asking him to sing when I glimpsed him closer, sickle-legged and gourd-headed and pale and puny in his fine-fitting clothes. For he looked mad and dangerous; and the man of the place, though he was a big, strong old gentleman with a square jaw, looked afraid.

"I been short this year, Mr. Onselm," he said, begging like. "The last bit of meat I fished out of the brine on Tuesday. And I don't want to have to kill the pig till December."

Mr. Onselm tramped over to the pen. The pig was a friendly one, it reared its front feet against the boards and grunted up to him. Mr. Onselm spit into the pen. "All right," he said, "but I want some meal."

He sickle-legged back to the cabin. A brown barrel stood in the dog trot. Mr. Onselm lifted the cover and pinched some meal between his pink fingertips. "Get me a sack," he told the man.

The man went indoors and brought out the sack. Mr. Onselm held it open while the man scooped out meal enough

to fill it. Then Mr. Onselm held it tight shut while the man lashed the neck with twine. Finally Mr. Onselm looked up and saw me standing there.

"Who are you?" he asked, sort of crooning.

"My name's John," I said.

"John what?" Then, without waiting for my answer, "Where did you steal that guitar?"

"It was given to me," I replied. "I strung it with silver wires myself."

"Silver," he said, and opened his squint eye by a trifle.

With my left hand I clamped a chord. With my right thumb I picked a whisper from the silver strings. I began to make a song:

"Mister Onselm,
They do what you tell 'em—"

"That will do," said Mr. Onselm, not so musically, and I stopped playing. He relaxed. "They do what I tell 'em," he said, half to himself. "Not bad."

We studied each other a few ticks of time. Then he turned and tramped out of the yard in among the trees. When he was out of sight the man of the place asked, right friendly, what he could do for me.

"I'm just walking through," I said. I didn't want to ask right off for some dinner.

"I heard you name yourself John," he said. "So happens my name's John too, John Bristow."

"Nice place you've got," I said, looking around. "Cropper or tenant?"

"I own the house and the land," he told me, and I was surprised; for Mr. Onselm had treated him the way a mean boss treats a cropper.

"Then that Mr. Onselm was just a visitor," I said.

"Visitor?" Mr. Bristow snorted. "He visits everybody here around. Lets them know what he wants, and they pass it to him. Thought you knew him, you sang about him so ready."

"Shucks, I made that up." I touched the silver strings again. "I sing a many a new song that comes to me."

"I love the old songs better," he said, and smiled, so I sang one:

"I had been in Georgia
 Not a many more weeks than three,
 When I fell in love with a pretty fair girl,
 And she fell in love with me.

"Her lips were red as red could be,
 Her eyes were brown as brown,
 Her hair was like the thundercloud
 Before the rain comes down."

You should have seen Mr. Bristow's face shine. He said:
 "By God, you sure enough can sing it and play it."

"Do my possible best," I said. "But Mr. Onselm don't like it." I thought a moment, then asked: "What way can he get everything he wants in this valley?"

"Shoo, can't tell you way. Just done it for years, he has."

"Anybody refuse him?"

"Once Old Jim Desbro refused him a chicken. Mr. Onselm pointed his finger at Old Jim's mules, they was plowing. Them mules couldn't move ary foot, not till Mr. Onselm had the chicken. Another time, Miss Tilly Parmer hid a cake when she seen him come. He pointed a finger and dumbbed her. She never spoke one mumbling word from that day to when she died. Could hear and understand, but when she tried to talk she could just wheeze."

"He's a hoodoo man," I said, "which means the law can't do anything."

"Not even if the law worried about anything this far from the county seat." He looked at the meal back against the cabin. "About time for the Ugly Bird to fetch Mr. Onselm's meal."

"What's the Ugly Bird?" I asked, but he didn't have to answer.

It must have hung over us, high and quiet, and now it dropped into the yard like a fish hawk into a pond.

First out I saw it was dark, heavy-winged, bigger than a buzzard. Then I saw the shiny gray-black of the body, like wet slate, and how it seemed to have feathers only on its wide wings. Then I made out the thin snaky neck, the bulgy head and long stork beak, the eyes set in front of its head—man-fashion in front, not to each side.

The feet that taloned onto the sack showed pink and

smooth with five graspy toes. The wings snapped like a tablecloth in a wind, and it churned away over the trees with the meal sack.

"That's the Ugly Bird," said Mr. Bristow. I barely heard him. "Mr. Onselm has companioned with it ever since I recollect."

"I never saw such a bird," I said. "Must be a scarce one. You know what struck me while I watched it?"

"I do know, John. Its feet look like Mr. Onselm's hands."

"Might it be," I asked, "that a hoodoo man like Mr. Onselm knows what way to shape himself into a bird?"

He shook his head. "It's known that when he's at one place, the Ugly Bird's been sighted at another." He tried to change the subject. "Silver strings on your guitar—never heard of any but steel strings."

"In the olden days," I told him, "silver was used a many times for strings. It gives a more singy sound."

In my mind I had it the subject wouldn't be changed. I tried a chord on my guitar, and began to sing:

"You all have heard of the Ugly Bird
So curious and so queer,
That flies its flight by day and night
And fills folks' hearts with fear.

"I never come here to hide from fear,
And I give you my promised word
That I soon expect to twist the neck
Of the God damn Ugly Bird."

When I finished, Mr. Bristow felt in his pocket.

"I was going to bid you eat with me," he said, "but—here, maybe you better buy something."

He gave me a quarter and a dime. I about gave them back, but I thanked him and walked away down the same trail Mr. Onselm had gone. Mr. Bristow watched me go, looking shrunk up. My song had scared him, so I kept singing it.

"O Ugly Bird! O Ugly Bird!
You snoop and sneak and thief!
This place can't be for you and me,
And one of us got to leave."

Singing, I tried to remember all I'd heard or read or guessed that might help toward my Ugly Bird study.

Didn't witch people have partner animals? I'd read and heard tell about the animals called familiars—mostly cats or black dogs or the like, but sometimes birds.

That might be the secret, or a right much of it, for the Ugly Bird wasn't Mr. Onselm's other self. Mr. Bristow had said the two of them were seen different places at one time. Mr. Onselm didn't turn into the Ugly Bird then. They were just close partners. Brothers. With the Ugly Bird's feet like Mr. Onselm's hands.

I awared of something in the sky, the big black V of a flying creature. It quartered over me, half as high as the highest woolly scrap of cloud. Once or twice it seemed like it would stoop for me, like a hawk for a rabbit, but it didn't. Looking up and letting my feet find the trail, I rounded a bunch of bushes and there, on a rotten log in a clearing, sat Mr. Onselm.

His gourd-head sank on his thin neck. His elbows set on his knees, and the soft, pink, long hands hid his face, as if he was miserable. His look made me feel disgusted. I came toward him.

"You don't feel so brash, do you?" I asked.

"Go away," he sort of gulped, soft and sick.

"Why?" I wanted to know. "I like it here." Sitting on the log, I pulled my guitar across me. "I feel like singing, Mr. Onselm."

"His father got hung for horse stealing,
His mother got burned for a witch,
And his only friend is the Ugly Bird,
The dirty son of—"

Something hit me like a shooting star from overhead.

It hit my back and shoulder, and knocked me floundering forward on one hand and one knee. It was only the mercy of God I didn't fall on my guitar and smash it. I crawled forward a few scrambles and made to get up, shaky and dizzy.

The Ugly Bird had flown down and dropped the sack of meal on me. Now it skimmed across the clearing, at the height of the low branches, its eyes glinting at me, and its mouth came open a little. I saw teeth, sharp and mean, like

a garpiké's teeth. It swooped for me, and the wind of its wings was colder than a winter storm.

Without stopping to think, I flung up my both hands to box it off from me, and it gave back, flew backwards like the biggest, devilishest humming bird ever seen in a nightmare. I was too dizzy and scared to wonder why it gave back; I had barely the wit to be thankful.

"Get out of here," moaned Mr. Onselm, who hadn't stirred.

I shame to say that I got. I kept my hands up and backed across the clearing and into the trail beyond. Then I half realized where my luck had been. My hands had lifted the guitar toward the Ugly Bird, and somehow it hadn't liked the guitar.

Just once I looked back. The Ugly Bird was perching on the log and it sort of nuzzled up to Mr. Onselm, most horrible. They were sure enough close together. I stumbled off away.

I found a stream, with stones to make steps across. I turned and walked down to where it made a wide pool. There I knelt and washed my face—it looked pallid in the water image—and sat with my back to a tree and hugged my guitar and rested. I shook all over. I must have felt as bad for a while as Mr. Onselm looked like he felt, sitting on the log waiting for his Ugly Bird and—what else?

Had he been hungry? Sick? Or just evil? I couldn't say which.

After a while I walked back to the trail and along it again, till I came to what must have been the only store thereabouts.

It faced one way on a rough road that could carry wagon and car traffic, and the trail joined on and reached the door. The building wasn't big but it was good, made of sawed planks well painted. It rested on big rocks instead of posts, and had a roofed open front like a porch, with a bench where people could sit.

Opening the door, I went in. You'll find a many such stores in back country places through the land. Counters. Shelves of cans and packages. Smoked meat hung one corner, a glass-front icebox for fresh meat another. One point, sign says U. S. POST OFFICE, with half a dozen pigeon-holes for letters and a couple of cigar boxes for stamps and money-order blanks. The proprietor wasn't in. Only a girl,

scared and shaking, and Mr. Onselm, there ahead of me, telling her what he wanted.

He wanted her.

"I don't care if Sam Heaven did leave you in charge here," he said with the music in his voice. "He won't stop my taking you with me."

Then he swung around and fixed his squint eye and wide-open eye on me, like two mismated gun muzzles. "You again," he said.

He looked hale and hearty. I strayed my hands over the guitar strings, and he twisted up his face as if it colicked him.

"Winnie," he said to the girl, "wait on him and get him out of here."

Her eyes were round in her scared face. I never saw as sweet a face as hers, or as scared. Her hair was dark and thick. It was like the thundercloud before the rain comes down. It made her paleness look paler. She was small, and she cowered for fear of Mr. Onselm.

"Yes, sir?" she said to me.

"Box of crackers," I decided, pointing to a near shelf. "And a can of those sardine fish."

She put them on the counter. I dug out the quarter Mr. Bristow had given me, and slapped it down on the counter top between the girl and Mr. Onselm.

"Get away!" he squeaked, shrill and mean as a bat. He had jumped back, almost halfway across the floor. And for once both of his eyes were big.

"What's the matter?" I asked him, purely wondering. "This is a good silver quarter." And I picked it up and held it out for him to take and study.

But he ran out of the store like a rabbit. A rabbit with the dogs after it.

The girl he'd called Winnie just leaned against the wall as if she was tired. I asked: "Why did he light out like that?"

She took the quarter. "It doesn't scare me much," she said, and rung it up on the old cash register. "All that scares me is—Mr. Onselm."

I picked up the crackers and sardines. "He's courting you?"

She shuddered, though it was warm. "I'd sooner be in a hole with a snake than be courted by Mr. Onselm."

"Why not just tell him to leave you be?"

"He'd not listen. He always does what pleases him. Nobody dares stop him."

"I know, I heard about the mules he stopped and the poor lady he dumbed." I returned to the other subject. "Why did he squinch away from money? I'd reckon he loved money."

She shook her head. The thundercloud hair stirred. "He never needs any. Takes what he wants without paying."

"Including you?"

"Not including me yet. But he'll do that later."

I laid down my dime I had left. "Let's have a coke drink, you and me."

She rang up the dime too. There was a sort of dry chuckle at the door, like a stone rattling down the well. I looked quick, and saw two long, dark wings flop away from the door. The Ugly Bird had spied.

But the girl Winnie smiled over her coke drink. I asked permission to open my fish and crackers on the bench outside. She nodded yes. Out there, I worried open the can with my pocket knife and had my meal. When I finished I put the trash in a garbage barrel and tuned my guitar. Winnie came out and harked while I sang about the girl whose hair was like the thundercloud before the rain comes down, and she blushed till she was pale no more.

Then we talked about Mr. Onselm and the Ugly Bird, and how they had been seen in two different places at once—

"But," said Winnie, "who's seen them together?"

"Shoo, I have," I told her. "Not long ago." And I told how Mr. Onselm sat, all sick and miserable, and the conjer bird crowded up against him.

She heard all that, with eyes staring off, as if looking for something far away. Finally she said, "John, you say it crowded up to him."

"It did that thing, as if it studied to get right inside him."

"Inside him!"

"That's rght."

"Makes me think of something I heard somebody say about hoodoo folks," she said. "How the hoodoo folk sometimes put a stuff out, mostly in dark rooms. And it's part of them, but it takes the shape and mind of another person—once in a while, the shape and mind of an animal."

"Shoo," I said again, "now you mention it, I've heard the

same thing. It might explain those Louisiana stories about werewolves."

"Shape and mind of an animal," she repeated herself. "Maybe the shape and mind of a bird. And they call it echo—no, ecto—ecto—"

"Ectoplasm," I remembered. "That's right. I've even seen pictures they say were taken of such stuff. It seems to live—it'll yell, if you grab it or hit it or stab it."

"Could maybe—" she began, but a musical voice interrupted.

"He's been around here long enough," said Mr. Onselm.

He was back. With him were three men. Mr. Bristow, and a tall, gawky man with splay shoulders and a black-stubbed chin, and a soft, smooth-grizzled man with an old fancy vest over his white shirt.

Mr. Onselm acted like the leader of a posse. "Sam Heaver," he crooned at the soft, grizzled one, "can tramps loaf at your store?"

The soft old storekeeper looked dead and gloomy at me. "Better get going, son," he said, as if he'd memorized it.

I laid my guitar on the bench. "You men ail my stomach," I said, looking at them. "You let this half-born, half-bred hoodoo man sic you on me like hound dogs when I'm hurting nobody and nothing."

"Better go," he said again.

I faced Mr. Onselm, and he laughed like a sweetly played horn. "You," he said, "without a dime in your pocket! You can't do anything to anybody."

Without a dime . . . the Ugly Bird had seen me spend my silver money, the silver money that ailed Mr. Onselm.

"Take his guitar, Hobe," said Mr. Onselm, and the gawky man, clumsy but quick, grabbed the guitar from the bench and backed away to the door.

"That takes care of him," Mr. Onselm sort of purred, and he fairly jumped and grabbed Winnie by the wrist. He pulled her along toward the trail, and I heard her whimper.

"Stop him!" I bawled, but they stood and looked, scared and dumb. Mr. Onselm, still holding Winnie, faced me. He lifted his free hand, with the pink forefinger sticking out like the barrel of a pistol.

Just the look he gave me made me weary and dizzy. He was going to hoodoo me, like he'd done the mules, like he'd done the woman who tried to hide her cake from him. I

turned from him, sick and afraid, and I heard him giggle, thinking he'd won already. In the doorway stood the gawky man called Hobe, with the guitar.

I made a long jump at him and started to wrestle it away from him.

"Hang onto it, Hobe," I heard Mr. Onselm sort of choke out, and, from Mr. Bristow:

"There's the Ugly Bird!"

Its wings flapped like a storm in the air behind me. But I'd torn my guitar from Hobe's hands and turned on my heel.

A little way off, Mr. Onselm stood stiff and straight as a stone figure in front of a courthouse. He still held Winnie's wrist. Between them the Ugly Bird came swooping at me, its beak pointing for me like a stabbing bayonet.

I dug in my toes and smashed the guitar at it. Full-slam I struck its bulgy head above the beak and across the eyes, and I heard the polished wood of my music-maker crash to splinters.

And down went the Ugly Bird!

Down it went.

Quiet it lay.

Its great big wings stretched out on either side, without a flutter. Its beak was driven into the ground like a nail. It didn't kick or flop or stir once.

But Mr. Onselm, standing where he stood holding Winnie, screamed out the way you might scream if something had clawed out all your insides with a single tearing grab.

He didn't move, I don't even know if his mouth came open. Winnie gave a pull with all her strength and tottered back, clear of him. And as if only his hold on her had kept him standing, Mr. Onselm slapped over and down on his face, his arms flung out like the Ugly Bird's wings, his face in the dirt like the Ugly Bird's face.

Still holding my broken guitar by the neck like a club, I ran to him and stooped. "Get up," I said, and took hold of what hair he had and lifted his face up.

One look was enough. From the war, I know a dead man when I see one. I let go his hair, and his face went back into the dirt as if it belonged there.

The others moved at last, tottering a few steps closer. And they didn't act like enemies now, for Mr. Onselm who had made them act so was down and dead.

Then Hobe gave a scared shout, and we looked that way.

The Ugly Bird all of a sudden looked rotten mushy, and was soaking into the ground. To me, anyhow, it looked shadowy and misty, and I could see through it. I wanted to move close, then I didn't want to. It was melting away like snow on top of a stove; only no wetness left behind.

It was gone, while we watched and wondered and felt bad all over.

Mr. Bristow knelt and turned Mr. Onselm over. On the dead face ran sick lines across, thin and purple, as though he'd been struck down by a blow of a toaster or a gridiron.

"The guitar strings," said Mr. Bristow. "The silver guitar strings. It finished him, like any hoodoo man."

That was it. Won't a silver bullet kill a witch, or a silver knife a witch's cat? And a silver key locks out ghosts, doesn't it?

"What was the word you said?" whispered Winnie to me.

"Ectoplasm," I told her. "Like his soul coming out—and getting struck dead outside his body."

More important was talk about what to do now. The men decided. They allowed to report to the county seat that Mr. Onselm's heart had stopped on him, which it had. They went over the tale three or four times to make sure they'd all tell it the same. They cheered up as they talked. You never saw gladder people to get rid of a neighbor.

"And, John," said Mr. Bristow, "we'd sure enough be proud if you stayed here. You took this curse off us."

Hobe wanted me to come live on his farm and help him work it on shares. Sam Heaver offered me all the money out of his old cash register. I thanked him and said no, sir, to Hobe I said thank you kindly, I'd better not. If they wanted their story to stick with the sheriff, they'd better forget that I'd been around when Mr. Onselm's heart stopped. All I was sorry for was my broken guitar.

But while we'd talked, Mr. Bristow was gone. He came back, with a guitar from his place, and he acted honored if I'd take it in place of mine. So I tightened my silver strings on it and tried a chord or two.

Winnie swore she'd pray for me by name each night of her life, and I told her that would sure see me safe from any assaults of the devil.

"Assaults of the devil, John!" she said, almost shrill in

the voice, she was so earnest. "It's you who drove the devil from this valley."

The others all said they agreed on that.

"It was foretold about you in the Bible," said Winnie, her voice soft again. "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John."

But that was far too much for her to say, and I was that abashed, I said goodbye all around in a hurry. I strummed my new guitar as I walked away, until I got an old song back in my mind. I've heard tell that the song's written in an old-time book called *Percy's Frolics*, or *Relics*, or something:

"Lady, I never loved witchcraft,
Never dealt in privy wile,
But evermore held the high way
Of love and honor, free from guile. . . ."

And though I couldn't bring myself to look back to the place I was leaving forever, I knew that Winnie watched me, and that she listened, listened, till she had to strain her ears to catch the last, faintest end of my song.



When Richard Parker, a British writer, was first introduced to American audiences, "The Magazine of Fantasy and Science-Fiction," in discussing the miniature-type story, proclaimed The Wheelbarrow Boy as "one of the neatest and most madly logical of these miniatures."

THE WHEELBARROW BOY

by Richard Parker

"NOW SEE HERE, Thomis," I said. "I've just about had enough of you. If you haven't settled yourself down and started some work in two minutes' time I shall turn you into a wheelbarrow. I'm not warning you again."

Of course, Thomis was not the only one: the whole class had the fidgets: he just happened to be the one I picked on. It was a windy day, and wind always upsets kids and makes them harder to handle. Also, I happened to know that Thomis's father had won a bit of money on the Pools, so it was easy to understand the boy's being off balance. But it's fatal to start making allowances for bad behavior.

After about three minutes I called out, "Well, Thomis? How many sums have you done?"

"I'm just writing the date," said the boy sullenly.

"Right," I said. "You can't say I didn't warn you." And I changed him into a wheelbarrow there and then—a bright red metal wheelbarrow with a pneumatic tyre.

The class went suddenly quiet, the way they do when you take a strong line, and during the next half-hour we got a lot of work done. When the bell for morning break went I drove them all out so as to have the room to myself.

"All right, Thomis," I said. "You can change back now." Nothing happened.

I thought at first he was sulking, but after a while I began to think that something had gone seriously wrong. I went round to the Headmaster's office.

"Look," I said, "I just changed Thomis into a wheelbarrow and I can't get him back."

"Oh," said the Head and stared at the scattering of paper on his desk. "Are you in a violent hurry about it?"

"No," I said. "It's a bit worrying, though."

"Which is Thomis?"

"Scruffy little fellow—pasty-faced—always got a sniff and a mouthful of gum."

"Red hair?"

"No, that's Sanderson. Black, and like a bird's nest."

"Oh yes. I've got him. Well, now," he looked at the clock. "Suppose you bring this Thomis chap along here in about half an hour?"

"All right," I said.

I was a bit thoughtful as I went upstairs to the Staff Room. Tongelow was brewing the tea, and as I looked at him I remembered that he had some sort of official position in the Union.

"How would it be if I paid my Union sub?" I said.

He put the teapot down gently. "What've you done?" he asked. "Pushed a kid out of a second-floor window?"

I pretended to be hurt. "I just thought it was about time I paid," I said. "It doesn't do to get too much in arrears."

In the end he took the money and gave me a receipt, and when I had tucked that away in my wallet I felt a lot better.

Back in my own room Thomis was still leaning up in his chair, red and awkward, a constant reproach to me. I could not start any serious work, so after about ten minutes I set the class something to keep them busy and then lifted Thomis down and wheeled him round to the Head.

"Oh, good," he said. "So the gardening requisition has started to come in at last."

"No," I said, dumping the barrow down in the middle of his carpet. "This is Thomis. I told you . . ."

"Sorry," he said. "I'd clean forgotten. Leave him there and I'll get to work on him straight away. I'll send him back to you when he's presentable."

