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CORGI

THE DEVIL'S KISSES

Edited by
LINDA LOVECRAFT



From the publishers of **THE EXORCIST** –
the world's first collection of
erotic horror stories

The Devil's Kisses

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Edited by Linda Lovecraft

The Devil's Kisses

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THE DEVIL'S KISSES

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INTRODUCTION

Was it God or the Devil who invented sex?

Nobody seems to know for sure. The priests can't make up their minds whether we should be grateful to God for the idea or put the blame on Old Nick and most other people are probably too busy doing it to give the question much of their time. But one thing is certain: since men first noticed they were different from women and vice versa, Satan has shown a whole lot of interest in the sex lives of human beings.

If the history of witchcraft is true, Satan's curiosity sometimes gets too much to bear and he pays a visit to Earth to look into the matter more closely. Authorities on the subject claim he was forever popping up at the sabbaths held in his honour in order to personally pleasure his most ardent worshippers. Maybe *pleasure* isn't quite the right word because, according to the witches honoured in this way, the Devil's penis was thicker than a donkey's and icicle-cold to the touch. Some accounts even claim it split into two at the end so he could plug two orifices at once – an ingenious time-and-labour-saving device if ever there was!

Even with accessories like this, Satan found he simply didn't have time to personally attend to all the dirty work his diabolical mind dreamt up (we can't blame him, of course; he was just doing his *job*.) So he began to share his work-load with lesser devils and demons. One of their chief errands was to enter into the bodies of innocent young virgins and nuns and put them up to all kinds of unladylike activities of the kind shown in *The Exorcist*. This sort of devilry was so successful that eventually Satan had to organize a special team of demons specializing in the pleasant tasks of seduction and possession. He called these demons his succubi and incubi. A

succubus can take on the form of a beautiful young girl and the incubus a beautiful young man. Both are irresistible to the opposite sex and have an endless capacity for wild sex. Nowadays we generally call them swingers.

As a matter of interest, some of these demons can take on both male and female form. In their masculine shape they dish out the copious amounts of sperm they've accumulated whilst in the female role. Another example of the Devil's great sense of home economy!

In this collection of erotic horror classics, you will discover several varieties of these horny demons. Veteran SF writer Poul Anderson's story of *Operation Incubus* deals with a thoroughly traditional form of erotic demon. On the other hand, *The Other Woman* by Britisher Ramsey Campbell follows the career of a modern-style succubus. Once she gets to work on the hero of the story, he simply can't get her out of his mind – or his bed!

One fine day our plucky astronauts are going to meet up with another kind of succubus if Catherine Moore's *Shambleau* is any kind of prediction. Her succubus is similar to another of the Devil's children – the more famous *vampire*. The Shambleau doesn't suck blood, it's true, but then I once met a vampire in Chicago and it wasn't just blood that she sucked either. Amazing to think that this story caused a lot of fuss and bother and some overheated collars when it first appeared in *Weird Tales* magazine back in the thirties! People were more easily shocked in those days, of course, but the story still packs a pretty powerful punch.

If vampires and succubi leave you cold, maybe *The Ohio Love Sculpture* will turn you on. This story by Adobe James is sure to appeal to anyone interested in stuffing girls – and what red-corpuscled male isn't? One thing that doesn't need stuffing is *The Human Chair*. It's full up already, strictly sitting-room only. The Japanese author of this creepy fetish story calls himself Edogawa Rampo which is how the Japanese pronounce Edgar Allan Poe. If you don't believe me, try saying it over and over in a rush . . .

Christianna Brand's *Akin to Love* is a Black Magic story

in the *Rosemary's Baby* tradition. It's about a girl courted by a corpse that just won't take *no* for answer. His motto seems to be 'Never say die!' There's more of the Black Arts in *Naked Lady* in which Mindret Lord mixes voodoo with voyeurism. The occult also figures in *The Diamond* by award-winning French author André Pieyre de Mandiargues, who wrote *The Girl on the Motor-cycle*. Cool and mystical, the story simmers to a climax of bestiality and rape. . . . Even more hectic is Charles Beaumont's *The Love-Master*. This story describes a meeting between an aging libertine and an insatiable young nymphomaniac. When a pair like that get together, it's a question of who or *what* wears out first . . .

Any sado-masochists in the audience ought to be able to whip up some enthusiasm over *Jenny Cut-throat*, a juicy little shocker by famous thriller writer, John Blackburn. Jenny is a harsh mistress to be sure. But passionate too. The way she strokes her lovers leaves deep deep scars . . .

Finally there is Chris Miller's contribution, *Boxed In*. Compared to most of the other stories in this book, its theme is refreshingly normal: *young love*. A tender, touching story of a young man on a date with his beloved, there is nothing the slightest bit perverse about it at all (if you can overlook a hint of incest, a cold touch of necrophilia . . .).

The merry subject of necrophilia reminds me of the case of a young Frenchman called Henri Blot who was once hauled into court for committing strange acts with the bodies of the dead he'd dug up in a graveyard.

'Everyone to their own taste,' he indignantly told the court. 'Mine happens to be for corpses!'

I hope that this selection of *The Devil's Kisses* will satisfy every taste, that there is something for everybody to enjoy. If, however, I've overlooked your particular taste which happens to be even more weird and bizarre than anything in this book – that, I'm afraid, is *your* problem!

Love and Kisses,

LINDA LOVECRAFT

THE OHIO LOVE SCULPTURE

by Adobe James

My hobby – indeed, my very life – is erotica.

I possess 15,000 pieces in my fire- and burglar-proofed library, many of them dating back to before the time of Christ. I've travelled over two million miles and spent in excess of \$3,500,000 on my library acquisitions.

I've spent a like amount of time and money on erotic art!

Fantastic? Oh, no, my friend, not fantastic at all, for erotica is an expensive hobby. An example! Once, I had an entire wall of a Cambodian cave removed, crated, and shipped half-way around the world to me in New York. It is the pride of my collection today. A little cleaning here and there – the proper lighting – brought out hidden details of the figures on the wall. When one enters my darkened museum and the lights rise slowly, the viewer is greeted with an explosion of colour and hundreds of panels showing figures co-joined in every conceivable expression of love. It is so effective that many other connoisseurs, caught in the hypnotic grip of my cave wall panorama, swear the figures become animated if one looks at them long enough.

You may wonder at my preoccupation with erotica. It's really quite simple, erotica is the one art form that has remained unchanged through all of mankind's recorded history. Heroes and saviours have come and gone, civilizations, races, and countries have risen and fallen, religions, political beliefs, and fads are born, grow, and die in the dusts of history. Mountains, snow caps, and deserts spring up on the face of the earth, and the seas lick inward with tongues a hundred miles long. Only one thing remains constant – erotica.

You see this constancy in erotic artifacts from Mesopotamia, Egypt, Anatolia, Phoenicia, Persia, India, China, Japan, Australia, Polynesia, Africa, Greece, Italy, and the Americas. Its immutability is comforting.

Invariably I am asked the difference between pornography and erotica. It is a question that has no answer, for if one has to ask it, he can never understand the answer. At best all I can say is that pornography is pornography. Erotica is . . . erotica. There's as much difference between the two as there is between a rare vintage wine and the sour 'red-eye' that is sold in bulk to the peasants.

It is unfortunate that we have uncultured idiots in our American judicial system who cannot differentiate between the two.

Take, for instance, their actions towards the Ohio Love Sculpture.

I first learned of the Ohio art from Ali S. Reyem, a member of the Turkish legation in New York. How he had gotten wind of the sculpture, I never discovered, but Ali was a collector and we all have our informants.

I well remember that evening. Harold Cabot, Ali, and myself, were dining together at the club. Harold had just finished telling us of his new acquisition, a copy of Shakespeare's *Selected Sonnets for Gentlemen*. Reputedly, there are only seven copies of this book in existence. Modestly, I can report that two of them are in my library. But I digress; Ali had been absent-minded most of the evening. When he failed to respond enthusiastically to the story, Harold, slightly miffed, turned to the Turk and asked tartly, 'and what have you purchased lately?'

Ali sighed, his huge frame quivering with the expulsion of breath. 'Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I tried to buy . . . but they were not for sale.'

I felt my nerve ends tingling as my collector's instinct began sniffing the wind. I glanced at Harold; he was sitting as though he were relaxed, but his dilated nostrils gave him away.

Ali continued as if it pained him to recount the experi-

ence, 'I suspected it a hoax. After all, what possible thing of worth could be found in a town called Amboy in your agricultural state of Ohio? But I went, nevertheless, because of my informant's reputation. The people of Amboy were almost as backward as the restless tribesmen in our Agri Dagi region. I went to the address given, walked across a barnyard full of indescribably dirty pigs and chickens, and knocked at the door. There was no answer. I knocked again. Then I went into the barn . . .' Ali drew deeply on his cigar, his eyes narrowed in thought. ' . . . and there they were!'

'There what were?' Harold interjected impatiently.

Ali's eyebrows shot up, 'Why, the Ohio Love Sculpture, of course.' He ground out his cigar and leaned forward, his voice lowered. 'They were beautiful. Exquisite! Perfect! Three of them, laid out on a velvet bedspread in anticipatory positions. One with her legs . . .' Ali used his hands as he described the statuary. The figures were of three young girls about fifteen or sixteen years of age, sculptured out of some unknown substance that had the same hue as carrara marble tinted by one of the Manacheilli artisans. The expressions, their full lips tightened in desire and eagerness, their taut stomach muscles, the extended thigh tendons, all gave off an unbelievable aura of sensualism.

'I couldn't move for a minute,' Ali said, perspiring now. 'I've seen the thirtieth cave of Ajanta, the tomb room of the Agina Aphrodite before it collapsed, the Lautrec and Gauguin collections . . . and none of them – nothing! – could compare to these Ohio works.' He looked apologetic, and added for emphasis, 'Not even your cave wall, Andrew.'

'Go on,' I said softly, not really believing they could be that good, but nonetheless mentally calculating how long it would take me to get to Ohio. Harold was ominously silent; he would be in the race too.

Ali pursed his lips and grimaced, 'I stepped forward to touch them and I heard a gun click behind me. I whirled around and there was the sculptor, a dirty, wild-eyed genius in bib overalls. He said nothing, but his gun spoke an international language. We stared at each other for a minute and

then I said, "My name is Ali Reyem. I am with the Turkish Legation in New York." I pulled my credentials out of my pocket. He never took his eyes from my face. I told him his sculpture was the most beautiful I had ever seen. He did not react to the compliment. Then I asked him how much he wanted for them.

'He spoke for the first time. In a viciously spectral voice he said, "They are not for sale. Go now, or I will kill you."

'In spite of his threat, I tried to bargain with him. "Not even for a . . . ah . . . \$25,000?" The man shook his head and raised the gun. I offered him a hundred thousand while backing towards the door. The gun was shoved into my stomach. "A hundred and fifty thousand," I shouted as I moved out of the barn. Again the man answered in that same hollow voice, "They are not for sale!"'

Ali looked at Harold and myself. 'I pride myself in knowing men. This was a mad man . . . a genius and possibly one of the greatest sculptors the world has ever known . . . but a mad man! And he will not sell – ever! You should know that I tried again the next morning, offering a certified cheque for \$165,000. He shot over my head. I came home. That was a week ago. I have not slept since that time. Those beautiful, beautiful statues . . . gathering dust in a chicken barn . . .'

Harold, complaining of a sudden blinding headache, excused himself a few moments later, and almost ran in his haste to get out of the room. I fear I was equally impolite to my old friend, leaving a woebegone Ali sitting staring at his dead cigar and a half-finished brandy.

I had no doubt that Harold would attempt to beat me to Ohio. So . . . I did the most expedient thing, and chartered a jet. Three and a half hours after I had left Ali, my plane landed at Lebanon, Ohio. Another forty-five minutes passed and I was at the location.

A cold eerie wind was blowing through the stubbles of the corn field when I walked across the dirt road and approached the house. Even though it was long after midnight, one solitary light burned upstairs. The house itself was in a state of disrepair. A broken old chair on the front porch had springs

sticking out of it like serpents peering from the hair of Medusa. A storm shutter swung aimlessly to-and-fro on one rusted hinge, and the shredded tar paper on the roof flapped noisily with each dusty gust of wind.

I knocked.

After a long while there were halting steps inside, then the door creaked open and I saw the sculptor just as Ali had described him. Smaller, dirtier, perhaps – with a smell about him – but undoubtedly the same man . . . and undoubtedly insane.

I introduced myself and said, 'I have come to see the sculpture.'

'Get out of here,' he snarled. 'They are not for sale.' His face had twisted into a grotesque mask of hatred. He brought the shotgun into sight.

I had expected this and had planned accordingly. I held up one hand beseechingly, 'Of course they aren't for sale. They are works of art – made by a genius . . . and one would not bargain or barter over something as priceless as they.'

The remark was, colloquially speaking, 'corny'; it was meant to be. It stopped him. The hatred was replaced by another look, one of uncertainty. He cocked his head to one side and questioned, 'You mean . . . you . . . you aren't going to try and take them away from me?'

'No,' I lied, 'I've heard of their beauty, their perfection, and have come to pay homage to the man who made them.' No normal person would have accepted the remark at face value, but – animal like – the old man was listening to my tone of voice, not what I was actually saying.

He looked into my face for a few minutes and then slowly lowered his gun. Tears began running down both sides of his hawk-like nose. 'Everyone who has seen my lovelies has tried to steal, or buy, or take them away from me.' He stared at me pathetically, a weary and footsore Diogenes wanting to lay down his lantern.

Disregarding the stench, I put my arm around his shoulders, 'Are they really as beautiful as I've heard?'

The old man was eager for me to see them now. He held

the hurricane lamp high as we trotted across the barnyard casting weird shadows behind us. He turned when we reached the barn door. 'Close your eyes,' he said. 'The lights have to be just right at night, you know.'

Ah, here was a true connoisseur, I thought, one who knows exactly what has to be done to show the art work off to its best advantage. I heard him moving around for a second, and then almost bashfully, he said, 'Come in.'

The light fell upon the sculpture. Involuntarily, my breath left my body. The sensual power of the figures was a tangible thing that gripped me with a steel fist in the abdomen. In all my years of collecting there had never been anything like this. Surely, I thought, my acquisitions had led me to this moment – and these would be the climax to my collection. There had never been anything so powerfully beautiful, so sexually realistic before – and there would never be anything to compare with these again.

You must understand my feelings in this matter. Not since I was a very young man and susceptible to the more sensual aspects of erotica has anything influenced me the way the statues did. My throat was dry with desire, and my heart hammered inside its cavity like a wild frightened beast lunging against the bars of an insufferable cage. I cannot say how long I stood there revelling in the beauty, but finally my self-control regained command of my itinerant mind.

I would sell my soul – give millions – to have these statues. And I felt sorrow for their creator, for I knew I would not hesitate to kill for them either.

I began talking to him again. I made thrust after thrust into that shadowy, fearful desert of his paranoid mind. I kept hammering away for almost an hour – always on the same theme, that there were those people plotting to take the statues away from him. Finally he was weeping futilely in the corner, looking like a wide-eyed frightened child. It was time for the *coup d'état*. I bit my lips and said, haltingly, 'Of course . . . if you weren't here . . . and the statues weren't here. If they were put in some secret hiding place . . . and you guarded them . . .'

He jumped up. 'Yes. Yes! That's it. I'll hide them.'

I shook my head, 'No . . . they'll follow you. But . . . if I helped you find a place – a long way from here – maybe in New York . . .'

The sculptor fell on his knees and clutched my pants beseechingly, 'Please . . . please help me. Tell me where to go.'

'All right,' I said, as if reaching some noble conclusion, 'I'll make arrangements for you to hide them in a secret museum.' His eyes narrowed slightly, and I added, 'Of course, you'll have to watch them day and night because they'll be your responsibility.' The remark quashed any feelings of doubt the old man may have had.

Our arrangements were completed just as dawn was breaking. We carefully loaded the sculpture in the farm's dilapidated old pick-up truck. He would bring them to New York, arriving at my place within seventy-two hours. The next three days would seem an eternity to me, but my only other alternative would be to take them myself and this would arouse the old man's suspicions.

As the sculptor blew out the lantern, I took my last look at the three figures in the back of the truck. In the soft light of the new day the expressions on the girls' faces had taken on a look of happy satiation. Then we covered them with blankets and an old tarp.

I left the old man a few minutes later and returned to New York. The next three days were spent in feverish anticipation. I purchased red velvet Roman couches for the figures and rearranged the museum to make room for them. They would be in the corner about twenty-five feet from the wall paintings – would serve as a grand soul-sucking climax for my guests.

When the telephone rang that evening of the third day, I felt a fleeting moment of panic as I thought it might be the sculptor.

It was Harold Cabot. His voice sounded odd, 'I've been meaning to call you and offer congratulations.'

'Ah, you heard?' It was impossible to keep the happiness, and the pride, out of my voice.

'No, but when the sculpture wasn't there when I arrived, I surmised you had beaten me again.'

I smiled and felt pity for poor Harold. I also felt relief to know the old man had gotten away safely.

The horrible foreboding struck me when Harold next spoke, 'I just wanted to say that I'm sorry.'

'Sorry? Sorry, for what?'

'Well,' he seemed very uncertain over the telephone, 'haven't you seen the newspapers this afternoon?'

'No!' The strangled shout was forced out of my suddenly aching throat, 'what have they to do with me?'

There was a long silence on the other end of the phone; I could hear him breathing. Then Harold's voice was indescribably sad when he said, 'It's all there. On the front page. About the old man and the Ohio sculpture. He was involved in a minor accident and the police discovered the statues.' I heard him swallow, 'Andrew . . . they - the police - are going to destroy the sculpture.'

'Destroy? Oh, God, no! No! No! Why should they do something idiotic like that. It isn't pornography. What police? I'll call them . . . I'll have the governor . . .'

'No, Andrew. It wouldn't do any good.'

'Why not, you fool. Those statues are art! Do you hear me,' I was almost screaming. 'They're art. They can't destroy them. They belong to me . . . and the sculptor.'

Harold's voice seemed to come from a long way off, and my mind backed away into some dark corner, screaming impotent exorcisms at his words. And when I said nothing, he repeated the statement again, 'Sculptor? Oh, no, Andrew. The old man wasn't a sculptor; he was a taxidermist!'

THE HUMAN CHAIR

by Edogawa Rampo

OSHIKO saw her husband off to his work at the Foreign Office at a little past ten o'clock. Then, now that her time was once again her very own, she shut herself up in the study she shared with her husband to resume work on the story she was to submit for the special summer issue of *K* - magazine.

She was a versatile writer with high literary talent and a smooth-flowing style. Even her husband's popularity as a diplomat was overshadowed by hers as an authoress.

Daily she was overwhelmed with letters from readers praising her works. In fact, this very morning, as soon as she sat down before her desk, she immediately proceeded to glance through the numerous letters which the morning mail had brought. Without exception, in content they all followed the same pattern, but prompted by her deep feminine sense of consideration, she always read through each piece of correspondence addressed to her, whether monotonous or interesting.

Taking the short and simple letters first, she quickly noted their contents. Finally she came to one which was a bulky, manuscript-like sheaf of pages. Although she had not received any advance notice that a manuscript was to be sent her, still it was not uncommon for her to receive the efforts of amateur writers seeking her valuable criticism. In most cases these were long-winded, pointless, and yawn-provoking attempts at writing. Nevertheless, she now opened the envelope in her hand and took out the numerous, closely written sheets.

As she had anticipated, it was a manuscript, carefully

bound. But somehow, for some unknown reason, there was neither a title nor a by-line. The manuscript began abruptly:

'Dear Madam: ...'

Momentarily she reflected. Maybe, after all, it was just a letter. Unconsciously her eyes hurried on to read two or three lines, and then gradually she became absorbed in a strangely gruesome narrative. Her curiosity aroused to the bursting point and spurred on by some unknown magnetic force, she continued to read:

Dear Madam: I do hope you will forgive this presumptuous letter from a complete stranger. What I am about to write, Madam, may shock you no end. However, I am determined to lay bare before you a confession – my own – and to describe in detail the terrible crime I have committed.

For many months I have hidden myself away from the light of civilization, hidden, as it were, like the devil himself. In this whole wide world no one knows of my deeds. However, quite recently, a queer change took place in my conscious mind, and I just couldn't bear to keep my secret any longer. I simply had to confess!

All that I have written so far must certainly have awakened only perplexity in your mind. However, I beseech you to bear with me and kindly read my communication to the bitter end, because if you do, you will fully understand the strange workings of my mind and the reason why it is to you in particular that I make this confession.

I am really at a loss as to where to begin, for the facts which I am setting forth are all so grotesquely out of the ordinary. Frankly, words fail me, for human words seem utterly inadequate to sketch all the details. But, nevertheless, I will try to lay bare the events in chronological order, just as they happened.

First let me explain that I am ugly beyond description. Please bear this fact in mind; otherwise I fear that if and when you do grant my ultimate request and *do* see me, you may be shocked and horrified at the sight of my face – after so many months of unsanitary living. However, I implore

you to believe me when I state that, despite the extreme ugliness of my face, within my heart there has always burned a pure and overwhelming passion!

Next, let me explain that I am a humble workman by trade. Had I been born in a well-to-do family, I might have found the power, with money, to ease the torture of my soul brought on by my ugliness. Or perhaps, if I had been endowed by nature with artistic talents, I might again have been able to forget my bestial countenance and seek consolation in music or poetry. But, unblessed with any such talents, and being the unfortunate creature that I am, I had no trade to turn to except that of a humble cabinet-maker. Eventually my speciality became that of making assorted types of chairs.

In this particular line I was fairly successful, to such a degree in fact that I gained the reputation of being able to satisfy any kind of order, no matter how complicated. For this reason, in woodworking circles I came to enjoy the special privilege of accepting only orders for luxury chairs, with complicated requests for unique carvings, new designs for the back-rest and arm-supports, fancy padding for the cushions and seat – all work of a nature which called for skilled hands and patient trial and 'study, work which an amateur craftsman could hardly undertake.

The reward for all my pains, however, lay in the sheer delight of creating. You may even consider me a braggart when you hear this, but it all seemed to me to be the same type of thrill which a true artist feels upon creating a masterpiece.