I went back to my class and did a double period of composition, but no Thomis turned up. I thought the Old Man must have forgotten again, so when the bell went at twelve I took a peep into his room to jog his memory. He was on his knees on the carpet, jacket and tie off, with sweat pouring off his face. He got up weakly when he saw me.

"I've tried everything," he said, "and I can't budge him. Did you do anything unorthodox?"

"No," I said. "It was only a routine punishment."

"I think you'd better ring the Union," he said. "Ask for Legal Aid—Maxstein's the lawyer—and see where you stand."

"Do you mean we're stuck with this?" I said.

"You are," said the Head. "I should ring now, before they go to lunch."

I got through to the Union in about ten minutes and luckily Maxstein was still there. He listened to my story, grunting now and then.

"You are a member, I suppose?"

"Oh yes," I said.

"Paid up?"

"Certainly."

"Good," he said. "Now let me see. I think I'd better ring you back in an hour or so. I've not had a case quite like this before, so I'll need to think about it."

"Can't you give me a rough idea of how I stand?" I said.

"We're right behind you, of course," said Maxstein, "Free legal aid and all the rest of it. But . . ."

"Oh, good," I said. "But what?"

"But I don't fancy your chances," he said and rang off.

The afternoon dragged on, but there was no phone call from Maxstein. The Head got fed up with Thomis and had him wheeled out into the passage. At break-time I phoned the Union again.

"Sorry I didn't ring you," said Maxstein when I got through to him again. "I've been very busy."

"What am I to do?" I asked.

"The whole thing," said Maxstein, "turns on the attitude of the parents. If they decide to prosecute I'll have to come down and work out some line of defence with you."

"Meanwhile," I said, "Thomis is still a wheelbarrow."

"Quite. Now here's what I suggest. Take him home to-night—yourself. See his people and try to get some idea of their attitude. You never know; they might be grateful."

"Grateful?" I said.

"Well, there was that case in Glasgow—kid turned into a mincing machine—and the mother was as pleased as could be and refused to have him changed back. So go round and see, and let me know in the morning."

"All right," I said.

At 4 o'clock I waited behind and then, when the place was empty, wheeled Thomis out into the street.

I attracted quite a lot of attention on the way, from which I guessed the story must have preceded me. A lot of people I did not know nodded or said, "Good evening," and three or four ran out of shops to stare.

At last I reached the place and Mr. Thomis opened the door. The house seemed to be full of people and noise, so I gathered it was a party in celebration of the Pools.

He stared at me in a glazed sort of way for a moment and then made a violent effort to concentrate.

"It's Teddy's teacher," he bawled to those inside. "You're just in time. Come in and have a spot of something."

"Well, actually," I said, "I've come about Teddy . . ."

"It can wait," said Mr. Thomis. "Come on in."

"No, but it's serious," I said. "You see, I turned Teddy into a wheelbarrow this morning, and now . . ."

"Come and have a drink first," he said urgently.

So I went in, and drank to the healths of Mr. and Mrs.

Thomis. "How much did you win?" I asked politely.

"Eleven thousand quid," said Mr. Thomis. "What a lark, eh?"

"And now," I said firmly, "about Teddy."

"Oh, this wheelbarrow caper," said Mr. Thomis. "We'll soon see about that."

He dragged me outside into the yard and went up to the wheelbarrow. "Is this him?" he said.

I nodded.

"Now look here, Teddy," said Mr. Thomis fiercely. "Just you come to your senses this minute, or I'll bash the day-lights out of you." And as he spoke he began to unbuckle a heavy belt that was playing second fiddle to his braces.

The wheelbarrow changed back into Teddy Thomis and nipped smartly down the garden and through a hole in the fence.

"There you are," said Mr. Thomis. "Trouble with you teachers is you're too soft with the kids. Here, come in and have another drink."



The semi-human, quasi-human, or transmuted human-animal creatures of legend and myth are not always fearsome and horrible figures. There is black magic and white; there are good fairies as well as evil goblins; there are seductive mermaids as well as ferocious werewolves.

In Fish Story, Leslie Charteris tells of a creature that is possibly the most warmly appealing animal-type human being—or human-type animal being, perhaps—to have appeared in fiction in recent years.

FISH STORY

by Leslie Charteris

I USED TO SEE the old man every day around Bill Thompson's place, down at Marathon, in the Florida Keys. He was almost a part of the scenery, like the mangrove islands off shore or the pelicans that wheeled lazily back and forth

and sat out on the sand bar at low tide. He didn't keep much busier than they did, either. Sometimes he'd cart off a load of trash, or trundle a barrow-load of ice out to one of the boats. But mostly he'd just be standing or sitting around on the pier or beside the pool, staring into the water.

I couldn't have guessed just how old he actually was. His rather shapeless figure, in patched and faded khaki dungarees, didn't have either the corpulence or emaciation of decay, and his slouch suggested laziness or relaxation rather than decrepitude: when he had to, he could move about as well as anyone. But he could have passed for anything from 55 to 90.

He didn't talk much to anyone unless he had to. But when I passed him I would give him a friendly time of day, and he would always respond cordially enough. Then he would go back to staring down at the water.

It's usually pretty clear in the bay, and when it's calm you can see small fish cruising about on their aimless errands, and sometimes a conch clawing its laborious way over the bottom under its heavy shell. I looked down with the old man a couple of times, but that was about all I could see.

Once I asked him if he was looking at anything special that I was missing.

"No, sir," he said pleasantly. "Just lookin' at the fish."

He didn't seem disposed to enlarge on the subject, so I left it at that. I've heard of bird watching, which has always struck me as a slightly eccentric but harmless pastime, so I figured there might be fish watchers too.

Next time I saw him at it, I said: "How are the fish today?"

"Fine," he said imperturbably; which was as courteous a reply as you could expect to a rather silly question.

I stood beside him for a while and looked at the fish with him. After a long while he seemed to thaw out a little in the encouraging climate of my silence.

"People could learn a lot by lookin' at fish, 'stead of talkin' about 'em so much," he volunteered. "I been watchin' 'em all my life. Started when I used to fish for a living. Figured if I watched 'em enough—how they moved about, how they et, what kind of things interested 'em—I'd know better 'n anybody how to catch 'em. I did, too. Now I just watch 'em," he concluded.

Later, I was down at the cleaning table on the dock,

starting to scale a nice four-pound red snapper we'd caught that afternoon, when the old man came by. A lot of the scales were flying into the water as I scraped them off, and the mullet and needle-fish were having a field day, darting and leaping for them like kids in a shower of popcorn. The old man stood by my elbow and watched them for quite a while.

"That's a fair enough little fish you got," he said at last, nodding at the one I was cleaning. "How'd you take him?"

"Spinning."

"They been comin' in with the wells full all day," he said. "Kingfish, mostly. That all you got?"

"This is all we brought home," I said. "We had a lot of sport with a whole flock of kings, but they were all too big for just my wife and me to eat, so we turned 'em loose. We aren't greedy, and this one looked just right for dinner."

I could feel something transmitted from him almost like a gentle glow, a warmth quite different from the ordinary politeness.

"It's a pity more folks don't think like that," he said presently. "I've seen 'em come in with more fish than they an' all their friends could eat, and seen 'em throw it away. I've seen 'em kill tarpon, even, which nobody can eat an' which wasn't anything like big enough to try for a record, even, an' bring 'em in just to have their pictures taken with it."

"My wife and I only fish for fun," I said, being perfectly truthful but trying not to sound smug about it. "We just enjoy playing with them and eating one occasionally."

"I can eat 'em too," he said matter-of-factly. "They're good food."

I rinsed off the fillets I had cut from the two sides of the snapper and set them aside, and I was just starting to clean off the table when he put out his hand and picked up the strips I had trimmed from the back and the belly, with the fins and the small bones in.

"May I have these?" he asked.

It hadn't occurred to me that he might be hungry, but I had never asked what he lived on.

"Here," I said, "these fillets are quite big, and we aren't big eaters. Why don't you take one of them?"

"No," he said, "I was just going to feed the bonefish."

In Bill Thompson's swimming pool, which is nothing but

a big hollow blasted out of the coral rock in front of the cottages, where anybody can swim without being nervous about being mistaken for a free lunch counter by some stray barracuda, there are a lot of fish, which have been caught and dumped there live by various contributors, and which live there in a sort of natural aquarium, quite happily, since they are walled in by a ring of fill and the water changes with every tide. Among them are three bonefish, which any angler will tell you is the fastest and spookiest thing with fins; but these three have become so domesticated and used to people that they just cruise up and down the shallows along the shore and look up at you beguilingly like spoiled puppies hoping for a handout.

I walked over to the pool with the old man and watched him feed the bonefish. He broke the trimmings up with his fingers and threw them carefully, aiming them so that the fish had to keep racing for them. Sometimes he chewed a small piece himself.

"See how they swim?" he said.

"Just like fish," I said.

"That's the only way to swim," he said. "Most everybody these days thinks he can swim, but they don't know nothin' about it. Like you. You think you swim pretty good. I've watched you."

"Oh, I just get along," I said rather huffily.

"You don't know the first thing about it," he said dispassionately. "No more'n anybody else. I see 'em all splashin' about, kickin' an' thrashin' like big overgrown beetles. All the fish must look at 'em an' laugh fit to split their sides."

"Well," I said, hoisting my fillets, "I'm going to run along and have the last laugh on this one, anyway."

I went into our cottage and found Audrey already clean and shining like a schoolgirl, the way she always looks after a shower.

"I'm starved," she said. "Whatever kept you?"

"Taking a swimming lesson," I said. "The old geezer thinks I swim like a beetle. He watches fish all the time, and he knows the difference."

Picking up my mail at the office next morning, I asked Bill Thompson about him.

"Old Andrew?" Bill said with a grin. "He's quite a character. Been around here ever since anyone can remember.

Used to be the best fishing guide in these parts, too, once upon a time."

"What stopped him?" I asked.

"I don't really know. They say his wife took out in a skiff once to pick up some lobster traps; somehow the boat tipped over, and she was drowned. She couldn't swim. Andrew went on a long drink and never fished again. That's one story, anyway. Maybe it did have something to do with getting him touched in the head. But he's harmless. I give him a few odd jobs, and he makes enough to live on and get drunk once or twice a week. He's happy as long as he can hang around the dock and look at the fish."

Late that afternoon, Audrey, who pampers me demoralizingly, came and put her arms around my neck and insisted that I knock off the writing I had been doing and come with her for a swim.

"The water's like glass today," she said. "Let's take the snorkels."

We have a couple of French diving masks with built-in breathing tubes, which we call snorkels and which are the latest and best thing of their kind. The mask fits over the whole face, and you breathe naturally through the nose, instead of having to hold a tube in your mouth like the contraptions most skin divers are still using. You can't go down deep with them, like with an aqualung, but you can paddle around face down on the surface indefinitely, without ever having to come up for air, and look down into the water as if into an aquarium. This is almost our favorite pastime, and in clear warm water we can spend hours at it.

The old man was standing by the pool again, and he watched us put this gear on our heads and go in. He was still watching, after however long it was, when we came out.

"Pretty fancy helmets you got there," he remarked.

"We like them," I said—perhaps a little brusquely, because I was still ridiculously peeved about his contempt for my swimming.

"I seen spear fishermen with things like that," he said calmly. "Only not so fancy. It all comes to the same thing, I guess. Just makes it easier for 'em to go in an' kill fish."

"Is that worse than catching them on a line?" I asked.

"It is," he stated. "You catch a fish on a hook, an' he gets away, or you cut him off, the hook rusts out an' he's none the worse. A fish gets away with one o' them spears in

him, an' he's goin' to die, or the other fish 'll kill him, an' do no good to nobody. Then they'll go down an' spear a grouper in a hole, say, an' he thrashes around an' stirs up all the spawn that may be settin' there, an' that means a lot more little fish that ain't never goin' to be born."

"We don't really spear fish," Audrey said. "They look so pretty in the water, I just hate to see him even trying to shoot at one."

"So I gave it up," I said. "I never was much good at it, anyway. And we get as much fun out of just looking at them."

Again I felt that invisible glow that seemed to come out of him when you said something that fitted in with his ideas.

"I suppose you wouldn't let me try on one o' them things?" he said.

"Sure," I said.

I put it on for him and showed him how he had to keep his head forward so that the shut-off valve wouldn't cut off his air. He stood for a minute getting the feel of it; then, without taking off even his shirt, he walked out into the water and started swimming.

We watched for a little while, and Audrey said: "Well, you've made a friend. I'm going in and get the first shower. Don't stay all night."

She went in, and I stayed and watched the old man for a long time. He swam around very slowly and cautiously, like a frog. At last he came out and took the helmet off.

"It's mighty nice," he said.

Now that I had him weakened, I couldn't resist getting in the dig I had been saving up.

"I've been thinking," I said, working up to it, "about what you said about swimming."

"You have?" he said innocently.

"Yes," I said. "How would *you* say people ought to swim?"

"They ought to look at the fish," he said. "See how a fish swims. No flailin' around. Just a little wiggle, an' it *glides* through the water. Look at the animals that really know how to swim. Look at seals. Look at an otter. They don't swim like people. They swim like fish."

"They're also built more like a fish," I pointed out. "People have got awkward things like arms and legs, and not enough joints to wiggle with."

"All right," he said. "But they could try. Take your two arms. Make believe they're a couple of eels, an' make 'em go snake-like, like an eel swims, from your shoulders right down to your hands. An' then your legs. You could put 'em together an' try to move 'em with your body, like a fish."

I had him now.

"So," I said, trying not to make my voice too cruel, "how come you swim like a frog?"

He looked at me in silence, and I could feel he was hurt.

"You watched me," I said, "and I was watching you."

"That's why I wasn't doin' it right," he said. "I never like to swim right when anyone's watchin'."

"Oh," I said—too politely.

He went on staring at me with his clear depthless eyes.

"You don't believe me," he said. "Nobody believes me."

"Of course I do," I said uncomfortably.

He didn't have to be a clairvoyant to detect the hollowness of my words. He seemed to be fighting a great struggle within himself, but I could feel that it wasn't a struggle with ordinary indignation. He was sorry for himself, and sorry for me, and some infinitely pent-up frustration in him was stirring in what might have been a kind of death agony.

After what seemed like an age, he seemed to come to an epochal decision. He glanced around him almost furtively, as if afraid of being seen in commission of some dread misdeed. It was getting dark already, and there was no one around. He turned away from me and walked back into the water.

He waded in up to his waist and lay forward, floating like a log. Then—it's almost impossible to describe—he gave a queer sort of fish-like wriggle, all over, and disappeared.

It must have been a trick of the fading light, but he *had* looked rather like a basking fish going down. Nothing to it really, of course: any good swimmer can duck-dive something like that. I frowned at the area where he had vanished, expecting him to come up close by at any moment, and making a mental resolution to humor him more generously thereafter.

"Hey!"

I turned rather stupidly. I knew it was his voice. And there he was, his gray head bobbing above the water at the far end of the pool.

I didn't literally rub my eyes, but I felt like doing it. It

seemed only a few seconds since he had gone under. I knew that my thoughts had been wool-gathering, and obviously I'd simply been unaware of the lapse of time.

"Do that again," I called to him.

He flattened out and wriggled out of sight again, and this time I counted, keeping a deliberate rhythm: *Thousand-one, thousand-two, thousand-three, thousand-four. . . .*

I'd just gotten that far, meaning four seconds, when there was a swirl in the water right at my feet, and the old man stood up out of it, shaking himself like a big dog, and plodded up the crushed coral slope to face me.

"Now, you've seen it," he said. "If I die tomorrow, somebody seen it."

Without another word he trudged slowly away into the deepening twilight, dripping water; and I went slowly into the cottage.

"Did you learn anything?" Audrey asked brightly.

"Yes," I said. "I found out I need my eyes examined. Or maybe my head."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing," I said. "The old boy can see more in fish than I can. But maybe he's the one that's cracked, and not me."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," she said mischievously; and I laughed and was glad I could turn it off, because I wasn't ready to talk about what I'd seen. Or thought I'd seen. I was afraid I actually had suffered some kind of hallucination.

It haunted me before I fell asleep, though, and again when I woke up in the morning. I could remember exactly how I'd counted the seconds, with that trick of saying "thousand" in between which helps to keep them spaced evenly: it beat in my head like a metronome. I checked it against my watch, and it came out right on the nose.

Audrey always likes to sleep a bit late when we're on vacation, so I swallowed some breakfast and went out by the pool. I knew it was a good big swimming hole, but perhaps my eye for distance was a little vague. I paced it off carefully, from the point opposite where the old man had been when he started his last swim to the place where I knew I'd been standing. Then I shook my head and paced it over again. It came out the same.

Even if I'd faced jail for perjury, I couldn't have made it any less than fifty yards.

Fifty yards in four seconds would mean a hundred yards in eight seconds, if he could keep it up. And he hadn't seemed in the least winded when he came out.

But a hundred yards in eight seconds is a second faster than the fastest human has ever *run*!

In eight seconds, a hundred yards, that's three hundred feet, that's thirty-seven-and-a-half feet a second. Sixty miles an hour is eighty-eight feet a second (I remembered that without having to work it out, from a story I'd written involving an automobile accident). Eighty-eight into thirty-seven gives you a little more than forty percent, meaning that his speed was better than twenty-four miles an hour. That's a good clip for a twin-engine express cruiser.

I've heard that porpoises have been timed at a speed up to seventy-five miles an hour. But a man—an *old man*. . . .

My head was swimming a little.

The old man had come up beside me from somewhere, silently. He had a handful of shrimp heads, and he was tossing them one by one to the fish.

"You ain't dreaming," he said, without taking his eyes off them. "You saw it."

"Would you do it again?" I asked.

"No."

"Haven't you ever thought," I said, trying not to disturb him with my excitement, "you could be one of the wonders of the world. You could break every swimming record that's ever been set. They'd pay you thousands of dollars to put on exhibitions. You could revolutionize the whole sport of swimming. Athletic coaches would pay you a fortune for your secrets—"

"I don't aim to make a spectacle of myself," he said. "And the only person I ever wanted to teach how to swim, just wouldn't learn."

"I heard about that," I said gently. "But somebody else might learn, and it might save his life."

"Anybody who wants to learn bad enough, can learn," he said with the stubbornness of his years. "*You* could learn, if you wanted to, and if you didn't think you knew it all already. All you have to do is forget everything they taught you, and just watch the fish. Try to feel like a fish, an' move like a fish, 'stead of kickin' about like a drownin'

cockroach, an' one day it'll just come to you, sudden an' quiet like. But I wouldn't tell nobody. Next thing you know, everybody'd be out with them gol-darned spears, swimmin' like fish an' seein' how many they could kill."

He tossed in the last shrimp head, wiped his hands on his jeans, and stood there just looking at the bonefish cruising back and forth. I wished in vain that some inspiration would tell me how to penetrate his quiet obduracy.

"You know," he said, "folks don't give fish enough credit. What do they call somebody they're contemptuous of? A poor fish. Poor fish, my eye. Fish are a lot better off than most people. They've always got something to eat, even if it's each other, an' they don't need no money or clothes or machinery. They don't even have to worry about the weather. Down there just a few feet under it's always calm even in the worst storm, it doesn't rain or blow, it doesn't get hotter or colder. Sometimes I wonder why any creatures ever wanted to crawl up out of the water an' live on land, like evolution says they did. Sometimes I think we'd a been a lot better off improvin' our race by stayin' down under the sea. An' one o' these days, maybe some of us 'll go back to it."

"We're hardly fitted for that now," I said, to keep him talking, "unless we could get our gills back."

"What about whales an' porpoises?" he said. "They breathe air, just like we do, but they spend all their lives in the sea an' never come up on land. How do they do it? Well, they don't try to stay on the top all the time, an' wear theirselves out, like human bein's do when they're scared of drownin'. They just relax an' let 'emself go down, an' just push 'emself up when they want to get a breath. A lot o' folks wouldn't get drowned if they only did that. They could stay in the water all day and night if they wouldn't fight it. I know. I spent two whole summers up at Marineland, that big aquarium they got near St. Augustine, just watchin' the porpoises through the glass windows. I just about got the feel of it myself. Any day now, maybe, I'll be sure I can do it like they do. An' then I'll go out an' be with them all the time—like some other folks have, I reckon."

It was absurd, but he was so utterly earnest that a little chill riffled through my hair.

"Other folks?" I repeated.

"That's right," he said, almost belligerently. "You ever hear of mermaids?"

"I never heard of one being caught."

"You ain't likely to. They're too smart. But they been seen."

"Manatees," I said. "That's what the old-time sailors saw, perhaps with a bottle of rum to help them. They just thought they looked human, and took it from there."

"I'm talkin' about mermaids," he said. "Not things with fish tails, but people who learned how to be like fish or porpoises. Like I aim to do; an' it won't be so long from now."

Then I knew that his poor old brain was really adrift, even if he had discovered some strange new trick about swimming; and I was almost relieved to see Audrey coming across towards us.

"Good morning," she said to him cheerfully. "Are you giving my husband some good advice?"

"I been tryin' to, ma'am," he said gravely. "But I don't think he believes me. Maybe you'll both find out, one o' these days. You're young, but you got the right things in your hearts. That's why I talked more to him than I ever talked to nobody yet. An' you"—he looked at me again—"bein' a writin' feller, perhaps one day you'll tell folks that old Andrew wasn't quite as crazy as they thought."

He tipped his cap and slouched unhurriedly away.

"What is the bee in his bonnet?" Audrey asked.

"It isn't a bee," I said. "It's a minnow."

And I told her all about it.

"Poor old guy," she said. "Losing his wife like that must have really done it to him. . . . But of course he couldn't actually have swam as fast as you thought he did. You must have lost count, or something."

"I must have," I said, and was glad to drop it there.

It was a dead-calm day, so we took a boat out to the ocean reef and went snorkeling there. I had never found fish so fascinating to watch.