As soon as a chair was completed, it was my usual custom to sit on it to see how it felt, and despite the dismal life of one of my humble profession, at such moments I experienced an indescribable thrill. Giving my mind free rein, I used to imagine the types of people who would eventually curl up in the chair, certainly people of nobility, living in palatial residences, with exquisite, priceless paintings hanging on the walls, glittering crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceilings, expensive rugs on the floor, etc.; and one particular

chair, which I imagined standing before a mahogany table, gave me the vision of fragrant Western flowers scenting the air with sweet perfume. Enwrapped in these strange visions, I came to feel that I, too, belonged to such settings, and I derived no end of pleasure from imagining myself to be an influential figure in society.

Foolish thoughts such as these kept coming to me in rapid succession. Imagine, Madam, the pathetic figure I made, sitting comfortably in a luxurious chair of my own making and pretending that I was holding hands with the girl of my dreams. As was always the case, however, the noisy chattering of the uncouth women of the neighbourhood and the hysterical shrieking, babbling, and wailing of their children quickly dispelled all my beautiful dreams; again grim reality reared its ugly head before my eyes.

Once back to earth I again found myself a miserable creature, a helpless crawling worm! And as for my beloved, that angelic woman, she too vanished like a mist. I cursed myself for my folly! Why, even the dirty women tending babies in the streets did not so much as bother to glance in my direction. Every time I completed a new chair I was haunted by feelings of utter despair. And with the passing of the months, my long-accumulated misery was enough to choke me.

One day I was charged with the task of making a huge, leather-covered armchair, of a type I had never before conceived, for a foreign hotel located in Yokohama. Actually, this particular type of chair was to have been imported from abroad, but through the persuasion of my employer, who admired my skill as a chair-maker, I received the order.

In order to live up to my reputation as a super-craftsman, I began to devote myself seriously to my new assignment. Steadily I became so engrossed in my labours that at times I even skipped food and sleep. Really, it would be no exaggeration to state that the job became my very life, every fibre of the wood I used seemingly linked to my heart and soul.

At last when the chair was completed, I experienced a satisfaction hitherto unknown, for I honestly believed I had achieved a piece of work which immeasurably surpassed all

my other creations. As before, I rested the weight of my body on the four legs that supported the chair, first dragging it to a sunny spot on the porch of my workshop. What comfort! What supreme luxury! Not too hard or too soft, the springs seemed to match the cushion with uncanny precision. And as for the leather, what an alluring touch it possessed! This chair not only supported the person who sat in it, but it also seemed to embrace and to hug. Still further, I also noted the perfect reclining angle of the back-support, the delicate puffy swelling of the arm-rests, the perfect symmetry of each of the component parts. Surely no product could have expressed with greater eloquence the definition of the word 'comfort'.

I let my body sink deeply into the chair and, caressing the two arm-rests with my hands, gasped with genuine satisfaction and pleasure.

Again my imagination began to play its usual tricks raising strange fancies in my mind. The scene which I imagined now rose before my eyes so vividly that, for a moment, I asked myself if I were not slowly going insane. While in this mental condition, a weird idea suddenly leaped to my mind. Assuredly, it was the whispering of the devil himself. Although it was a sinister idea, it attracted me with a powerful magnetism which I found impossible to resist.

At first, no doubt, the idea found its seed in my secret yearning to keep the chair for myself. Realizing, however, that this was totally out of the question, I next longed to accompany the chair wherever it went. Slowly but steadily, as I continued to nurse this fantastic notion, my mind fell into the grip of an almost terrifying temptation. Imagine, Madam, I really and actually made up my mind to carry out that awful scheme to the end, come what may!

Quickly I took the armchair apart, and then put it together again to suit my weird purposes. As it was a large armchair, with the seat covered right down to the level of the floor, and furthermore, as the back rest and arm-supports were all large in dimensions, I soon contrived to make the cavity inside large enough to accommodate a man without

any danger of exposure. Of course, my work was hampered by the large amount of wooden framework and the springs inside, but with my usual skill as a craftsman I remodelled the chair so that the knees could be placed below the seat, the torso and the head inside the back-rest. Seated thus in the cavity, one could remain perfectly concealed.

As this type of craftsmanship came as second nature to me, I also added a few finishing touches, such as improved acoustics to catch outside noises and of course a peep-hole cut out in the leather but absolutely unnoticeable. Furthermore, I also provided storage space for supplies, wherein I placed a few boxes of hardtack and a water bottle. For another of nature's needs I also inserted a large rubber bag, and by the time I finished fitting the interior of the chair with these and other unique facilities, it had become quite a habitable place, but not for longer than two or three days at a stretch.

Completing my weird task, I stripped down to my waist and buried myself inside the chair. Just imagine the strange feeling I experienced, Madam! Really, I felt that I had buried myself in a lonely grave. Upon careful reflection I realized that it was indeed a grave. As soon as I entered the chair I was swallowed up by complete darkness, and to everyone else in the world I no longer existed!

Presently a messenger arrived from the dealer's to take delivery of the armchair, bringing with him a large handcart. My apprentice, the only person with whom I lived, was utterly unaware of what had happened. I saw him talking to the messenger.

While my chair was being loaded on to the handcart, one of the cart-pullers exclaimed: 'Good God! This chair certainly is heavy! It must weigh a ton!'

When I heard this, my heart leaped to my mouth. However, as the chair itself was obviously an extraordinarily heavy one, no suspicions were aroused, and before long I could feel the vibration of the rattling handcart being pulled along the streets. Of course, I worried incessantly, but at length, that same afternoon, the armchair in which I was

concealed was placed with a thud on the floor of a room in the hotel. Later I discovered that it was not an ordinary room, but the lobby.

Now as you may already have guessed long ago, my key motive in this mad venture was to leave my hole in the chair when the coast was clear, loiter around the hotel, and start stealing. Who would dream that a man was concealed inside a chair? Like a fleeting shadow I could ransack every room at will, and by the time any alarm was sounded, I would be safe and sound inside my sanctuary, holding my breath and observing the ridiculous antics of the people outside looking for me.

Possibly you have heard of the hermit crab that is often found on coastal rocks. Shaped like a large spider, this crab crawls about stealthily and, as soon as it hears footsteps, quickly retreats into an empty shell, from which hiding place, with gruesome, hairy front legs partly exposed, it looks furtively about. I was just like this freak monster-crab. But instead of a shell, I had a better shield – a chair which would conceal me far more effectively.

As you can imagine, my plan was so unique and original, so utterly unexpected, that no one was ever the wiser. Consequently, my adventure was a complete success. On the third day after my arrival at the hotel I discovered that I had already taken in quite a haul.

Imagine the thrill and excitement of being able to rob to my heart's content, not to mention the fun derived from observing the people rushing hither and thither only a few inches away under my very nose, shouting: 'The thief went this way!' and: 'He went that way!' Unfortunately, I do not have the time to describe all my experiences in detail. Rather, allow me to proceed with my narrative and tell you of a far greater source of weird joy which I managed to discover – in fact, what I am about to relate now is the key point of this letter.

First, however, I must request you to turn your thoughts back to the moment when my chair – and I – were both placed in the lobby of the hotel. As soon as the chair was put

on the floor all the various members of the staff took turns testing out the seat. After the novelty wore off they all left the room, and then silence reigned, absolute and complete. However, I could not find the courage to leave my sanctum, for I began to imagine a thousand dangers. For what seemed like ages I kept my ears alerted for the slightest sound. After a while I heard heavy footsteps drawing near, evidently from the direction of the corridor. The next moment the unknown feet must have started to tread on a heavy carpet, for the walking sound died out completely.

Some time later the sound of a man panting, all out of breath, assailed my ears. Before I could anticipate what the next development would be, a large, heavy body like that of a European fell on my knees and seemed to bounce two or three times before settling down. With just a thin layer of leather between the seat of his trousers and my knees, I could almost feel the warmth of his body. As for his broad, muscular shoulders, they rested flatly against my chest, while his two heavy arms were deposited squarely on mine. I could imagine this individual puffing away at his cigar, for the strong aroma came floating to my nostrils.

Just imagine yourself in my queer position, Madam, and reflect for a brief moment on the utterly unnatural state of affairs. As for myself, however, I was utterly frightened, so much so that I crouched in my dark hide-out as if petrified, cold sweat running down my armpits.

Beginning with this individual, several people 'sat on my knees' that day, as if they had patiently awaited their turn. No one, however, suspected even for a fleeting moment that the soft 'cushion' on which they were sitting was actually human flesh with blood circulating in its veins – confined in a strange world of darkness.

What was it about this mystic hole that fascinated me so? I somehow felt like an animal living in a totally new world. And as for the people who lived in the world outside, I could distinguish them only as people who made weird noises, breathed heavily, talked, rustled their clothes, and possessed soft, round bodies.

Gradually I could begin to distinguish the sitters just by the sense of touch rather than of sight. Those who were fat felt like large jellyfish, while those who were specially thin made me feel that I was supporting a skeleton. Other distinguishing factors consisted of the curve of the spine, the breadth of the shoulder blades, the length of the arms, and the thickness of their thighs as well as the contour of their bottoms. It may seem strange, but I speak nothing but the truth when I say that, although all people may seem alike, there are countless distinguishing traits among all men which can be 'seen' merely by the feel of their bodies. In fact, there are just as many differences as in the case of fingerprints or facial contours. This theory, of course, also applies to female bodies.

Usually women are classified in two large categories – the plain and the beautiful. However, in my dark, confined world inside the chair, facial merits or demerits were of secondary importance, being overshadowed by the more meaningful qualities found in the feel of flesh, the sound of the voice, body odour. (Madam, I do hope you will not be offended by the boldness with which I sometimes speak.)

And so, to continue with my narration, there was one girl – the first who ever sat on me – who kindled in my heart a passionate love. Judging solely by her voice, she was European. At the moment, although there was no one else present in the room, her heart must have been filled with happiness, because she was singing with a sweet voice when she came tripping into the room.

Soon I heard her standing immediately in front of my chair, and without giving any warning she suddenly burst into laughter. The very next moment I could hear her flapping her arms like a fish struggling in a net, and then she sat down – on me! For a period of about thirty minutes she continued to sing, moving her body and feet in tempo with her melody.

For me this was quite an unexpected development, for I had always held aloof from all members of the opposite sex because of my ugly face. Now I realized that I was present in

the same room with a European girl whom I had never seen, my skin virtually touching hers through a thin layer of leather.

Unaware of my presence, she continued to act with unrestrained freedom, doing as she pleased. Inside the chair, I could visualize myself hugging her, kissing her snowy white neck – if only I could remove that layer of leather . . .

Following this somewhat unhallowed but nevertheless enjoyable experience, I forgot all about my original intentions of committing robbery. Instead, I seemed to be plunging headlong into a new whirlpool of maddening pleasure.

Long I pondered: 'Maybe I was destined to enjoy this type of existence.' Gradually the truth seemed to dawn on me. For those who were as ugly and as shunned as myself, it was assuredly wiser to enjoy life inside a chair. For in this strange, dark world I could hear and touch all desirable creatures.

Love in a chair! This may seem altogether too fantastic. Only one who has actually experienced it will be able to vouch for the thrills and the joys it provides. Of course, it is a strange sort of love, limited to the senses of touch, hearing, and smell, a love burning in a world of darkness.

Believe it or not, many of the events that take place in this world are beyond full understanding. In the beginning I had intended only to perpetrate a series of robberies, and then flee. Now, however, I became so attached to my 'quarters' that I adjusted them more and more to permanent living.

In my nocturnal prowlings I always took the greatest of precautions, watching each step I took, hardly making a sound. Hence there was little danger of being detected. When I recall, however, that I spent several months inside the chair without being discovered even once, it indeed surprises even me.

For the better part of each day I remained inside the chair, sitting like a contortionist with my arms folded and knees bent. As a consequence I felt as if my whole body was paralysed. Furthermore, as I could never stand up straight, my muscles became taut and inflexible, and gradually I

began to crawl instead of walk to the washroom. What a madman I was! Even in the face of all these sufferings I could not persuade myself to abandon my folly and leave that weird world of sensuous pleasure.

In the hotel, although there were several guests who stayed for a month or even two, making the place their home, there was always a constant inflow of new guests, and an equal exodus of the old. As a result I could never manage to enjoy a permanent love. Even now, as I bring back to mind all my 'love affairs', I can recall nothing but the touch of warm flesh.

Some of the women possessed the firm bodies of ponies; others seemed to have the slimy bodies of snakes; and still others had bodies composed of nothing but fat, giving them the bounce of a rubber ball. There were also the unusual exceptions who seemed to have bodies made only of sheer muscle, like artistic Greek statues. But notwithstanding the species or types, one and all had a special magnetic allure quite distinctive from the others, and I was perpetually shifting the object of my passions.

At one time, for example, an internationally famous dancer came to Japan and happened to stay at this same hotel. Although she sat in my chair only on one single occasion, the contact of her smooth, soft flesh against my own afforded me a hitherto unknown thrill. So divine was the touch of her body that I felt inspired to a state of positive exaltation. On this occasion, instead of my carnal instincts being aroused, I simply felt like a gifted artist being caressed by the magic wand of a fairy.

Strange, eerie episodes followed in rapid succession. However, as space prohibits, I shall refrain from giving a detailed description of each and every case. Instead, I shall continue to outline the general course of events.

One day, several months following my arrival at the hotel, there suddenly occurred an unexpected change in the shape of my destiny. For some reason the foreign proprietor of the hotel was forced to leave for his homeland, and as a result the management was transferred to Japanese hands.

Originating from this change in proprietorship, a new policy was adopted, calling for a drastic retrenchment in expenditures, abolishment of luxurious fittings, and other steps to increase profits through economy. One of the first results of this new policy was that the management put all the extravagant furnishings of the hotel up for auction. Included in the list of items for sale was my chair.

When I learned of this new development, I immediately felt the greatest of disappointments. Soon, however, a voice inside me advised that I should return to the natural world outside – and spend the tidy sum I had acquired by stealing. I of course realized that I would no longer have to return to my humble life as a craftsman, for actually I was comparatively wealthy. The thought of my new role in society seemed to overcome my disappointment in having to leave the hotel. Also, when I reflected deeply on all the pleasures which I had derived there, I was forced to admit that, although my ‘love affairs’ had been many, they had all been with foreign women and that somehow something had always been lacking.

I then realized fully and deeply that as a Japanese I really craved a lover of my own kind. While I was turning these thoughts over in my mind, my chair – with me still in it – was sent to a furniture store to be sold at an auction. Maybe this time, I told myself, the chair will be purchased by a Japanese home. With my fingers crossed, I decided to be patient and to continue with my existence in the chair a while longer.

Although I suffered for two or three days in my chair while it stood in front of the furniture store, eventually it came up for sale and was promptly purchased. This, fortunately, was because of the excellent workmanship which had gone into its making, and although it was no longer new, it still had a ‘dignified bearing’.

The purchaser was a high-ranking official who lived in Tokyo. When I was being transferred from the furniture store to the man’s palatial residence, the bouncing and vibrating of the vehicle almost killed me. I gritted my teeth

and bore up bravely, however, comforted by the thought that at last I had been bought by a Japanese.

Inside his house I was placed in a spacious Western-style study. One thing about the room which gave me the greatest of satisfactions was the fact that my chair was meant more for the use of his young and attractive wife than for his own.

Within a month I had come to be with the wife constantly, united with her as one, so to speak. With the exception of the dining and sleeping hours, her soft body was always seated on my knees for the simple reason that she was engaged in a deep-thinking task.

You have no idea how much I loved this lady! She was the first Japanese woman with whom I had ever come into such close contact, and moreover she possessed a wonderfully appealing body. She seemed the answer to all my prayers! Compared with this, all my other 'affairs' with the various women in the hotel seemed like childish flirtations, nothing more.

Proof of the mad love which I now cherished for this intellectual lady was found in the fact that I longed to hold her every moment of the time. When she was away, even for a fleeting moment, I waited for her return like a love-crazed Romeo yearning for his Juliet. Such feelings I had never hitherto experienced.

Gradually I came to want to convey my feelings to her . . . somehow. I tried vainly to carry out my purpose, but always encountered a blank wall, for I was absolutely helpless. Oh, how I longed to have her reciprocate my love! Yes, you may consider this the confession of a madman, for I *was* mad – madly in love with her!

But how could I signal to her? If I revealed myself, the shock of the discovery would immediately prompt her to call her husband and the servants. And that, of course, would be fatal to me, for exposure would not only mean disgrace, but severe punishment for the crimes I had committed.

I therefore decided on another course of action, namely, to add in every way to her comfort and thus awaken in her a natural love for – the chair! As she was a true artist, I somehow felt confident that her natural love of beauty would

guide her in the direction I desired. And as for myself, I was willing to find pure contentment in her love even for a material object, for I could find solace in the belief that her delicate feelings of love for even a mere chair were powerful enough to penetrate to the creature that dwelt inside . . . which was myself!

In every way I endeavoured to make her more comfortable every time she placed her weight on my chair. Whenever she became tired from sitting long in one position on my humble person, I would slowly move my knees and embrace her more warmly, making her more snug. And when she dozed off to sleep I would move my knees, ever so softly, to rock her into a deeper slumber.

Somehow, possibly by a miracle (or was it just my imagination?), this lady now seemed to love my chair deeply, for every time she sat down she acted like a baby falling into a mother's embrace, or a girl surrendering herself into the arms of her lover. And when she moved herself about in the chair, I felt that she was feeling an almost amorous joy. In this way the fire of my love and passion rose into a leaping flame that could never be extinguished, and I finally reached a stage where I simply had to make a strange, bold plea.

Ultimately I began to feel that if she would just look at me, even for a brief passing moment, I could die with the deepest contentment.

No doubt, Madam, by this time, you must certainly have guessed who the object of my mad passion is. To put it explicitly, she happens to be none other than yourself, Madam! Ever since your husband brought the chair from that furniture store I have been suffering excruciating pains because of my mad love and longing for you. I am but a worm . . . a loathsome creature.

I have but one request. Could you meet me once, just once? I will ask nothing further of you. I of course do not deserve your sympathy, for I have always been nothing but a villain, unworthy even to touch the soles of your feet. But if you will grant me this one request, just out of compassion, my gratitude will be eternal.

Last night I stole out of your residence to write this confession because, even leaving aside the danger, I did not possess the courage to meet you suddenly face to face, without any warning or preparation.

While you are reading this letter, I will be roaming around your house with bated breath. If you will agree to my request, please place your handkerchief on the pot of flowers that stands outside your window. At this signal I will open your front door and enter as a humble visitor. . . .

Thus ended the letter.

Even before Yoshiko had read many pages, some premonition of evil had caused her to become deadly pale. Rising unconsciously, she had fled from the study, from *that chair* upon which she had been seated, and had sought sanctuary in one of the Japanese rooms of her house.

For a moment it had been her intention to stop reading and tear up the eerie message; but somehow, she had read on, with the closely-written sheets laid on a low desk.

Now that she had finished, her premonition was proved correct. That chair on which she had sat from day to day . . . had it really contained a man? If true, what a horrible experience she had unknowingly undergone! A sudden chill came over her, as if ice water had been poured down her back, and the shivers that followed seemed never to stop.

Like one in a trance, she gazed into space. Should she examine the chair? But how could she possibly steel herself for such a horrible ordeal? Even though the chair might now be empty, what about the filthy remains, such as the food and other necessary items which he must have used?

'Madam, a letter for you.'

With a start, she looked up and found her maid standing at the doorway with an envelope in her hand.

In a daze, Yoshiko took the envelope and stifled a scream. Horror of horrors! It was another message from the same man! Again her name was written in that same familiar scrawl.

For a long while she hesitated, wondering whether she

should open it. At last she mustered up enough courage to break the seal and shakingly took out the pages. This second communication was short and curt, and it contained another breath-taking surprise:

Forgive my boldness in addressing another message to you. To begin with, I merely happen to be one of your ardent admirers. The manuscript which I submitted to you under separate cover was based on pure imagination and my knowledge that you had recently bought *that chair*. It is a sample of my own humble attempts at fictional writing. If you would kindly comment on it, I shall know no greater satisfaction.

For personal reasons I submitted my MS prior to writing this letter of explanation, and I assume you have already read it. How did you find it? If, Madam, you have found it amusing or entertaining in some degree, I shall feel that my literary efforts have not been wasted.

Although I purposely refrained from telling you in the MS, I intend to give my story the title of 'The Human Chair.'

With all my deepest respects and sincere wishes, I remain,
Cordially yours,

AKIN TO LOVE

by Christianna Brand

SHE was screaming . . . Screaming . . . 'Don't leave me, come back, come back!' But they didn't come back; they had rushed away, all three of them, sick, white, gibbering with the horror of it – leaving her here alone.

It seemed so long ago now, long, long ago, another world, another age since, easily chatting, they had gone up the splendid sweep of the staircase and into that room. A lovely room – square, high ceilinged, furnished as far as possible in keeping with its eighteenth-century air; there was even, though nowadays its curtains were of nylon, a four-poster bed. Her hostess had stirred up the fire to a blaze and kissed her good night – wished they hadn't talked so much to her this evening about all the silly village gossip, hoped she was all right, was she, darling? – and smiled and gone away. In her dressing-gown and nightie, the oil-lamp glowing softly on the table by the bedside, she had sat down before the cheerfully-crackling little fire to brush out her silky hair.

She loved brushing her hair, sitting by the fireside, dreaming. Her thoughts drifted off, a million miles from suicides and hauntings. A young girl had killed herself after sleeping in this room – but that had been fifty, sixty years ago; a woman more recently, but she had been newly widowed and still grieving. And an old woman had slept here and felt a silence, she had said, a chill, 'a feeling of evil; I could smell it as a horse scents danger . . .' but she too, doubtless, had been primed all evening with stories about the house. A young man had lived here, it seemed, two hundred years ago, who had deserted his beautiful wife and joined one of the Hell

Fire Clubs, sold his soul to the devil, all the rest of it; had repented and come home and his wife refused to forgive him. And so he had killed himself, or killed the wife, or the wife had killed him, nobody seemed to be sure; but anyway, of course he had haunted here ever since. Wherefore, girls and young widows committed suicide, old women felt a sense of nameless evil, a silence, a chill. . . .