We didn't see the old man again, but other people did, they said later. He was in every bar in town, making no trouble, just drinking steadily and not talking to anyone, but he could still walk straight when they last saw him. In the morning, they found his clothes and shoes and cap and an empty pint bottle on Bill Thompson's dock, and that was all. It seemed as if he must have gone swimming in the night,

and then the liquor had overpowered him and he hadn't come back. The tide didn't bring him in, and the fishing boats kept a lookout for his body for days, but it was never found. Finally they figured that the barracuda or the morays had probably finished it.

Audrey and I missed him around the dock, and felt strangely depressed about the manner of his going. It seemed as if he should have had a happier ending, somehow. But how could that have been possible?

It was several days later, sunning ourselves beside the pool, that we both looked at each other suddenly with the same complete telepathic agreement. Audrey jumped up and pulled on her bathing cap.

"Come on," she said. "I'll race you the length of the pool." Audrey is slim and utterly feminine, but she can go through the water in a way that, to my chagrin, always takes my best efforts to keep up with. I still didn't have all my heart in the race at first, and about half-way she was a length ahead of me. I put my head down and started to work.

And then, somehow, I was still thinking about the old man, and thinking about the fish I'd looked at, and I could see in my mind the funny sort of wiggle the old man had made when I watched him, and I seemed suddenly to feel it with all my body, and I was just silly enough to try it. . . .

After a moment I looked up to catch a breath and see how I was doing. This just saved me from banging my head on a rock at the end of the pool. Audrey, going like a young torpedo, was about fifteen yards behind.

When she joined me on the beach her eyes were big and round.

"Why, you old so-and-so," she sputtered. "So you've been holding out on me ever since I've known you!"

"Never," I said.

"Making believe I could almost beat you," she fumed, "when all the time you could swim like—"

"A fish," I said, and put a finger on her lips.

Sometimes we hardly seem to need to say a word to each other. It's a way two perfectly normal people can get when they've found complete harmony with each other. But she had to finalize it.

"I know it's impossible," she said, "but do you suppose . . ."

"Of course it is," I said. "But let's think it."

But we never swim like fish where anybody can see us. And very seldom even when we know we're alone. Somehow, it has us a little scared.



What Leslie Charteris treated as fantasy, Clifford Simak treats as all-out science-fiction.

This story is from the prize-winning book, City. It is one of my own personal nominations for the all-time honor roll of The Very Best of Science-Fiction.

DESERTION

by Clifford Simak

FOUR MEN, TWO BY TWO, had gone into the howling maelstrom that was Jupiter and had not returned. They had walked into the keening gale—or rather, they had loped, bellies low against the ground, wet sides gleaming in the rain.

For they did not go in the shape of men.

Now the fifth man stood before the desk of Kent Fowler, head of Dome No. 3, Jovian Survey Commission.

Under Fowler's desk, old Towser scratched a flea, then settled down to sleep again.

Harold Allen, Fowler saw with a sudden pang, was young—too young. He had the easy confidence of youth, the face of one who never had known fear. And that was strange. For men in the domes of Jupiter did know fear—fear and humility. It was hard for Man to reconcile his puny self with the mighty forces of the monstrous planet.

"You understand," said Fowler, "that you need not do this. You understand that you need not go."

It was formula, of course. The other four had been told the same thing, but they had gone. This fifth one, Fowler knew, would go as well. But suddenly he felt a dull hope stir within him that Allen wouldn't go.

"When do I start?" asked Allen.

There had been a time when Fowler might have taken quiet pride in that answer, but not now. He frowned briefly.

"Within the hour," he said.

Allen stood waiting, quietly.

"Four other men have gone out and have not returned," said Fowler. "You know that, of course. We want you to return. We don't want you going off on any heroic rescue expedition. The main thing, the only thing, is that you come back, that you prove man can live in a Jovian form. Go to the first survey stake, no farther, then come back. Don't take any chances. Don't investigate anything. Just come back."

Allen nodded. "I understand all that."

"Miss Stanley will operate the converter," Fowler went on. "You need have no fear on that particular score. The other men were converted without mishap. They left the converter in apparently perfect condition. You will be in thoroughly competent hands. Miss Stanley is the best qualified conversion operator in the Solar System. She has had experience on most of the other planets. That is why she's here."

Allen grinned at the woman and Fowler saw something flicker across Miss Stanley's face—something that might have been pity, or rage—or just plain fear. But it was gone again and she was smiling back at the youth who stood before the desk. Smiling in that prim, school-teacherish way she had of smiling, almost as if she hated herself for doing it.

"I shall be looking forward," said Allen, "to my conversion."

And the way he said it, he made it all a joke, a vast, ironic joke.

But it was no joke.

It was serious business, deadly serious. Upon these tests, Fowler knew, depended the fate of men on Jupiter. If the tests succeeded, the resources of the giant planet would be thrown open. Man would take over Jupiter as he already had taken over the other smaller planets. And if they failed—

If they failed, Man would continue to be chained and

hampered by the terrific pressure, the greater force of gravity, the weird chemistry of the planet. He would continue to be shut within the domes, unable to set actual foot upon the planet, unable to see it with direct, unaided vision, forced to rely upon the awkward tractors and the televisor, forced to work with clumsy tools and mechanisms or through the medium of robots that themselves were clumsy.

For Man, unprotected and in his natural form, would be blotted out by Jupiter's terrific pressure of fifteen thousand pounds per square inch, pressure that made terrestrial sea bottoms seem a vacuum by comparison.

Even the strongest metal Earthmen could devise couldn't exist under pressure such as that, under the pressure and the alkaline rains that forever swept the planet. It grew brittle and flaky, crumbling like clay, or it ran away in little streams and puddles of ammonia salts. Only by stepping up the toughness and strength of that metal, by increasing its electronic tension, could it be made to withstand the weight of thousands of miles of swirling, choking gases that made up the atmosphere. And even when that was done, everything had to be coated with tough quartz to keep away the rain—the liquid ammonia that fell as bitter rain.

Fowler sat listening to the engines in the sub-floor of the dome—engines that ran on endlessly, the dome never quiet of them. They had to run and keep on running, for if they stopped the power flowing into the metal walls of the dome would stop, the electronic tension would ease up and that would be the end of everything.

Towser roused himself under Fowler's desk and scratched another flea, his leg thumping hard against the floor.

"Is there anything else?" asked Allen.

Fowler shook his head. "Perhaps there's something you want to do," he said. "Perhaps you—"

He had meant to say write a letter and he was glad he caught himself quick enough so he didn't say it.

Allen looked at his watch. "I'll be there on time," he said. He swung around and headed for the door.

Fowler knew Miss Stanley was watching him and he didn't want to turn and meet her eyes. He fumbled with a sheaf of papers on the desk before him.

"How long are you going to keep this up?" asked Miss Stanley and she bit off each word with a vicious snap.

He swung around in his chair and faced her then. Her lips were drawn into a straight, thin line, her hair seemed skinned back from her forehead tighter than ever, giving her face that queer, almost startling death-mask quality.

He tried to make his voice cool and level. "As long as there's any need of it," he said. "As long as there's any hope."

"You're going to keep on sentencing them to death," she said. "You're going to keep marching them out face to face with Jupiter. You're going to sit in here safe and comfortable and send them out to die."

"There is no room for sentimentality, Miss Stanley," Fowler said, trying to keep the note of anger from his voice. "You know as well as I do why we're doing this. You realize that Man in his own form simply cannot cope with Jupiter. The only answer is to turn men into the sort of things that can cope with it. We've done it on the other planets.

"If a few men die, but we finally succeed, the price is small. Through the ages men have thrown away their lives on foolish things, for foolish reasons. Why should we hesitate, then, at a little death in a thing as great as this?"

Miss Stanley sat stiff and straight, hands folded in her lap, the lights shining on her graying hair and Fowler, watching her, tried to imagine what she might feel, what she might be thinking. He wasn't exactly afraid of her, but he didn't feel quite comfortable when she was around. Those sharp blue eyes saw too much, her hands looked far too competent. She should be somebody's Aunt sitting in a rocking chair with her knitting needles. But she wasn't. She was the top-notch conversion unit operator in the Solar System and she didn't like the way he was doing things.

"There is something wrong, Mr. Fowler," she declared.

"Precisely," agreed Fowler. "That's why I'm sending young Allen out alone. He may find out what it is."

"And if he doesn't?"

"I'll send someone else."

She rose slowly from her chair, started toward the door, then stopped before his desk.

"Some day," she said, "you will be a great man. You never let a chance go by. This is your chance. You knew it was when this dome was picked for the tests. If you put it

through, you'll go up a notch or two. No matter how many men may die, you'll go up a notch or two."

"Miss Stanley," he said and his voice was curt, "young Allen is going out soon. Please be sure that your machine—"

"My machine," she told him, icily, "is not to blame. It operates along the co-ordinates the biologists set up."

He sat hunched at his desk, listening to her footsteps go down the corridor.

What she said was true, of course. The biologists had set up the co-ordinates. But the biologists could be wrong. Just a hair-breadth of difference, one iota of digression and the converter would be sending out something that wasn't the thing they meant to send. A mutant that might crack up, go haywire, come unstuck under some condition or stress of circumstance wholly unsuspected.

For Man didn't know much about what was going on outside. Only what his instruments told him was going on. And the samplings of those happenings furnished by those instruments and mechanisms had been no more than samplings, for Jupiter was unbelievably large and the domes were very few.

Even the work of the biologists in getting the data on the Lopers, apparently the highest form of Jovian life, had involved more than three years of intensive study and after that two years of checking to make sure. Work that could have been done on Earth in a week or two. But work that, in this case, couldn't be done on Earth at all, for one couldn't take a Jovian life form to Earth. The pressure here on Jupiter couldn't be duplicated outside of Jupiter and at Earth pressure and temperature the Lopers would simply have disappeared in a puff of gas.

Yet it was work that had to be done if Man ever hoped to go about Jupiter in the life form of the Lopers. For before the converter could change a man to another life form, every detailed physical characteristic of that life form must be known—surely and positively, with no chance of mistake.

Allen did not come back.

The tractors, combing the nearby terrain, found no trace of him, unless the skulking thing reported by one of the drivers had been the missing Earthman in Loper form.

The biologists sneered their most accomplished academic sneers when Fowler suggested the co-ordinates might be

wrong. Carefully they pointed out, the co-ordinates worked. When a man was put into the converter and the switch was thrown, the man became a Loper. He left the machine and moved away, out of sight, into the soupy atmosphere.

Some quirk, Fowler had suggested; some tiny deviation from the thing a Loper should be, some minor defect. If there were, the biologists said, it would take years to find it.

And Fowler knew that they were right.

So there were five men now instead of four and Harold Allen had walked out into Jupiter for nothing at all. It was as if he'd never gone so far as knowledge was concerned.

Fowler reached across his desk and picked up the personnel file, a thin sheaf of paper neatly clipped together. It was a thing he dreaded but a thing he had to do. Somehow the reason for these strange disappearances must be found. And there was no other way than to send out more men.

He sat for a moment listening to the howling of the wind above the dome, the everlasting thundering gale that swept across the planet in boiling, twisting wrath.

Was there some threat out there, he asked himself? Some danger they did not know about? Something that lay in wait and gobbled up the Lopers, making no distinction between Lopers that were *bona fide* and Lopers that were men? To the gobblers, of course, it would make no difference.

Or had there been a basic fault in selecting the Lopers as the type of life best fitted for existence on the surface of the planet? The evident intelligence of the Lopers, he knew, had been one factor in that determination. For if the thing Man became did not have capacity for intelligence, Man could not for long retain his own intelligence in such a guise.

Had the biologists let that one factor weigh too heavily, using it to offset some other factor that might be unsatisfactory, even disastrous? It didn't seem likely. Stiffnecked as they might be, the biologists knew their business.

Or was the whole thing impossible, doomed from the very start? Conversion to other life forms had worked on other planets, but that did not necessarily mean it would work on Jupiter. Perhaps Man's intelligence could not function correctly through the sensory apparatus provided Jovian life. Perhaps the Lopers were so alien there was no common ground for human knowledge and the Jovian conception of existence to meet and work together.

Or the fault might lie with Man, be inherent with the race.

Some mental aberration which, coupled with what they found outside, wouldn't let them come back. Although it might not be an aberration, not in the human sense. Perhaps just one ordinary human mental trait, accepted as commonplace on Earth, would be so violently at odds with Jovian existence that it would blast human sanity.

Claws rattled and clicked down the corridor. Listening to them, Fowler smiled wanly. It was Towser coming back from the kitchen, where he had gone to see his friend, the cook.

Towser came into the room, carrying a bone. He wagged his tail at Fowler and flopped down beside the desk, bone between his paws. For a long moment his rheumy old eyes regarded his master and Fowler reached down a hand to ruffle a ragged ear.

"You still like me, Towser?" Fowler asked and Towser thumped his tail.

"You're the only one," said Fowler.

He straightened and swung back to the desk. His hand reached out and picked up the file.

Bennett? Bennett had a girl waiting for him back on Earth.

Andrews? Andrews was planning on going back to Mars Tech just as soon as he earned enough to see him through a year.

Olson? Olson was nearing pension age. All the time telling the boys how he was going to settle down and grow roses.

Carefully, Fowler laid the file back on the desk.

Sentencing men to death. Miss Stanley had said that, her pale lips scarcely moving in her parchment face. Marching men out to die while he, Fowler, sat here safe and comfortable.

They were saying it all through the dome; no doubt, especially since Allen had failed to return. They wouldn't say it to his face, of course. Even the man'or men he called before this desk and told they were the next to go, wouldn't say it to him.

But he would see it in their eyes.

He picked up the file again. Bennett, Andrews, Olson. There were others, but there was no use in going on.

Kent Fowler knew that he couldn't do it, couldn't face them, couldn't send more men out to die.

He leaned forward and flipped up the toggle on the intercommunicator.

"Yes, Mr. Fowler."

"Miss Stanley, please."

He waited for Miss Stanley, listening to Towser chewing half-heartedly on the bone. Towser's teeth were getting bad.

"Miss Stanley," said Miss Stanley's voice.

"Just wanted to tell you, Miss Stanley, to get ready for two more."

"Aren't you afraid," asked Miss Stanley, "that you'll run out of them? Sending out one at a time, they'd last longer, give you twice the satisfaction."

"One of them," said Fowler, "will be a dog."

"A dog!"

"Yes, Towser."

He heard the quick, cold rage that iced her voice. "Your own dog! He's been with you all these years—"

"That's the point," said Fowler. "Towser would be unhappy if I left him behind."

It was not the Jupiter he had known through the televisor. He had expected it to be different, but not like this. He had expected a hell of ammonia rain and stinking fumes and the deafening, thundering tumult of the storm. He had expected swirling clouds and fog and the snarling flicker of monstrous thunderbolts.

He had not expected the lashing downpour would be reduced to drifting purple mist that moved like fleeing shadows over a red and purple sward. He had not even guessed the snaking bolts of lightning would be flares of pure ecstasy across a painted sky.

Waiting for Towser, Fowler flexed the muscles of his body, amazed at the smooth, sleek strength he found. Not a bad body, he decided, and grimaced at remembering how he had pitied the Lopers when he glimpsed them through the television screen.

For it had been hard to imagine a living organism based upon ammonia and hydrogen rather than upon water and oxygen, hard to believe that such a form of life could know the same quick thrill of life that humankind could know. Hard to conceive of life out in the soupy maelstrom that was Jupiter, not knowing, of course, that through Jovian eyes it was no soupy maelstrom at all.

The wind brushed against him with what seemed gentle fingers and he remembered with a start that by Earth standards the wind was a roaring gale, a two-hundred-mile an hour howler laden with deadly gases.

Pleasant scents seeped into his body. And yet scarcely scents, for it was not the sense of smell as he remembered it. It was as if his whole being was soaking up the sensation of lavender—and yet not lavender. It was something, he knew, for which he had no word, undoubtedly the first of many enigmas in terminology. For the words he knew, the thought symbols that served him as an Earthman would not serve him as a Jovian.

The lock in the side of the dome opened and Towser came tumbling out—at least he thought it must be Towser.

He started to call to the dog, his mind shaping the words he meant to say. But he couldn't say them. There was no way to say them. He had nothing to say them with.

For a moment his mind swirled in muddy terror, a blind fear that eddied in little puffs of panic through his brain.

How did Jovians talk? How—

Suddenly he was aware of Towser, intensely aware of the bumbling, eager friendliness of the shaggy animal that had followed him from Earth to many planets. As if the thing that was Towser had reached out and for a moment sat within his brain.

And out of the bubbling welcome that he sensed, came words.

"Hiya, pal."

Not words really, better than words. Thought symbols in his brain, communicated thought symbols that had shades of meaning words could never have.

"Hiya, Towser," he said.

"I feel good," said Towser. "Like I was a pup. Lately I've been feeling pretty punk. Legs stiffening up on me and teeth wearing down to almost nothing. Hard to mumble a bone with teeth like that. Besides, the fleas give me hell. Used to be I never paid much attention to them. A couple of fleas more or less never meant much in my early days."

"But . . . but—" Fowler's thoughts tumbled awkwardly. "You're talking to me!"

"Sure thing," said Towser. "I always talked to you, but you couldn't hear me. I tried to say things to you, but I couldn't make the grade."

"I understood you sometimes," Fowler said.

"Not very well," said Towser. "You knew when I wanted food and when I wanted a drink and when I wanted out, but that's about all you ever managed."

"I'm sorry," Fowler said.

"Forget it," Towser told him. "I'll race you to the cliff."

For the first time, Fowler saw the cliff, apparently many miles away, but with a strange crystalline beauty that sparkled in the shadow of the many-colored clouds.

Fowler hesitated. "It's a long way."

"Ah, come on," said Towser and even as he said it he started for the cliff.

Fowler followed, testing his legs, testing the strength in that new body of his, a bit doubtful at first, amazed a moment later, then running with a sheer joyousness that was one with the red and purple sward, with the drifting smoke of the rain across the land.

As he ran the consciousness of music came to him, a music that beat into his body, that surged throughout his being, that lifted him on wings of silver speed. Music like bells might make from some steeple on a sunny, springtime hill.

As the cliff drew nearer the music deepened and filled the universe with a spray of magic sound. And he knew the music came from the tumbling waterfall that feathered down the face of the shining cliff.

Only, he knew, it was no waterfall, but an ammonia-fall and the cliff was white because it was oxygen, solidified.

He skidded to a stop beside Towser where the waterfall broke into a glittering rainbow of many hundred colors. Literally many hundred, for here, he saw, was no shading of one primary to another as human beings saw, but a clearcut selectivity that broke the prism down to its last ultimate classification.

"The music," said Towser.

"Yes, what about it?"

"The music," said Towser, "is vibrations. Vibrations of water falling."

"But Towser, you don't know about vibrations."

"Yes, I do," contended Towser. "It just popped into my head."

Fowler gulped mentally. "Just popped!"

And suddenly, within his own head, he held a formula—

the formula for a process that would make metal to withstand the pressure of Jupiter.

He stared, astounded, at the waterfall and swiftly his mind took the many colors and placed them in their exact sequence in the spectrum. Just like that. Just out of blue sky. Out of nothing, for he knew nothing either of metals or of colors.

"Towser," he cried. "Towser, something's happening to us!"

"Yeah, I know," said Towser.

"It's our brains," said Fowler. "We're using them, all of them, down to the last hidden corner. Using them to figure out things we should have known all the time. Maybe the brains of Earth things naturally are slow and foggy. Maybe we are the morons of the universe. Maybe we are fixed so we have to do things the hard way."

And, in the new sharp clarity of thought that seemed to grip him, he knew that it would not only be the matter of colors in a waterfall or metals that would resist the pressure of Jupiter. He sensed other things, things not yet quite clear. A vague whispering that hinted of greater things, of mysteries beyond the pale of human thought, beyond even the pale of human imagination. Mysteries, fact, logic built on reasoning. Things that any brain should know if it used all its reasoning power.

"We're still mostly Earth," he said. "We're just beginning to learn a few of the things we are to know—a few of the things that were kept from us as human beings, perhaps because we were human beings. Because our human bodies were poor bodies. Poorly equipped for thinking, poorly equipped in certain senses that one has to have to know. Perhaps even lacking in certain senses that are necessary to true knowledge."

He stared back at the dome, a tiny black thing dwarfed by the distance.

Back there were men who couldn't see the beauty that was Jupiter. Men who thought that swirling clouds and lashing rain obscured the planet's face. Unseeing human eyes. Poor eyes. Eyes that could not see the beauty in the clouds, that could not see through the storm. Bodies that could not feel the thrill of trilling music stemming from the rush of broken water.

Men who walked alone, in terrible loneliness, talking with

their tongue like Boy Scouts wigwagging out their messages, unable to reach out and touch one another's mind as he could reach out and touch Towser's mind. Shut off forever from that personal, intimate contact with other living things.

He, Fowler, had expected terror inspired by alien things out here on the surface, had expected to cower before the threat of unknown things, had steeled himself against disgust of a situation that was not of Earth.

But instead he had found something greater than Man had ever known. A swifter, surer body. A sense of exhilaration, a deeper sense of life. A sharper mind. A world of beauty that even the dreamers of the Earth had not yet imagined.

"Let's get going," Towser urged.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Anywhere," said Towser. "Just start going and see where we end up. I have a feeling . . . well, a feeling—"

"Yes, I know," said Fowler.

For he had the feeling, too. The feeling of high destiny. A certain sense of greatness. A knowledge that somewhere off beyond the horizons lay adventure and things greater than adventure.

Those other five had felt it, too. Had felt the urge to go and see, the compelling sense that here lay a life of fullness and of knowledge.

That, he knew, was why they had not returned.

"I won't go back," said Towser.

"We can't let them down," said Fowler.

Fowler took a step or two, back toward the dome, then stopped.

Back to the dome. Back to that aching, poison-laden body he had left. It hadn't seemed aching before, but now he knew it was.

Back to the fuzzy brain. Back to muddled thinking. Back to the flapping mouths that formed signals others understood. Back to eyes that now would be worse than no sight at all. Back to squalor, back to crawling, back to ignorance.

"Perhaps some day," he said, muttering to himself.