And certainly it was extraordinarily quiet – strangely still. Should there not be some sighing of night breezes, some faint brushing of leaf upon leaf at the window sill, some stirring of nocturnal creatures, bat and owl? – should there not be, at least, some flutter of flame from this small log fire that so lately had gaily crackled, but now was like a fire seen, brightly burning, through sound-resistant glass? Sound resistant and heat resistant also; for she held out her hand to its blaze and felt no warmth from it, no warmth at all . . .

No warmth at all. Fear pierced her, she thrust her hand forward to the very bars of the grate and knew with a shock of realization that her hand remained still cold, as cold as ice – that all her body was taut with chill, that it was as though for a million years the sun had been gone and brought no warming rays to the ice-bound earth. And through the dark chill – the creeping-on of the sense of evil . . . ‘I could smell it as a horse scents danger . . .’ the old woman had said. And now, suddenly, it was all about her, strong, pungent, unmistakable as the stench of decay: the knowledge of the presence of evil, the knowledge of the presence of cruelty and pain. . . .

At the heart of the evil – life. A voice whispered out of the evil: ‘I am here.’

And she saw him standing there, quietly. Aged thirty, perhaps; as fair as herself, of middle height and slender, dressed in the velvet and brocade of the late eighteenth century. And she looked at his pale face and suddenly all evil, all the cruelty were gone; for in all the world there never had been so much sadness, so much longing, so much – pleading – in the face of any man.

He did not move. He stood with one hand on the carved

mahogany upright of the four-poster bed. He said: 'Are you afraid?'

Of course she was afraid, crouching there, trembling, huddled at the edge of her chair. She tried to call out, to scream for help, but no sound came. 'Go away! Get away!' She muttered and mumbled small, meaningless, ejaculatory prayers. 'Don't come near me, get away, get away . . .' Beyond him, in the shadows by the head of the four-poster bed, the oil lamp glowed steadily and with a new and sickening stab of terror, she recognized that she saw this lamp though he stood between herself and it. 'Who are you? What are you? You are not a man—'

'I was a man,' he sadly said.

'You're not a man now,' she blurted out, whimpering. 'You're a ghost, you're a dead thing, go away, get away, go back where you belong. . . .'

'I belong in hell,' he said.

'In — hell? Then if you belong in hell—' She was gathering courage, finding some strength in the gentleness of his answers, the terrible, pleading sadness in his face — 'go back there to hell, go back where you belong.'

'I belong here,' he said. 'This is my hell.'

'Here — in this room?'

'I made it my hell. I created it hell for myself; and for — another. She could have undone all the wrong; she could — here, in this room, she could have held out her arms to me and made it all heaven again. But she would not. I had made it a hell for her too and so she would not, or could not, and there was no other way back . . .' And the sadness was there and the terrible longing. 'No other way back, but through a woman's forgiveness: a woman who could love enough to forgive.'

So now she knew. No evil: that had been all repented in the long ago past. No cruelty — that had been in the bleak refusal of pardon to the sinner come home. And no fear, nothing to fear, only a sad ghost caught and caged in eternal atonement at the scene of his ultimate despair. She faltered: 'What is it you want of me?' but even as she asked, she knew.

'If it could be found in the heart of a woman to forgive – to know it all and in spite of it all to love as *she* could not love, to love enough to forgive . . .'

'Your sins were not sins against me,' she said.

'They were sins against womankind.' He moved now, he came close to her, and she was not afraid. And he saw that she was not afraid and came closer and knelt at her feet, but not touching her; and now for the first time smiled at her, gently and whimsically. 'It is like the child's fairy story – isn't it? The prince caught in the heart of the mountain of ice, and one tear from the princess will melt the mountain away and set him free.'

'That's in the fairy stories.'

'Yes, but . . . fairy stories have deep roots, you know. Fairy stories come from old, ancient legends and legends from myths; and myths from the uttermost womb of religious time.' And he held out his hand, the lace ruffle falling away like foam from the narrow wrist, and said, 'Put your hand into mine, Princess, and who knows but that in time the tear may come that will wash all the mountain of my sins away.'

She thought: those other two – they refused him their hand; they refused him their tears. A woman, widowed, obsessed with sorrows of her own, a girl too young and uncaring to understand the passion of his need for this sacrifice – this one short step across the threshold of fear to render him succour who cried out for it from out of the depths of death. But afterwards, they had remembered and understood . . .

Not for her should be that remorse, not for her that memory, not if at so small a cost to herself she might set this damned soul free. A hand clasp across the gulf between the living and the dead . . . She stretched out her hand to him, her young and lovely hand, and would not let him see how she shivered at the chill of icy fingers closing over hers. 'Tell me what there is to forgive; and if I can forgive, in the name of "womankind" as you say – I will try to forgive.'

And he told her. The Hell Fire Club – the first light-hearted entering-in upon a world of darkness unimagined,

unimaginable; the only half-understood surrendering up of free will; the realization, too late, that the soul was netted in snares of evil unthought of in the mind of uncontaminated man . . . 'It was like walking into quicksands . . . A gay evening, laughter and nonsense, a good deal of wine; and then – an invitation whispered behind the back of a hand, a challenge, a wager . . .' And the grass at the edge of the quicksands was bright and the first steps innocent and easy and then – 'Then there was no turning, no going back; and soon no desire to go back. I . . .' He shuddered like a man with an ague. 'There was a woman that night, lying across an altar . . .' He broke off. 'You should not hear these things. And yet – if I don't tell you, how can you forgive?'

Those others – they had not listened, could not forgive; and so at last in remorse had destroyed themselves. She said: 'Tell me, then. Tell me.'

So again he told her: the total submission to the antithesis of Good – the sacrilege, the sadism, the revulsion from all things clean and kind; the corruption of the innocent, the young and the beautiful defiled, brought low – the craving for more and more, for worse and worse . . . He told her, until her own mind caught the infection and, sick with horror, yet cried out, 'Tell me . . .' And he put his cold arms about her to comfort her and only when at last he was done, released her and said: 'So at last I came back to her; and this load of filth I laid at her feet as I now lay it at yours, and asked her to forgive me, to make me clean again by her tears . . .'

But she had had no courage to listen, could not forgive; and so through the centuries he had carried the burden of his sins and come again and laid them at the feet of another, and again, and again. And they too had repudiated him, had heard him part way, and the shock of it – at any rate had failed in compassion in the end. But she—? Should she too fail? She faltered out at last: 'If I speak the words "I forgive you—"?'

She saw the look of doom fore-known return to his eyes. 'You know that meaningless words will not set me free.'

'I could shed tears—'

'For the victims: for the tortured, the shamed, the defiled. But not for me?' He got up from the place where he had knelt all this time at her feet, and stood before her. 'You can't forgive. Only love can forgive. I have failed once more.' And she felt that the room grew cold again and hushed again and knew that he was leaving her. His sad voice said, 'For ever . . . For ever . . .'

She dragged herself to her feet. She stammered out: 'At least I can pity you . . .'

Ice-cold hands caught at her hands again. 'Love me! Love me! Pity is not enough.'

She put up her hands, she framed his cold face in her hands, she looked into his eyes, she saw all the longing, the pleading there. 'Pity is akin to love,' she said.

As cold as death were his kisses on her lips, as cold as death his arms about her body holding her close to him. Like a dead thing herself, made animate for an hour, she surrendered, powerless, to the wild, chill fever of his ecstasy, gave herself up, virginal, to the embrace of the living dead — like a dead thing lay at last in the crook of his rigid arm on the great four-poster bed. He bent over her. Out of the immensity of her sacrifice, she whispered: 'Tell me now that I have set you free,' and looked up into his face.

Gone the sadness, gone the look of longing, the piteous pleading. Instead . . .

She blurted out to him: 'Why are you laughing?'

Laughing: shrieking, screaming with mocking, triumphant laughter, the more horrible that she knew that no ears but her own could hear. His face was distorted with it, made hideous by it, a mask of mockery; the stench of evil was in her nostrils again, the great bed was grave-cold, its canopy a coffin-lid above her. In the grate the fire crept and crackled no more, beyond that room all the world seemed hushed again into unnatural stillness. His face bending over hers, mouth hollow and black with the open screaming of his laughter, was vile with all the vile filth he had recited to her that night, feigning repentance. 'Those others — do you think

they didn't listen too, drinking it all down? Do you think they didn't tumble over themselves, they too, with their "pity" and their "forgiveness"? They and a dozen others before them, in the years since that poor fool also listened and also "forgave" – forgave *me*, dared to offer charitable absolution to *me*, to me who had walked as a friend with the Prince of Darkness . . . ?

But at that name, he lifted his head, as he spoke that name he went suddenly rigid and lifted his head and was silent – listening. And the cold in the room grew ice cold and the silence was the silence of nothingness, of the world's dissolution. Into the cold and the silence he muttered: 'Master . . . ! Master . . . !' as though at a summons; and crawled up from the bed and, like a cowed dog, slunk back into the shadows of the evil from which he had emerged – and so was gone.

Outside, a little breeze blew and a leaf tapped at the glass of the window pane; and a cock crowed, and faintly, faintly, the grey night skies were a-shimmer with the first pale promise of the dawn.

So long ago . . . So long ago . . . Those others had gone forth and destroyed themselves, the young girl who had lived in an age of innocence, not waiting; the young widow waiting only a little while. But she – she had waited: and now crouched screaming, screaming . . . 'Come back! Come back!'

But they did not come back. In all that white, shining, pitiless place there was no movement now, as in that room there had been no sound. Only the shush-shush sigh of the double doors left swinging in their panic flight. 'Come back! Come back! Don't leave me here alone! Don't leave me here alone – with this!'

But the doors sighed and were still, closing: upon whose frosted panes she could, from within, make out the mirror image—

WARDEN TYRRELL

THE DIAMOND

by André Pieyre de Mandiargues

*... Like a living jelly in which light was made flesh
by a process of inconceivable wizardry.*

Julien Gracq

'THE new diamonds have arrived,' Sarah's father told her. 'Take the key of the safe. You examine them tomorrow morning.'

He had spoken without taking his eyes off the carpet, which made a silky red and brown background to his slender feet, clad in shoes of such soft leather that they seemed to be the work rather of a glover than a shoemaker. His hands, lying on velvet arm-rests, were small too, with pointed nails. His head, on the other hand, was exaggeratedly large, and was made to look even larger by the tawny Newgate frill which joined his abundantly curled head of hair standing up fan-wise against the back of the arm-chair. Monsieur Mose (Césarion-David) was a lapidary, just as his parents and ancestors had been for centuries. In addition to his business and his clientele, he had inherited from them an old house, with fine gilded iron-work which was much admired, at the top of the Rue des Lions. It was there that he had his shop, on the ground floor, and he lived on the first floor with his daughter, who would doubtless one day succeed him, since he had no other heir.

'We've been expecting them for a long time,' said the girl. 'I'm curious to see that large bluish stone which you're going to pay a great deal for, and which should have the lustre of

the planet Venus, if old Benaïm has not misled us in his description of it.'

'Old Benaïm has never misled me,' said the lapidary. 'I am certain that the stone is admirable, but I don't want to see it until you have done so. A virgin should be the first to form an opinion of the coldness and fire of a diamond.'

The girl raised her head with a proud movement. She had large dark eyes, flecked with grey and green, in an oval face, the skin rather dark and very smooth; her black hair was dressed in two plaits, which lay over her small breasts on a dress made of a preposterous material on which upside-down fish were playing among water flowers; her neck and her hands were long (and seemed even longer for bearing no jewellery); her legs were very long.

Monsieur Mose looked at her.

'You're like a snake in the sun,' he said. 'Most women are fascinated by diamonds as mice are by the eyes of serpents. Others remain unscathed, but they are merely indifferent. Whereas you, perhaps because of your strangely serpentine nature, you are in spontaneous harmony with stones. You know how to understand them and weigh them up, you talk to them, you caress them; one would think that you go to the very heart of them, for you have pointed out flaws to me which had escaped the attention of the most cunning dealers in Antwerp. You would do well not to marry, if you want to keep the friendship of those truly noble stones, the diamond and the emerald. At all events, you are not like your mother.'

'I'm not thinking of marrying, and I am glad I am not like my mother,' said Sarah Mose.

Truth to tell, she would have had to have made a great effort to recall the memory of her mother, who had died only a few years after her birth, but photographs, brought out of albums and cardboard boxes, had often shown her a woman whose beauty would have appealed (she thought) to the taste of unrefined men – bulging without restraint, fat and oozing fat (it seemed) from every pore, her bathing-dress or evening-dresses of the most outrageous type exposing a quite immoderate amount of flesh. Sarah had torn up, then

burnt, these photographs, and the only thing in the world which she did not forgive her father was that he had allowed himself to be seduced by such a coarse creature, who had all the same given birth to her. She had almost forgotten this last point; she would have liked to have been created solely by her father. Contrary to common sense, for young people frequently hold the opposite view, the repugnance she felt for the mechanics of birth came from the strong and deep hostility she had felt when faced with pictures of her mother.

Monsieur Mose, who was a taciturn man at home, did not reply, and his eyes went back to the designs on the carpet. The girl, too, said nothing. As to that undesirable character, wife of one, mother of the other, whom they had conjured up, her phantom was without substance, and it had already disappeared from their memory by the time the maid-servant came to announce dinner.

In the middle of the day Monsieur Mose and his daughter had a light meal. In the evening, on the other hand, they liked heavy food, seasoned with vinegar and highly spiced, meats smoked or pickled, potted or soured, dishes served cold as if to make them more indigestible. Stomachs full to bursting, they would then go to bed without delay, where sleep meted out dreams to them in proportion to what they had wolfed down. 'Going to the theatre' – thus they laughingly termed bed time, and at the bottom of the staircase, before going up to their rooms, they would wish each other a good show. Nevertheless, from a scarcely comprehensible sense of decency, they refrained from confiding to each other what they had seen, felt, or what they thought had happened to them during the nocturnal performances brought on by their excesses at table. They did not tell each other a word about it the next day when they met after their early tea (which they had in the dining-room, but separately, the daughter first, the father an hour or more later).

The menu being the same as usual, Monsieur Mose sat down to a dish of eels with green salad (pretty to look at, in their frame of blue china) and, without bothering to fill his

plate, he started eating directly from the dish, brutally, voraciously, and did so all the more because Sarah had not followed him to table, where she would sometimes give him stern looks, when he abandoned himself with too much ardour or noise to the pleasures of eating. While wolfing his food, and drinking dark, strong beer, he wondered if she were going to join him. No, she did not come. When he had finished, and was even more heavily replete than usual, he found, when he returned to the drawing-room, that she was no longer there. This did not worry him at all, for he knew the whims of the young lady who on some evenings, did not want any 'theatre'. And he went up to bed before the cigar which he had lit was quite finished, for he would have risked falling asleep in his arm-chair if he had waited any longer.

She had preceded him, reaching the first floor as he had entered the dining-room, and she had shut herself in her room. There was no secret about it, and her father should have remembered, had the food and drink not so stupefied him, that every evening when she had been entrusted with the task of examining precious stones the next day, she would fast and meditate alone before going to sleep. And so, undressed, then clad in her night-dress, having undone her plaits and combed her hair, she remained for minutes or hours motionless on a small, shiny leather sofa. At first she had an impression of cold, for her night-dress was not thick, then she no longer felt anything, and she succeeded in reducing and even in eliminating almost entirely the movement of her thought. She lost all sense of time: she forgot to listen to her heart. Eyes wide in the darkness, she vaguely saw floating grey things, which had no existence at all.

She well knew the curve (if it can be so called) of these states of mental torpor. Taking advantage of a moment when it seemed to her that she was coming out again from a deep hole, she tried to move, and did so. The simple gesture of lighting a lamp beside the sofa cost her an effort of will-power as enormous as that of a drowning man extricating himself from sweet and enveloping waters. After that, it was very simple: she again felt cold, she felt a great weariness,

she had a desire to rest her limbs and gain the warmth of her bed. From a glass tube she poured into her hand three granules which produced unalloyed sleep and wiped out the slightest memory of dreams; she placed them under her tongue to allow them to dissolve slowly, put out the light and got into bed. She fell asleep immediately.

It was at dawn, or shortly afterwards, that she awoke. In order not to risk arriving late at what, better than a tryst, was for her a pledge of honour (for she treated diamonds with a consideration with which she did not often favour human beings), she had left the shutters and curtains wide open, so as to be woken as soon as it was light. Her mind alert, her ideas clear, as they were every time she took those granules in the evening, she did not dawdle at all but jumped out of bed. In the rest of the house, her father and the servant-girls were certainly still sleeping. Without consideration for their sleep, which the noise of the water was perhaps going to disturb, she went into the dressing-room and turned on the taps of the bath. She took a very hot bath (so hot that she had to enter the scalding water little bits at a time, while getting used to it, first a foot, then a leg, then the other, and finally the rest), and she washed her body very carefully, returning again and again to those parts – her sex and her rump – which seemed to her to need the strictest and most scrupulous cleanliness. She omitted to rub herself down with toilet water, wishing to preserve that marvellous lightness which had fallen on her like a state of beatitude, and which a scent, however light, might have destroyed. Then she put on some mules and a dress made of a white woollen material, extremely soft and fine, pure wool, a garment which came from Arabia and which her father had received as a gift one day when he had bought a consignment of turquoises from some merchants from those parts. He had been robbed over the turquoises which, losing their beautiful colour, were dead after a few months, but Sarah, as her share, had received the dress. This, which opened down the front, had no button-holes; it was fastened invisibly by means of a clasp at the neck and another at the waist. Her

hair, which she had combed and brushed at length but had not pinned up, grew warm in contact with the wool. It occurred to her that, through her hair, she was in the process of charging herself with electricity. 'Like a big Leyden jar!' she said to herself, pleased with this thought which added something new to the proceedings, for so far as her toilet and her dress were concerned, she had done no more than follow exactly the rule which she had adopted once and for all in her dealings with stones.

'Would I give someone a shock if they touched me?' she further wondered. 'Would I be able to knock over the man who did so?' Truth to tell, she would not have been displeased to see someone come into her room and try the daring experiment. She would have struck him down beneath a rain of sparks worthy of a lathe, but in her day dream the insolent fellow, whom she imagined crushed, dejected and begging for mercy, remained completely anonymous. Less than a mask, he was like a puppet. Like all the men who had processed past her without her ever having dreamed of looking at one more than at the others, or of subsequently remembering any one face in particular as sufficiently striking not to be merged in the great mass of male faces. Men were something which had not occurred in Sarah Mose's world. She knew all about how they functioned, but she considered herself to be cold, and boasted of this coldness; and she had vowed to live only among stones both now and when her father had passed away.

In the passage, when she left her room, the light which was coming from a grey sky-light was scarcely enough for her not to have to feel her way. When she passed the door of her father's room, of the servants' room, she stopped for a moment, listened, but the thick doors muffled the sound of breathing, nothing could be heard, and it seemed as if the house were quite empty. The main staircase went no further than the first floor. It was succeeded by another, narrow and twisting, which started from behind a door at the end of the passage. This Sarah entered, and she went up to the strong

room, which was situated over the attic, detached like a little pavilion on the roof of the old house.

Up there, there was a circular landing, ill-lit. Sarah at first remained motionless for a moment in order to recover her breath after the rapid ascent, then she undid the two clasps of her dress, threw her arms back and let the garment slip to the ground. She likewise set aside her mules, for it was her wont to come to the precious stones naked and bare-foot. It was as if, in order to have the right to examine them, she too was obliged to assume the state of an object to be examined, divested of the slightest thing which might hinder the investigation.

In her clenched fist a bunch of keys, the exact double of the lapidary's, furnished the key necessary. The lock, which was a triple one, was smooth to the hand; the door moved soundlessly on well-oiled hinges. Inside it was still dark, but handles just inside the room controlled the movement of four large shutters, pulled by cords, supported by counterweights to make them easier to open and shut. Their axis was horizontal, at floor level, so that when the handles were turned they lowered themselves like the petals of a flower caressed by the sun, and let in the daylight in a more or less strong stream, according to the slant, through four bay-windows which almost completely occupied the surface of the walls. The advantage of these shutters was that they were so arranged as entirely to prevent any possible inquisitive people who might, at a pinch, climb on the roofs of neighbouring houses, on the very chimneys or on the weathercocks, from catching a glimpse of anything whatsoever inside the glass-walled room.

The girl therefore adjusted the angle of the shutters so that the room had the best lighting possible, and she shivered a little when the sunbeams fell on her naked body. She went towards the safe, a triangular prism of black steel, which was placed in a corner to the right of the door. She remembered the code-word very well (and she remembered her joy when her father had told it to her); it was *haras*, her own name turned around, 'like a glove', she thought, 'like a

bag, like an octopus that has been caught and killed, its guts hanging out', her name reflected by a mirror.

In order to spell out this word, she knelt on the floor (for the lock was low down) in front of the metal chest. While the little wheels were turning between her fingers, her thoughts, in spite of the attention she had to give to the task, roamed about, and she fell to thinking of pictures painted at different epochs, which, under the pretext of representing historical or mythological deeds, had presented her with the odd combination of a naked girl and a man clad in armour. Often the girl was on her knees in front of the man; sometimes she was a captive, chained to a rock, to a wall, guarded by a dragon, and then the man appeared as a liberator. 'But here,' Sarah was thinking, 'it is I who have power over the knight, since I possess the word which makes him act, and which is my name written backwards. By this master word, I compel him to open his armour and to let me take his treasure.'

When the last letter was set in place, Sarah fitted the key into the lock of the safe and slid the bolt; she pulled the heavy door which swivelled round and came to rest against the wall, exactly at the height of the glazing. Inside, under the dark metal, there was another coffer of the same shape as the large one, but which was merely made of soft leather. It had three drawers in front, which had no locks for they were opened by three brass knobs, and from it there emanated a good smell of new suitcase. A smell of skin, one might properly have said, pursuing a little further the comparison of the defensive piece of furniture with a knight who had surrendered unconditionally, and whose conqueror (the naked girl depicted by the artists) had removed the breast-plate of his armour.

Knowing that the first two drawers contained gems which had already been catalogued, it was in the third drawer, the bottom one, amongst the unset stones, that Sarah Mose looked for the diamonds. The stones, cut and uncut, were in envelopes, in boxes, which bore an indication of their contents; there was also a little leather bag, which was tied up

and sealed with an unbroken seal, which could only be the one which Benaim had sent. Sarah took this bag with respect, as if she were receiving it from the hands of her father, who had put it in the safe the evening before expressly for her, after having merely undone the outer packing and checked that the seals were intact. Careful to hold it a little way away from her body, as if the slightest contact anywhere except with her fingers might have been detrimental to the stones (or dangerous to herself), she placed it on a very large ebony table, which occupied the centre of the room. One corner of this table was gleaming in the sun, but all the rest of its surface, more than three quarters of it, was in the shade. Sarah placed the bag on the shady side, beside various instruments which were mostly used for checking.

Having broken the seal of yellow wax, she still had another task, for the knot which gathered the top of the bag was a multiple one: the wax, which had dried on it, had made it very stiff, and the tie which the sender had used was a leather thong with a wire twined round it. It would doubtless have been simpler to cut it with the pliers. Yet Sarah scorned this tool, two specimens of which were within her reach, amongst the room's equipment. She knew that her pointed nails were sufficiently hard to deal with any fastening, however tough or complicated it might be, and, far from fearing difficulty, she had a tendency to seek it out; in any case, she was not particularly anxious to reach her goal immediately, preferring to dwell on her curiosity a little. The work lasted some time, though rather less than she had expected. Then she loosened the thong and opened the bag.

Out of it came a number of small objects wrapped up in tissue paper, about twenty, no more, scattering over the table top, which was so glossy and so well made that not the least mark of a joint was visible on it, as if it had been cut in a single piece from the heart of a giant ebony tree. Quite naked, Sarah bent over this polished surface, which showed her a reflection of herself, dim, as in a lake at night; she leaned against the edge of the table and it did not need much effort for her long arm to reach those diamonds which had

rolled further away. None of them had fallen on the ground. Leaving aside, for the time being, those which had a white wrapping, the girl took the one which was contained in a twist of azure paper, the bulkiest and heaviest of the batch. Taken from this wrapping (folded six times, meticulously, its purpose being to prevent the stone from getting ground by rubbing against the others), she held it between the tapering thumb and index finger of her hand, beneath her gaze. A magnificent diamond, indeed, not only because of its size, and Sarah, in spite of her cautious nature was obliged to acknowledge that it was even better than anything she could have expected, and that never had she beheld during the several years in which the stones bought by Monsieur Mose had been coming to her for a preliminary examination, either such lustre or such splendid purity, enhanced by such magnificent size. Some people might have considered such purity embarrassing, or even frightening, because of its fire devoid of the slightest trace, however small, of warmth, due to the slightly sappharine whiteness of its light and its absolutely glacial character. There is a degree, in things virgin and pure, which by its excess can inspire fear. And which can be harmful, too (thus has it been said of the most beautiful diamonds that they bring bad luck), when empty individuals are rash enough to expose their flabby bodies and their poorly tempered souls to it. But this excessive degree suited the lapidary's daughter perfectly; she was as naturally in harmony with it as the lizard is with the sun and the barren rock.

She placed the large diamond on a little felt-covered cube; she took a triple magnifying-glass, with a horn handle, which came from the most famous factory in Jena, for it was the instrument which she always used to scrutinize a stone and study it thoroughly. As she made use of the three lenses, and as the magnifying power was not very different from that of a (toy) microscope, the slightest movement blurred the picture, and Sarah had with a very steady hand to hold the magnifying glass almost touching the object with its under-side, while her long eye-lashes brushed against the

other side. In order to do this, she was half-lying on the table, in a rather unstable position. With her legs resting on the floor at a very acute angle, and her stomach flattened against the table, she raised her bust up a little so that her breasts rested lightly on the wood and she could breathe without discomfort. With her elbows on the table, she used her free hand to support her forehead. The cold of the thick ebony, after having reached her stomach, was mounting towards her heart, as if she had thrown herself on a stretch of black earth between piles of snow and thickets laden with hoar-frost; she was conscious of being naked in the small hours of the morning and in solitude, before a stone which, under the magnifying glass, became like an enormous block of ice faintly tinged with azure. 'An ice castle,' she thought, observing the regularity of the outline and the angles cut like the buttresses of a stronghold. She further concluded that it was 'the height of perfection', a thing not dead but alive, or at least animated (owing to such perfection), and that led her to wonder where really, in this early morning encounter between a naked girl and such a rare stone, was the object, and where the judge or the witness. Then, what can have happened, she made perhaps a false movement, her feet slipped on the polished floor and her head fell on to the table; then she had the impression that the magnifying glass went into her eye and she (probably) lost consciousness.

She regained it immediately. She saw that she was shut up in a kind of cell built in the shape of a regular polyhedron, with transparent walls. She got up (for she had flopped down like a sack). It took her some time, some experience of the place and some mental effort to perceive and then to admit the singularly incredible fact, which was that she was a captive inside the diamond, into which she had been thrown by her fall.

It was cold, in her diaphanous prison, and what would she not have given (on condition that she had had something at her disposal which could have served as exchange currency) to have a little wool or cotton at least to cover her back and her bosom? So pure was the air, which her lungs were

breathing in with all possible slowness and every precaution, that it was almost unbreathable. It had the glacial fierceness of the air of mountain peaks, the air which grips a mountaineer at an altitude of over ten thousand feet and which goes to his head. Did it have those glints of light blue, just exactly 'sky' blue, which she remembered having seen playing in the stone when she had set about her first examination of it? Eyes wide open, she tried to distinguish traces of colour, but she saw nothing but absolute transparency. And yet, she could have no doubt that she had been relentlessly plunged into what, a minute earlier, she had been viewing in complete peace of mind from outside, and she was in despair, knowing that she would not long be able to withstand that cold or that too-sharp air. Her fingers, searching for an outlet, encountered everywhere only polished surfaces, equally cold and without the slightest break in them.

In order to try to warm herself, she did some gymnastics, which resulted only in making her breathing more hurried and painful. An onlooker, his eye to the magnifying glass as hers had been a very short while earlier, would have been very amused to see that minute sportswoman in the process of doing knee-bends interspersed with arm-stretches in the centre of the gem. The idea of such an onlooker occurred to Sarah, and she felt she would die of the ridiculousness of the situation she was in; then she felt reassured, thinking that from the outside nothing could be seen in the diamond apart from a lively blue light. In order for one's gaze to penetrate the wall, one had to be inside, as was unfortunately her case.

For she could see through it perfectly. Yes. And when she turned round, on one side she observed the plinth covered in felt from which the diamond had fallen at the moment of her own fall. It rose close by like a cubic building with no openings in it, a Mohammedan tomb perhaps, covered with a kind of bushy and russet-coloured vegetation. Behind it lay the magnifying glass with its lenses asunder, like a milling machine with crystal millstones for use in a factory or a laboratory rather than in an ordinary mill. On the other side, since there was nothing to break the regularity of the

surface of the table, there stretched a vast plane, smooth and black, varied only by the contrast of light and shade. Sarah looked in that direction more insistently, if not hopefully; towards a luminous area made by a beam of sunlight, and which was slowly drawing nearer to the stone as the heavenly body rose in the sky. The girl could reasonably expect its advent to bring a little warmth and an end to her physical sufferings. Her freedom, since it was obvious that there was not, and never would be, anything of which this could be the rational consequence, did not preoccupy her, and as to regaining it she put her trust in the power of the absurd, which is at least as great as that of a bolt from the blue, and would be well able to extricate her from a prison in which it had shut her up so easily.

The impatient girl would have liked to calculate the bright warm sunbeam's approach, but she had no means of measuring time, for she had left her wrist-watch on the bedside table in her room, owing to her care (already mentioned) only to come into contact with precious stones in a state of complete nakedness, without the smallest piece of jewellery, ribbon, or even comb, or the least hairpin. And if she had kept the rule less faithfully would not the said contact, which had not been benign, have risked being much more malign? Large stones are dangerous. One can never take sufficient precautions before approaching them. Sarah thought that her father undoubtedly knew more about this than he said, and that it was with full knowledge of it that he had for some years handed over to her the duty of going to make the preliminary examination of diamond-merchants' consignments. Yet, because she loved him, and because she loved her profession, she did not inveigh against him, she did not get angry with him. Coming back to the sunbeam, the movement of which was not as slow, on second thoughts, as it had seemed, she tried to count at a rhythm equal to seconds, in order to estimate the speed of its progress. With no other result, it must be added, save that of 'passing the time' (which she wished to do); she had not yet estimated anything when the area of light, which had grown in the

interval, reached the immediate vicinity of the stone.

Already the cold seemed to have diminished. Then the sun touched the stone. It did so first at the apex of a bezel, and the line of the angle began to spark like a piece of iron treated with an oxy-acetylene torch; the area grew; a whole facet, licked by the sun slantwise, became as if incandescent, giving off flames in which blue contended with red before joining with it in long purple and violet fringes. Sarah, who, after having thought she would freeze, was now afraid of being burned, had moved as far as she could (not very far) from the flaming pane, and did not take her eyes off it. Thus she did not miss anything of what happened when the solar flame entered the space at the interior of the stone. She saw a kind of dazzling plume penetrate, a kind of brand, its glare increasing with its volume, aimed at her, then, in one flash (because of the refraction, she thought) there was a blaze of light which was a diffusion rather than an explosion (for she felt neither shock nor displacement of air), and the whole diamond was ablaze. The antagonism between blue and red subsisted in this singular conflagration, but the former colour triumphed aggressively over the latter, which was no longer visible except in fleeting glints. The heat (which must have joined forces with the red) had conquered the cold in an even more decisive fashion.

Sarah was conscious of this heat; she knew too that it was too high a temperature for the human body to stand with impunity in ordinary circumstances, and if hers was experiencing no injury, nor even any discomfort, the reason for this was doubtless her union with the mineral substance which had received the beam of fire. In other words, it was in the capacity of a diamond-like particle that she was inhabited by the flame of the sun unharmed. She had scarcely time to be amazed at this (or to reflect on what she had read about the existence of Vulcans, of salamanders and scintillae, which live as naturally in fire as fish in water), for she had just noticed that she was no longer alone inside the diamond.

A man was with her, whose body, quite naked like her own, was supremely beautiful, but whose head was like that

of a lion. His skin, very smooth, was a fiery red; his great mane shone with a golden glitter hardly bearable to the eyes; the hair on his body was gleaming too, but sparse. He was standing in the middle of the stone, opposite the girl, his arms and legs stretched wide apart so that the tips of his hands and of his feet formed the four points of a square inscribed within the polyhedron as if a perfect plane had cut it in two, and so that his navel, at the point of intersection of the diagonals which might have been drawn, coincided exactly with the centre of this imaginary square. His penis was erect, vertical. It reached approximately to two-thirds of the height of the navel. Sarah, who was seeing such a sight for the first time in her life, looked with curiosity at this kind of little man screwed on to the big one (reversed, however, if the scrotum corresponded to the head under the enormous mane), and she thought that there must be, between the big man and the little man, a ratio of proportions as perfect as it was incalculable, governed probably by the number π . She thought that the little man contained the irrational quantity, and that this cylindrical body was the sheath of π . At that point, her thoughts wandered, and she turned away her eyes so as not to have cause to blush, for the idea had occurred to her that if her chastity were to react against the lewd sight with the appropriate redness, then she would no longer be so clearly distinguishable from the man of leonine aspect, to whom she would be brought closer by a similarity in colour, and she was afraid of suffering a thousand evils from such proximity or promiscuity. Trying, in order to protect herself, to retrieve in her mind the memory of the cold which had made her groan, she nevertheless felt a burning fluid mounting in her veins and little by little reaching her face. Her pallor diminished and proceeded to succumb to the flush.

A movement, so close to her that it compelled attention, made her look in front of her once more, since it would have been vain to feign indifference, and she saw that the red man was forsaking the St. Andrew's cross pose in which he had appeared to her. His arms had fallen back to the side of his

body; his mouth and his eyes, a short time ago without expression, had acquired an air of violence and incredible gaiety (Southern, Mediterranean, Greek, or rather Etruscan, thought the girl, while apprehending that all this Southernness boded no good). Making a little jump, which flattened his mane against what could be termed the ceiling of the crystalline room, he brought his feet together with a springy movement. His bare heels touched the ground and, in one stride, he was on Sarah Mose. She had remained watchful, and during this stride she had thrown herself to one side; she had slid under his arm, then into the opposite corner, to find a refuge. He turned round. The space at their disposal was really too restricted for him to need prolonged efforts before seizing her.

She struggled with some vigour, but this did not seem to put the red man off his game. He was smiling, and the arc of his mouth became still broader and further stretched, his eyes shone brighter, his mane blazed more intensely. 'A dancer!' she thought, while trying to flee his embrace. He laid her on a slanting wall, a surface, inclined at forty-five degrees, and held himself at arms' length over her, without touching her with his body, but holding her tight by the wrists in order to compel her to remain motionless.

Then he spoke to her. He did so in a curiously deep voice, a kind of whisper which seemed to come from very far away and, especially, very low down, as if he feared that, by raising his voice, he might arouse echoes which the multiple sides of the polyhedron would send back endlessly. He told her that he had entered the big stone solely in order to be joined to her, for, from a virgin of the race of the prophets and a man with a lion's mane, sprung from a sunbeam and red as fire by virtue of his origin, there would be born, in the near future, an offspring of sovereign spirit through whom the persecuted race would illumine and dominate the whole world. When she heard that, she ceased struggling, for she was proud of being a Jewess. The annunciation of her glorious rôle filled her with calm joy. She remembered that in her secret heart she had always had the certainty that she had

been born to an immense destiny. So this was what it was. There was no question of her refusing (assuming that it had been within her power to accept or refuse the proposal, which was not at all the case, naked as she was and grasped by two powerful hands); she closed her eyes, so that her consent might be understood better than by words. Without loosening his grip on her wrists, the red man lowered himself towards her by bending his arms; he laid his body over hers, he gently parted her thighs, and he penetrated inside her. 'The number π is excruciating,' she thought to herself, and she thought too that she, in her turn, was being crucified, in a position identical or at least similar to that of the man when he had come face to face with her for the first time. But she withstood the pain and, without complaining, she responded to the impetus with which he was rather brutally besetting her.

A noise, outside the stone, made her open her eyes again. She had so completely forgotten the outside world that she had some difficulty in recalling that there did exist a space other than that of the minute, transparent, geometric cell in which she was shut up with a little creature of fire who was in the act of inflicting on her a torture; and, in spite of the pain and the rending, she was not very sure whether it was concrete fact or else a nightmare devoid of reality. As the noise persisted, she realized that someone was knocking at the door, and regretted not having locked it. It swung on its hinges, and Sarah saw a gigantic form passing through, remaining in the shade, however, without interfering in any way with the sunbeam. Monsieur Mose, who had just entered the strong-room, had come up to the table; he leant towards the diamond all bathed in light, and his surprise turned to stupor when he noticed the glowing red lustre given out by the gem, that peerless and purple scintillation which could only come, as the wrapping-paper attested, from the big and very precious stone in which, according to old Benaim, there should have shone the most virginal and frigid blue that ever charmed the eyes of the most exacting of lapidaries. In order to make sure that there was no ques-

tion of an illusion (he wished that it were one), Monsieur Mose took the magnifying glass and stooped lower, without daring to touch the diamond of which, superstitious as always, he was slightly afraid.

'A strange stone,' he murmured. 'Benaim told me that under a lamp he had never seen anything so blue, and he was certainly not lying. How can it be that it is red in the sunlight? And where can my daughter be? I would very much like to know her opinion.'

He would have been greatly astonished, to be sure, terror-stricken even, had he been told that his daughter, whom he could not see, but who could see him, was in none other place but under his very eyes, inside the diamond, and that there she was the victim of that brutal creature who was going hard at her while tossing his wild beast's mane. Above that mane she saw her father's face like an enormous mountain, she saw his woolly hair and his beard floating like clouds round the mountain, she saw his great globulous eye, screwed to the magnifying glass, anxiously examining the crystal in which she was being belaboured without pity or mercy. Then the vision faded, for Monsieur Mose had put down the magnifying glass and was moving away from the table. By chance (perhaps) he had remembered Sarah's dressing-gown and slippers, which he had noticed in a heap on the floor before entering the room. It was a memory which made him hesitate to remain there any longer, because of the nakedness which it implied. He went out.

Sarah felt the male spilling over inside her for the second time, as he bit her neck, gently, without breaking the skin, after the example of lions which thus hold captive the female during coitus. She would have liked to reproach him with having violated her under the very eye of her father, even though invisibly. And then, she was in pain. Had she not had enough suffering and humiliation, and had she not sufficiently consented to all that was necessary for her to be able to accomplish her task? She looked at him who was to make her fruitful (the word lover could not occur to her mind), and she had the impression that he had grown paler

since the beginning of his assault on her, as if the tortures he was inflicting on her were no less injurious to the tormentor than they were to the victim. Certainly he was losing colour, and what is more, was doing so quickly, and in the same way as a decanter of wine does which one empties by holding it upside down over a sink. He withdrew himself from her (it was his last perceptible movement); he disappeared, for the sunbeam, shifting as the sun climbed in the sky, had just left the stone. There remained not the slightest trace of red inside the polyhedron. The cold suddenly returned, with unbearable violence, and Sarah fainted, imagining as she did so that snowy waters were swirling over her or that she was being hurled to the bottom of a lake, the frozen surface of which had given beneath her feet.

When she regained consciousness, she had left the diamond, no less mysteriously, no less naturally, than she had entered it. She was on the ground, or rather on the floor, between the table and the safe. Her legs were wide apart, and a rather sharp pain, situated towards her midpoint, confirmed memories which were still blurred, and showed the girl had not been deluded by a dream. Another proof was some blood, which had slightly stained the lower part of her belly and one of her thighs. Her memory began to function more actively again. No, she had not dreamed it; she could be certain of that.

After having waited a little while in order to remedy her weakness and to rest from her hardships, Sarah got up, went and took the diamond in which she had suffered, and, without further examining it (for everything might have begun all over again . . .) she did it up in the twist of paper in which it had been wrapped. Together with the other stones gathered from the table, it went back into the bag; the bag went back in its place in the drawer of the coffer, the steel cabinet was carefully closed, and the letters of the word were jumbled up again. Sarah re-closed the shutters, then she went out of the room, leaving everything where it had been previously. On the landing, she dressed again (she had only to pull on her dress and slip her feet into her mules). While

going downstairs she had a curious impression: she felt herself heavy with a marvellous weight. She did not wash herself at all; she went to bed, fell asleep immediately, and slept until lunch time.

The next day and the days that followed, many times, at varied intervals, Monsieur Mose examined the large diamond. Whichever way he turned it, at whatever angle, or in whatever light he put it, he never made out that beautiful blue lustre which the man who had sold it had compared to that of the pole-star, that frigid purity which had been many a time guaranteed to him and for which he had agreed to pay a very high price, for it would have assured him of an even higher resale price. He had thought he must be mad, or accursed, when, far from the resplendence on which, in his blind faith in his colleague's promises, he had been counting, he discerned, towards the centre of the stone, a speck so clearly distinct from the surrounding substance that one could not in all honesty deny that it was that most abominable of all things: a flaw. After that, at each fresh examination, his gaze again found the defective speck: he almost infallibly lighted upon it straight away. Truth to tell, it was not exactly a speck, but rather a little red stain, such as the bursting of a blood vessel produces under the skin, or else like an ember seen glowing among the ashes of a dying fire. But what was strangest and most maddening (the word suited the mood of Monsieur Mose, who persisted in feeling threatened with insanity and was secretly entreating his daughter to love him sufficiently to look after him) was that it seemed to increase in size week by week, and that after a little over a month it had become much more vivid (it seemed) and at the same time much more solid and extensive. Sarah, who had kept the stone under observation, had not failed to notice the matter. Her opinion should have been worth hearing. Why then did she refuse to give it, and why, each time she was questioned about the examination she had made of the stone, did she only reply by averting her eyes and, if the questions persisted, by leaving the room (even in the middle of a meal)? Why did she obstinately

refuse to join her father in re-examining the flawed diamond, why did she not even want to go into the strong-room any more?

By way of settling the matter (the lapidary was one of those men who feel the need to settle things as an imperative duty) one day when he had again vainly tried to make his daughter talk, Monsieur Mose said:

‘Old Benaïm was making fun of us, but I shall give him tit for tat. Whether he wants to or not, I’ll make him take that bewitched stone back.’

At that Sarah, as if by a miracle, recovered her speech. It was in order to beg her father not to break the deal, to insist, rather, on a reduction of the agreed price, but to keep this diamond to which she had become attached (as she rather confusedly said) ‘more than to anything in the world after her father’, since that morning when she had had the good fortune of being faced with it for the first time. And she so entreated and implored him that Monsieur Mose, who was less concerned about money than about peace and quiet, granted her all she wanted, without understanding anything. More: he gave her the stone, and suggested having it mounted as a ring. The work was given to the best craftsman, as an urgent order, and was soon completed. Two days later Sarah had the ring, which from then on never left her finger. She would seek out solitude, and would take from her pocket a magnifying glass once again, in order to see a bright red mark growing in the heart of what she called her nuptial stone; just as she knew and felt that there was growing in her womb the little being who had been conceived of a virgin and a kind of red and virile lion sprung from a sunbeam, he who would soon be born for the glory of the long-persecuted race.

THE LOVE-MASTER

by Charles Beaumont

'My wife is frigid,' said the young man, getting directly to the point. 'That's the long and the short of it.'

'Nonsense!' Salvadori raised a desiccated finger to his fine Roman nose. 'Women,' he declared, 'are creatures of milk and blood and fire; they are cradles of delight, ships of spices, doorways leading to lands of wonder!'

'That may be,' responded the young man. 'But my wife Beatrice—'

'—is no different.' Candlelight shot the rapids of the Love-Master's brook-grey hair as he nodded impatiently. 'I assure you of that.'

'You don't know her.'

'She is a woman? Young? Healthy?'

'Yes.'