"We got a lot to do and a lot to see," said Towser. "We got a lot to learn. We'll find things—"

Yes, they could find things. Civilizations, perhaps. Civilizations that would make the civilization of Man seem puny by comparison. Beauty and, more important, an understanding of that beauty. And a comradeship no one had ever

known before—that no man, no dog had ever known before.

And life. The quickness of life after what seemed a drugged existence.

"I can't go back," said Towser.

"Nor I," said Fowler.

"They would turn me back into a dog," said Towser.

"And me," said Fowler, "back into a man."



Of the several transmutation powers attributed to witches, the most enviable has always been the devil-drawn faculty of turning oneself into a young and beautiful (or handsome) creature of overwhelming sexual appeal—always, of course, for the most unworthy of purposes.

The "seductive witch" and the "demon lover" have, as symbols, far outlasted real belief in the supernatural. Here, in a story which has all the trappings of true witchcraft—a lonely cabin, a lonely swamp, and an air of brooding enchantment—Walt Miller gives us a tale of a demon lover who turns out to be neither symbol nor superstition . . .

THE TRIFLIN' MAN

by *Walter M. Miller, Jr.*

THE RAIN SANG light in the sodden palmettos and the wind moaned through the pines about the unpainted shack, whipping the sea of grass that billowed about the islands of scrub. The land lay bathed in rain-haze beneath the pines. Rain trickled from the roof of the shack and made a rattling spray in the rivulets under the eaves. Rain blew from the roof in foggy cloudlets. Rain played marimba-sounds on the wooden steps. A droopy chicken huddled in the drenched grass, too sick to stir or seek a shelter.

No road led across the scrublands to the distant highway, but only a sandy footpath that was now a gushing torrent that ran down to an overflowing creek of brackish water. A

'possum hurried across the inundated footpath at the edge of the clearing, drenched and miserable, seeking higher ground.

The cabin was without a chimney, but a length of stove-pipe projected from a side window, and bent skyward at a clumsy angle. A thin trail of brown smoke leaked from beneath the rain-hood, and wound away on the gusty breeze. In the cabin, there was life, and an aura of song lingered about the rain-washed walls, song as mournful as the sodden land, low as the wail of a distant train.

*Whose hands was drivin' the nails O Lord?
Whose hands was drivin' the nails?
Lord O Lord!
My hands was drivin' the nails O Lord!
My hands was drivin' the nails!
And I did crucify my God!*

The song was low and vibrant in the cabin, and Lucey rocked to it, rolling her head as she sang over the stove, where a smoked 'possum simmered in pot-likker with sweet-taters, while corn bread toasted in the oven. The cabin was full of food-smells and sweat-smells, and smoky light through dusty panes.

From a rickety iron bed near the window came a sudden choking sob, an animal sound of almost unendurable torment and despair. Lucey stopped singing, and turned to blink toward the cry, sudden concern melting her pudgy face into a mountain woman cherub's face, full of compassion.

"Awwwwwww . . ." The sound welled unbidden from her throat, a rich low outpouring of love and sympathy for the sallow twitching youth who lay on the yellowish sheets, his eyes wild, his hands tensing into claws.

"Awwwww, Doodie—you ain't gonna have another spell?" she said.

Only a small hurt this time, my son. It can't be helped. It's like tuning a guitar. You can't do it without sounding the strings, or pulsing the neural fibers. But only a small hurt this time. . . .

The youth writhed and shuddered, stiffening into a puppet strained by steel springs. His back arched, and his muscles quivered. He flung himself suddenly into reflexive gymnastics, sobbing in small shrieks.

Lucey murmured softly. An immense mass of love, she waddled toward the bed in bounces of rubbery flesh. She bent over him to purr low in her throat.

"Poor Doodie . . . poor li'l Doodie. Mama's lamb."

The boy sobbed and thrashed. The paroxysm brought froth to his lips and jerked his limbs into cramped spasms. He jerked and writhed and tumbled on the bed.

"You jus try to lay calm, Doodie. You jus try. You gonna be all right. It ain't gonna last long, Doodie. It's gonna go away."

"No!" he whimpered. "No! Don't touch me, Mama! *Don't!*"

"Now, Doodie . . ."

She sat on the edge of the bed to gather him up in her massive arms. The spasms grew more frantic, less reflexive. He fought her, shrieking terror. She lay beside him, moaning low with pity. She enveloped him with her arms, enfolding him so that he could no longer kick. She pulled his face into the hollow of her huge bosom and squeezed him. With his tense body pressed tightly against the bulky mass of her, she melted again with love, and began chanting a rhythmic lullaby while he twitched and slavered against her, fighting away, pretending to suffocate.

Gradually, as exhaustion overcame him, the spasm passed. He lay wheezing quietly in her arms.

The strings are tuned, my son, and it was only a small hurt. Has the hurt stopped, my son?

Yes, father, if only this monstress would let me be.

Accept my knowledge, and be content. The time will come.

"Who you whisperin' to, Doodie? Why are you mumblin' so?" She looked down at his tousled head pressed tightly between her breasts.

His muttering ceased, and he lay quietly as if in a trance. It was always so. The boy had fits, and when the paroxysm had passed, he went into a rigid sleep. But it was more like a frozen moment of awareness, and old Ma Kutter said the boy was "witched." Lucey had never believed in "witchin'."

When he was tensely quiet, she tenderly disengaged herself and slid off the bed. He lay on his side, face toward the window, eyes slitted and mouth agape. Humming softly, Lucey returned to the stove and took a stick of oak out of the bucket. She paused to glance back at him—and he seemed to be rigidly listening to something. The rain?

"Doodie . . .?"

"When are you coming for us, father?" came in a ghost whisper from the bed. "When, *when?*"

"What are you talking about, Doodie?" The cast-iron stove-lid clattered on the hot metal as she lifted it nervously aside. She glanced down briefly at the red coals in the stove, then back at Doodie.

"Very soon . . . very soon!" he whispered.

Lucey chucked the stick of wood in atop the coals, then stood staring at the bed until the flames licked up about the lid-hole to glisten orange on her sweat-glazed face.

"Who are you talkin' to, Doodie?"

She expected no answer, but after several seconds, his breathing grew deeper. Then it came: "My *father*."

Lucey's plump mouth went slowly shut and her hand quivered as she fumbled for the stove lid.

"Your pa is dead, Doodie. You know that."

The emaciated youth stirred on the bed, picked himself up slowly on one arm, and turned to look at her, his eyes blazing. "You lie!" he cried. "Mama, you lie!"

"Doodie!"

"I hate you, Mama. I hate all of you, and I'll make you pay. I'll be like *him*."

The stove-lid clattered back in place. She wiped her hands nervously on her dress. "You're sick, Doodie! You're not right in the mind. You never even *seed* your pa."

"I talk to him," the boy said. "He tells me things. He told me why you're my mother. He told me how. And he told me who *I* am."

"You're my son!" Lucey's voice had gone up an octave, and she edged defensively away.

"Only half of me, Mama." The boy said, then laughed defiantly. "Only half of me is even human. You knew that when he came here, and paid you to have his baby?"

"Doodie!"

"You can't lie to me, Mama. *He* tells me. *He* knows."

"He was just a man, Doodie. Now he's gone. He never came back, do you hear?"

The boy stared out the window at the rain-shroud. When he spoke again, it was in a small slow voice of contempt.

"It doesn't matter. He doesn't want you to believe—any of you." He paused to snicker. "He doesn't want to warn you what we're going to do."

Lucey shook her head slowly. "Lord, have mercy on me," she breathed. "I know I done wrong. But please, punish old Lucey and not my boy."

"I ain't crazy, Mama."

"If you ain't crazy you're 'witched,' and talkin' to the dead."

"He ain't dead. He's Outside."

Lucey's eyes flickered quickly to the door.

"And he's comin' back—soon." The boy chuckled. "Then he'll make me like him, and it won't hurt to listen."

"You talk like he wasn't a man. I seed him, and you didn't. Your pa was just a man, Doodie."

"No, Mama. He showed you a man because he wanted you to see a man. Next time, he'll come the way he *really* is."

"Why would your pa come back," she snorted, summoning courage to stir the pot. "What would he want here? If you was right in the head, you wouldn't get fits, and you'd know you never seed him. What's his name? You don't even know his name."

"His name is a purple bitter with black velvet, Mama. Only there isn't any word."

"Fits," she moaned. "A child with fits."

"The crawlers, you mean? That's when he talks to me. It hurts at first."

She advanced on him with a big tin spoon, and shook it at him. "You're sick, Doodie. And don't you carry on so. A doctor's what you need . . . if only Mama had some money."

"I won't fuss with you, Mama."

"Huh!" She stood there for a moment, shaking her head. Then she went back to stir the pot. Odorous steam arose to perfume the shack.

The boy turned his head to watch her with luminous eyes. "The fits are when he talks, Mama. Honest they are. It's like electricity inside me. I wish I could tell you how."

"Sick!" she shook her head vigorously. "Sick, that's all."

"If I was all like him, it wouldn't hurt. It only hurts because I'm half like you."

"Doodie, you're gonna drive your old mother to her grave. Why do you torment me so?"

He turned back to the window and fell silent . . . determinedly, hostilely silent. The silence grew like an angry thing in the cabin, and Lucey's noises at the stove only served to punctuate it.

"Where does your father stay, Doodie?" she asked at last, in cautious desperation.

"Outside . . ."

"Gitalong! Wheeah outside, in a palmetto scrub? In the cypress swamp?"

"Way Outside. Outside the world."

"Who taught you such silliness? Spirits an' such! I ought to tan you good, Doodie!"

"From another world," the boy went on.

"An' he talks to you from the other world?"

Doodie nodded solemnly.

Lucey stirred vigorously at the pot, her face creased in a dark frown. Lots of folks believed in spirits, and lots of folks believed in mediums. But Lucey had got herself straight with the Lord.

"I'm gonna call the parson," she grunted flatly.

"Why?"

"Christian folks don't truck with spirits."

"He's no spirit, Mama. He's like a man, only he's not. He comes from a star."

She set her jaw and fell grimly silent. She didn't like to remember Doodie's father. He'd come seeking shelter from a storm, and he was big and taciturn, and he made love like a machine. Lucey had been younger then—younger and wilder, and not afraid of shame. He'd vanished as quickly as he'd come.

When he had gone, it almost felt like he'd been there to accomplished an errand, some piece of business that had to be handled hastily and efficiently.

"Why'd he want a son?" she scoffed. "If what you say is true—which it ain't."

The boy stirred restlessly. "Maybe I shouldn't tell."

"You tell Mama."

"You won't believe it anyway," he said listlessly. "He fixed it so I'd *look* human. He fixed it so he could talk to me. I tell him things. Things he could find out himself if he wanted to."

"What does he want to know?"

"How humans work inside."

"Livers and lungs and such? Ssssst! Silliest I ever—"

"And brains. Now they know."

"*They?*"

"Pa's people. *You'll* see. Now they know, and they're com-

ing to run things. Things will be different, lots different."

"When?"

"Soon. Only pa's coming sooner. He's their . . . their . . ." The boy groped for a word. "He's like a detective."

Lucey took the corn bread out of the oven and sank despairfully into a chair. "Doodie, Doodie . . ."

"What, Mama?"

"Oh, Sweet Jesus! What did I do, what did I do? He's a child of the devil. Fits an' lies and puny ways. Lord, have mercy on me."

With an effort, the boy sat up to stare at her weakly. "He's no devil, Mama. He's no man, but he's better than a man. You'll see."

"You're not right in the mind, Doodie."

"It's all right. He wouldn't want you to believe. Then you'd be warned. They'd be warned too."

"They?"

"Humans—white and black and yellow. He picked poor people to have his sons, so nobody would believe."

"Sons? You mean you ain't the only one?"

Doodie shook his head. "I got brothers, Mama—half-brothers. I talk to them sometimes too."

She was silent a long time. "Doodie, you better go to sleep," she said wearily at last.

"Nobody'll believe . . . until he comes, and the rest of them come after him."

"He ain't comin', Doodie. You ain't seed him—never."

"Not with my eyes," he said.

She shook her head slowly, peering at him with brimming eyes. "Poor little boy. Cain't I do somethin' to make you see?"

Doodie sighed. He was tired and didn't answer. He fell back on the pillow and lay motionless. The water that crawled down the pane rippled the rain-light over his sallow face. He might have been a pretty child, if it had not been for the tightness in his face, and the tumor-shape on his forehead.

He said it was the tumor-shape that let him talk to his father. After a few moments, Lucey arose, and took their supper off the stove. Doodie sat propped up on pillows, but he only nibbled at his food.

"Take it away," he told her suddenly. "I can feel it starting again."

There was nothing she could do. While he shrieked and tossed again on the bed, she went out on the rain-swept porch to pray. She prayed softly that her sin be upon herself, not upon her boy. She prayed for understanding, and when she was done she cried until Doodie was silent again inside.

When she went back into the house, he was watching her with cold hard eyes.

"It's tonight," he said. "He's coming *tonight*, Mama."

The rain ceased at twilight, but the wind stiffened, hurling drops of water from the pines and scattering them like shot across the sagging roof. Running water gurgled in the ditch, and a rabbit ran toward higher ground. In the west, the clouds lifted a dark bandage from a bloody slash of sky, and somewhere a dog howled in the dusk. Rain-pelted, the sick hen lay dying in the yard.

Lucey stood in the doorway, nervously peering out into the pines and the scrub, while she listened to the croak of the treefrogs at sunset, and the conch-shell sounds of wind in the pines.

"Ain't no night for strangers to be out wanderin'," she said. "There won't be no moon till nearly midnight."

"He'll come," promised the small voice behind her. "He's coming from the Outside."

"Shush, child. He's nothing of the sort."

"He'll come, all right."

"What if I won't let him in the door?"

Doodie laughed. "You can't stop him, Mama. I'm only *half* like you and it hurts when he talks-inside."

"Yes, child?"

"If he talks-inside to a human, the human dies. He told me."

"Sounds like witch-woman talk," Lucey said scornfully and stared back at him from the doorway. "I don't want no more of it. There's nobody can kill somebody by just a-talkin'."

"*He* can. And it ain't just talking. It's talking *inside*."

"Ain't nobody can talk inside your mother but your mother."

"That's what I been saying," Doodie laughed. "If he did, you'd die. That's why he needed *me*."

Lucey's eyes kept flickering toward the rain-soaked scrub, and she hugged her huge arms, and shivered. "Silliest I

ever!" she snorted. "He was just a man, and you never even seed him."

She went inside and got the shotgun, and sat down at the table to clean it, after lighting a smoky oil lamp on the wall.

"Why are you cleaning that gun, Mama?"

"Wildcat around the chicken yard last night!" she muttered. "Tonight I'm gonna watch."

Doodie stared at her with narrowed eyes, and the look on his face started her shivering again. Sometimes he did seem not-quite-human, a shape witched or haunted wherein a silent cat prowled by itself and watched, through human eyes.

How could she believe the wild words of a child subject to fits, a child whose story was like those told by witching women and herb healers? A thing that came from the stars, a thing that could come in the guise of a man and talk, make love, eat, and laugh, a thing that wanted a half-human son to which it could speak from afar.

How could she believe in a thing that was like a spy sent into the city before the army came, a thing that could make her conceive when it wasn't even human? It was wilder than any of the stories they told in the deep swamps, and Lucey was a good Christian now.

Still, when Doodie fell asleep, she took the gun and went out to wait for the wildcat that had been disturbing the chickens. It wasn't unChristian to believe in wildcats, not even tonight.

Doodie's father had been just a man, a triflin' man. True, she couldn't remember him very clearly, because she had been drinking corn squeezins with Jacob Fleeter before the stranger came. She had been all giggly, and he had been all shimmery, and she couldn't remember a word he'd said.

"Lord forgive me," she breathed as she left the house.

The wet grass dragged about her legs as she crossed the yard and traversed a clearing toward an island of palmetto scrub from which she could cover both the house and the chicken-yard.

The clouds had broken, and stars shone brightly, but there was no moon. Lucey moved by instinct, knowing each inch of land for half a mile around the shack.

She sat on a wet and rotting log in the edge of the palmetto thicket, laid the shotgun across her lap, stuffed a corn-cob pipe with tobacco from Deevey's field, and sat smoking

in the blackness while whippoorwills mourned over the land, and an occasional owl hooted from the swamp. The air was cool and clean after the rain, and only a few nightbirds flitted in the brush while crickets chirped in the distance and treefrogs spoke mysteriously.

"AAAAaaAAaaarrrwww . . . Na!"

The cry was low and piercing. Was it Doodie, having another spasm—or only a dream? She half-rose, then paused, listening. There were a few more whimpers, then silence. A dream, she decided, and settled back to wait. There was nothing she could do for Doodie, not until the State Health-mobile came through again, and examined him for "catchin'" ailments. If they found he wasn't right in the mind, they might take him away.

The glowing ember in the pipe was hypnotic—the only thing to be clearly seen except the stars. She stared at the stars, wondering about their names, until they began to crawl before her eyes. Then she looked at the ember in the pipe again, brightening and dimming with each breath, acquiring a lacy crust of ashes, growing sleepy in the bowl and sinking deeper, deeper, while the whippoorwills pierced the night with melancholy.

. . . "Na na naaaAAAhhhaaa . . . !"'

When the cries woke her, she knew she had slept for some time. Faint moonlight seeped through the pine branches from the east, and there was a light mist over the land. The air had chilled, and she shivered as she arose to stretch, propping the gun across the rotten log. She waited for Doodie's cries to cease.

The cries continued, unabated.

Stiffening with sudden apprehension, she started back toward the shack. Then she saw it—a faint violet glow through the trees to the north, just past the corner of the hen house! She stopped again, tense with fright. Doodie's cries were becoming meaningful.

"Pa! I can't stand it any closer! Naa, naaa! I can't think, I can't think at all. No, *please*—"

Reflexively, Lucey started to bolt for the house, but checked herself in time. No lamp burned in the window. She picked up the shotgun and a pebble. After a nervous pause, she tossed the pebble at the porch.

It bounced from the wall with a loud crack, and she slunk

low into shadows. Doodie's cries continued without pause. A minute passed, and no one emerged from the house.

A sudden metallic sound, like the opening of a metal door, came from the direction of the violet light. Quickly she stepped over the log and pressed back into the scrub thicket. Shaking with fear, she waited in the palmettos, crouching in the moonlight among the spiny fronds, and lifting her head occasionally to peer toward the violet light.

She saw nothing for a time, and then, gradually, the moonlight seemed to dim. She glanced upward. A tenuous shadow, like smoke, had begun to obscure the face of the moon, a translucent blur like the thinnest cloud.

At first, she dismissed it as a cloud. But it writhed within itself, curled and crawled, not dispersing, but seeming to swim. Smoke from the violet light? She watched it with wide, upturned eyes.

Despite its volatile shape, it clung together as a single entity as smoke would never have done. She could still see it faintly after it had cleared the lunar disk, scintillating in the moon glow.

It swam like an airborne jellyfish. A cluster of silver threads it seemed, tangled in a cloud of filaments—or a giant mass of dandelion fluff. It leaked out misty pseudopods, then drew them back as it pulled itself through the air. Weightless as chick-down, huge as a barn, it flew—and drifted from the direction of the sphere in a semi-circle, as if inspecting the land, at times moving against the wind.

It was coming closer to the house.

It moved with purpose, and therefore was alive. This Lucey knew. It moved with its millions of spun threads, finer than a spider's web, the patterns as ordered as a neural array.

It contracted suddenly and began to settle toward the house. Glittering opaquely, blotting out half the cabin, it kept contracting and drawing itself in, becoming denser until it fell in the yard with a blinding flash of incandescent light.

Lucey's flesh crawled. Her hands trembled on the gun, her breath came in shallow gasps.

Before her eyes it was changing into a manlike thing.

Frozen, she waited, thinking swiftly. Could it be that Doodie was right?

Could it be—

Doodie was still whimpering in the house, weary now, as he always was when the spasm had spent itself. But the words still came, words addressed to his father.

The thing in the yard was assuming the shape of a man—and Lucey knew who the man would be.

She reared up quickly in the palmettos, like an enraged, hulking river animal breaking to the surface. She came up shotgun in hand and bellowed across the clearing. "Hey theah! You triflin' skunk! *Look at me!*"

Still groping for human shape, the creature froze.

"Run off and leave me with child!" Lucey shouted. "And no way to pay his keep!"

The creature kept coming toward her, and the pulsing grew stronger.

"Don't come any nearer, you hear?"

When it kept coming, Lucey grunted in a gathering rage and charged out of the palmettos to meet it, shotgun raised, screaming insults. The thing wobbled to a stop, its face a shapeless blob with black shadows for eyes.

She brought the gun to her shoulder and fired both barrels at once.

The thing tumbled to the ground. Crackling arcs danced about it, and a smell of ozone came on the breeze. For one hideous moment it was lighted by a glow from within. Then the glow died, and it began to expand. It grew erratically, and the moonlight danced in silvery filaments about it. A blob of its substance broke loose from the rest, and wind-borne, sailed across the clearing and dashed itself to dust in the palmettos.

A sudden gust took the rest of it, rolling it away in the grass, gauzy shreds tearing loose from the mass. The gust blew it against the trunk of a pine. It lodged there briefly, quivering in the breeze and shimmering palely under the moon. Then it broke into dust that scattered eastward across the land.

"Praised be the Lord," breathed Lucey, beginning to cry.

A high whining sound pierced the night, from the direction of the violet light. She whirled to stare. The light grew brighter. Then the whine abruptly ceased. A luminescent sphere, glowing with violet haze, moved upward from the pines. It paused, then in stately majesty continued the ascent, gathering speed until it became a ghostly chariot that

dwindled. Up, up, up toward the gleaming stars. She watched it until it vanished from sight.

Then she straightened her shoulders, and glowered toward the dust-traces that blew eastward over the scrub.

"Ain't nothing worse than a triflin' man," she philosophized. "If he's human, or if he's not."

Wearily she returned to the cabin. Doodie was sleeping peacefully. Smiling, she tucked him in, and went to bed. There was corn to hoe, come dawn.

Report: Servopilot recon six, to fleet. Missionman caught in transition phase by native organism, and devastated, thus destroying liaison with native analog. Suggest delay of invasion plans. Unpredictability factors associated with mothers of genetic analogs. Withdraw contacts. Servo Six.



A creature of extra-terrestrial origin may, obviously, come in any shape, size, or form—not to mention color, credo, or condition of sexiness—that may happen to suit the fancy of its creator. Some of the most intriguing creations, however, have been those of no fixed form at all: the shape-changers of the old stories, in supra-modern dress, equipped with magical science which is capable of accomplishing far, far more than the elder earthly witches ever dreamed of.

Mr. Miller's demon lover was one of these; now Fritz Leiber gives us a slightly different version, pitted in not-quite-mortal combat against a character who will be readily recognized as one of the most hero-ized (if not quite heroic) and devilish (if not precisely demon) lovers of our day.

THE NIGHT HE CRIED

by **Fritz Leiber**

I GLANCED DOWN MY NECK secretly at the two snowy hillocks, ruby peaked, that were pushing out my blouse tautly without the aid of a brassière. I decided they'd more than do. So I

turned away scornfully as his vast top-down convertible cruised past my street lamp. I struck my hip and a big match against the fluted column, and lit a cigarette. I was Lili Marlene to a T—or rather to a V-neckline. (I must tell you that my command of earth-idiom and allusion is remarkable, but if you'd had my training you wouldn't wonder.)

The convertible slowed down and backed up. I smiled. I'd been certain that my magnificently formed milk glands would turn the trick. I puffed on my cigarette languorously.

"Hi, Babel!"

Right from the first I'd known it was the man I was supposed to contact. Handsome hatchet face. Six or seven feet tall. Quite a creature. Male, as they say.

I hopped into his car, vaulting over the low door before he opened it. We zoomed off through New York's purple, smelly twilight.

"What's your name, Big Male?" I asked him.

Scorning to answer, he stripped me with his eyes. But I had confidence in my milk glands. Lord knows, I'd been hours perfecting them.

"Slickie Millane, isn't it?" I prompted recklessly.

"That's possible," he conceded, poker-faced.

"Well then, what are we waiting for?" I asked him, nudging him with the leftermost of my beautifully conical milk glands.

"Look here, Babe," he told me, just a bit coldly, "I'm the one who dispenses sex and justice in this area."

I snuggled submissively under his encircling right arm, still nudging him now and again with my left milk gland. The convertible sped. The skyscrapers shrank, exfoliated, became countryside. The convertible stopped.

As the hand of his encircling arm began to explore my prize possessions, I drew away a bit, not frustratingly, and informed him, "Slickie dear, I am from Galaxy Center . . ."

"What's that—a magazine publisher?" he demanded hotly, being somewhat inflamed by my cool milk glands.

". . . and we are interested in how sex and justice are dispensed in all areas," I went on, disregarding his interruption and his somewhat juvenile fondlings. "To be bold, we suspect that you may be somewhat misled about this business of sex."

Vertical, centimeter-deep furrows creased his brow. His head poised above mine like a hawk's. "What are you talking

about, Babe?" he demanded with suspicious rage, even snatching his hands away.

"Briefly, Slickie," I said, "you do not seem to feel that sex is for the production of progeny or for the mutual solace of two creatures. You seem to think—"

His rage exploded into action. He grabbed a great big gun out of the glove compartment. I sprang to my two transmuted nether tentacles—most handsome gams if I, the artist, do say so. He jabbed the muzzle of the gun into my midriff.

"That's exactly what I mean, Slickie," I managed to say before my beautiful midriff, which I'd been at such pains to perfect, erupted into smoke and ghastly red splatter. I did a backward flipflop out of the car and lay still—a most fetching corpse with a rucked-up skirt. As the convertible snorted off triumphantly, I snagged hold of the rear bumper, briefly changing my hand back to a tentacle for better gripping. Before the pavement had abraded more than a few grams of my substance, I pulled myself up onto the bumper, where I proceeded to reconstitute my vanished midriff with material from the air, the rest of my body, and the paint on the trunk lid. On this occasion the work went rapidly, with no artistic gropings, since I had the curves memorized from the first time I'd worked them out. Then I touched up my abrasions, stripped myself, whipped myself up a snazzy silver lamé evening frock out of chromium from the bumper, and put in time creating costume jewelry out of the tail light and the rest of the chrome.

The car stopped at a bar and Slickie slid out. For a moment his proud profile was silhouetted against the smoky glow. Then he was inside. I threw away the costume jewelry and climbed over the folded top and popped down on the leather-upholstered seat, scarcely a kilogram lighter than when I'd first sat there.

The minutes dragged. To pass them, I mentally reviewed the thousand-and-some basic types of mutual affection on the million-plus planets, not forgetting the one and only basic type of love.

There was a burst of juke-box jazz. Footsteps tracked from the bar toward the convertible. I leaned back comfortably with my silver-filmed milk glands dramatically highlighted.

"Hi, Slickie," I called, making my voice sweet and soft to cushion the shock.

Nevertheless it was a considerable one. For all of ten seconds he stood there, canted forward a little, like a wooden Indian that's just been nudged from behind and is about to topple.

Then with a naive ingenuity that rather touched me, he asked huskily, "Hey, have you got a twin sister?"

"Could be," I said with a shrug that jogged my milk glands deliciously.

"Well, what are you doing in my car?"

"Waiting for you," I told him simply.

He considered that as he slowly and carefully walked around the car and got behind the wheel, never taking his eyes off me. I nudged him in my usual manner. He jerked away.

"What are you up to?" he inquired suspiciously.

"Why are you surprised, Slickie?" I countered innocently. "I've heard this sort of thing happens to you all the time."

"What sort of thing?"

"Girls turning up in your car, your bar, your bedroom—everywhere."

"Where'd you hear it?"

"I read it in your Spike Mallet books."

"Oh," he said, somewhat mollified. But then his suspicion came back. "But what are you really up to?" he demanded.

"Slickie," I assured him with complete sincerity, bugging my beautiful eyes, "I just love you."

This statement awakened in him an irritation so great that it overrode his uneasiness about me, for he cuffed me in the face—so suddenly that I almost forgot and changed it back to my top tentacle.

"I make the advances around here, Babe," he asserted harshly.

Completely under control again, I welled a tiny trickle of blood out of the left-hand corner of my gorgeous mouth. "Anything you say, Slickie, dear," I assented submissively and cuddled up against him in a prim, girlish way to which he could hardly take exception.

But I must have bothered or at least puzzled him, for he drove slowly, his dark-eaved eyes following an invisible tennis ball that bounded between me and the street ahead. Abruptly the eaves lifted and he smiled.

"Look, I just got an idea for a story," he said. "There's

this girl from Galaxy Center—" and he whipped around to watch my reactions, but I didn't blink.

He continued, "I mean, she's sort of from the center of the galaxy, where everything's radioactive. Now there's this guy that's got her up in his attic." His face grew deeply thoughtful. "She's the most beautiful girl in the universe and he loves her like crazy, but she's all streaming with hard radiations and it'll kill him if he touches her."

"Yes, Slickie—and then?" I prompted after the car had dreamed its way for several blocks between high buildings.

He looked at me sharply. "That's all. Don't you get it?"

"Yes, Slickie," I assured him soothingly. My statement seemed to satisfy him, but he was still edgy.

He stopped the car in front of an apartment hotel that thrust toward the stars with a dark presumptuousness. He got out on the street side and walked around the rear end and suddenly stopped. I followed him. He was studying the gray bumper and the patch of raw sheet metal off which I'd used the paint. He looked around at me where I stood sprayed with silver lamé in the revealing lamp light.

"Wipe your chin," he said critically.

"Why not kiss the blood off it, Slickie?" I replied with an ingenuousness I hoped would take the curse off the suggestion.

"Aw nuts," he said nervously and stalked into the foyer so swiftly he might have been trying to get away from me. However, he made no move to stop me when I followed him into the tiny place and the even tinier elevator. In the latter cubicle I maneuvered so as to give him a series of breathtaking scenic views of the Grand Tetons that rose behind the plunging silver horizon of my neckline, and he unfroze considerably. By the time he opened the door of his apartment he had got so positively cordial that he urged me across the threshold with a casual spank.

It was just as I had visualized it—the tiger skins, the gun racks, the fireplace, the open bedroom door, the bar just beside it, the adventures of Spike Mallet in handsomely tooled leather bindings, the vast divan covered with zebra skin . . .

On the last was stretched a beautiful ice-faced blonde in a filmy negligee.

This was a complication for which I wasn't prepared. I

stood rooted by the door while Slickie walked swiftly past me.

The blonde slithered to her feet. There was murder in her glacial eyes. "You two-timing rat!" she grated. Her hand darted under her negligee. Slickie's snaked under the left-hand side of his jacket.

Then it hit me what was going to happen. She would bring out a small but deadly silver-plated automatic, but before she could level it, Slickie's cannon would make a red ruin of her midriff.

There I was, standing twenty feet away from both of them—and this poor girl couldn't reconstitute herself.

Swifter than thought I changed my arms back to upper dorsal tentacles and jerked back both Slickie's and the girl's elbows. They turned around, considerably startled, and saw me standing twenty feet away. I'd turned my tentacles back to arms before they'd noticed them. Their astonishment increased.

But I knew I had won only a temporary respite. Unless something happened, Slickie's trigger-blissful rage would swiftly be refocused on this foolish fragile creature. To save her, I had to divert his ire to myself.

"Get that little tramp out of here," I ordered Slickie from the corner of my mouth as I walked past him to the bar.

"Easy, Babe," he warned me.

I poured myself a liter of Scotch—I had to open a second bottle to complete the measure—and downed it. I really didn't need it, but the assorted molecules were congenial building blocks and I was rather eager to get back to normal weight.

"Haven't you got that tramp out of here yet?" I demanded, eyeing him scornfully over my insouciant silver-filmed shoulder.

"Easy, Babe," he repeated, the vertical furrows creasing his brow to a depth of at least a centimeter and a half.

"That's telling her, Slickie," the blonde applauded.

"You two-timing rat!" I plagiarized, whipping up my silver skirt as if to whisk a gun from my nonexistent girdle.

His cannon coughed. Always a good sportsman, I moved an inch so that the bullet, slightly mis-aimed, took me exactly in the right eye, messily blowing off the back of my head. I winked at Slickie with my left eye and fell back through the doorway into the bedroom darkness.

I knew I had no time to spare. When a man's shot one girl he begins to lose his natural restraint. Lying on the floor, I reconstituted my eye and did a quick patch-job on the back of my head in seventeen seconds flat.

As I emerged from the bedroom, they were entering into a clinch, each holding a gun lightly against the other's back.

"Slickie," I said, pouring myself a scant half liter of Scotch, "I told you about that tramp."

The ice-blond squawked, threw up her hands as if she'd had a shot of strychnine, and ran out the door. I fancied I could feel the building tilt as she leaned on the elevator button.

I downed the Scotch and advanced, shattering the paralyzed space-time that Slickie seemed to be depending on as a defense.

"Slickie," I said, "let's get down to cases. I am indeed from Galaxy Center and we very definitely don't like your attitude. We don't care what your motives are, or whether they are derived from jumbled genes, a curdled childhood, or a sick society. We simply love you and we want you to reform." I grabbed him by a shivering shoulder that was now hardly higher than my waist, and dragged him into the bedroom, snatching up the rest of the Scotch on the way. I switched on the light. The bedroom was a really lush love-nest. I drained the Scotch—there was about a half liter left—and faced the cowering Slickie. "Now do to me," I told him uncompromisingly, "the thing you're always going to do to those girls, except you have to shoot them."

He frothed like an epileptic, snatched out his cannon and emptied its magazine into various parts of my torso, but since he hit only two of my five brains, I wasn't bothered. I reeled back bloodily through the blue smoke and fell into the bathroom. I felt real crazy—maybe I shouldn't have taken that last half liter. I reconstituted my torso faster even than I had my head, but my silver lamé frock was a mess. Not wanting to waste time and reluctant to use any more reconstituting energy, I stripped it off and popped into the off-the-shoulders evening dress the blonde had left lying over the edge of the bathtub. The dress wasn't a bad fit. I went back into the bedroom. Slickie was sobbing softly at the foot of the bed and gently beating his head against it.

"Slickie," I said, perhaps a shade too curtly, "about this love business—"

He sprang for the ceiling but didn't quite burst through it. Falling back, by chance on his feet, he headed for the hall. Now it wasn't in my orders from Galaxy Center that he run away and excite this world—in fact, my superiors had strictly forbidden such a happening. I had to stop Slickie. But I was a bit confused—perhaps fuddled by that last half liter. I hesitated—then he was too far away, had too big a start. To stop him, I knew I'd have to use tentacles. Swifter than thought I changed them and shot them out.

"Slickie," I cried reassuringly, dragging him to me.

Then I realized that in my excitement, instead of using my upper dorsal tentacles, I'd used the upper ventral ones I kept transmuted into my beautiful milk glands. I do suppose they looked rather strange to Slickie as they came out of the bosom of my off-the-shoulders evening dress and drew him to me.

Frightening sounds came out of him. I let him go and tried to resume my gorgeous shape, but now I was really confused (that last half liter!) and lost control of my transmutations. When I found myself turning my topmost tentacle into a milk gland I gave up completely and—except for a lung and vocal cords—resumed my normal shape. It was quite a relief. After all, I had done what Galaxy Center had intended I should. From now on, the mere sight of a brassière in a show window would be enough to give Slickie the shakes.

Still, I was bothered about the guy. As I say, he'd touched me.

I caressed him tenderly with my tentacles. Over and over again I explained that I was just a heptapus and that Galaxy Center had selected me for the job simply because my seven tentacles would transmute nicely into the seven extremities of the human female.

Over and over again I told him how I loved him.

It didn't seem to help. Slickie Millane continued to weep hysterically.



No collection of stories about shape-changers would be complete without at least one bona-fide appearance of the Devil himself.

The Demon King has never before been published in this country. It is a pleasure to offer it now.

THE DEMON KING

by J. B. Priestley

AMONG THE COMPANY ASSEMBLED for Mr. Tom Burt's Grand Annual Pantomime at the old Theatre Royal, Bruddersford, there was a good deal of disagreement. They were not quite "the jolly, friendly party" they pretended to be (through the good office of "Thespian") to the readers of The Bruddersford Herald and Weekly Herald Budget. The Principal Boy told her husband and about fifty-five other people that she could work with anybody, but that nevertheless the management had gone and engaged, as Principal Girl, the one woman in the profession who made it almost impossible for anybody to work with anybody. The Principal Girl told her friend, the Second Boy, that the Principal Boy and the Second Girl were spoiling everything and might easily ruin the show. The Fairy Queen went about pointing out that she did not want to make trouble, being notoriously easy-going, but that sooner or later the Second Girl would hear a few things that she would not like. Johnny Wingfield had been heard to declare that some people did not realize even yet that what audiences wanted from a panto was some good fast comedy work by the chief comedian, who had to have all the scope he required. (Dippy and Doppy, the broker's men, hinted that even if there were two stages, Johnny Wingfield would want them both all the time.)

But they were all agreed on one point, namely that there was not a better demon in provincial panto than Mr. Kirk Ireton, who had been engaged by Mr. Tom Burt for this particular show. The pantomime was "Jack and Jill," and those people who are puzzled to know what demons have to do with Jack and Jill, those innocent water-fetchers, should pay a visit to the nearest pantomime, which will teach them

a lot they did not know about fairy tales. Kirk Ireton was not merely a demon, but the Demon King, and when the curtain first went up, you saw him on a darkened stage standing in front of a little chorus of attendant demons, made up of local baritones at ten shillings a night. Ireton looked the part, for he was tall and rather satanically featured and was known to be very clever with his make-up; and what was more important, he sounded the part too, for he had a tremendous bass voice, of most demonish quality. He had played Mephistopheles in Faust many times with a good touring opera company. He was, indeed, a man with a fine future behind him. If it had not been for one weakness, pantomime would never have seen him. The trouble was that for years now he had been in the habit of "lifting the elbow" too much. That was how they all put it. Nobody said that he drank too much, but all agreed that he lifted the elbow. And the problem now was—would there be trouble because of this elbow-lifting?

He had rehearsed with enthusiasm, sending his great voice to the back of the empty, forlorn gallery in the two numbers allotted to him, but at the later rehearsals there had been ominous signs of elbow-lifting.

"Going to be all right, Mr. Ireton?" the stage-manager inquired, anxiously.

Ireton raised his formidable and satanic eyebrows. "Of course it is," he replied, somewhat hoarsely. "What's worrying you, old man?"

The other explained hastily that he wasn't worried.

"You'll go well here," he went on. "They'll eat those two numbers of yours. Very musical in these parts. But you know Bruddersford, of course. You've played here before."

"I have," replied Ireton, grimly. "And I loathe the dam' place. Bore me stiff. Nothing to do in it."

This was not reassuring. The stage-manager knew only too well Mr. Ireton was already finding something to do in the town, and his enthusiastic description of the local golf courses had no effect. Ireton loathed golf too, it seemed. All very ominous.

They were opening on Boxing Day night. By the afternoon, it was known that Kirk Ireton had been observed lifting the elbow very determinedly in the smoke-room of The Cooper's Arms, near the theatre. One of the stage hands had seen him: "And by gow, he wor lapping it up

an' all," said this gentleman, no bad judge of anybody's power of suction. From there, it appeared, he had vanished, along with several other riotous persons, two of them thought to be Leeds men—and in Bruddersford they know what Leeds men are.

The curtain was due to rise at seven-fifteen sharp. Most members of the company arrived at the theatre very early. Kirk Ireton was not one of them. He was still absent at six-thirty, though he had to wear an elaborate make-up, with glittering tinselled eyelids and all the rest of it, and had to be on the stage when the curtain rose. A messenger was dispatched to his lodgings, which were not far from the theatre. Even before the messenger returned, to say that Mr. Ireton had not been in since noon, the stage-manager was desperately coaching one of the local baritones, the best of a stiff and stupid lot, in the part of the Demon King. At six forty-five, no Ireton; at seven, no Ireton. It was hopeless.

"All right, that fellow's done for himself now," said the great Mr. Burt, who had come to give his Grand Annual his blessing. "He doesn't get another engagement from me as long as he lives. What's this local chap like?"

The stage-manager groaned and wiped his brow. "Like nothing on earth except a bow-legged baritone from a Wesleyan choir."

"He'll have to manage somehow. You'll have to cut the part."

"Cut it, Mr. Burt! I've slaughtered it, and what's left of it, he'll slaughter."

Mr. Tom Burt, like the sensible manager he was, believed in a pantomime opening in the old-fashioned way, with a mysterious dark scene among the supernaturals. Here it was a cavern in the hill beneath the Magic Well, and in these dismal recesses the Demon King and his attendants were to be discovered waving their crimson cloaks and plotting evil in good, round chest notes. Then the Demon King would sing his number (which had nothing whatever to do with Jack and Jill or demonology either), the Fairy Queen would appear, accompanied by a white spotlight, there would be a little dialogue between them, and then a short duet.

The cavern scene was all set, the five attendant demons were in their places, while the sixth, now acting as King, was receiving a few last instructions from the stage-manager,

and the orchestra, beyond the curtain, were coming to the end of the overture, when suddenly, from nowhere, there appeared on the dimly-lighted stage a tall and terrifically imposing figure.

"My God! There's Ireton," cried the stage-manager and hustled across, leaving the temporary Demon King abandoned, a pitiful makeshift now. The new arrival was coolly taking his place in the centre. He looked superb. The costume, a skin-tight crimson affair touched with a baleful green, was far better than the one provided by the management. And the make-up was better still. The face had a greenish phosphorescent glow, and its eyes flashed between glittering lids. When he first caught sight of that face, the stage-manager felt a sudden idiotic tremor of fear, but being a stage-manager first and a human being afterwards (as all stage-managers have to be), he did not feel that tremor long, for it was soon chased away by a sense of elation. It flashed across his mind that Ireton must have gone rushing off to Leeds or somewhere in search of this stupendous costume and make-up. Good old Ireton! He had given them all a fright, but it had been worth it.

"All right, Ireton?" said the stage-manager quickly.

"All right," replied the Demon King, with a magnificent, careless gesture.

"Well, you get back in the chorus then," said the stage-manager to the Wesleyan baritone.

"That'll do me champion," said that gentleman, with a sigh of relief. He was not ambitious.

"All ready?"

The violins began playing a shivery sort of music and up the curtain went. The six attendant demons, led by the sense of relief, told the audience who they were and hailed their monarch in appropriate form. The Demon King, towering above them, dominating the scene superbly, replied in a voice of astonishing strength and richness. Then he sang the number allotted to him. It had nothing to do with Jack and Jill and very little to do with demons, being a rather commonplace bass song about sailors and shipwrecks and storms, with thunder and lightning effects supplied by the theatre. Undoubtedly this was the same song that had been rehearsed; the words were the same; the music was the same. Yet it all seemed different. It was really sinister. As you listened, you saw the great waves breaking over the doomed

ships, and the pitiful little white faces disappearing in the dark flood. Somehow, the storm was much stormier. There was one great clap of thunder and flash of lightning that made all the attendant demons, the conductor of the orchestra, and a number of people in the wings, nearly jump out of their skins.

"And how the devil did you do that?" said the stage-manager, after running round to the other wing.

"That's what I said to 'Orace 'ere," replied the man in charge of the two sheets of tin and the cannon ball.

"Didn't touch a thing that time, did we, mate?" said Horace.

"If you ask me, somebody let off a firework, one o' them big Chinese crackers, for that one," his mate continued. "Somebody monkeying about, that's what it is."

And now a white spotlight had found its way on to the stage, and there, shining in its pure ray, was Miss Dulcie Farrar, the Fairy Queen, who was busy waving a silver wand. She was also busy controlling her emotions, for somehow she felt unaccountably nervous. Opening night is opening night, of course, but Miss Farrar had been playing Fairy Queens for the last ten years (and Principal Girls for the ten years before them), and there was nothing in this part to worry her. She rapidly came to the conclusion that it was Mr. Ireton's sudden reappearance, after she had made up her mind that he was not turning up, that had made her feel so shaky, and this caused her to feel rather resentful. Moreover, as an experienced Fairy Queen who had had trouble with demons before, she was convinced that he was about to take more than his share of the stage. Just because he had hit upon such a good make-up! And it *was* a good make-up, there could be no question about that. That greenish face, those glittering eyes—really, it was awful. Overdoing it, she called it. After all, a panto was a panto.