'Then I do not need to know her.' Salvadori rolled the wheel chair up close to his visitor and studied the lean, pale features. There was something vaguely disturbing here, something a bit off-centre, but he could not place it. Perhaps the hat, a large and incongruous Stetson. 'Mr. Cubbison, I trust that you, yourself, are not — ah—'

The young man flushed. 'There is nothing wrong with me,' he said. 'Physically.'

'Then,' Salvadori said, 'you have little to worry about. Only remember this: There is no such thing as a frigid woman. They are all as alike as locks, and want but the proper key.'

'Nice simile,' Cubbison granted, 'but not very believable. I've tried everything.'

At that the Love-Master grinned, crookedly, like an ancient tiger. He was incredibly old, that much one could see in the parchmented flesh, the veined and white-whiskered arms, the woollen shawl tucked under tremblous knees; but there was power of a kind in that creaking hull of skin, and from those dark olive eyes there shone a light that told of other years, better days.

'Everything, Mr. Cubbison?'

Once again the visitor flushed. His glance travelled uncomfortably over the dusty, dusky room, returning at last to the old man in the wheel chair. 'I think perhaps we ought to get down to business,' he said nervously. 'But I warn you, I haven't much faith in love potions or spells or any of that sort of thing.'

'Nor do I,' replied Salvadori. *'They are buncombe.'*

Cubbison's eyes flickered. 'I'm afraid I don't understand,' he said. 'I'd heard that you were some kind of a wizard.'

'And so I am,' the old man laughed. *'In a way. But I am no thief. I offer no magical formulae for success: merely the benefit of personal experience. This disappoints you?'*

'It surprises me.'

'Then you are typical. I cannot count the number of young frustrates who have come to me expecting miracles, hoping for pentagrams or at the very least, genii. They all felt quite cheated when I offered them, instead, conversation. But that attitude changed soon enough.'

'Indeed?'

'Oh, yes. For, you see, I have never had an unsuccessful case.'

'Never?'

Salvadori adjusted his white silk scarf. 'Never,' he said, humbly. His eyes momentarily gathered the distance of years. 'There is actually nothing complex or sinister about it,' he said. 'Had I been a great matador in my youth, I would today be dispensing advice to neophyte *toreros*; similarly if I had been a great race driver, or hunter, or soldier. As it happens, I was a great lover.' He sighed. 'Alas, the rewards for my endeavours were not tangible. They could not

be carried in the pocket, like a bull's ear, or mounted on the mantel, like a gold cup; yet they were real enough, and I have them all – *here*.' Salvadori tapped his forehead.

Cubbison coughed and the old man's mind surfaced.

'Well, young fellow, do you want to avail yourself of my services, or not?'

'I can't see that it would do any harm.'

'Very well, then. Pull up a chair.'

The thin, hatted man dusted the seat of a harp-back with a handkerchief of fine linen and moved forward. 'About the price—' he began.

'Afterwards,' Salvadori chuckled. He settled his iron-maned head against the pillow, closed his eyes and murmured: 'Describe the subject. High points only, please.'

'Well, she's . . . fairly attractive. Twenty-seven years of age. Hundred and ten pounds, I imagine. Good shape. May I smoke?'

'Describe the subject, Mr. Cubbison.'

The young man took a long puff on the cigarette, then blurted: 'Dammit, she's a fish, that's all. When we married, I understood that she'd been everywhere, done everything; you know, woman of the world. But I can't believe it. No matter what one tries, Beatrice simply shakes her head and treats the whole thing as if it were a pathetic joke. Of course, she *claims* to want to love – don't they all? – and she *pretends* to co-operate, but the end is always the same. Sometimes she cries, or laughs, or sits awake all night smoking; mostly she just says, "Sorry, no good".'

Salvadori listened carefully. Occasionally he would open one eye, then close it again. At length, when the visitor had concluded, he put his hands together and said: 'Mr. Cubbison, I am glad to report yours is one of the more basic dilemmas. I anticipate no difficulty whatever.'

The young man's eyes widened. 'You can say that?' he asked. 'After all I've told you?'

'Of course,' Salvadori leaned forward in the wheel chair. The guttering candle brought his handsome profile into sharp relief. 'In fact, I shall prescribe a comparatively mild,

but highly effective, remedy. Cubbison, have you ever heard of "*The Chinese Flip*" method?"

'No, I can't say that I have.'

'Then listen. Performed with anything approaching accuracy, this should put an end to your problem.' Upon which remark, Salvadori went on to describe in minute detail Method No. 12, which he'd learned a half-century before in Bechuanaland. He observed the shocked expression on his visitor's face and went through it all a second time.

'Good Lord,' said the young man.

'Nothing, really, once you get the hang of it. But a word of caution – don't overdo. And now, good evening. I will see you tomorrow at midnight.'

The Love-Master watched the gaunt young client walk dazedly from the room; then, when the door was closed, he fell into a sleep of dreams.

Next evening at twelve the soft knock came and Salvadori wheeled his aging body to the door. It was Mr. Cubbison, looking frailer and paler than ever before.

'No saccharine displays of gratitude,' the Love-Master murmured, 'and, please, no lurid descriptions. A simple cheque for one hundred dollars will suffice.'

But the young man did not smile or make a move towards his chequebook.

'What's the trouble, are you ill?' Salvadori inquired, frowning. 'It went well, needless to say?'

'No,' the visitor said. 'It didn't.'

'Not at all?'

'No.'

'Hmm.' Salvadori looked startled for an instant, then regained his composure. 'Well,' he smiled, 'it appears I underestimated the subject. Score one for her!'

'I'm afraid it isn't any use,' Cubbison said, sighing deeply. 'Of course, you could meet her – that is—'

'Sorry! I no longer make house calls. It's a cardinal policy I've had to adopt, for reasons that should be manifest. For almost twenty years, Cubbison, women have tried to seduce me out of retirement; they have come by the hundreds and

employed every low trick known to the female mind, but always they have failed. In the School for Scandal I am a professor *emeritus* and so it must and shall remain. Besides, we're in no trouble yet. Merely a call for stronger medicine . . .'

The old man tented his fingers and thought for a long time.

'Cubbison, I think we are going to try a little something called "*The Australian Hop*" – a facetious-sounding but nonetheless lethal technique, originally developed for a certain recalcitrant maiden in the brush country, who – but never mind that. Tell me, how are your muscles?'

'All right, I suppose.'

'Then pay strict attention. The first step . . .'

In a way, Salvadori felt ashamed, for Method 18 was nominally for advanced students. It was a lot of technique for an amateur to handle. Still, there was one's reputation to consider; and though one might become old and jaded, one had to eat . . .

When the gloved knock sounded again the following night, Salvadori chuckled, imagining the beatific expression of his client.

'Well?'

Cubbison shook his head sadly: there was a look of ineffable weariness – and defeat – about his eyes. 'No go,' he said.

Salvadori blinked. 'This,' he hawked, 'is difficult to believe. You followed my instructions?'

'To the letter.'

'And the subject . . . did not respond?'

'Oh, she responded, all right. Like a dead eel. Like a frozen trout— See here, Mr. Salvadori, I'm very much afraid that Beatrice is beyond even your powers. I think we ought to give up. She and I will just go on living like sister and brother.'

'What?' The Love-Master reached out a trembling hand and laid it across his client's face. 'Mr. Cubbison, don't be

obscene. You have not, I hope, orally capitulated with your wife?"

'Beg pardon?"

'Let it go. Be quiet a moment; I must think.' Salvadori made fists and put them to his temples. 'In the summer of '04,' he said slowly, 'in Florence, I made the acquaintance of a certain Princess, an altogether ravishing vessel but, alas, caught up like a fly in the web of virtue. It was perhaps my second most trying case, hard fought and won at no small expense. However, *won*. As I recall, it was Method 26 – "*The Drunken Reptile*" – that turned the trick.'

Mr. Cubbison, looking thin and wan beneath the Stetson, shrugged.

'My boy, my boy,' Salvadori said, gently, in a voice thick with confidence, 'you mustn't despair. Remember: "No tree so tall / it cannot fall." Now listen . . .'

As the Love-Master spoke, seated there like a time-lost fragment of Roman sculpture, Cubbison's eyes grew large and frightened and occasionally he gasped.

Then he grinned. 'Salvadori,' he said, 'what you have just described is without doubt the most shocking thing I've ever heard. But,' he rose, 'it might work!'

'Might? It will,' the old man said. 'You can count on that. Beatrice will love your forever!'

But, when the visitor left Salvadori did not find sleep so easy. It had been a long time since he'd heard of a woman whose defenses could withstand both *The Chinese Flip* and *The Australian Hop*. He could not even imagine a woman in *this* age upon whom Method 26 would not work its fiendish spell.

And yet . . .

'She laughed at me,' the hatted Cubbison said, hotly. 'Called me a damned acrobat!'

'You are surely exaggerating!'

'Not a bit. Laughed, I tell you. Said, "Bunny, that's a scream!"'

'At what point?'

'The penultimate point. Where, according to your thesis, she ought to have been undulating in helpless frenzies.'

'Gad.' Salvadori bit his lip. 'In this case, I fear it's time we brought out The Big Guns. Mr. Cubbison, yours has turned out, I must confess, to be a rare case; most rare, indeed. But the battle is not lost.'

At which time the Love-Master, throwing caution to the winds, explained the workings of Method 34, '*The Tasmanian Trounce, Double Switchback and Rebound!*' It shocked even his hardened sensibilities; but it was foolproof. No female could resist its insidious puissance; not possibly!

'She fell asleep,' Cubbison said, one night later.

Salvadori got a wild, frantic look in his eyes. He outlined the dreadful Method 37 – '*The Creeping Terror*' – which, he recalled, had driven the Marquis de Silva Ramos' wife mad as a March hare thirty summers previous.

'She yawned,' said Cubbison.

And Salvadori thought, *What a woman! She must indeed have been everywhere and done everything!* Carefully, he went through his entire repertoire, not excluding the nerve-shattering '*Belgian Carousel*' (Method 51) nor even '*Roman Times*' (Method 60), held in reserve since its first use on the adamant Lady Titterington, long gone to her reward.

But always it was the same. Always Cubbison would return with his report of failure. 'She giggled,' he would say; or, 'She just looked at me.'

Until at last, Salvadori saw clearly that there was but one thing to do.

'Mr. Cubbison, I have reached a decision. It violates my strictest rule of business, but, under the circumstances, there in unhappily no choice.'

'Yes?' said Mr. Cubbison.

'There is one technique,' Salvadori whispered, 'which I have not mentioned. Method 100. It bears no name. It is absolutely guaranteed: on that, sir, I would stake my life.' His countenance reddened with fierce pride. 'However – to

describe it to you would (and I mean no offense) be tantamount to handing a jar of nitroglycerin to a three-year-old baboon. I shudder to think of the consequences of even one small error . . . Only two men have ever mastered Method 100. The first, or so the rumour goes, was Don Giovanni. The second, myself. Therefore—'

The young client leaned forward, breathing heavily.

'Therefore, I shall make my first house call in fifteen years!'

Cubbison leaped to his feet; he seemed on the edge of tears. 'Salvadori, can you mean it!' he quavered. 'Would you?'

The old man raised a claw. 'I dislike emotional excess,' he said with distaste. 'Please sit down and pay attention. Now: you will make very certain that the room is in darkness. Understood?'

'Yes, of course.'

'And do not call me until the subject is nearly asleep. That is quite important. Should my identity be discovered' – Salvadori gave way to a paroxysm – 'I'd have no peace for the rest of my days. The subject would be at my door constantly, entreating, imploring, threatening . . . It would be horrible.'

'But,' said Cubbison, 'here is something. If I cannot repeat Method 100—'

'Once,' Salvadori said, 'is enough. She will, of course, go on hoping, but meanwhile (the ice having been broken, as it were) the other techniques will suffice.'

The young man took the Love-Master's boney shoulders. 'I – I hardly know what to say.'

'Say good night, Mr. Cubbison. I do this only because it is necessary, and do not wish to dwell on it. I shall see you later.'

Having braved the strumpet winds, Salvadori sat panting wearily in the darkened alcove, ruminating with displeasure on the ordeal before him. When a knight is old, he mused, heavy lie the cudgels. Heavy the mace and heavy the dirk and hard the battle.

He began to nod sleepily.

Then a voice whispered, 'Now!' and the Love-Master straightened, senses alert. He rolled the chair in rubbery silence to the black room and entered.

'Cubbison?' he hissed softly.

No answer.

Well enough. Instinct brought him to the panoplied bed. Reflex put him into it.

He lay still for a time, going over Method 100 in his mind; then, listening to the steady breathing, absorbing the feral warmth, reluctantly he struck.

It went perfectly.

At the precise moment planned, he hurled his wizened frame back into the chair, exited the room, whispered 'Cubbison, hop to it!' and caromed clattering out of the house, into the dark and wind-swept streets.

'All over.' He rumbled a mighty sigh. Reputation or no reputation, he told himself, rolling up the concrete ramp to his quarters, he would never again break the rule.

Sleep for the Love-Master was immediate.

Promptly at midnight the next evening, there came again the gloved knock. Salvadori set aside his dish of smoked oysters. He was weak and racked with bamboo shoots of pain, but no longer disturbed.

'Come in, Mr. Cubbison.'

The young man entered; he was smiling peculiarly.

'The charge,' Salvadori said crisply, 'is one thousand dollars. Cash, if you don't mind.'

The visitor laid ten one-hundred-dollar bills on the scarred table.

'I trust it went well?'

'Oh, yes!'

'Everything satisfactory?'

'Yes!'

'Then, Cubbison, good-bye to you.'

The visitor, however, made no indication that he was prepared to leave. His smile grew broader. Then, suddenly, he rushed forward and planted a kiss on Salvadori's forehead.

'Damn it, boy,' the old man spluttered, 'get away!' Then Salvadori, the Love-Master, touched his assailant and gasped. His eyeballs threatened to roll from their sockets.

For the visitor, still smiling, had stepped back and, for the first time, removed the large Stetson; and golden lock of hair had cascaded forth.

'Cubbison, in the name of decency!'

'I hope that you'll forgive me, darling,' the visitor said, taking off coat, trousers, shirt and other encumbrances, 'but it was the only way I could have you. And I couldn't take less!'

Salvadori's knuckles bleached against the chairarms. Within moments, to his profound dismay, he was staring at a woman of immense beauty – full-rounded, soft, and white as an elephant's tusk.

He shrank against the pillow as she laughed once and started padding toward him with all the deadly stealth of a starved panther.

Cubbison!' Salvadori croaked, refusing to believe the trick that had been played. '*Cubbison!*'

The woman paused. 'Call me Beatrice,' she said.

And then she sprang.

OPERATION INCUBUS

by Poul Anderson

'No,' I said to my bride's business associate. 'You are not coming along on the honeymoon.'

He laid back his ears. 'Mneowrr!' he said resentfully.

'You'll be quite all right by yourself in this apartment for a month,' I told him. 'The superintendent has promised to feed you every evening, the same time as he sets out the milk for the Brownie. And don't forget, when the Brownie comes in here, you are not to chase him. The last time you did that, the Good People sweetened our martinis three days in a row.'

Svartalf glowered yellow-eyed and switched his tail. I suppose that was cat for, Well, dammit, anything the size of a mouse, which scuttles like a mouse, has got to expect to be treated like a mouse.

'He'll be here to dust and change *your* litterbox,' I reminded Svartalf in my sternest voice. 'You've got the run of the place, and you can fly up the chimney on the whisk-broom anytime you want fresh air. But the Brownie is off limits, bucko, and if I come back and hear you've been after him, I'll take wolf shape and tree you. Understand?'

Svartalf jerked his tail at me, straight upward.

Virginia Graylock, who had now for an incredible few hours been Mrs. Stephen Matuchek, entered the living room. I was so stunned by the view of tall slenderness in a white dress, straight aristocratic features and red hair shouting down to her shoulders, that the voice didn't register except as a symphonic accompaniment. She had to repeat: 'Darling, are you absolutely sure we can't take him? His feelings are hurt.'

I recovered enough to say, 'His feelings are made of tool steel. It's okay if he wants to share our bed when we get back, I guess – within reason – but fifteen pounds of black witchcat on my stomach when I'm honeymooning is out of reason. Besides, what's worse, he'd prefer your stomach.'

Ginny blushed. 'It will be so odd without my familiar, after all these years. If he promised to behave—'

Svartalf, who had been standing on a table, rubbed against her hip and purred. Which was not a bad idea, I thought. However, I had my foot down and wasn't about to lift it. 'He's incapable of behaving,' I said. 'And you won't need him. We're going to forget the world and its work, aren't we? I'm not going to study any texts, nor visit any of my fellow theriomorphs, even that were-coyote family down at Acapulco who invited us to drop in. You're not going to cast any spells nor attend any covens. It's going to be just us two, and we don't want any pussy—' I braked as fast as possible. She only sighed a little, nodded, and stroked a soothing hand across the cat's back.

You might think a successful, high-salaried New York witch would be anything but innocent. Certainly Ginny had a temper and her own kind of sophistication. However, quite apart from a stubbornly loyal and clean personality, she had hitherto practiced those branches of the Art which require maidenhood. She would have to relearn a great many aspects of her own trade, now she was married. Which was one reason we were going to college together: I for an engineering degree (getting straight A's in Shamanistics and Differential Equations, but having some trouble with Arcane Languages and Electronics) and she for a doctorate in thaumaturgy (plus instruction in those techniques she would have to know to compensate for being wedded).

In short, my fire-and-ice girl had become, temporarily, only another bride. And what's so only about that?

'All right, dear,' she said. With a flick of her earlier self: 'Enjoy wearing the family pants while you can.'

'I intend to do so all the time,' I bragged.

She cocked her head. 'All the time?' Hastily: 'We'd best be on our way. Everything's packed.'

'Check, mate,' I agreed. She stuck out her tongue at me. I patted Svartalf. 'So long, chum. No grudges, I trust?' He bit a piece out of my hand and said he supposed not. Ginny hugged him, seized my arm, and hurried me out.

The home to which we'd be coming back was a third-floor apartment near Trismegistus University. Our wedding this morning had been quiet, a few friends at the church, a luncheon afterwards at somebody's house, and then we made our farewells. But Ginny's connections in New York and mine in Hollywood have money. Several people had clubbed together to give us a Persian carpet: a somewhat overwhelming present, but show me the bridal couple that doesn't like a touch of luxury.

It lay on the landing, its colors aglow in the sun. Our baggage was piled in the rear. We snuggled down side by side on cushions of polymerized sea foam. Ginny murmured the command words. We started moving so smoothly I didn't notice when we were airborne. The carpet wasn't as fast or flashy as a sports-model broomstick, but the hundred dragonpower spell on it got us out of the city in minutes.

Midwestern plains rolled green and enormous beneath us, here and there a river like argent ribbon; but we were alone with birds and clouds. The force screen was so well designed that we never felt the wind of our passage. Ginny slipped off her dress. She had a sunsuit beneath it, and now I understand transistor theory – the absence of material has as real an existence as the presence. We sunbathed on our way south, stopped at twilight to have supper at a charming little restaurant in the Ozarks, but decided not to stay in a broomotel. Instead, we flew on. The carpet was soft and thick and roomy. I started to raise the convertible top, but Ginny said we'd keep warm enough if we flew low, and she was right. Stars crowded the sky, until a big yellow Southern moon rose to drown half of them, and the air was murmurous, and we could hear crickets chorus from the dark earth below, and nothing else is any of your business.

I knew exactly where I was bound. A wartime friend of mine, Juan Fernandez, had put his Army experience to good

use. He'd been in the propaganda section, and done many excellent scripts. These days, instead of nightmares, he was broadcasting one of the most popular dream series on the West Coast, and his sponsors were paying him accordingly. In fact, everyone loved Fernandez except the psychoanalysts, and they're obsolete now that scientific research has come up with some really efficient anti-possession techniques. Last year he had built a lodge in the country of his ancestors. It stood all by itself on the Sonora coast, at one of the loneliest spots on Midgard and one of the most beautiful. Fernandez had offered me the use of it this month for our honeymoon.

We glided down about noon the next day. Westward, the Gulf of California burned blue and molten white. Surf broke on a wide strip of sand beach, then cliffs raised tier after tier, finally the land itself rolled off to the east, dry, stark, and awesome. The lodge made a little spot of green, perched on the lowest bluff just above the strand.

Ginny clapped her hands. 'Oh! I wouldn't have believed it!'

'You Easterners don't know what big country is,' I said smugly.

She shaded her eyes against the sun-dazzle and pointed. 'But what's that?'

My own gaze travelled no further than her arm, but I remembered well enough. Atop a cliff, about a mile north of the lodge and several hundred feet higher, crumbling walls surrounded a rubbleheap; the snag of one tower stood at the northwest angle, to scowl among winds. 'La Fortaleza,' I said. 'It's Spanish work, Seventeenth Century. Some Don had an idea he could exploit this area for profit. He erected the castle as a strong point and residence, even brought a wife here from Castile. But everything went wrong and the place was soon abandoned.'

'Can we explore it?'

'If you like.'

Ginny laid a hand on my shoulder. 'What's wrong, Steve?'

'Oh . . . nothing. I don't care for the Fortaleza myself.'

Even as a human by daylight, I sense wrongness. I went over there once after dark, wolf shape, and then it stank. Not so much in a physical way, but – Oh, forget it.’

She said soberly: ‘The Spaniards enslaved the Indians in those times, didn’t they? I imagine a lot of human agony went into that castle.’

‘And left a residuum. Yeah, probably. But hell, it was long ago. We’ll have a look around. The ruins are picturesque, and the view from there is tremendous.’

‘If you really are worried about ghosts—’

‘Forget it, darling! I’m not superstitious!’

And then we landed at the lodge and did indeed forget it.

The place was built in cloister style, white walls and red-tile roof enclosing a courtyard where a fountain played. But there was also a garden surrounding the outside, green with leaves and grass, red and white and purple and gold with flowerbeds. We were quite alone. The grounds were elementalized for Earth and Water, so they needed no attendants; the other two elemental forces kept the house air-conditioned, and there was also an expensive cleanliness spell on it. Ginny prepared a Mexican lunch from the supplies we’d brought along. She was so beautiful in shorts, halter, and frilly apron that I hadn’t the heart to offer to teach her to cook. She exclaimed aloud when the dirty dishes floated back to the kitchen and followed to watch them dive into soapy water and frisk around. ‘It’s the most up-to-date automatic dishwasher I’ve ever seen!’ she cried.