Miss Farrar, still waving her wand, moved a step or two nearer, and cried:

*"I know your horrid plot, you evil thing,
And I defy you, though you are the Demon King."*

"What, you?" he roared, contemptuously, pointing a long forefinger at her.

Miss Farrar should have replied: "Yes, I, the Queen of Fairyland," but for a minute she could not get out a word. As that horribly long forefinger shot out at her, she had felt a sudden sharp pain and had then found herself unable to move. She stood there, her wand held out at a ridiculous angle, motionless, silent, her mouth wide open. But her mind was active enough. "Is it a stroke?" it was asking, feverishly. "Like Uncle Edgar had that time at Greenwich. Oo, it must be. Oo, whatever shall I do? Oo. Ooooo."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho." The Demon King's sinister baying mirth resounded through the theatre.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha." This was from the Wesleyan and his friends, and was a very poor chorus of laughs, dubious, almost apologetic. It suggested that the Wesleyan and his friends were out of their depth, the depth of respectable Bruddersfordian demons.

Their King now made a quick little gesture with one hand, and Miss Farrar found herself able to move and speak again. Indeed, the next second, she was not sure that she had ever been *unable* to speak and move. That horrible minute had vanished like a tiny bad dream. She defied him again, and this time nothing happened beyond an exchange of bad lines of lame verse. There were not many of these, however, for there was the duet to be fitted in, and the whole scene had to be played in as short a time as possible. The duet, in which the two supernaturals only defied one another all over again, was early Verdi by way of the local musical director.

After singing a few bars each, they had a rest while the musical director exercised his fourteen instrumentalists in a most imposing operatic passage. It was during this halt that Miss Farrar, who was now quite close to her fellow-duettist, whispered: "You're in great voice, to-night, Mr. Ireton. Wish I was. Too nervous. Don't know why, but I am. Wish I could get it out like you."

She received, as a reply, a flash of those glittering eyes (it really was an astonishing make-up) and a curious little signal with the long forefinger. There was no time for more, for now the voice part began again.

Nobody in the theatre was more surprised by what happened then than the Fairy Queen herself. She could not believe that the marvellously rich soprano voice that came pealing and soaring belonged to her. It was tremendous.

Covent Garden would have acclaimed it. Never before, in all her twenty years of hard vocalism, had Miss Dulcie Farrar sung like that, though she had always felt that *some-where* inside her there was a voice of that quality only waiting the proper signal to emerge and then astonish the world. Now, in some fantastic fashion, it had received that signal.

Not that the Fairy Queen overshadowed her supernatural colleague. There was no overshadowing *him*. He trolled in a diapason bass, and with a fine fury of gesture. The pair of them turned that stolen and botched duet into a work of art and significance. You could hear Heaven and Hell at battle in it. The curtain came down on a good rattle of applause. They are very fond of music in Bruddersford, but unfortunately the people who attended the first night of the pantomime are not the people who are most fond of music, otherwise there would have been a furore.

"Great stuff, that," said Mr. Tom Burt, who was on the spot. "Never mind, Jim. Let 'em take a curtain. Go on, you two, take the curtain." And when they had both bowed their acknowledgments, Miss Farrar excited and trembling, the Demon King cool and amused, almost contemptuous, Mr. Burt continued: "That would have stopped the show in some places, absolutely stopped the show. But the trouble is, they won't applaud, won't get going easily."

"That's true, Mr. Burt," Miss Farrar observed. "They take a lot of warming up here. I wish they didn't. Don't you, Mr. Ireton?"

"Easy to warm them," said the tall, crimson figure.

"Well, if anything could, that ought to have done," the lady remarked.

"That's so," said Mr. Burt, condescendingly. "You were great, Ireton. But they won't let themselves go."

"Yes, they will." The Demon King, who appeared to be taking his part very seriously, for he had not yet dropped into his ordinary tones, flicked his long fingers in the air, roughly in the direction of the auditorium, gave a short laugh, turned away, and then somehow completely vanished, though it was not difficult to do that in those crowded wings.

Half an hour later, Mr. Burt, his manager, and the stage-manager, all decided that something must have gone wrong

with Bruddersford. Liquor must have been flowing like water in the town. That was the only explanation.

"Either they're all drunk or I am," cried the stage-manager.

"I've been giving 'em pantomimes here for five-and-twenty years," said Mr. Burt, "and I've never known it happen before."

"Well, nobody can say they're not enjoying it."

"Enjoying it! They're enjoying it too much. They're going daft. Honestly, I don't like it. It's too much of a good thing."

The stage-manager looked at his watch. "It's holding up the show, that's certain. God knows when we're going to get through at this rate. If they're going to behave like this every night, we'll have to cut an hour out of it."

"Listen to 'em now," said Mr. Burt. "And that's one of the oldest gags in the show. Listen to 'em. Nay, dash it, they must be all half seas over."

What had happened? Why—this: that the audience had suddenly decided to let itself go in a fashion never known in Bruddersford before. The Bruddersfordians are notoriously difficult to please, not so much because their taste is so exquisite, but rather because, having paid out money, they insist upon having their money's worth, and usually arrive at a place of entertainment in a gloomy and suspicious frame of mind. Really tough managers like to open a new show in Bruddersford, knowing very well that if it will go there, it will go anywhere. But for the last half hour of this pantomime there had been more laughter and applause than the Theatre Royal had known for the past six months. Every entrance produced a storm of welcome. The smallest and stalest gags set the whole house screaming, roaring, and rocking. Every song was determinedly encored. If the people had been specially brought out of jail for the performance, they could not have been more easily pleased.

"Here," said Johnny Wingfield, as he made an exit as a Dame pursued by a cow, "this is frightening me. What's the matter with 'em? Is this a new way of giving the bird?"

"Don't ask me," said the Principal Boy. "I wasn't surprised they gave me such a nice welcome when I went on, because I've always been a favourite here, as Mr. Burt'll tell you, but the way they're carrying on now, making such a fuss over nothing, it's simply ridiculous. Slowing up the show, too."

After another quarter of an hour of this monstrous enthusiasm, this delirium, Mr. Burt could be heard grumbling to the Principal Girl, with whom he was standing in that close proximity which Principal Girls somehow invite, "I'll tell you what it is, Alice," Mr. Burt was saying. "If this goes on much longer, I'll make a speech from the stage, asking 'em to draw it mild. Never known 'em to behave like this. And it's a funny thing, I was only saying to somebody—now who was it I said that to?—anyhow, I was only saying to somebody that I wished this audience would let themselves go a bit more. Well, now I wish they wouldn't. And that's that."

There was a chuckle, not loud, but rich, and distinctly audible.

"Here," cried Mr. Burt. "Who's that? What's the joke?"

It was obviously nobody in their immediate vicinity.

"It sounded like Kirk Ireton," said the Principal Girl, "judging by the voice." But Ireton was nowhere to be seen. Indeed, one or two people who had been looking for him, both in his dressing-room and behind, had not been able to find him. But he would not be on again for another hour, and nobody had time to discover whether Ireton was drinking again or not. The odd thing was, though, that the audience lost its wild enthusiasm just as suddenly as it had found it, and long before the interval it had turned itself into the familiar stolid Bruddersford crowd, grimly waiting for its money's worth. The pantomime went on its way exactly as rehearsed, until it came to the time when the demons had to put in another appearance.

Jack, having found the magic water and tumbled down the hill, had to wander into the mysterious cavern and there rest a while. At least, he declared that he would rest, but being played by a large and shapely female, and probably having that restless feminine temperament, what he did do was to sing a popular song with immense gusto. At the end of that song, when Jack once more declared that he would rest, the Demon King had to make a sudden appearance through a trap-door. And it was reported from below, where a spring-board was in readiness, that no Demon King had arrived to be shot on to the stage.

"Now where—oh, where—the devil has Ireton got to?" moaned the stage-manager, sending people right and left, up and down, to find him.

The moment arrived, Jack spoke his and her cue, and the stage-manager was making frantic signals to her from the wings.

"Ouh-wer," screamed Jack, and produced the most realistic bit of business in the whole pantomime. For the stage directions read *Shows fright*, and Jack undoubtedly did show fright, as well he (or she) might, for no sooner was the cue spoken than there came a horrible green flash, followed by a crimson glare, and standing before her, having apparently arrived from nowhere, was the Demon King. Jack was now in the power of the Demon King and would remain in those evil clutches until rescued by Jill and the Fairy Queen. And it seemed as if the Principal Boy had suddenly developed a capacity for acting (of which nobody had ever suspected her before), or else that she was thoroughly frightened, for now she behaved like a large rabbit in tights. That unrehearsed appearance of the Demon King seemed to have upset her, and now and then she sent uneasy glances into the wings.

It had been decided, after a great deal of talk and drinks round, to introduce a rather novel dancing scene into this pantomime, in the form of a sort of infernal ballet. The Demon King, in order to show his power and to impress his captive, would command his subjects to dance—that is, after he himself had indulged in a little singing, assisted by his faithful six. They talk of that scene yet in Bruddersford. It was only witnessed in its full glory on this one night, but that was enough, for it passed into civic history, and local landlords were often called in to settle bets about it in the pubs. First, the Demon King sang his second number, assisted by the Wesleyan and his friends. He made a glorious job of it, and after a fumbled opening and a sudden glare from him, the Wesleyan six made a glorious job of it, too. Then the Demon King had to call for his dancing subjects, who were made up of the troupe of girls known as Tom Burt's Happy Yorkshire Lasses, daintily but demonishly tricked out in red and green. While the Happy Yorkshire Lasses pranced in the foreground, the six attendants were supposed to make a few rhythmical movements in the background, enough to suggest that, if they wanted to dance, they could dance, a suggestion that the stage-manager and the producer knew to be entirely false. The six, in fact, could not dance and would not try very hard, being not

only wooden but also stubborn Bruddersford baritones.

But now, the Happy Yorkshire Lasses having tripped a measure, the Demon King sprang to his full height, which seemed to be about seven feet two inches, swept an arm along the Wesleyan six, and commanded them harshly to dance. And they did dance, they danced like men possessed. The King himself beat time for them, flashing an eye at the conductor now and again to quicken that gentleman's baton, and his faithful six, all with the most grotesque and puzzled expressions on their faces, cut the most amazing capers, bounding high into the air, tumbling over one another, flinging their arms and legs about in an ecstasy, and all in time to the music. The sweat shone on their faces; their eyes rolled forlornly; but still they did not stop, but went on in crazier and crazier fashion, like genuine demons at play.

"All dance!" roared the Demon King, cracking his long fingers like a whip, and it seemed as if something had inspired the fourteen cynical men in the orchestral pit, for they played like madmen grown tuneful, and on came the Happy Yorkshire Lasses again, to fling themselves into the wild sport, not as if they were doing something they had rehearsed a hundred times, but as if they, too, were inspired. They joined the orgy of the bounding six, and now, instead of there being only eighteen Happy Lasses in red and green, there seemed to be dozens and dozens of them. The very stage seemed to get bigger and bigger, to give space to all these whirling figures of demoniac revelry. And as they all went spinning, leaping, cavorting crazily the audience, shaken at last out of its stolidity, cheered them on, and all was one wild insanity.

Yet when it was done, when the King cried "Stop!" and all was over, it was as if it had never been, as if everybody had dreamed it, so that nobody was ready to swear that it had really happened. The Wesleyan and the other five all felt a certain faintness, but each was convinced that he had imagined all that wild activity while he was making a few sedate movements in the background. Nobody could be quite certain about anything. The pantomime went on its way; Jack was rescued by Jill and the Fairy Queen (who was now complaining of neuralgia); and the Demon King allowed himself to be foiled, after which he quietly disappeared again. They were looking for him when the whole thing was over

except for that grand entry of all the characters at the very end. It was his business to march in with the Fairy Queen, the pair of them dividing between them all the applause for the supernaturals. Miss Farrar, feeling very miserable with her neuralgia, delayed her entrance for him, but as he was not to be found, she climbed the little ladder at the back alone, to march solemnly down the steps towards the audience. And the extraordinary thing was that when she was actually making her entrance, at the top of those steps, she discovered that she was not alone, that her fellow supernatural was there too, and that he must have slipped away to freshen his make-up. He was more demonish than ever.

As they walked down between the files of Happy Yorkshire Lassies, now armed to the teeth with tinsel spears and shields, Miss Farrar whispered: "Wish I'd arranged for a bouquet. You never get anything here."

"You'd like some flowers?" said the fantastic figure at her elbow.

"Think I would! So would everybody else."

"Quite easy," he remarked, bowing slowly to the footlights. He took her hand and led her to one side, and it is a fact—as Miss Farrar will tell you, within half an hour of your making her acquaintance—that the moment their hands met, her neuralgia completely vanished. And now came the time for the bouquets. Miss Farrar knew what they would be; there would be one for Principal Girl, bought by the management, and one for the Principal Boy, bought by herself.

"Oo, look!" cried the Second Boy. "My gosh!—Bruddersford's gone mad."

The space between the orchestra pit and the front row of stalls had been turned into a hothouse. The conductor was so busy passing up bouquets that he was no longer visible. There were dozens of bouquets, and all of them beautiful. It was monstrous. Somebody must have spent a fortune on flowers. Up they came, while everybody cheered, and every woman with a part had at least two or three. Miss Farrar, pink and wide-eyed above a mass of orchids, turned to her colleague among the supernaturals, only to find that once again he had quietly disappeared. Down came the curtain for the last time, but everybody remained standing there, with arms filled with expensive flowers, chattering excitedly. Then suddenly somebody cried "Oo!" and dropped her flowers,

and others cried "Oo!" and dropped their flowers, until at last everybody who had had a bouquet had dropped it and cried "Oo!"

"Hot," cried the Principal Girl, blowing on her fingers, "hot as anything, weren't they? Burnt me properly. That's a nice trick."

"Oo, look!" said the Second Boy, once more, "look at 'em all. Withering away." And they were, every one of them, all shedding their colour and bloom, curling, writhing, withering away. . . .

"Message come through for you, sir, an hour since," said the doorkeeper to the manager, "only I couldn't get at yer. From the Leeds Infirmary, it is. Says Mr. Ireton was knocked down in Boar Lane by a car this afternoon, but he'll be all right tomorrow. Didn't know who he was at first, so couldn't let anybody know."

The manager stared at him, made a number of strange noises, then fled, signing various imaginary temperance pledges as he went.

"And another thing," said the stage-hand to the stage-manager. "That's where I saw the bloke last. He was there one minute and next minute he wasn't. And look at the place. All scorched."

"That's right," said his mate, "and what's more, just you take a whiff—that's all, just take a whiff. Oo's started using brimstone in this the-ater? Not me nor you neither. But I've a good idea who it is."



Phantasms, apparitions, and hallucinations, have always been a stock-in-trade of the sorcerer. Science-fantasy, in exploring the possibilities of the extra-sensory perceptions and faculties, has dabbled with the notion of creating material objects by "telekinesis"—a simple matter (once you get the knack of it) of assembling whatever loose atoms which happen to be floating around into the shape of any desired object . . . with or without a pentagram or witch's brew for help.

PROOF OF THE PUDDING

by Robert Sheckley

HIS ARMS WERE VERY TIRED, but he lifted the chisel and mallet again. He was almost through; only a few more letters and the inscription, cut deeply into the tough granite, would be finished. He rounded out the last period and straightened up, dropping his tools carelessly to the floor of the cave. Proudly he wiped the perspiration from his dirty stubbled face and read what he had written.

My name is man and this is my last work.

I rose from the slime of the planet. Naked and defenseless, I fashioned tools. I built and demolished, created and destroyed. I created a thing greater than myself that destroyed me.

He smiled. What he had written was good. Not literary enough, perhaps, but a fitting tribute to the human race, written by the last man. He glanced at the tools at his feet. Having no further use for them, he dissolved them, and, hungry from his long work, squatted in the rubble of the cave and created a dinner. He stared at the food for a moment, wondering what was lacking; then, sheepishly, created a table and chair, utensils and plates. He was embarrassed. He had forgotten them again.

Although there was no need to rush, he ate hurriedly, noting the odd fact that when he didn't think of anything specific, he always created hamburger, mashed potatoes, peas, bread and ice cream. Habit, he decided. Finished, he made the remnants of the meal disappear, and with them

the plates, utensils and table. The chair he retained. Sitting on it, he stared thoughtfully at the inscription. *It's fine*, he thought, *but no human other than myself will ever read it.*

It was fairly certain that he was the last man alive on the Earth. The war had been thorough. Thorough as only man, a meticulous animal, could make it. There had been no neutrals in this war, no middle-of-the-road policy. You were on one side or the other. Bacteria, gas and radiations had covered the Earth like a vast cloud. In the first days of that war, invincible secret weapon had succeeded secret weapon with almost monotonous regularity. And after the last hand had pushed the last button, the bombs, automatically guided and impelled, had continued to rain down. The unhappy Earth was a huge junkyard, without a living thing, plant or animal, from pole to pole.

He had watched a good part of it. He had waited until he was fairly sure the last bomb had been dropped; then he had come down.

Very clever of you, he thought bitterly, looking out the mouth of the cave at the lava plain his ship rested on, and at the twisted mountains behind it.

You're a traitor—but who cares?

He had been a captain in the Western Hemisphere Defense. Within two days of warfare, he had known what the end would be. Filling a cruiser with canned air, food and water, he had fled. In the confusion and destruction, he knew that he would never be missed; after a few days there was no one left to miss him. He had raced the big ship to the dark side of the Moon, and waited. It was a twelve-day war—he had guessed it would last fourteen—but he had to wait nearly six months before the automatic missiles stopped falling. Then he had come down.

To find himself the only survivor . . .

He had expected others to recognize the futility of it, load ships and flock to the dark side of the Moon also. Evidently there had been no time, even if there had been the desire. He had thought that there would be scattered groups of survivors, but he hadn't found any. The war had been too thorough.

Landing on the Earth should have killed him, for the air itself was poisoned. He hadn't cared—and he had lived. He seemed to be immune to the various kinds of germs and radiations, or perhaps that was part of his new power. He

certainly had encountered enough of both, skipping around the world in his ship, from the ruins of one city to another, across blasted valleys and plains, scorched mountains. He had found no life, but he did discover something.

He could create. He realized the power on his third day on Earth. Wistfully, he had wished for a tree in the midst of the melted rock and metal; a tree had appeared. The rest of the day he experimented, and found that he could create anything that he had ever seen or heard about.

Things he knew best, he could create best. Things he knew just from books or conversation—palaces, for example—tended to be lopsided and uncertain, although he could make them nearly perfect by laboring mentally over the details. Everything he created was three-dimensional. Even food tasted like food and seemed to nourish him. He could forget all about one of his creations, go to sleep, and it would still be there when he awakened. He could also uncreate. A single concentrated thought and the thing he had made would vanish. The larger the thing, the longer it took to uncreate.

Things he *hadn't* made—valleys and mountains—he could uncreate, too, but it took longer. It seemed as though matter was easier to handle once he had shaped it. He could make birds and small animals, or things that looked like birds and small animals.

He had never tried to make a human being.

He wasn't a scientist; he had been a space-pilot. He had a vague concept of atomic theory and practically no idea of genetics. He thought that some change must have taken place in his germ-plasm, or in his brain, or perhaps in the Earth. The "why" of it all didn't especially bother him. It was a fact and he accepted it.

He stared at the monument again. Something about it bothered him.

Of course, he could have created it, but he didn't know if the things he made would endure after his death. They seemed stable enough, but they might dissolve with his own dissolution. Therefore he compromised. He created a chisel and mallet, but selected a granite wall that he hadn't made. He cut the letters into the inside of the wall of the cave so they would be safe from the elements, working many hours at a stretch, sleeping and eating beside the wall.

From the mouth of the cave, he could see his ship, perched

on a level plain of scorched ground. He was in no rush to get back to it. In six days the inscription was done, cut deeply and eternally into the rock.

The thought that had been bothering him as he stared at the gray granite finally came to the surface. The only people who would come to read it would be visitors from the stars. How would they decipher it? He stared at the inscription angrily. He should have written it in symbols. But what kind of symbols? Mathematics? Of course, but what would that tell them about Man? And what made him think *they* would discover the cave anyway? There was no use for an inscription when Man's entire history was written over the face of the planet, scorched into the crust for anyone to see. He cursed his stupidity for wasting six days working at the useless inscription. He was about to uncreate it when he turned his head, hearing footsteps at the mouth of the cave.

He almost fell off the chair getting to his feet.

A girl was standing there. He blinked rapidly, and she was still there, a tall, dark-haired girl dressed in a torn, dirty one-piece coverall.

"Hi," she said, and walked into the cave. "I heard your hammer from the valley."

Automatically, he offered her his chair and created another for himself. She tested it gingerly before she sat down.

"I saw you do it," she said, "but I still don't believe it. Mirrors?"

"No," he muttered uncertainly. "I create. That is, I have the power to—wait a minute! How did you get here?" While he was demanding to know, he was considering and rejecting possibilities. Hidden in a cave? On a mountain top? No, there would be only one possible way . . .

"I was in your ship, pal." She leaned back in the chair and clasped her hands around one knee. "When you loaded up that cruiser, I figured you were going to beat it. I was getting tired of setting fuses eighteen hours a day, so I stowed away. Anybody else alive?"

"No. Why didn't I see you, then?" He stared at the ragged, beautiful girl, and a vague thought crossed his mind. He reached out and touched her arm. She didn't draw back, but her pretty face grew annoyed.

"I'm real," she said bluntly. "You must have seen me at the base. Remember?"

He tried to think back to the time when there had been a base—centuries ago, it seemed. There *had* been a dark-haired girl there, one who had never given him a tumble.

"I think I froze to death," she was saying. "Or into coma, anyhow, a few hours after your ship took off. Lousy heating system you have in that crate!" She shivered reminiscently.

"Would have used up too much oxygen," he explained. "Just kept the pilot's compartment heated and aired. Used a suit to drag supplies forward when I needed them."

"I'm glad you didn't see me," she laughed. "I must have looked like the devil, all covered with frost and killed, I bet. Some sleeping beauty I probably made! Well, I froze. When you opened all the compartments, I revived. That's the whole story. Guess it took a few days. How come you didn't see me?"

"I suppose I never looked back there," he admitted. "Quick enough, I found I didn't need supplies. Funny, I thought I opened all the compartments, but I don't really remember—"

She looked at the inscription on the wall. "What's that?"

"I thought I'd leave a sort of monument—"

"Who's going to read it?" she asked practically.

"No one, probably. It was just a foolish idea." He concentrated on it. In a few moments the granite wall was bare. "I still don't understand how you could be alive now," he said puzzled.

"But I am. I don't see how you do that—" she gestured at the chair and wall—"But I'll accept the fact that you can. Why don't you accept the fact that I'm alive?"

"Don't get me wrong," the man said. "I want company very much, especially female company. It's just—Turn your back."

She complied, with a questioning look. Quickly he destroyed the stubble on his face and created a clean pair of pressed pants and a shirt. Stepping out of his tattered uniform, he put on the new clothes, destroyed the rags, and, on an afterthought, created a comb and straightened his tangled brown hair.

"All right," he said. "You can turn back now."

"Not bad," she smiled, looking him over. "Let me use that comb—and would you please make me a dress? Size twelve, but see that the weight goes in the right places."

On the third attempt he had the thing right—he had never

realized how deceptive the shapes of women could be— and then he made a pair of gold sandals with high heels for her.

"A little tight," she said, putting them on, "and not too practical without sidewalks. But thanks much. This trick of yours really solves the Christmas present problem, doesn't it?" Her dark hair was shiny in the noon Sun, and she looked very lovely and warm and human.

"See if *you* can create," he urged, anxious to share his startling new ability with her.

"I've already tried," she said. "No go. Still a man's world."

He frowned. "How can I be absolutely sure you're real?"

"That again? Do you remember creating me, Master?" she asked mockingly, bending to loosen the strap on one shoe.

"I had been thinking—about women," he said grimly. "I might have created you while I was asleep. Why shouldn't my subconscious mind have as much power as my conscious mind? I would have equipped you with a memory, given you a background. You would have been extremely plausible. And if my subconscious mind *did* create you, then it would make certain that my conscious mind would never know."

"You're ridiculous!"

"Because if my conscious mind knew," he went on relentlessly, "it would reject your existence. Your entire function, as a creation of my subconscious, would be to keep me from knowing. To prove, by any means in your power, by any logic, that you were—"

"Let's see you make a woman, then, if your mind is so good!" She crossed her arms and leaned back in the chair, giving a single sharp nod.

"All right." He stared at the cave wall and a woman started to appear. It took shape sloppily, one arm too short, legs too long. Concentrating harder, he was able to make its proportions fairly true. But its eyes were set at an odd angle; its shoulders and back were sloped and twisted. He had created a shell without brains or internal organs, an automaton. He commanded it to speak, but only gulps came from the shapeless mouth; he hadn't given it any vocal apparatus. Shuddering, he destroyed the nightmare figure.

"I'm not a sculptor," he said. "Nor am I God."

"I'm glad you finally realize that."

"That still doesn't prove," he continued stubbornly, "that

you're real. I don't know what my subconscious mind is capable of."

"Make something for me," she said abruptly. "I'm tired of listening to this nonsense."

I've hurt her feelings, he thought. *The only other human on Earth and I've hurt her.* He nodded, took her by the hand and led her out of the cave. On the flat plain below he created a city. He had experimented with it a few days back, and it was much easier this time. Patterned after pictures and childhood dreams of the Thousand and One Nights, it towered black and white and rose. The walls were gleaming ruby, and the gates were of silver-stained ebony. The towers were red gold, and sapphires glittered in them. A great staircase of milky ivory climbed to the highest opal spire, set with thousands of steps of veined marble. There were lagoons of blue water, and little birds fluttered above them, and silver and gold fish darted through the still depths.

They walked through the city, and he created roses for her, white and yellow and red, and gardens of strange blossoms. Between two domed and spired buildings he created a vast pool of water; on it he put a purple-canopied pleasure barge, loading it with every kind of food and drink he could remember.

They floated across the lagoon, fanned by the soft breeze he had created.

"And all this is false," he reminded her after a little while.

She smiled. "No it's not. You can touch it. It's real."

"Will it be here after I die?"

"Who cares? Besides, if you can do all this, you can cure any sickness. Perhaps you can even cure old age and death." She plucked a blossom from an overhanging bough and sniffed its fragrance. "You could keep this from fading and dying. You could probably do the same for us, so where's the problem?"

"Would you like to go away?" he said, puffing on a newly created cigarette. "Would you like to find a new planet, untouched by war? Would you like to start over?"

"Start over? You mean . . . Later perhaps. Now I don't even want to go near the ship. It reminds me of the war."

They floated on a little way.

"Are you sure now that I'm real?" she asked.

"If you want me to be honest, no," he replied. "But I want very much to believe it."

"Then listen to me," she said, leaning toward him. "I'm real." She slipped her arms around his neck. "I've always been real. I always will be real. You want proof? Well, I know I'm real. So do you. What more can you ask?"

He stared at her for a long moment, felt her warm arms around his neck, listened to her breathing. He could smell the fragrance of her skin and hair, the unique essence of an individual.

Slowly he said, "I believe you. I love you. What—what is your name?"

She thought for a moment. "Joan."

"Strange," he said. "I always dreamed of a girl named Joan. What's your last name?"

She kissed him.

Overhead, the swallows he had created—*his* swallows—wheeled in wide circles above the lagoon, his fish darted aimlessly to and fro, and his city stretched, proud and beautiful, to the edge of the twisted lava mountains.

"You didn't tell me your last name," he said.

"Oh, that. A girl's maiden name never matters—she always takes her husband's."

"That's an evasion!"

She smiled. "It is, isn't it?"



Homecoming is the story which marked Ray Bradbury's emergence from the "Weird Tales" school of writing into the national literary scene. The story won a prize in the O. Henry Memorial Award collection for 1947 and the author went on to establish his popularity on the general fiction scene. He has been acclaimed as a master both of horror and of a very special kind of satire. To satirize blatantly is easy; to do so with compassion is, perhaps, a mark of greatness.

HOMEcoming

by Ray Bradbury

"HERE THEY COME," said Cecy, lying there flat in her bed. "Where are they?" cried Timothy from the doorway. "Some of them are over Europe, some over Asia, some of them over the Island, some over South America!" said Cecy, her eyes closed, the lashes long, brown, and quivering.

Timothy came forward upon the bare plankings of the upstairs room. "Who are they?"

"Uncle Einar and Uncle Fry, and there's Cousin William, and I see Frulda and Helgar and Aunt Morgiana and Cousin Vivian, and I see Uncle Johann! They're all coming fast!"

"Are they up in the sky?" cried Timothy, his little gray eyes flashing. Standing by the bed, he looked no more than his fourteen years. The wind blew outside, the house was dark and lit only by starlight.

"They're coming through the air and traveling along the ground, in many forms," said Cecy, in her sleeping. She did not move on the bed; she thought inward on herself and told what she saw. "I see a wolflike thing coming over a dark river—at the shallows—just above a waterfall, the starlight shining up his pelt. I see a brown oak leaf blowing far up in the sky. I see a small bat flying. I see many other things, running through the forest trees and slipping through the highest branches; and they're *all* coming this way!"

"Will they be here by tomorrow night?" Timothy clutched the bedclothes. The spider on his lapel swung like a black pendulum, excitedly dancing. He leaned over his sister. "Will they all be here in time for the Homecoming?"

"Yes, yes, Timothy, yes," sighed Cecy. She stiffened. "Ask no more of me. Go away now. Let me travel in the places I like best."

"Thanks, Cecy," he said. Out in the hall, he ran to his room. He hurriedly made his bed. He had just awakened a few minutes ago, at sunset, and as the first stars had risen, he had gone to let his excitement about the party run with Cecy. Now she slept so quietly there was not a sound. The spider hung on a silvery lasso about Timothy's slender neck as he washed his face. "Just think, Spid, tomorrow night is Allhallows' Eve!"

He lifted his face and looked into the mirror. His was the only mirror allowed in the house. It was his mother's concession to his illness. Oh, if only he were not so afflicted! He opened his mouth, surveyed the poor, inadequate teeth nature had given him. No more than so many corn kernels—round, soft and pale in his jaws. Some of the high spirit died in him.

It was now totally dark and he lit a candle to see by. He felt exhausted. This past week the whole family had lived in the fashion of the old country. Sleeping by day, rousing at sunset to move about. There were blue hollows under his eyes. "Spid, I'm no good," he said, quietly, to the little creature. "I can't even get used to sleeping days like the others."

He took up the candleholder. Oh, to have strong teeth, with incisors like steel spikes. Or strong hands, even, or a strong mind. Even to have the power to send one's mind out, free, as Cecy did. But, no, he was the imperfect one, the sick one. He was even—he shivered and drew the candle flame closer—afraid of the dark. His brothers snorted at him. Bion and Leonard and Sam. They laughed at him because he slept in a bed. With Cecy it was different; her bed was part of her comfort for the composure necessary to send her mind abroad to hunt. But Timothy, did he sleep in the wonderful polished boxes like the others? He did not! Mother let him have his own bed, his own room, his own mirror. No wonder the family skirted him like a holy man's crucifix. If only the wings would sprout from his shoulder blades. He bared his back, stared at it. He sighed again. No chance. Never.

Downstairs were exciting and mysterious sounds. The slithering sound of black crepe going up in all the halls and on the ceilings and doors. The smell of burning black tapers crept up the banistered stair well. Mother's voice, high and firm. Father's voice, echoing from the damp cellar. Bion walking from outside the old country house lugging vast two-gallon jugs.

"I've just got to go to the party, Spid," said Timothy. The spider whirled at the end of its silk, and Timothy felt alone. He would polish cases, fetch toadstools and spiders, hang crepe, but when the party started he'd be ignored. The less seen or said of the imperfect son the better.

All through the house below, Laura ran.

"The Homecoming!" she shouted gaily. "The Homecoming!" Her footsteps everywhere at once.

Timothy passed Cecy's room again, and she was sleeping quietly. Once a month she went belowstairs. Always she stayed in bed. Lovely Cecy. He felt like asking her, "Where are you now, Cecy? And *in* who? And what's happening? Are you beyond the hills? And what goes on there?" But he went on to Ellen's room instead.

Ellen sat at her desk, sorting out many kinds of blond, red and black hair and little scimitars of fingernail gathered from her manicurist job at the Mellin Village beauty parlor fifteen miles over. A sturdy mahogany case lay in one corner with her name on it.

"Go away," she said, not even looking at him. "I can't work with you gawking."

"Allhallows' Eve, Ellen; just think!" he said, trying to be friendly.

"Hunh!" She put some fingernail clippings in a small white sack, labeled them. "What can it mean to you? What do you know of it? It'll scare the hell out of you. Go back to bed."

His cheeks burned. "I'm needed to polish and work and help serve."

"If you don't go, you'll find a dozen raw oysters in your bed tomorrow," said Ellen, matter-of-factly. "Good-by, Timothy."

In his anger, rushing downstairs, he bumped into Laura.

"Watch where you're going!" she shrieked from clenched teeth.

She swept away. He ran to the open cellar door, smelled the channel of moist earthy air rising from below. "Father?"

"It's about time," Father shouted up the steps. "Hurry down, or they'll be here before we're ready!"

Timothy hesitated only long enough to hear the million other sounds in the house. Brothers came and went like trains in a station, talking and arguing. If you stood in one spot long enough the entire household passed with their pale hands full of things. Leonard with his little black medical case, Samuel with his large, dusty ebon-bound book under his arm, bearing more black crepe, and Bion excursioning to the car outside and bringing in many more gallons of liquid.

Father stopped polishing to give Timothy a rag and a

scowl. He thumped the huge mahogany box. "Come on, shine this up, so we can start on another. Sleep your life away."

While waxing the surface, Timothy looked inside.

"Uncle Einar's a big man, isn't he, Papa?"

"Unh."

"How big is he?"

"The size of the box'll tell you."

"I was only asking. Seven feet tall?"

"You talk a lot."

About nine o'clock Timothy went out into the October weather. For two hours in the now-warm, now-cold wind he walked the meadows collecting toadstools and spiders. His heart began to beat with anticipation again. How many relatives had Mother said would come? Seventy? One hundred? He passed a farmhouse. If only you knew what was happening at our house, he said to the glowing windows. He climbed a hill and looked at the town, miles away, settling into sleep, the town hall clock high and round white in the distance. The town did not know, either. He brought home many jars of toadstools and spiders.

In the little chapel belowstairs a brief ceremony was celebrated. It was like all the other rituals over the years, with Father chanting the dark lines, Mother's beautiful white ivory hands moving in the reverse blessings, and all the children gathered except Cecy, who lay upstairs in bed. But Cecy was present. You saw her peering, now from Bion's eyes, now Samuel's, now Mother's, and you felt a movement and now she was in you, fleetingly, and gone.

Timothy prayed to the Dark One with a tightened stomach. "Please, please, help me grow up, help me be like my sisters and brothers. Don't let me be different. If only I could put the hair in the plastic images as Ellen does, or make people fall in love with me as Laura does with people, or read strange books as Sam does, or work in a respected job like Leonard and Bion do. Or even raise a family one day, as Mother and Father have done. . . ."

At midnight a storm hammered the house. Lightning struck outside in amazing, snow-white bolts. There was a sound of an approaching, probing, sucking tornado, funneling and nuzzling the moist night earth. Then the front door, blasted half off its hinges, hung stiff and discarded, and in

trooped Grandmama and Grandpapa, all the way from the old country!

From then on people arrived each hour. There was a flutter at the side window, a rap on the front porch, a knock at the back. There were fey noises from the cellar; autumn wind piped down the chimney throat, chanting. Mother filled the large crystal punch bowl with a scarlet fluid poured from the jugs Bion had carried home. Father swept from room to room lighting more tapers. Laura and Ellen hammered up more wolfsbane. And Timothy stood amidst this wild excitement, no expression to his face, his hands trembling at his sides, gazing now here, now there. Banging of doors, laughter, the sound of liquid pouring, darkness, sound of wind, the webbed thunder of wings, the padding of feet, the welcoming bursts of talk at the entrances, the transparent rattlings of casements, the shadows passing, coming, going, wavering.

"Well, well, and *this* must be Timothy!"

"What?"

A chilly hand took his hand. A long hairy face leaned down over him. "A good lad, a fine lad," said the stranger.

"Timothy," said his mother. "This is Uncle Jason."

"Hello, Uncle Jason."

"And over here—" Mother drifted Uncle Jason away. Uncle Jason peered back at Timothy over his caped shoulder, and winked.

Timothy stood alone.

From off a thousand miles in the candled darkness, he heard a high fluting voice; that was Ellen. "And my brothers, they *are* clever. Can you guess their occupations, Aunt Morgiana?"

"I have no idea."

"They operate the undertaking establishment in town."

"What!" A gasp.

"Yes!" Shrill laughter. "Isn't that priceless!"

Timothy stood very still.

A pause in the laughter. "They bring home sustenance for Mama, Papa and all of us," said Laura. "Except, of course, Timothy. . . ."

An uneasy silence. Uncle Jason's voice demanded. "Well? Come now. What about Timothy?"

"Oh, Laura, your tongue," said Mother.

Laura went on with it. Timothy shut his eyes. "Timothy doesn't—well—doesn't *like* blood. He's delicate."

"He'll learn," said Mother. "He'll learn," she said very firmly. "He's my son, and he'll learn. He's only fourteen."

"But I was raised on the stuff," said Uncle Jason, his voice passing from one room on into another. The wind played the trees outside like harps. A little rain spatted on the windows—"raised on the stuff," passing away into faintness.

Timothy bit his lips and opened his eyes.

"Well, it was all my fault." Mother was showing them into the kitchen now. "I tried forcing him. You can't force children, you only make them sick, and then they never get a taste for things. Look at Bion, now, he was thirteen before he . . ."

"I understand," murmured Uncle Jason. "Timothy will come around."

"I'm sure he will," said Mother, defiantly.

Candle flames quivered as shadows crossed and recrossed the dozen musty rooms. Timothy was cold. He smelled the hot tallow in his nostrils and instinctively he grabbed at a candle and walked with it around and about the house, pretending to straighten the crepe.

"*Timothy*," someone whispered behind a patterned wall, hissing and sizzling and sighing the words, "*Timothy is afraid of thee dark*."

Leonard's voice. Hateful Leonard!

"I like the candle, that's all," said Timothy in a reproachful whisper.

More noise, more laughter, and thunder. Cascades of roaring laughter. Bangings and clickings and shouts and rustles of clothing. Clammy fog swept through the front door. Out of the fog, settling his wings, stalked a tall man.

"Uncle Einar!"

Timothy propelled himself on his thin legs straight through the fog, under the green webbing shadows. He threw himself across Einar's arms. Einar lifted him.

"You've wings, Timothy!" He tossed the boy light as thistles. "Wings, Timothy; fly!" Faces wheeled under. Darkness rotated. The house blew away. Timothy felt breezelike. He flapped his arms. Einar's fingers caught and threw him once more to the ceiling. The ceiling rushed down like a

charred wall. "Fly, Timothy!" shouted Einar, loud and deep. "Fly with wings! Wings!"

He felt an exquisite ecstasy in his shoulder blades, as if roots grew, burst to explode and blossom into new, moist membrane. He babbled wild stuff; again Einar hurled him high.

The autumn wind broke in a tide on the house, rain crashed down, shaking the beams, causing chandeliers to tilt their enraged candle lights. And the one hundred relatives peered out from every black, enchanted room, circling inward, all shapes and sizes, to where Einar balanced the child like a baton in the roaring spaces.

"Enough!" shouted Einar, at last.

Timothy, deposited on the floor timbers, exaltedly, exhaustedly fell against Uncle Einar, sobbing happily. "Uncle, uncle, uncle!"

"Was it good, flying? Eh, Timothy?" said Uncle Einar, bending down, patting Timothy's head. "Good, good."

It was coming toward dawn. Most had arrived and were ready to bed down for the daylight, sleep motionlessly with no sound until the following sunset, when they would shout out of their mahogany boxes for the revelry.

Uncle Einar, followed by dozens of others, moved toward the cellar. Mother directed them downward to the crowded row on row of highly polished boxes. Einar, his wings like sea-green tarpaulins tented behind him, moved with a curious whistling and through the passageway; where his wings touched they made a sound of drumheads gently beaten.

Upstairs, Timothy lay wearily thinking, trying to like the darkness. There was so much you could do in darkness that people couldn't criticize you for, because they never saw you. He *did* like the night, but it was a qualified liking; sometimes there was so much night he cried out in rebellion.

In the cellar, mahogany doors sealed downward, drawn in by pale hands. In corners, certain relatives circled three times to lie down, heads on paws, eyelids shut. The sun rose. There was a sleeping.

Sunset. The revel exploded like a bat nest struck full, shrieking out, fluttering, spreading. Box doors banked wide. Steps rushed up from cellar damp. More late guests, kicking on front and back portals, were admitted.

It rained, and sodden visitors laid their capes, their water-pelleted hats, their sprinkled veils upon Timothy who bore

them to a closet. The rooms were crowd-packed. The laughter of one cousin shot from one room, angled off the wall of another, ricocheted, banked and returned to Timothy's ears from a fourth room, accurate and cynical.

A mouse ran across the floor.

"I know you, Niece Leibersrouter!" exclaimed Father.

The mouse spiraled three women's feet and vanished into a corner. Moments later a beautiful woman rose up out of nothing and stood in the corner, smiling her white smile at them all.

Something huddled against the flooded pane of the kitchen window. It sighed and wept and tapped continually, pressed against the glass, but Timothy could make nothing of it, he saw nothing. In imagination he was outside staring in. The rain was on him, the wind at him, and the taper-dotted darkness inside was inviting. Waltzes were being danced; tall thin figures pirouetted to outlandish music. Stars of light flickered off lifted bottles; small clods of earth crumbled from casques, and a spider fell and went silently legging over the floor.

Timothy shivered. He was inside the house again. Mother was calling him to run here, run there, help, serve, out to the kitchen now, fetch this, fetch that, bring the plates, heap the food—on and on—the party happened around him but not to him. The dozens of towering people pressed in against him, elbowed him, ignored him.

Finally, he turned and slipped away up the stairs.

He called softly. "Cecy. Where are you now, Cecy?"

She waited a long while before answering. "In the Imperial Valley," she murmured faintly. "Beside the Salton Sea, near the mud pots and the steam and the quiet. I'm inside a farmer's wife. I'm sitting on a front porch. I can make her move if I want, or do anything or think anything. The sun's going down."

"What's it like, Cecy?"

"You can hear mud pots hissing," she said, slowly, as if speaking in a church. "Little gray heads of steam push up the mud like bald men rising in the thick syrup, head first, out in the broiling channels. The gray heads rip like rubber fabric, collapse with noises like wet lips moving. And feathery plumes of steam escape from the ripped tissue. And there is a smell of deep sulphurous burning and old time. The dinosaur has been abroiling here ten million years."

"Is he done yet, Cecy?"

"Yes, he's done. Quite done." Cecy's calm sleeper's lips turned up. The languid words fell slowly from her shaping mouth. "Inside this woman's skull I am, looking out, watching the sea that does not move, and is so quiet it makes you afraid. I sit on the porch and wait for my husband to come home. Occasionally, a fish leaps, falls back, starlight edging it. The valley, the sea, the few cars, the wooden porch, my rocking chair, myself, the silence."

"What now, Cecy?"

"I'm getting up from my rocking chair," she said.

"Yes?"

"I'm walking off the porch, toward the mud pots. Planes fly over, like primordial birds. Then it is quiet, so quiet."

"How long will you stay inside her, Cecy?"