So we had plenty of time for an afternoon of surfbathing. At sunset we climbed back up a stairway hewn from the yellow rock, ravenous, and I prepared steaks by introducing them to a charcoal fire but allowing no further conversation. Afterwards we moved out on a patio overlooking the sea. We sat in deck chairs, holding hands, and the stars came out to greet us.

‘Let’s Skinturn at moonrise and frolic a bit,’ I suggested. ‘You’d make a delightful lady wolf. Or, hm. I wou— Never mind!’

She shook her head. ‘I can’t, Steve, dear.’

'Sure, you can. You'd need a T-spell, of course, but—'

'That's just it. You have lycanthropic genes; all you need to change species is polarized light. But for me it's a major transformation, and . . . I don't know . . . I don't feel able to do it. I can't even remember the formulas. I guess I'm not able, any more. All my professional knowledge has gotten even fuzzier than I expected. I'll need refresher courses in the most elementary things.'

I sighed. I'd been looking forward to wolfing it. You don't really know the world till you've explored it with animal as well as human sense, and Ginny was certainly a part of the world — Whoa, there! 'Okay,' I said. 'Next year, when you're an adept again.'

'Of course. I'm sorry, darling. If you want to run off by yourself, werewise, go ahead.'

'Not without you.'

She chuckled. 'You might get fleas, anyhow.' She was leaning over to nibble my ear when we both heard the footsteps.

I rose to my feet, muttering inhospitable things. A form, shadowy under the velvet sky, approached us over a path which snaked inland. Who the devil? I thought. Someone from the village, ten miles hence? But — My nose in human shape is dull by my wolf standards, but suddenly there was a smell I didn't like. It wasn't unpleasant; indeed, its pungency seemed all at once to heighten Ginny's half-visible beauty to an unbearable degree. And yet something in me bristled.

I stepped forward as the stranger reached our patio. He was medium tall for a Mexican, which made him shorter than me. He moved so gracefully, no more loudly than smoke, that I wondered if he could be a werecougar. A dark cape over an immaculate white suit garbed the supple body. His wide-brimmed hat made the face obscure, till he took it off and bowed. Then light from a window touched him. I had never seen so handsome a man, high cheekbones, Grecian nose, pointed chin, wide-set eyes of a gold-flecked greenish grey. His skin was whiter than my wife's, and the

sleek hair was ash-blond. I wondered if he was even a Mexican national, let alone of native stock.

'*Buenas noches, señor,*' I said curtly. '*Pardón, pero no hablamos español.*' Which was not quite true, but I didn't want to make polite chitchat.

The voice that answered was tenor or contralto, I couldn't decide which, but music in any case. 'I' faith, good sir, I speak as many tongues as needful. I pray forgiveness, but having observed from afar that this house was lighted, methought its master had returned, and I did but come with neighbourly greeting.'

His pronunciation was as archaic as the phrasing: the vowels, for instance, sounded Swedish, though the sentences didn't have a Swedish rhythm. At the moment, however, I was surprised by the words themselves. 'Neighbour?'

'My sister and I have made abode within yon ancient castle.'

'What? But - Oh.' I stopped Fernandez hadn't mentioned anything like this, but then, he himself hadn't been here for months. The Fortaleza and grounds belonged to the Mexican government, from which he had purchased a few acres for his hideaway. 'Did you buy it, then?'

'A few rooms were made a right comfortable habitation for us, sir,' he evaded. 'I hight Amaris Maledicto.' The mouth, so cleanly shaped that you scarcely noticed how full it was, curved into an altogether charming smile. Had it not been for the odour in my nostrils, I might have been captivated. 'You and your fair lady are guests, then, of Señor Fernandez? Be welcome.'

'We've borrowed the lodge.' Ginny's voice was a little breathless. I stole a glance, and saw by the yellow window-light that her eyes were full upon his, and brilliant. 'Our . . . our name . . . Virginia. Stephen and Virginia . . . Matuchek.' I thought, with a cold sort of puzzlement, that brides were supposed to make a great show of being Mrs. So-and-So, not play it down in that fashion. 'It's very kind of you to walk all this way. Did your . . . your sister . . . come too?'

'Nay,' said Maledicto. 'And truth to tell, however glad of

your society, 'tis belike well she was spared the sight of such loveliness as is yours. 'Twould but excite envy and wistfulness.'

From him, somehow, unbelievably, in that flowering night above the great dim sea, under stars and sheer cliffs, that speech to another man's wife wasn't impudent, or affected, or anything except precisely right. Even by the half-illumination on the patio, I saw Ginny blush. Her eyes broke free of Maledicto's, the lashes fluttered birdlike, she answered confusedly: 'It's so kind of you ... yes ... won't you sit down?'

He bowed again and flowed into a chair. I plucked at Ginny's dress, drew her back towards the house and hissed furiously: 'What the devil are you thinking of? Now we won't get rid of this character for an hour!'

She shook free with an angry gesture I remembered from past quarrels. 'We have some cognac, Señor Maledicto,' she said. It would have been her best smile she gave him, slow and sideways, except that the faintest tremble was still upon her lips. 'I'll get it. And would you like a cigar? Steve brought some Perfectos.'

I sat down as she bustled inside. For a moment I was too outraged to speak. Maledicto took the word. 'A charming lass, sir. A creature of purest delight.'

'My *wife*,' I growled. 'We came here for privacy.'

'Oh, misdoubt me not!' His chuckle seemed to blend with the sea-murmur. Where he sat, in shadow, I could make him out only as a white and black blur; and yet those oblique eyes glowed at me. 'I understand, and shall not presume upon your patience. Mayhap later 'twould please you to meet my sister—'

'I don't play bridge.'

'Bridge? Oh, aye, indeed, I remember. 'Tis a modern game with playing cards.' His hand sketched an airy dismissal. 'Nay, sir, our way is not to force ourselves unwanted. Indeed, we cannot visit save where some desire for us exists, albeit unspoken. 'Twas but ... how should a man know aught from our dwelling, save that neighbours had arrived? And now I

cannot churlishly refuse your lady's courtesy. But 'tis for a short time only, sir.'

Well, that was as soft an answer as ever turned away wrath. I still couldn't like Maledicto, but my hostility was eased enough so I could analyse my motives. Which turned out to be largely reaction to a third wheel. Something about him, maybe the perfume he used, made me desire Ginny more than ever before.

But my rage came back as she hovered over him with the cognac, chattered too loudly and laughed too much and insisted on having the Maledictos to dinner tomorrow! I hardly listened to their conversation. He talked smoothly, wittily, never quite answering any questions about himself. I sat and rehearsed what I'd say after he left.

And finally he rose. 'I must not keep you,' he said. 'Moreover, 'tis a stony path to the Fortaleza, one with which I am not yet familiar. So I must go slowly, lest I lose my way.'

'Oh! But that could be dangerous.' Ginny turned to me. 'You've been over the trail, Steve. Show him home.'

'I'd not afford you that much trouble,' demurred Maledicto.

'It's the least we can do. I insist, Amaris. It won't take you long, Steve. You said you felt like a run in the moonlight, and look, the moon is almost due to come up.'

'Okay, okay, okay!' I snapped, as ungraciously as possible. I could, indeed, turn wolf on the way back, and work some of my temper off. If I tried to argue with her now, the way I felt, our second night would see one Armageddon of a quarrel. 'Let's go.'

He kissed her hand. She said good night in a soft, blurry voice, like a schoolgirl in love for the first time. He had a flashlight; it made a small bobbing puddle of radiance before us, picking out stones and clumps of sagebrush. The moon-glow on the eastern ridges grew stronger. I felt it tingle along my nerves. For a while, as we wound over the mountainside, only the scrunch of our shoes made any noise.

'You brought no torch of your own, sir,' he said at last. I grunted. Why should I tell him I'd been given witch-sight in

the Army – to say nothing of the fact that I was a werewolf who in my alternate species had no need of flashlights? ‘Well, you shall take mine back,’ he continued. ‘The way were perilous otherwise.’

That I knew. An ordinary human would blunder off the trail, even in bright moonlight. It was such a dim, nearly obliterated path, and the land was so gnarled and full of shadows. If he then got excited, the man would stumble around lost till dawn – or, quite probably, go off a precipice and smash his skull.

‘I will call for it tomorrow evening.’ Maledicto sighed happily. ‘Ah, sir, ’tis rare good you’ve come. New-wedded folk are aye overflowing full of love, and Cybelita has long been as parched as Amaris.’

‘Your sister?’ I said.

‘Yes. Would you care to meet her this eventide?’

‘No.’

Silence fell again. We dipped into a gut-black ravine, rounded a crag, and could no more see the lodge. Only the dim sheen of waters, the moonglow opposite, the suddenly very far and cold stars, lit that country. I saw the broken walls of the Fortaleza almost over my head, crowning their cliff like teeth in a jaw. Maledicto and I might have been the last living creatures on Middle Earth.

He stopped suddenly. His flashlight snapped out. ‘Good night, Señor Matuchek!’ he cried, and his laughter was evil and beautiful.

‘What?’ I blinked bewildered into the murk that clamped on me. ‘What the hell do you mean? We’re not at the castle yet!’

‘Nay. Proceed thither if thou will. And if thou canst.’

I heard his feet go back down the path. They didn’t crunch the gravel any more. They were soft and very rapid, like the feet of a bounding animal.

Back towards the lodge.

A moment I stood as if cast in lead. I could hear the faintest movement of air, rustling dry sagebrush, the ocean. Then my heartbeat shook all other noises out of me.

'Ginny!' I screamed.

I whirled and raced homewards. My toes caught a rock, I pitched over, bloodied my hands with the fall. I staggered up, the bluffs and gullies flung my curses back to me, I went stumbling down a slope through brush and cactus. When at last I stopped, panting, to glare around, I'd lost sight of the castle and hadn't yet spied the lodge. I'd lost my way.

My gaze swept down the slope to the dropoff. The sea was a wan glimmer beyond. A little sense came back. Maledicto had adroitly removed me from the scene, perhaps murdered me: if I were the untrained, unspecial Homo Sapiens he assumed. But I had a little more in reserve than he knew, such as witch-sight. I mumbled the formula and felt the retinal changes. And then I could see for miles. The view was blurred, of course; the human eyeball can't focus infra-red wave-lengths very well; but I could recognize landmarks. I set a general course and made for home.

With nightmare slowness. Maledicto had gone faster than human.

Then the moon broke over the hills.

The change was on me before I had even consciously willed it. I certainly didn't stop to undress, bundle my clothes and carry them in my mouth. My wolf-jaws ripped everything to rags except the elastic-banded shorts, and I went shadow-swift over the mountainside. If you think a bob-tailed two-hundred-pound wolf in shorts is ridiculous, you're probably right; but it didn't occur to me at that moment

I couldn't see as far with lupine eyes. But I could smell my own trail, in bruised vegetation, vivid as a cry. I found the path again and drank another scent. Now I knew what the undertone of Maledicto's odour had been.

Demon.

I'd never caught that exact whiff before now, and my wolf brain wasn't up to wondering about his species. It didn't even wonder what he desired of Ginny. There was only room in my narrow skull for hate, and for hurrying.

The lodge came into view. I sprang on to the patio. No one was about. But the master bedroom faced the sea, its window open. I went through in a leap.

He had her in his arms. She was still pressing him away, resisting, but her eyes were closed and her strength faded. 'No,' she whispered. 'No, help, don't, Amaris, Amaris, Amaris.' Her hands moved to his throat, slid to his neck, drew his face towards hers. They swayed downward together in the gloom.

I howled, once, and sank my teeth in him.

His blood did not taste human. It was like liquor, it burned and sang within me. I dared not bite him again. Another such draught and I might lie doglike at his feet, begging him to stroke me. I willed myself human.

The flow of transformation took no longer than he needed to release Ginny and turn around. Despite his surprise, he didn't snarl back at me. A shaft of moonlight caught his faerie visage, blazed gold in his eyes, and he was laughing.

My fist smashed forward with all my weight behind it. Poor, slow man-flesh, how shall it fight the quicksilver life of Air and Darkness? Maledicto flickered aside. He simply wasn't there. I caromed into a wall and fell down, my knuckles one crumple of anguish.

His laughter belled above me. 'And this puling thing should deserve as lively a wench as thee? Say but the word, Virginia, and I whip him to his kennel.'

'Steve ...' She huddled back in a corner, not coming to me. I reeled on to my feet. Maledicto grinned, put an arm about Ginny's waist, drew her to him. She shuddered, again trying to pull away. He kissed her, and she made a broken sound and the motions of resistance started once more to become the motions of love. I charged. Maledicto shoved with his free hand. I went down, hard. He put a foot on my head and held me.

'I'd liefer not break thy bones,' he said, 'but if thou'rt not gentle enough to respect the lady's wishes—'

'*Wishes?*' Ginny broke from him. 'God in Heaven!' she wailed. 'Get out!'

Maledicto chuckled. 'I must needs flee the holy names, if a victim of mine invoke them in full sincerity,' he murmured. 'And yet thou seest that I remain here. Thy inmost desire is to me, Virginia.'

She snatched up a vase and hurled it at him. He fielded it expertly, dropped it to shatter on me, and went to the window. 'Oh, aye, this time the spell has been broken,' he said. 'Have no fear, though. At a more propitious hour, I shall return.'

There was a moment's rippling, and he had gone over the sill. I crawled after him. The patio lay white and bare in the moonlight.

I sat down and held my head. Ginny flung herself sobbing beside me. A long time passed. Finally I got up, switched on the light, found a cigarette and slumped on the edge of the bed. She crouched at my knees, but I didn't touch her.

'What was it?' I asked.

'An incubus.' Her head was bent, I saw only the red hair flowing down her back. She had put on her frilliest nightgown while we were gone — for whom? Her voice came small and thin. 'He . . . it . . . it must haunt the ruins. Came over with the Spaniards. . . . Maybe it was responsible for their failure to—'

I dragged smoke into my lungs. 'Why hasn't it been reported?' I wondered aloud, dully. And then: 'Oh, yeah, sure. It must have a very limited range of operation. A family curse on a family now extinct, so it could only haunt the home and lands of that old Don. Since his time, no one had been here after dark.'

'Until we—' Her whisper trailed off.

'Well, Juan and his wife, with occasional guests.' I smoked more fiercely. 'You're the witch. You have all the information. I barely know that an incubus is an erotic demon. Tell me, why did it never bother the Fernandez?'

She began to weep afresh, deep, hopeless gasps. I thought that despair had combined with the earlier loss of witch-power to drive her thaumaturgic training clean out of reach. My own mind was glass-clear as I continued: 'Because it did

speak the truth, I suppose, about holy symbols being a shield for people who really want to be shielded. Juan and his wife are good Catholics. They wouldn't come here without hanging crucifixes in every room. And neither of them wishes to be unfaithful to the other.'

The face she raised was wild. 'Do you think that I—'

'Oh, not consciously. If we'd thought to put up some crosses when we arrived, or just to offer a prayer, we'd have been safe too. We'd never even have known there was an incubus around. But we had too much else to think about, and it's too late now. Subconsciously, I suppose, you must have toyed with the idea that a little vacation from strict monogamy could do no one any harm—'

'Steve!' She scrambled stiffly to her feet. 'On my honeymoon! You could say such a thing!'

'Could and did.' I ground out the cigarette, wishing it were Maledicto's face. 'How else could it lay a spell on you?'

'And you — Steve — Steve, I love you. Nobody else but you.'

'Well, you better rev up the carpet,' I sighed. 'Fly to, oh, I imagine Guaymas is the nearest town big enough to have an exorcist on the police force. Report this and ask for protection. Because if I remember my demonology, it can follow you anywhere, once you've come under its influence.'

'But nothing happened!' She cried it as if I were striking her; which, in a sense, I was.

'No, there wasn't time. Then. And, of course, you'd have been able to bounce any demon off with a purely secular spell, if you'd possessed your witch-powers. But those are gone for the time being. Until you relearn them, you'll need an exorcist guard, every hour of the day you aren't in a church. Unless — I stood up too.'

'What?' She caught me with cold frantic hands. I shook her off, blinded by the double hurt to my manhood — Maledicto had whipped me in fight and almost seduced my bride. 'Steve, what are thinking?'

'Why, that I might get rid of him myself.'

'You *can't*! You're no warlock, and he's a demon!'

'I'm a werewolf. It may be a fair match.' I shuffled into the bathroom, where I began to dress my wounds. They were superficial, except for swollen knuckles. She tried to help, but I gestured her away from me.

I knew I wasn't rational. There was too much pain and fury in me. I had some vague idea of going to the Fortaleza, whither Maledicto had presumably returned. In wolf shape, I'd be as fast and strong as he. Of course, I dare not bite . . . but if I could switch to human as occasion warranted, use the unarmed combat techniques I'd learned in the Army. . . . It was as hopeless a plan as ever men coughed forth, but my own demon was driving me.

Ginny sensed it: that much witchcraft remained to her, if it were not simply inborn. She was quite pale in the unmerciful glare of the saintelmo, she shivered and gulped, but after a while she nodded. 'If you must. We'll go there together.'

'No!' The roar burst from my gullet. 'Be off to Guaymas, I said! Haven't I troubles enough? Let me alone till I can decide if I want you back!'

Another instant she stared at me. May I never again see such eyes. Then she fled.

I went out on the patio and became a wolf. The demon stench was thick on the air. I followed it over the mountainside.

The earth was a dazzle of moonlight. My nose caught smells of dust, sage, cactus, kelp and iodine more remotely; my ears heard a bat's sonar squeak, the terrified scuttering of a jackrabbit; my pelt tingled with sensations for which men have no words. I felt none of my human torture now. The lupine brain could only hold clean, murderous carnivore thoughts. It was like being reborn. I understand that some psychiatrists have got good results by turning their patients temporarily into animals.

Presently the old watchtower lifted its corroded outline across the moon. I entered what had been a gateway, every nerve abristle for attack. The courtyard lay empty around me. Sand had blown in during the centuries, weeds thrust

between the flagstones, only a shard of paving jutted here and there. Near the centre was a heap which had once been a building. Cellars lay underneath. I'd explored them a little, once, but not deeply enough to come on the lair of the incubus.

I bayed at the moon, to challenge him.

It rustled in the tower door. A white form stepped out. My heart made one leap, and I crouched back. I thought wildly, could I slash his jugular on the first bite, it wouldn't matter how much of that drug-blood I got, he would be dead in the flesh and his essence must return from this plane of reality. . . .

Laughter ran around me on soft little feet. She made another stride outward, so that she could stand under a cataract of moonlight, impossibly white against the black mouldering walls. 'Good even, fair youth,' she said, 'I had not hoped for this much fortune.'

Her scent entered my lungs and my blood. I growled, and it turned into a whine. I wagged the stump of my war-casualty tail. She came up and scratched me behind the ears. I licked her arm; the taste was dizzying. Somewhere in a thunderful wilderness, I thought it was no use remaining lupine. The currents of change ran through me. I stood up a man.

She was as tall and ripplesome as Amaris, and she had the same strange pointed face and eyes that fluoresced under the moon. But the pale hair fell past her waist in a cloud, and she wore a gown obviously woven by stingy spiders, on a figure that – Oh, well, I won't try to describe it. I suppose half the fun was simply in the way it moved.

'Cybelita . . . I presume?' I managed to husk.

'And thou art Stephen.' A slender hand fell upon mine and lingered. 'Ah, welcome!'

I wet my lips. 'Er . . . is your brother at home?'

She swayed closer. 'What matters that?'

'I – uh –' I thought crazily that one can't very well explain that one's business with a lady's brother is to kill him. And after all, well, anyhow – 'Look here,' I blurted. 'You, he, you've got to leave us alone!'

Cybelita smiled yieldingly. 'Ah, thy grief is mine, Stephen.'

And yet, canst thou not find it in thy heart to pity us? Knowest thou what damnation in truth consists of? To be a creature in whom the elements exist unblent – Fire of love, Air of impulse, Water of wantonness, and the dark might of Earth – to be of such a nature, and then doomed to slink like a rat in these ruins, and howl to empty skies, and hunger and hunger for three hundred years! If thou wert starving, and two folk passing by spread a feast, wouldst thou not take such few crumbs as they could well spare?’

I croaked something about the analogic fallacy.

‘‘Til not malignancy,’ she pleaded. She drew close, her arms reached up to my shoulders and her bosom nudged mine. ‘Tis need which forces us. And after all. Stephen, ye mortals are not so perfect. Were ye saints with never an impure thought, no demon could venture near. We are drawn by that in ye which is akin to ourselves.’

‘Uh, well, yes,’ I choked. ‘You have two points there . . . a point, I mean. Yes.’

Cybelita laughed again. ‘But la, sweet youth! Here I stand in moonlight, my arms about the most beautiful unclothed lad this world has ever seen—’

‘Oh, my God!’ I remembered that my outfit was a pair of skivvies. Since she didn’t shrink away, my exclamation must not have counted as a prayer.

‘—and discourse on metaphysic! Nay, now thou’rt all a-blush.’ Cybelita pirouetted from me. ‘I’d not have the advantage of thee. That’s not true friendship. So let us be alike in garb.’ She snapped her fingers and the gown vanished. Not that it made a very big difference, except morally, and by that time morals seemed irrelevant.

‘And now, come, come, my darling. My wolf, thou’rt the first *loup-garou* that e’er I met – had I suspected so new a wonder, no time would have been wasted on the woman – Come!’ She threw herself against me. I don’t know exactly what made me respond to her kiss. It was like being caught in a rose-coloured cyclone.

Somehow I found a last resting place in the fragments of my willpower. ‘No! I have a wife!’

Cybelita laughed less pleasantly. ‘Ha! Where thinkest

thou Amaris has been since the moment thou left the wench alone?"

I made one garroted sound.

' 'Tis happened now,' she purred. 'What's done can ne'er be undone. Blame not thy wife. She is but mortal. Shouldst thou be more?"

I previewed Purgatory for about a minute. Then, hardly aware what was happening, I snatched Cybelita to me. My kisses broke her lips a little and I tasted the demon blood. 'Come,' she crooned, 'my lover, my lover, bear me to the tower . . .'

I picked her up and started across the courtyard.

'Steve!'

Ginny's scream was a knife driven through me.

I dropped my burden. Cybelita landed on her lovely tocus and said a most unlovely word. I gaped at Ginny. She crouched on our Persian carpet, it hovered over the broken gateway, her red hair tumbled past her bare shoulders and I knew, in that moment when I had already lost her to Amaris (for it could nevermore be the same between us two), that she was all I would ever want.

Cybelita got up. She looked bleached in the moonlight. I had no further desire for her. To hell with her.

To Hell with her.

She sneered upward towards Ginny, turned back and opened her arms to me. I said 'Defend yourself!' and became a wolf.

Cybelita skipped back from my lunge. I heard Ginny cry out again, as if from another existence. My attention was all on the succubus. Cybelita's body pulsed, greyed, suddenly she was a wolf too. She grinned shamelessly at me and her femaleness hit me like a club.

I didn't take the offer. I went for her throat. We rolled over and fought. She was tough, but hadn't been trained in combat lycanthropy. I know the judo breaks for my animal shape, too. I go under her jaws and clamped my own teeth exactly where I wanted them.

The demon blood was sweet and horrible to taste. But this

time it couldn't rouse my wishes. The powers in me of Love, for my wife, and Hate, for the thing I fought, were too strong. Or, if you insist on outmoded terms, my glands were now supplying enough testosterone and adrenalin to swamp whatever hormone was in that ichor.

I killed her.

I lay by the body, gasping. A part of me heard the shriek of the foul spirit, disincarnated again, its Schrödinger function changing mathematical form to put it back in the Low Continuum where it belonged. The wolf corpse writhed horribly through shapes of woman, man, horned and tailed satanoid; then its last cohesive forces were spent and it puffed away in gas.

Piece by tattered piece, my wits returned. I lay across Ginny's dear lap. Moonlight poured cool over us, under friendly stars, down to a castle which was nothing but piled stones. Ginny laughed and wept and held me close.

I became a man again and drew her to me. 'It's okay, darling,' I breathed. 'Everything's okay. I finished her. I'll get Amaris next.'

'What?' Her wet face lifted from my breast towards my lips. 'Don't you n-n-n-know! You have!'

'Huh?'

'Yes. A little of my education c-c-came back to me . . . after you'd gone.' She drew a shaking breath. 'Incubi and succubi are identical. They change their sex as . . . as . . . indicated . . . Amaris and that hussy were the same!'

'Then she didn't - he didn't - you didn't -' I let out a yell which registered on seismographs in Baja California. And yet that noise was the most fervent prayer of thanks which Our Father had ever got from me.

Not that I hadn't been prepared to forgive my dearest, having had some experience of the demon's power. But learning that there wasn't anything which needed to be forgiven was like a mountain off my back.

'Steve!' cried Ginny. 'I love you too, but my ribs aren't made of iron!'

I climbed to my feet. 'It's over with,' I whispered,

incredulous. In a moment: 'More than over with. We even came out ahead of the game.'

'What do you mean?' she asked, still timid, but with a sunrise in her eyes.

'Well,' I said, 'I guess we've had a useful lesson in humility. Neither of us turned out to own a more decorous subconscious mind than the average person. But in what counts, I learned how you care for me. You followed me here, now knowing what might be waiting, when I'd told you to run for safety—'

Her tousled head rubbed against my shoulder. 'I learned the same about you, Steve. It's a good feeling.'

We walked on to the carpet. 'Home, James,' I said. After a second, when James was airborne: 'Uh, I suppose that you're dead tired.'

'Well, actually not. I'm still too keyed up. But you, poor darling—'

'I feel fine,' I grinned. 'We can sleep late tomorrow.'

'Mister Matuchek! What are you thinking?'

'The same as you, Mrs. Matuchek.'

I suppose she blushed in the moonlight. 'So I see. Very good, sir.'

Which turned out to have been a prophecy.

NAKED LADY

by Mindret Lord

MARION VAN ORTON finished packing her dressing-case, opened her purse to make sure that her steamer tickets were still there, took one last look in the mirror and then descended the wide, polished staircase of the Van Orton mansion for the last time. Gorham, the butler, met her at the door.

‘Madam will be gone for the week-end?’ he asked.

‘Including the week-end,’ Mrs. Van Orton amended.

The town car was waiting at the curb. He helped her into it and stood waiting at the door while she settled back comfortably. She looked up questioningly.

‘Will Madam leave any message?’ Gorham asked.

‘Oh,’ she sighed, ‘just say I’ve gone.’

‘For an indefinite stay, Madam?’

Languidly, Mrs. Van Orton motioned to the chauffeur. ‘No,’ she said. ‘Just say I’ve gone.’

The purring motor drew away. Only Gorham’s eyes moved as he watched it turn the corner. With a start he recovered himself and closed his mouth. ‘Well!’ he said as he walked up the stairs. A greater degree of volubility had returned to him when he reported the incident to the cook.

Just for the moment, Gilda Ransome’s life had crystallized into one desperate wish: if she couldn’t scratch her thigh, this instant, she would go stark, raving mad. A few hours earlier she had thought that if she didn’t have breakfast life would be insupportable. Hunger was bad enough – but this itch!

'You may rest now,' said Mr. Blake, the well-known designer of the fleshier covers of the naughtier magazines. He turned away and lit a cigarette. Gilda applied her nails to her skin as she went behind a screen and drew on a dressing-gown.

She began to think about her hunger again. She was not hungry because she was on a slimming diet. — she needed neither reduction nor addition. Every artist for whom she had posed had agreed that her figure was 'just the type' — presumably the type that sells magazines. And her face was certainly no less attractive than her figure — which is an emphatic statement.

She felt starved because influenza had kept her idle for three weeks and during that time her money had run out. She had never been one to save.

Later in the day she fainted while trying to hold a tiring pose. Mr. Blake was very much annoyed, and he determined that in the future he would use stronger, if less perfect, models.

In the West Indies there were many, many men who would have testified to the cleverness of Jeremiah Van Orton. As a lad of twenty he had come to Curaçao from Holland, and for forty-five years thereafter he had remained in the Indies. Then he had decided that he was too rich and too old to go on working. That was his first mistake. If he had kept his nose to the grindstone, he would not have come to New York. He would not have met Marion Martin, the actress. He would not have made a fool of himself.

Van Orton sat huddled in front of an open fire and thought the matter over. In this climactic hour he paused to review his life and works.

Vivid flashes of memory confused his efforts to keep his thoughts orderly. A tongue of flame licked around a log in the fireplace. A thread of scented smoke curled into the room. . . . A night in the Haitian jungle — when was it? Twenty — thirty years ago? A black wench was dying. 'For no reason,' the doctor said; 'for superstition. Voodoo.' . . .

Marion Martin had been convincing. She had said that she was tired of young men – men whom she could not respect. She had said a man was not in his prime until sixty or seventy. Until then, he was callow, unproved, not worthy of admiration or love. He knew nothing of metropolitan people. He had been attracted to her and, presently, he had believed and loved her. . . . What was that about the natives destroying with such care every fingernail cutting, every hair? One had to be careful – voodoo was strong in the West Indies. . . . He had given Marion his honourable name and a million dollars besides. Even if she hadn't pretended to love him, he might have done the same. She had given him the illusion of youth. He had thought of a future with her, for her. He might have lived for ever!

And now he was nothing but an old fool who was going to die. But so was she. Oh, yes, so was she!

The idea of following his wife to wherever she might come to rest and murdering her there never occurred to Jeremiah Van Orton. He was too tired and feeble for such a melodramatic rôle. One did not spend a lifetime in the Indies for nothing. He was clever; except for this little interlude of marriage, he had always been clever. He would find a way, a good way – a safe way for him, an unpleasant way for her.

Jeremiah Van Orton could always think better among his beautiful collection of paintings. He went to the drawing-room and drew up a chair before a Hobbema landscape. There he remained until he had planned all the details of his vengeance.

In the restaurant of the Hotel Lafayette, Michael Bonze sat across the table from his friend, Pierre Vanneau, and cursed the age in which they both were born.

'What does art mean in the Twentieth Century?' he asked rhetorically. 'Nothing! People talk about the dynamic beauty of a new stream-lined toilet seat or the Empire State Building. Or take Surrealism: daubs – damn it! – daubs by clumsy, colour-blind house-painters! Picasso eats while I

starve! Cocteau is the white-haired boy while I worry myself bald! People don't want things to look like what they are – they want them to look like the sublimation of the mood of the essence of the psychological reaction to what they might be if they weren't what they are. Oh, I know it sounds like sour grapes, but I wouldn't mind if it weren't for the fact that I'm a painter with greater talent than any of them. If I were living in Henry the Eighth's time, people would now be collecting Bonzes instead of Holbeins. Damn the Twentieth Century!

'Look,' said Vanneau, 'have you ever painted a beautiful young girl! You know – curves and flowing hair and so on?'

Bonze slapped his big hand down on the table top and the dishes jumped. 'Are you trying to be insulting?' he bellowed. 'Do you take me for Henry Clive? – or – or Zuloaga, maybe? No! No, I haven't painted any pretty valentines of beautiful young girls!'

Vanneau murmured into his coffee cup, 'Rubens did. Tiepolo did. Titian did. . . .'

'Oh, shut up!' said Bonze. 'You know what I meant. People won't take that sort of thing from a modern artist – it isn't art. Art is old, wrinkled-up men, or nauseous arrangements of dried fish and rotten apples, or anything sufficiently ugly and nasty.'

'How do you know that is so?' Vanneau asked. 'What modern artist has dared to paint a *pretty* picture? I don't know of anyone since Greuze, and his picture sold well enough.'

'Well—' Bonze began doubtfully.

'And look,' Vanneau continued, 'in this jaded age, sex appeal is important. Important? It is everything!' He spread out his arms in an all-embracing gesture. 'And what do you create for an avid public? A public that waters at the mouth at the very mention of nudism or film starlets? You give them old men and dried fish! Don't weep on *my* shoulder – you give me a pain!'

Bonze was still feeling a little sorry for himself. 'I give Meyergold, the critic, a pain, too. Today, he came to the

studio and said he didn't think I was ready, just yet, to have a show. He stayed about fifteen minutes. Damn him!

On the morning following his wife's departure, Jeremiah Van Orton engaged the services of a Mr. Moses Winkler, a student of biology, who was promised double payment if he could manage to get through his work without asking questions. He was led into a lady's boudoir and told that he must go over the entire room with a microscope in order to collect every human remain, no matter how small or apparently unimportant.

Mr. Van Orton watched every move he made. Somehow, Moses did not like the eagerness with which the old man greeted each new find. It made him quite nervous.

When Moses finished his work he was able to deliver to his employer a surprising number of small envelopes, on each of which he had written a description of the contents. One held grains of dust from a nail-file; another, an eyelash. On a brush in the bathroom he found a few flakes of skin. A minute drop of blood had been discovered on a handkerchief in the laundry basket. . . . The list went on.

Moses was paid and dismissed. He was glad to go.

Van Orton added the envelopes to a collection he had made of all the photographs of his wife that she had left in the house. He looked long at the relics before locking them safely away.

'It is not a great deal,' he muttered to himself, 'but in Haiti I've known them to do it with less - much less.'

Within a month, old Mr. Van Orton had become the scandal of Sutton Place. Every day, from nine until six, a constant stream of handsome young women entered and left his house. Much to Gorham's bewilderment and disapproval, it had become his master's custom to sit in the drawing-room and interview the young ladies, one by one. Discreet inquiries elicited the fact that they were artists' models answering a newspaper advertisement.

'What,' Gorham had asked the cook, 'does the old reprobate want with a model? And if he wants a model, why is he

so hard to satisfy? He must have seen two hundred of them already and he's not kept one over ten minutes.'

It was the cook's considered opinion that Jeremiah Van Orton was an indecent, dirty old man who should be put away where he couldn't do any harm.

The procession of applicants ended when Gilda Ransome was ushered into the drawing-room. Gorham was called and told that no more models would be seen. He breathed a sigh of relief and stole a glance at the young lady who had been chosen from among so many. Gorham had a shock – for a second he had thought she was Mrs. Van Orton. It was a startling resemblance.

Michael Bonze sat in his studio window and looked at the dreary square with bare trees and muddy streets. It was a picture of his mood. His money was running low and he was thinking that he ought to be putting in a stock of canned baked beans instead of buying a half-case of gin. There was nothing he wanted to paint. He hated painting and art patrons and critics.

A sedate foreign limousine came splashing along the street below and stopped at the door to his studio building. The sight didn't make him any happier. 'Art patron!' he said with a wealth of expression in his voice.

In a moment there was a knock on the door, and Michael opened it to admit Jeremiah Van Orton.

'You are Michael Bonze?' he asked.

Bonze admitted his identity, although, just then, he was not particularly proud of it. The caller presented his card with the question, 'You have heard of me?'

'Yes,' said Bonze; 'I've heard you have quite a large collection of Flemish paintings. Will you take a chair?'

Van Orton launched into his business at once. 'I have come to see you,' he said, 'because I want a special kind of painting which you do better than anyone I know.'

'Thank you!' Michael murmured and crossed his fingers behind him.

'Not that I like the sort of painting you do,' the old man

continued, 'on the contrary, I dislike it intensely. It is dull, spiritless – I might say, insipid.'

'Oh, do say "insipid"!' said Michael. 'Also say "good-bye", sir, at once!'

'Come, come!' said Van Orton, calmly. 'This is no time for compliments. I am not here to discuss art but to make you a proposition which you will find highly beneficial, financially.'

Bonze had a sudden vision of rows of canned baked beans, and he held his tongue.

'For a particular reason, which is none of your affair, I wish you to paint a life-size nude of a model I have selected. The pose makes very little difference, but I suggest that you have her reclining on a chaise-longue. For background you may use drapery or anything you please – it is of no importance.'

Bonze asked, 'Would you mind telling me why I should have been chosen for this work?'

'Because your painting is so realistically accurate that not even a coloured photograph can compare with it. I don't consider it art, but it will serve my purpose.'

After all, a man had to have some pride. 'I'm not interested,' said Bonze.

No shade of disappointment crossed the old man's face. 'No, no,' he agreed, 'of course not. But you would, perhaps, be interested in fifteen thousand dollars, a third payable now?'

Michael resisted an impulse to jump up and kiss the beneficent bald head. 'Write the cheque and send me the model,' he said. 'I'll start today.'

'Good!' said Van Orton. 'But now I must lay down two important conditions. First, I will give you a number of photographs of a young woman who bears some resemblance to the model you will use. I want you to study the pictures very closely, because your painting must look more like them than like the model.'

'But why,' Michael protested, 'why can't I simply paint a portrait of the subject of the photographs? It would be a lot more satisfactory and easier.'

'If the job were as easy as that, I wouldn't be paying you fifteen thousand dollars.' Van Orton reached in the pocket of his coat and withdrew ten or twelve little envelopes. 'The second request that I must make is this,' he continued. 'Each of these packets contains a pinch of powder. They are plainly marked, "hair, nails, skin, lips", and so on. Now, when you mix your paints for these various details, you must add these powders as indicated. You are a man of honour?'

'Certainly!' said the very mystified painter.

'You will give me your word that this will be done according to my instructions?'

Michael nodded.

'Very well. Here is my cheque for five thousand dollars. Hurry your work as much as you can with safety and let me know the instant it is done.' Van Orton went to the door. 'I brought the model with me in the car. I will send her up with the photographs. Good day!'

Bonze collapsed into a chair as the door closed.

Spring has come to Venice and the Piazza San Marco has a freshly washed and burnished look. Mrs. Van Orton sits at Florian's on the edge of the square, sipping a Pernod. She feels that God's in His Heaven and Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries.

Mrs. Van Orton has a figure that looks well in anything, but its effectiveness increases in inverse ratio with the amount of clothing she wears; hence, to some extent, Venice and the Lido. When she walks along the beach, this summer, the women will turn away and the men will turn towards her. The women will say, 'Who is that doll-faced American in the daring bathing-costume?' The men are discreet on the Lido - they will say nothing. But they will look.

And spring has come to Washington Square. The old trees are beginning to think about their Easter clothing. Probably they will decide that the well-dressed tree will wear a very light and delicate chartreuse. Feathers, too, may be worn.

Michael Bonze looked up from his painting. 'Darling,' he

said, 'you're the best work I've ever done. And you're just about finished.'

'Thank goodness!' said Gilda Ransome. 'May I move, now?'

'Go ahead,' he said. 'Get up and we'll make some coffee.'

He put down his palette and brushes and helped her into her kimono, kissing, as he did so, the back of her neck.

'I wonder,' he said, 'if I could have done such a good portrait if I hadn't fallen in love with you. I owe a lot to old Van Orton. If it hadn't been for him – and for Pierre Vanneau—'

'Why Pierre Vanneau?' she asked.

Michael smiled in memory of his annoyance. 'It was he who first suggested that I paint beautiful women. I was furious.'

'So shall I be,' said Gilda, 'if you dare to paint any woman but me.'

'Never fear!' he laughed. 'There will be no one but you. I'll paint you as everything from Medusa to the Virgin Mary.'

'I *might* make a Medusa,' said Gilda.

Later in the day, the picture was finished to the immense satisfaction of both artist and model.

The next morning Michael arose before Gilda was awake. He wanted to look at the portrait in the cold light of dawn. Without, he told himself, undue self-praise, he found it good – very good. Maybe it wasn't modern, maybe the style wasn't original, perhaps it wasn't spontaneous. But the draftsman-ship, the colour, the texture, the composition – that was all perfect. No one could deny it. It would take no violent stretch of the imagination to conceive the beautiful creature rising from her couch and stepping lightly down from the canvas to the floor.

Bonze thought it wasn't fair that this, his best work, was destined to be hung in a dark, lonely house, among a lot of gloomy Flemish paintings, for the exclusive pleasure of a solitary old Dutchman. After all, Art was for the masses. If Meyergold could see this, he'd sing a different tune. If it

weren't for the money, he'd never let Van Orton have the picture – the insulting old idiot! He wouldn't appreciate it, anyway. It wouldn't have made any difference to him if the picture had been good or bad. All he wanted was a likeness.

On the heels of this reflection, Bonze realized in a flash of inspiration how he could keep his picture. He would make a copy and give *that* to Van Orton. Naturally, it wouldn't be so good as the original, but what of that? He hadn't promised to deliver a masterpiece. Of course, there was the matter of those little packets of powder – he'd used it all in the original – but – well, it was silly, anyway.

He woke Gilda with a shout and told her his plan. 'I'll have the thing finished by the end of the week. Then I'll get my cheque and we'll go right down to the City Hall and be married.'

Gilda looked at the clock on the bed table. 'Is this a nice hour to propose to a girl?' she groaned and pulled the covers over her head.

Whistling loudly and cheerfully, Michael started to work.

Jeremiah Van Orton crouched before the likeness of his wife lying nude upon a chaise-longue. He had never seen her so. She had always kept him at arm's length. But now she was near – near enough to touch with the finger tips, or a long pin, or a keen-edged knife.

Though never for a moment did he take his mad gaze from the portrait, he did not neglect the task at which he worked. Methodically, he sharpened on a whetstone a number of efficient-looking probes and knives. The scrape of the steel and his panting breath were the only sounds in the darkened room. Incessantly, he moistened his opened lips with his tongue. His heart pounded in his ears.

Jeremiah knew that the excitement of the execution was killing him, that he must hurry. He got to his feet and addressed the painting in a high, cracked voice.

'Marion,' he said, 'I hold your life in this image by virtue of your skin and blood. Do you understand? This is you!'

He tried the point of a blue steel probe against his thumb. His voice rose to a shriek.

'You are going to die, Marion, my love, wherever you are!'

His bloodshot eyes fixed themselves in a hypnotic stare as he approached the portrait. Great veins throbbed in his shrivelled neck and temples.

'Excellent!' said Mr. Meyergold. 'Really excellent! I must say, my dear Bonze, you surprise me!'

He looked around with an expression frequently worn by owners of dogs that are able to sit up or shake hands. He assumed an air of patronizing pride. He reasoned that he had played an important part in the development of this young artist by his stern and uncompromising rejection, until now, of everything he had done. He turned again to the picture and nodded. Bonze was a good dog and it was no more than fair to throw him a bone – he had earned it. 'Excellent!' he repeated. 'What do you call it?'

'I call it,' said Michael, racking his brain for a likely name, 'I call it "Naked Lady".'

Mr. Meyergold glanced up sharply. 'Naked Lady'. He rolled it around on his tongue. 'Good! Oh, very good! A fine distinction. This is no ordinary nude; no allegorical Grecian goddess to whom a yard of drapery more or less makes no difference.' He thought that an awfully good line for a review and decided to make a note of it the instant he left. He laughed in appreciation of his wit. 'Oh, no, this young lady is shy and embarrassed without her clothing.' He went on enlarging the idea in the hope that he would hit upon another useful line. 'Here you've caught a lady in a most undignified situation. I get the impression that your "Naked Lady" is very much annoyed with us for looking at her.'

In her cabin on the beach, Marion Van Orton was changing from her bathing-suit to an elaborate pair of pyjamas. Suddenly she had a distinct impression that she was being observed. She jerked a bath-towel up to her chest and swung

around. Apparently there was nothing to account for her fear. But she *knew* that someone was minutely examining her. Hurriedly, she pulled on her pyjamas and ran from the cabin, fully expecting to surprise some rude man in the act of staring through a chink in the wall. There was no one near.

In spite of the heat of the day, she went back into the cabin and wrapped a heavy cloak tightly about her. Still the miserable feeling persisted.

'My goodness!' she said to herself, 'I feel positively naked!'

A month later, Marion Van Orton had cause to remember that day on the Lido. She was sitting in the Excelsior Bar, reading a *New York Times*, two weeks old. She had really been looking through it to see if there were any more news of the death of her husband. For a few days the papers had been full of 'Millionaire Husband of Actress Found Dead.' When she had first heard of it she had wondered which of the paintings it was that had been found slashed to rags and tatters, and she wondered what had happened before his heart failed that had made him want to ruin one of the pictures of which he had always been so proud.