"Until I've listened and looked and felt enough: until I've changed her life some way. I'm walking off the porch and along the wooden boards. My feet knock on the planks, tiredly, slowly."

"And now?"

"Now the sulphur fumes are all around me. I stare at the bubbles as they break and smooth. A bird darts by my temple, shrieking. Suddenly I am in the bird and fly away! And as I fly, inside my new small glass-bead eyes I see a woman below me, on a boardwalk, take one two three steps forward into the mud pots. I hear a sound as of a boulder plunged into molten depths. I keep flying, circle back. I see a white hand, like a spider, wriggle and disappear into the gray lava pool. The lava seals over. Now I'm flying home, swift, swift, swift!"

Something clapped hard against the window. Timothy started.

Cecy flicked her eyes wide, bright, full, happy, exhilarated.

"Now I'm *home!*" she said.

After a pause, Timothy ventured, "The Homecoming's on. And everybody's here."

"Then why are you upstairs?" She took his hand. "Well, ask me." She smiled slyly. "Ask me what you came to ask."

"I didn't come to ask anything," he said. "Well, almost nothing. Well, oh, Cecy!" It came from him in one long rapid flow. "I want to do something at the party to make them look at me, something to make me good as them, something

to make me belong, but there's nothing I can do and I feel funny and, well, I thought you might . . ."

"I might," She said, closing her eyes, smiling inwardly. "Stand up straight. Stand very still." He obeyed. "Now, shut your eyes and blank out your thoughts."

He stood very straight and thought of nothing, or at least thought of thinking nothing.

She sighed. "Shall we go downstairs now, Timothy?" Like a hand into a glove, Cecy was within him.

"Look everybody!" Timothy held the glass of warm red liquid. He held up the glass so that the whole house turned to watch him. Aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, sisters!

He drank it straight down.

He jerked a hand at his sister Laura. He held her gaze, whispering to her in a subtle voice that kept her silent, frozen. He felt tall as the trees as he walked to her. The party now slowed. It waited on all sides of him, watching. From all the room doors the faces peered. They were not laughing. Mother's face was astonished. Dad looked bewildered, but pleased and getting prouder every instant.

He nipped her, gently, over the neck vein. The candle flames swayed drunkenly. The wind climbed around on the roof outside. The relatives stared from all the doors. He popped toadstools into his mouth, swallowed, then beat his arms against his flanks and circled. "Look, Uncle Einar! I can fly, at last!" Beat went his hands. Up and down pumped his feet. The faces flashed past him.

At the top of the stairs before knowing it, flapping. Timothy heard his mother cry, "Stop, Timothy!" far below. "Hey!" shouted Timothy, and leaped off the top of the well, thrashing.

Halfway down, the wings he thought he owned dissolved. He screamed. Uncle Einar caught him.

Timothy flailed whitely in the receiving arms. A voice burst out of his lips unbidden. "This is Cecy! This is Cecy!" it announced, shrilly. "Cecy! Come see me, all of you, upstairs, first room on the left!" Followed by a long trill of high laughter. Timothy tried to cut it off with his tongue, his lips.

Everybody was laughing. Einar set him down. Running through the crowding blackness as the relatives flowed upstairs toward Cecy's room to congratulate her, Timothy

banged the front door open. Mother called out behind him, anxiously.

"Cecy, I hate you, I hate you!"

By the sycamore tree, in deep shadow, Timothy spewed out his dinner, sobbed bitterly and threshed in a pile of autumn leaves. Then he lay still. From his blouse pocket, from the protection of the matchbox he used for his retreat, the spider crawled forth. Spid walked along Timothy's arm. Spid explored up his neck to his ear and climbed in the ear to tickle it. Timothy shook his head. "Don't, Spid. Don't."

The feathery touch of a tentative feeler probing his eardrum set Timothy shivering. "Don't, Spid!" He sobbed somewhat less.

The spider traveled down his cheek, took a station under the boy's nose, looked up into the nostrils as if to seek the brain, and then clambered softly up over the rim of the nose to sit, to squat there peering at Timothy with green gem eyes until Timothy filled with ridiculous laughter. "Go away, Spid!"

Timothy sat up, rustling the leaves. The land was very bright with the moon. In the house he could hear the faint ribaldry as *Mirror, Mirror* was played. Celebrants shouted, dimly muffled, as they tried to identify those of themselves whose reflections did not, had not ever appeared in a glass.

"Timothy." Uncle Einar's wings spread and twitched and came in with a sound like kettledrums. Timothy felt himself plucked up like a thimble and set upon Einar's shoulder. "Don't feel badly, Nephew Timothy. Each to his own, each in his own way. How much better things are for you. How rich. The world's dead for us. We've seen so much of it, believe me. Life's best to those who live the least of it. It's worth more per ounce, Timothy, remember that."

The rest of the black morning, from midnight on, Uncle Einar led him about the house, from room to room, weaving and singing. A horde of late arrivals set the entire hilarity off afresh. Great-great-great-great and a thousand more great-greats Grandmother was there, wrapped in Egyptian ceremonies. She said not a word, but lay straight as a burnt ironing board against the wall, her eye hollows cupping a distant, wise, silent glimmering. At the breakfast, at four in the morning, one-thousand-odd-greats Grandmama was stiffly seated at the head of the longest table.

The numerous young cousins caroused at the crystal punch

bowl. Their shiny olive-pit eyes, their conical, devilish faces and curly bronze hair hovered over the drinking table, their hard-soft, half-girl half-boy bodies wrestling against each other as they got unpleasantly, sullenly drunk. The wind got higher, the stars burned with fiery intensity, the noises redoubled, the dances quickened, the drinking became more positive. To Timothy there were thousands of things to hear and watch. The many darknesses roiled, bubbled, the many faces passed and repassed. . . .

"Listen!"

The party held its breath. Far away the town clock struck its chimes, saying six o'clock. The party was ending. As if at a cue, in time to the rhythm of the clock striking, their one hundred voices began to sing songs that were four hundred years old, songs Timothy could not know. They twined their arms around one another, circling slowly, and sang, and somewhere in the cold distance of morning the town clock finished out its chimes and quieted.

Good-bys were said, there was a great rustling. Mother and Father and the brothers and sisters lined up at the door to shake hands and kiss each departing relative in turn. The sky beyond the open door colored and shone in the east. A cold wind entered.

The shouting and the laughing bit by bit faded and went away. Dawn grew more apparent. Everybody was embracing and crying and thinking how the world was becoming less a place for them. There had been a time when they had met every year, but now decades passed with no reconciliation. "Don't forget, we meet in Salem in 1970!" someone cried.

Salem. Timothy's numbed mind turned the word over. Salem, 1970. And there would be Uncle Fry and Grandma and Grandfather and a thousand-times-great Grandmother in her withered cerements. And Mother and Father and Ellen and Laura and Cecy and Leonard and Bion and Sam and all the rest. But would he be there? Would he be alive that long? Could he be certain of living until then?

With one last withering wind blast, away they all went, so many scarves, so many fluttery mammals, so many sere leaves, so many wolves loping, so many whinings and clustering noises, so many midnights and ideas and insanities.

Mother shut the door. Laura picked up a broom.

"No," said Mother, "we'll clean up tonight. We need sleep first."

Father walked down into the cellar, followed by Laura and Bion and Sam. Ellen walked upstairs, as did Leonard.

Timothy walked across the crepe-littered hall. His head was down, and in passing a party mirror he saw himself, the pale mortality of his face. He was cold and trembling.

"Timothy," said Mother.

He stopped at the stair well. She came to him, laid a hand on his face. "Son," she said. "We love you. Remember that. We all love you. No matter how different you are, no matter if you leave us one day," she said. She kissed his cheek. "And if and when you die, your bones will lie undisturbed, we'll see to that. You'll lie at ease forever, and I'll come see you every Allhallows' Eve and tuck you in the more secure."

The house was silent. Far away the wind went over a hill with its last cargo of small dark bats echoing, chittering.

He walked up the steps, one by one, crying to himself all the way.



Arthur Porges is a mathematician by profession; in his spare time he is a science-fantasy writer—and one of great precision and enviable polish.

Mop-Up has a cast of characters similar to that used in the Bradbury story, but Porges has removed them from the sinister house to a gloomy graveyard . . . and from the present to the far distant future.

MOP-UP

by Arthur Porges

WHEN HE HAD QUARTERED the stricken land in vain for almost two years without finding another living person, the man came upon a witch, a vampire, and a ghoul holding solemn parley by a gutted church.

As he broke through the tangled, untrimmed hedges into the weed-grown garden, the witch laughed shrilly; and as if

mocking her own white hairs, danced widdershins, cackling in delight, "There's one left, just as I thought, and a very pretty fellow, too!" She was a revolting old beldame, and he stared at her aghast.

The vampire, lean and elegant in a rusty black cloak, arose with his ruby eyes kindling. He crouched a little, and a pointed tongue flickered between full, soft lips. Catlike, he glided forward.

"Stop!" the witch cried. "He's the last, fool! Would you drink him dry? You must learn to use the blood of beasts. Remember, Baron—there's probably not another human in the whole world."

The vampire showed his enormous canines in a sly smile.

"You underestimate me, Mother. All I had in mind was a mere sip. It's been two years, and there's nothing quite like the fresh stuff, so strong and warm."

"No!" she protested. "He's mine. Not a drop. The poor darling's worn enough. There are plenty of animals left to suck on."

"Not for me—yet," was the lofty retort. "I prefer the blood banks. They'll keep me supplied for many years. People collected millions of pints, all nicely preserved, carefully stored, rich and tasty—then never got to use them. What a pity! Still," he added, his voice wistful, "cold blood is hardly the drink for a nobleman of my lineage."

"Blood banks!" she chortled, displaying strong, discolored teeth. "So that's where you've been getting it all this time. I wondered." She nodded cynical approval. "Then there's no problem, because *his* kind"—with a contemptuous gesture towards the ghoul, huddled beastlike behind them—"are set for ages, too. Nothing to do but pick and choose." Her stringy jaw muscles knotted. "So the man is mine!"

The ghoul gave him a single wicked glance, and continued digging at his clogged incisors with fingernails like splinters of glass. The man's stomach heaved; he gulped down a sour taste.

"Don't be afraid, darling boy," the hag crooned. "You're safe with us. And it's worth a deal to be snug these days, I can tell you."

He stood there, haggard and feverish, thinking himself mad. Among the survivors, if any, he had expected the usual proportion of carrion crows, but nothing like this fantastic trio. Still, perhaps, even their company was better than the

wrenching ache of complete isolation in a ravaged world. Two of them, at least, were outwardly human.

"You're not crazy," the witch reassured him, pinching his stubbled cheek. "You'll live long and well to serve me." She eyed him with a kind of leering coyness, utterly grotesque in an ugly old woman. "A fine, strong fellow. What a sweet lover he'll be for poor Mother Digby. I'll teach you the 435 ways—"

"Am I the last?" he muttered. "Really the last? I've searched. I—"

"Yes," the vampire said, with a melancholy smile. "Unfortunately, I fear you are." The ghoul tittered, and his eyes filmed over like oily, stagnant pools.

"Don't frighten him," she flared. "Sit down, my honey. Here, by me." She pulled him to her side, and dazed, he submitted.

"Tell me the truth," he begged again. "Am I actually the only one left?"

"Yes. First came the hydrogen bombs. It was something to see. I've been around a long time, my lad: the big Mississippi Quakes of 1815, Krakatoa, Hiroshima—they were nothing by comparison. The Baron knew it was coming—how did you know, hey? He won't tell." She snapped her fingers and laughed jeeringly; her bony elbow prodded the man. "Ah, it was the blood banks! I might have guessed—right?"

The Baron nodded coolly. "Yes. When they began to pyramid the stock piles, I suspected what would happen soon. That's when I told you to look out for fire. One atomic blast would have burnt your juiceless carcass to cinders." His lips twitched at her outraged expression. "As a nobleman, I was almost tempted to warn the more ancient monarchies of Europe. For the upstart Americans, with their absurd 'democracy' I care nothing. Rule by comic book! But in the Balkans—" He broke off with a sigh.

"Germs, Mother," the ghoul croaked suddenly, giving her a doglike glance of worship.

"Right, my pet. The germs came next. Every country had secret cultures, deadly soups of plagues old and new. How the people died! All but my lovely man here." She patted his thigh. "Why are you still alive, hey?"

He shook his head. "There was a new, untested serum in our lab—a last attempt. Just a tiny drop. I had nothing to

lose." He brooded a moment in silence, then asked, "How about Europe—Asia?"

"Wiped out. Nobody left. Not one saucy little Mamselle, or golden Eurasian, or cool English girl for you. Take old Mother Digby, and be satisfied. Don't let my wrinkled face fool you! Wine long in the cask is best!"

He shuddered away from her. "How can you be sure? About Europe?"

"There are ways. Before we lost contact with our fellows, I received regular reports; and since then I've made many flights of my own. Paris, London, Belgrade, Copenhagen—it's all the same. Some by bombs; more by disease."

"Where are Ours—the Others?" the ghoul demanded in a thick voice.

"Who knows?" she snapped, her lips tightening. "At the last Sabbath, few came. Maybe the old customs are dying as the silly humans died. Anyway, I've seen none for weeks now. Neither has the Baron." She turned back to the pale, bemused man. "Did you find any of your kind?"

"No," he admitted dully. "Only animals, and always huddled in groups. As if *they* were appalled, too. But—you're certain about the other countries?"

She flourished a veiny hand. "Clean sweep. From Tibet to Los Angeles. We cover oceans in hours, the Baron and I. *He*," sneering at the ghoul, "can only snuff about the ground." The ghoul winced. "You're the last human, all right. I knew one was about somewhere. I can tell. But no more rosy throats for the Baron, even if"—with a malicious smile—"he didn't prefer the easier method with blood banks!"

"Not much choice," was the unashamed reply. "And besides, people were getting harder to manage in these days of—ah—enlightenment. Even *he* was faced with a new problem: cremation."

A bubbling snarl came from the crouched ghoul.

"Never mind," the witch soothed him. "Your troubles have been over, these two years. No more cremation again, ever."

"We've just had cremation wholesale," the vampire pointed out. "And speaking of troubles," he jibed, "yours are not over, dear Mother. No orgies, no backsliding church folk to torment, and who's to care now if you dry up a cow?"

She ignored him, snuggling closer to the man. "Adam and

Eve," she simpered, resting her white head on his shoulder. "Don't!" He shrank away.

She glared at him. "Will you, will you," she hissed. "Don't cross me, my puling innocent, or—I!"

"He's good for only a short time at best," the vampire reminded her, pleasantly solicitous. "After that—"

"You lie!" she screeched. "By my arts he'll live a thousand—ten thousand—years. He'll learn to love me. And if you dare to touch him—I!"

The Baron shrugged. He winked at the man. "Ignore her threats to you. You're so valuable to the lecherous old hag that she wouldn't harm—what's that?" He rose to his full height, pointing.

Far out in the brush, a faint, bobbing light twinkled, then another.

"Fireflies," the witch said, indifferently. She stroked the man's hand, and tried to press her leathery cheek to his.

"No," said the ghoul. Doglike, he sniffed the air, his damp snout quivering.

A moment later, two rabbits hopped into the garden. One of them cautiously drew nearer. It stopped about ten feet away, and rose up on its hind paws, with ears up. Its button of a nose twitched. They watched the animal in amazement.

"They're certainly tame around here," the man muttered. He sensed a possible diversion, and alerted himself for escape. But he felt little hope. How could a lone mortal elude this dreadful trio?

The rabbit squeaked loudly, peremptorily, and a larger animal came up behind it, laboriously hauling in its jaws something that trailed on the ground.

"That's a beaver," said the man, unobtrusively edging away.

As the animal approached, they recognized its burden: a freshly felled sapling, one end gnawed to a rough point.

Suddenly the rabbit uttered a series of high, chirping sounds, strangely modulated. It waved one snowy paw in a gesture of command. The beaver responded with an irritable grunt, wrestling its clumsy stick forward. The dancing lights reappeared, very close now: tiny, flaming torches, gripped in the handlike paws of two raccoons, each running jerkily on three legs.

The rabbit made a new, imperious motion; it pointed directly at the squat, silent ghoul.

The witch broke into a laugh, and startled, the rabbit crouched, poised for flight. "Animals!" She jeered. "Attacking *us*!" She turned to the grave Baron. "You heard that rabbit—it's actually giving some sort of orders." She pointed a derisive finger at the rodent, small and wary, studying her with soft, luminous eyes. "Hey, there—do you think we're afraid of beavers and such vermin?"

"Wait." The vampire clutched her arm. "I doubt if they understand English. It's some simple language of their own. They've learned a lot in two years—if the whole thing didn't really begin much earlier. Mother, this is a serious matter. Don't you see? The stake's for me; the fire's for you; and for *him*, I imagine—"

The ghoul gave a hollow, moaning cry, and dived crashing into the nearest bushes. A moment after, there was a thin, bestial howl of pain. Then the underbrush crackled, and the ghoul stumbled back into the garden. He lurched blindly towards the witch, and they saw that his face was gone, leaving something like a wet sponge, soft and amorphous. The man stared in frozen horror, oblivious of his opportunity. There was a deep-chested growl from the weeds, and a great, shaggy form shambled out. It was a grizzly bear, grim and implacable, with bloody foam on its champing jaws.

Gasping, the witch leaped aside. The mangled ghoul groped for her, whimpering in fear. Silently the bear padded forward, its heavy coat rippling. But before it could close in, there was a quavering shriek like a woman in torment, a tawny blur, and a mountain lion, sickle claws wide spread, landed squarely upon the ghoul's back, smashing him to the ground.

Screaming hoarsely, the blinded monster writhed, clutching with thick, earth-stained fingers for his assailant. But the lion's hind legs were already gathered for the disembowelling stroke, and the ghoul had no chance. It was soon over; the quasi-human body lay still. The panther sat back, licking its great paws like any kitchen tabby. It paused once to give the man a sidelong, inscrutable glance. His pulse leaped to a new realization. Was the lion promising deliverance?

"Mother," the vampire said composedly, "this is the finish. Now we know where the Others went." There was a tinge of weariness in his accented voice. "Well, a nobleman

does not fear—death.” He pronounced the last word almost wonderingly.

“Idiot!” snarled the witch. “We’re not earthbound like that,” thrusting a finger at the torn ghoul.

The Baron gave a fatalistic shrug, met her challenging gaze, and smiled. He pulled his cloak tight, dislimned, and began to shrink. When he seemed about to vanish completely, there was a smoky flash, and a huge bat winged up from the garden, a spectral silhouette against the sunset sky. The black cloak lay empty on the grass.

A sonorous belling rang in the distance, harsh, yet mournfully musical, the call of a moose. Even in the circumstances, the man thrilled to the heady sound, recalling past hunts. The rabbit squealed in excitement, pointing upward. And they came, almost in military formation: a vast flight of birds, all predators of the air. Eagles, falcons, and hundreds of smaller piratical hawks, swift and rakish. They swooped with raucous cries; the sky throbbed to their wingbeats. A mighty golden eagle led the attack, hurtling 2,000 feet straight down, to strike with open talons. They heard the wind whistling through its stiff feathers and the crisp impact as the half-mile swoop reached a climax in that shattering blow.

The bat crumpled, disrupted in mid-air. It spun downward, erratic as a falling leaf, and there, in the weedy garden, the vampire reappeared, broken-backed.

As he squirmed, trying desperately to arise, the beaver drew near with its crudely-pointed sapling. Just out of reach, it paused, earnest and phlegmatic, its whiskered face indicating a solemn concern with the task ahead. The vampire glowered with concentrated malignance as a host of smaller animals pattered up. Sharp teeth and tenacious claws pinned the writhing thing, while four chipmunks held the stick upright in their facile paws, the point upon the heaving breast.

Then, from the darkening thicket, a bull moose emerged. He moved with stately tread, his split hooves clacking. On reaching the thrashing vampire, he snorted once, as if in profound distaste, and stood there waiting. The rabbit snapped its paw down in a vertical arc, and with a single blow of his massive forefoot, the moose drove the stake home.

Squawking imprecations, the witch abandoned her vain aerial search for an opening in the umbrella of birds, dropped heavily a dozen feet to the earth, and with ragged white

locks streaming, crashed through the ranks of lesser animals. One of them grated in agony. But the witch halted abruptly, cowering. She looked about with darting, baleful eyes, a hunched figure of evil. They poured into the garden from all sides: bears, panthers, badgers, and two purebred bulls, wickedly horned and bellicose. Overhead, the hawks circled, watching with fierce yellow eyes. The man saw the beasts converge, backing her steadily toward the church wall, a fire-scarred, crazily tilted brick barrier. There were muffled sounds, and he heard clearly a wheezy sobbing. He smiled briefly, and some of the tension left him. The raccoons, like conspirators in their dark masks, raced in with torches, followed by dozens of beasts dragging twigs and bark. An old, gaunt cow ambled by with a fence rail in her worn jaws. She peeped at the man with liquidly compassionate eyes. Before long, the pyre flamed high against the blackened wall. There was a final wailing cry as the witch died.

He dropped to his knees emotionally exhausted. They had freed him. The beasts of the forest and farm: the burly, comical black bears, the sullen, feral grizzlies, the pretty rabbits and squirrels, even an old cow, doubtless filled with affection for some mouldering barnyard where children had laughed and people had once been kind. All these had joined to deliver the last man.

Touched, he peered through growing dusk at the rabbit, trying to convey his gratitude and delight. There would be a new Golden Age, wherein man and beast might live in loving harmony. He forced back guilty visions of timid deer horribly wounded, of dying birds cheerfully ravaged by his dog. But that was past. No more hunting for him. Instead, he would teach them man's wonders. He would—

The rabbit hopped aside, and four lean wolves pressed forward, licking black lips. A bull pawed the earth, bellowing. High above, an early owl hooted.

The rabbit faced the wolves, pointing to the man with one paw, the other poised in a familiar manner.

The man understood that pregnant signal, and the soft, purring sounds he had begun to make died in his throat. It was thumbs down.

CREATURES OF DARKNESS ...AND OTHER WORLDS

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and left a soul-shaking secret behind her

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