There was nothing more in the *Times*. The story had been squeezed dry and dropped in favour of an expedition to the South Pole. Finishing a rather dull announcement of the forthcoming exhibit of paintings by an artist who had just married his model, Marion turned to her handsome companion.

'Some people insist,' she said, 'that more important things happen in New York than here, or anywhere else. But look at this paper; there isn't an interesting or important thing in it. It's all too, too boring for words.'

And then, quite suddenly, that awful nightmarish feeling returned to her. She was entirely naked and people were looking at her, criticizing her, appraising her. As she crossed her arms at her throat, her eyes darted about the room, searching for the guilty Peeping Tom. She could detect no one, but she knew, she *knew* that to someone her clothing was perfectly transparent.

Without excusing herself to her startled friend, Mrs. Van Orton jumped up and rushed to her room in the hotel. She locked and bolted the door. The sensation was growing stronger every moment. She pulled down the shades and turned off the light. But it was no better. She ran into the clothes closet and shut the door. Even there, there was no escape from the certain knowledge that she was bare and defenceless before a crowd. She drew the hanging dresses tightly around her and shrank into a corner of the closet. She felt she was going mad.

SHAMBLEAU

by C. L. Moore

MAN HAS CONQUERED Space before. You may be sure of that. Somewhere beyond the Egyptians, in that dimness out of which come echoes of half-mythical names – Atlantis, Mu – somewhere back of history's first beginnings there must have been an age when mankind, like us today, built cities of steel to house its star-roving ships and knew the names of the planets in their own native tongues – heard Venus' people call their wet world 'Shaardol' in that soft, sweet, slurring speech and mimicked Mars' guttural 'Lakkdiz' from the harsh tongues of Mars' dryland dwellers. You may be sure of it. Man has conquered Space before, and out of that conquest faint, faint echoes run still through a world that has forgotten the very fact of a civilization which must have been as mighty as our own. There have been too many myths and legends for us to doubt it. The myth of the Medusa, for instance, can never have had its roots in the soil of Earth. That tale of the snake-haired Gorgon whose gaze turned the gazer to stone never originated about any creature that Earth nourished. And those ancient Greeks who told the story must have remembered, dimly and half believing, a tale of antiquity about some strange being from one of the outlying planets their remotest ancestors once trod.

'Shambleau! Ha . . . Shambleau!' The wild hysteria of the mob rocketed from wall to wall of Lakkdarol's narrow streets and the storming of heavy boots over the slag-red pavement made an ominous undertone to that swelling bay, 'Shambleau! Shambleau!'

Northwest Smith heard it coming and stepped into the nearest doorway, laying a wary hand on his heat-gun's grip, and his colourless eyes narrowed. Strange sounds were common enough in the streets of Earth's latest colony on Mars – a raw, red little town where anything might happen, and very often did. But Northwest Smith, whose name is known and respected in every dive and wild outpost on a dozen wild planets, was a cautious man, despite his reputation. He set his back against the wall and gripped his pistol, and heard the rising shout come nearer and nearer.

Then into his range of vision flashed a red running figure, dodging like a hunted hare from shelter to shelter in the narrow street. It was a girl – a berry-brown girl in a single tattered garment whose scarlet burnt the eyes with its brilliance. She ran wearily, and he could hear her gasping breath from where he stood. As she came into view he saw her hesitate and lean one hand against the wall for support, and glance wildly around for shelter. She must not have seen him in the depths of the doorway, for as the bay of the mob grew louder and the pounding of feet sounded almost at the corner she gave a despairing little moan and dodged into the recess at his very side.

When she saw him standing there, tall and leather-brown, hand on his heat-gun, she sobbed once, inarticulately, and collapsed at his feet, a huddle of burning scarlet and bare, brown limbs.

Smith had not seen her face, but she was a girl, and sweetly made and in danger; and though he had not the reputation of a chivalrous man, something in her hopeless huddle at his feet touched that chord of sympathy for the underdog that stirs in every Earthman, and he pushed her gently into the corner behind him and jerked out his gun, just as the first of the running mob rounded the corner.

It was a motley crowd, Earthmen and Martians and a sprinkling of Venusian swampmen and strange, nameless denizens of unnamed planets – a typical Lakkdarol mob. When the first of them turned the corner and saw the empty street before them there was a faltering in the rush and the

foremost spread out and began to search the doorways on both sides of the street.

'Looking for something?' Smith's sardonic call sounded clear above the clamour of the mob.

They turned. The shouting died for a moment as they took in the scene before them – tall Earthman in the space-explorer's leathern garb, all one colour from the burning of savage suns save for the sinister pallor of his no-coloured eyes in a scarred and resolute face, gun in his steady hand and the scarlet girl crouched behind him, panting.

The foremost of the crowd – a burly Earthman in tattered leather from which the Patrol insignia had been ripped away – stared for a moment with a strange expression of incredulity on his face overspreading the savage exultation of the chase. Then he let loose a deep-throated bellow, 'Shambleau!' and lunged forward. Behind him the mob took up the cry again, 'Shambleau! Shambleau! Shambleau!' and surged after.

Smith, lounging negligently against the wall, arms folded and gun-hand draped over his left forearm, looked incapable of swift motion, but at the leader's first forward step the pistol swept in a practised half-circle and the dazzle of blue-white heat leaping from its muzzle seared an arc in the slag pavement at his feet. It was an old gesture, and not a man in the crowd but understood it. The foremost recoiled swiftly against the surge of those in the rear, and for a moment there was confusion as the two tides met and struggled. Smith's mouth curled into a grim curve as he watched. The man in the mutilated Patrol uniform lifted a threatening fist and stepped to the very edge of the deadline, while the crowd rocked to and fro behind him.

'Are you crossing that line?' queried Smith in an ominously gentle voice.

'We want that girl!'

'Come and get her!' Recklessly Smith grinned into his face. He saw danger there, but his defiance was not the fool-hardy gesture it seemed. An expert psychologist of mobs from long experience, he sensed no murder here. Not a gun

had appeared in any hand in the crowd. They desired the girl with an inexplicable bloodthirstiness he was at a loss to understand, but toward himself he sensed no such fury. A mauling he might expect, but his life was in no danger. Guns would have appeared before now if they were coming out at all. So he grinned in the man's angry face and leaned lazily against the wall.

Behind their self-appointed leader the crowd milled impatiently, and threatening voices began to rise again. Smith heard the girl moan at his feet.

'What do you want with her?' he demanded.

'She's Shambleau! Shambleau, you fool! Kick her out of there – we'll take care of her!'

'I'm taking care of her,' drawled Smith.

'She's Shambleau, I tell you! Damn your hide, man, we never let those things live! Kick her out here!'

The repeated name had no meaning to him, but Smith's innate stubbornness rose defiantly as the crowd surged forward to the very edge of the arc, their clamour growing louder. 'Shambleau! Kick her out here! Give us Shambleau! Shambleau!'

Smith dropped his indolent pose like a cloak and planted both feet wide, swinging up his gun threateningly. 'Keep back!' he yelled. 'She's mine! Keep back!'

He had no intention of using that heat-beam. He knew by now that they would not kill him unless he started the gun-play himself, and he did not mean to give up his life for any girl alive. But a severe mauling he expected, and he braced himself instinctively as the mob heaved within itself.

To his astonishment a thing happened then that he had never known to happen before. At his shouted defiance the foremost of the mob – those who had heard him clearly – drew back a little, not in alarm but evidently surprised. The ex-Patrolman said, 'Yours! She's *yours*?' in a voice from which puzzlement crowded out the anger.

Smith spread his booted legs wide before the crouching figure and flourished his gun.

'Yes,' he said. 'And I'm keeping her! Stand back there!'

The man stared at him wordlessly, and horror and disgust and incredulity mingled on his weather-beaten face. The incredulity triumphed for a moment and he said again.

'Yours!'

Smith nodded defiance.

The man stepped back suddenly, unutterable contempt in his very pose. He waved an arm to the crowd and said loudly, 'It's – his!' and the press melted away, gone silent, too, and the look of contempt spread from face to face.

The ex-Patrolman spat on the slag-paved street and turned his back indifferently. 'Keep her, then,' he advised briefly over one shoulder. 'But don't let her out again in this town!'

Smith stared in perplexity, almost open-mouthed as the suddenly scornful mob began to break up. His mind was in a whirl. That such bloodthirsty animosity should vanish in a breath he could not believe. And the curious mingling of contempt and disgust on the faces he saw baffled him even more. Lakkdarol was anything but a puritan town – it did not enter his head for a moment that his claiming the brown girl as his own had caused that strangely shocked revulsion to spread through the crowd. No, it was something deeper-rooted than that. Instinctive, instant disgust had been in the faces he saw – they would have looked less so if he had admitted cannibalism or *Pharol*-worship.

And they were leaving his vicinity as swiftly as if whatever unknowing sin he had committed were contagious. The street was emptying as rapidly as it had filled. He saw a sleek Venusian glance back over his shoulder as he turned the corner and sneer, 'Shambleau!' and the word awoke a new line of speculation in Smith's mind. Shambleau! Vaguely of French origin, it must be. And strange enough to hear it from the lips of Venusians and Martian drylanders, but it was their use of it that puzzled him more. 'We never let those things live,' the ex-Patrolman had said. It reminded him dimly of something . . . an ancient line from some writing in his own tongue . . . 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.' He

smiled to himself at the similarity, and simultaneously was aware of the girl at his elbow.

She had risen soundlessly. He turned to face her, sheathing his gun and stared at first with curiosity and then in the entirely frank openness with which men regard that which is not wholly human. For she was not. He knew it at a glance, though the brown, sweet body was shaped like a woman's and she wore the garment of scarlet – he saw it was leather – with an ease that few unhuman beings achieve towards clothing. He knew it from the moment he looked into her eyes, and a shiver of unrest went over him as he met them. They were frankly green as young grass, with slit-like, feline pupils that pulsed unceasingly, and there was a look of dark, animal wisdom in their depths – that look of the beast which sees more than man.

There was no hair upon her face – neither brows nor lashes, and he would have sworn that the tight scarlet turban bound around her head covered baldness. She had three fingers and a thumb, and her feet had four digits apiece too, and all sixteen of them were tipped with round claws that sheathed back into the flesh like a cat's. She ran her tongue over her lips – a thin, pink, flat tongue as feline as her eyes – and spoke with difficulty. He felt that that throat and tongue had never been shaped for human speech.

'Not – afraid now,' she said softly, and her little teeth were white and pointed as a kitten's.

'What did they want you for?' he asked her curiously. 'What had you done? Shambleau . . . is that your name?'

'I – not talk your – speech,' she demurred hesitantly.

'Well, try to – I want to know. Why were they chasing you? Will you be safe on the street now, or hadn't you better get indoors somewhere? They look dangerous.'

'I – go with you.' She brought it out with difficulty.

'Say you!' Smith grinned. 'What are you, anyhow? You look like a kitten to me.'

'Shambleau.' She said it sombrely.

'Where d'you live? Are you a Martian?'

'I come from – from far – from long ago – far country—'

'Wait!' laughed Smith. 'You're getting your wires crossed. You're not a Martian?'

She drew herself up very straight beside him, lifting the turbaned head, and there was something queenly in the poise of her.

'Martian?' she said scornfully. 'My people – are – are – you have no word. Your speech – hard for me.'

'What's yours? I might know it – try me.'

She lifted her head and met his eyes squarely, and there was in hers a subtle amusement – he could have sworn it.

'Some day I – speak to you in – my own language,' she promised, and the pink tongue flicked out over her lips, swiftly, hungrily.

Approaching footsteps on the red pavement interrupted Smith's reply. A dryland Martian came past, reeling a little and exuding an aroma of *segir*-whisky, the Venusian brand. When he caught the red flash of the girl's tatters he turned his head sharply, and as his *segir*-steeped brain took in the fact of her presence he lurched towards the recess unsteadily, bawling, 'Shambleau, by *Pharol*! Shambleau!' and reached out a clutching hand.

Smith struck it aside contemptuously.

'On your way, drylander,' he advised.

The man drew back and stared, blear-eyed.

'Yours, eh?' he croaked. 'Zut! You're welcome to it!' And like the ex-Patrolman before him he spat on the pavement and turned away, muttering harshly in the blasphemous tongue of the drylands.

Smith watched him shuffle off, and there was a crease between his colourless eyes, a nameless unease rising within him.

'Come on,' he said abruptly to the girl. 'If this sort of thing is going to happen we'd better get indoors. Where shall I take you?'

'With – you,' she murmured.

He stared down into the flat green eyes. Those ceaselessly pulsing pupils disturbed him, but it seemed to him, vaguely, that behind the animal shallows of her gaze was a shutter – a

closed barrier that might at any moment open to reveal the very deeps of that dark knowledge he sensed there.

Roughly he said again, 'Come on, then,' and stepped down into the street.

She pattered along a pace or two behind him, making no effort to keep up with his long strides, and though Smith – as men know from Venus to Jupiter's moons – walks as softly as a cat, even in spaceman's boots, the girl at his heels slid like a shadow over the rough pavement, making so little sound that even the lightness of his footsteps was loud in the empty street.

Smith chose the less frequented ways of Lakkdarol, and somewhat shamefacedly thanked his nameless gods that his lodgings were not far away, for the few pedestrians he met turned and stared after the two with that by now familiar mingling of horror and contempt which he was as far as ever from understanding.

The room he had engaged was a single cubicle in a lodging-house on the edge of the city. Lakkdarol, raw camp-town that it was in those days, could have furnished little better anywhere within its limits, and Smith's errand there was not one he wished to advertise. He had slept in worse places than this before, and knew that he would do so again.

There was no one in sight when he entered, and the girl slipped up the stairs at his heels and vanished through the door, shadowy, unseen by anyone in the house. Smith closed the door and leaned his broad shoulders against the panels, regarding her speculatively.

She took in what little the room had to offer in a glance – frowsy bed, rickety table, mirror hanging unevenly and cracked against the wall, unpainted chairs – a typical camp-town room in an Earth settlement abroad. She accepted its poverty in that single glance, dismissed it, then crossed to the window and leaned out for a moment, gazing across the low roof-tops towards the barren countryside beyond, red slag under the late afternoon sun.

'You can stay here,' said Smith abruptly, 'until I leave

town. I'm waiting here for a friend to come in from Venus. Have you eaten?"

'Yes,' said the girl quickly. 'I shall – need no – food for – a while.'

'Well—' Smith glanced around the room. 'I'll be in sometime tonight. You can go or stay just as you please. Better lock the door behind me.'

With no more formality than that he left her. The door closed and he heard the key turn, and smiled to himself. He did not expect, then, ever to see her again.

He went down the steps and out into the late-slanting sunlight with a mind so full of other matters that the brown girl receded very quickly into the background. Smith's errand in Lakkdarol, like most of his errands, is better not spoken of. Man lives as he must, and Smith's living was a perilous affair outside the law and ruled by the ray-gun only. It is enough to say that the shipping-port and its cargoes outbound interested him deeply just now, and that the friend he awaited was Yarol the Venusian, in that swift little Edsel ship the *Maid* that can flash from world to world with a derisive speed that laughs at Patrol boats and leaves pursuers floundering in the ether far behind. Smith and Yarol and the *Maid* were a trinity that had caused the Patrol leaders much worry and many grey hairs in the past, and the future looked very bright to Smith himself that evening as he left his lodging-house.

Lakkdarol roars by night, as Earthmen's camp-towns have a way of doing on every planet where Earth's out-posts are, and it was beginning lustily as Smith went down among the awakening lights towards the centre of town. His business there does not concern us. He mingled with the crowds where the lights were brightest, and there was the click of ivory counters and the jingle of silver, and red *segir* gurgled invitingly from black Venusian bottles, and much later Smith strolled homeward under the moving moons of Mars, and if the street wavered a little under his feet now and then – why, that is only understandable. Not even Smith could

drink red *segir* at every bar from the *Martian Lamb* to the *New Chicago* and remain entirely steady on his feet. But he found his way back with very little difficulty – considering – and spent a good five minutes hunting for his key before he remembered he had left it in the inner lock for the girl.

He knocked then, and there was no sound of footsteps from within, but in a few moments the latch clicked and the door swung open. She retreated soundlessly before him as he entered, and took up her favourite place against the window, leaning back on the sill and outlined against the starry sky beyond. The room was in darkness.

Smith flipped the switch by the door and then leaned back against the panels, steadying himself. The cool night air had sobered him a little, and his head was clear enough – liquor went to Smith's feet, not his head, or he would never have come this far along the lawless way he had chosen. He lounged against the door now and regarded the girl in the sudden glare of the bulbs, blinding a little as much at the scarlet of her clothing as at the light.

'So you stayed,' he said.

'I – waited,' she answered softly, leaning farther back against the sill and clasping the rough wood with slim, three-fingered hands, pale brown against the darkness.

'Why?'

She did not answer that, but her mouth curved into a slow smile. On a woman it would have been reply enough – provocative, daring. On Shambleau there was something pitiful and horrible in it – so human on the face of one half-animal. And yet . . . that sweet brown body curving so softly from the tatters of scarlet leather – the velvety texture of that brownness – the white-flashing smile. . . . Smith was aware of a stirring excitement within him. After all – time would be hanging heavy now until Yarol came. . . . Speculatively he allowed the steel-pale eyes to wander over her, with a slow regard that missed nothing. And when he spoke he was aware that his voice had deepened a little. . . .

'Come here,' he said.

She came forward slowly, on bare clawed feet that made

no slightest sound on the floor, and stood before him with downcast eyes and mouth trembling in that pitifully human smile. He took her by the shoulders – velvety soft shoulders, of a creamy smoothness that was not the texture of human flesh. A little tremor went over her, perceptibly, at the contact of his hands. Northwest Smith caught his breath suddenly and dragged her to him . . . sweet yielding brownness in the circle of his arms . . . heard her own breath catch and quicken as her velvety arms closed about his neck. And then he was looking down into her face, very near, and the green animal eyes met his with the pulsing pupils and the flicker of – something – deep behind their shallows – and through the rising clamour of his blood, even as he stooped his lips to hers, Smith felt something deep within him shudder away – inexplicable, instinctive, revolted. What it might be he had no words to tell, but the very touch of her was suddenly loathsome – so soft and velvet and unhuman – and it might have been an animal's face that lifted itself to his mouth – the dark knowledge looked hungrily from the darkness of those slit pupils – and for a mad instant he knew that same wild, feverish revulsion he had seen in the faces of the mob. . . .

'God!' he gasped, a far more ancient invocation against evil than he realized, then or ever, and he ripped her arms from his neck, swung her away with such a force that she reeled half across the room. Smith fell back against the door, breathing heavily, and stared at her while the wild revolt died slowly within him.

She had fallen to the floor beneath the window, and as she lay there against the wall with bent head he saw, curiously, that her turban had slipped – the turban that he had been so sure covered baldness – and a lock of scarlet hair fell below the binding leather, hair as scarlet as her garment, as unhumanly red as her eyes were unhumanly green. He stared, and shook his head dizzily and stared again, for it seemed to him that the thick lock of crimson had moved, *squirmed* of itself against her cheek.

At the contact of it her hands flew up and she tucked it away with a very human gesture and then dropped her head

again into her hands. And from the deep shadow of her fingers he thought she was staring up at him covertly.

Smith drew a deep breath and passed a hand across his forehead. The inexplicable moment had gone as quickly as it came – too swiftly for him to understand or analyse it. ‘Got to lay off the *segir*,’ he told himself unsteadily. Had he imagined that scarlet hair? After all, she was no more than a pretty brown girl-creature from one of the many half-human races peopling the planets. No more than that, after all. A pretty little thing, but animal . . . He laughed a little shakily.

‘No more of that,’ he said. ‘God knows I’m no angel, but there’s got to be a limit somewhere. Here.’ He crossed to the bed and sorted out a pair of blankets from the untidy heap, tossing them to the far corner of the room. ‘You can sleep there.’

Wordlessly she rose from the floor and began to rearrange the blankets, the uncomprehending resignation of the animal eloquent in every line of her.

Smith had a strange dream that night. He thought he had awakened to a room full of darkness and moonlight and moving shadows, for the nearer moon of Mars was racing through the sky and everything on the planet below her was endued with a restless life in the dark. And something . . . some nameless, unthinkable *thing* . . . was coiled about his throat . . . something like a soft snake, wet and warm. It lay loose and light about his neck . . . and it was moving gently, very gently, with a soft, caressive pressure that sent little thrills of delight through every nerve and fibre of him, a perilous delight – beyond physical pleasure, deeper than joy of the mind. That warm softness was caressing the very roots of his soul with a terrible intimacy. The ecstasy of it left him weak, and yet he knew – in a flash of knowledge born of this impossible dream – that the soul should not be handled. . . . And with that knowledge a horror broke upon him, turning the pleasure into a rapture of revulsion, hateful, horrible – but still most foully sweet. He tried to lift his hands and tear

the dream-monstrosity from his throat – tried but half-heartedly; for though his soul was revolted to its very deeps, yet the delight of his body was so great that his hands all but refused the attempt. But when at last he tried to lift his arms a cold shock went over him and he found that he could not stir . . . his body lay stony as marble beneath the blankets, a living marble that shuddered with a dreadful delight through every rigid vein.

The revulsion grew strong upon him as he struggled against the paralysing dream – a struggle of soul against sluggish body – titanically, until the moving dark was streaked with blankness that clouded and closed about him at last and he sank back into the oblivion from which he had awakened.

Next morning, when the bright sunlight shining through Mars' clear thin air awakened him, Smith lay for a while trying to remember. The dream had been more vivid than reality, but he could not now quite recall . . . only that it had been more sweet and horrible than anything else in life. He lay puzzling for a while, until a soft sound from the corner aroused him from his thoughts and he sat up to see the girl lying in a cat-like coil on her blankets, watching him with round, grave eyes. He regarded her somewhat ruefully.

'Morning,' he said. 'I've just had the devil of a dream. . . . Well, hungry?'

She shook her head silently, and he could have sworn there was a covert gleam of strange amusement in her eyes.

He stretched and yawned, dismissing the nightmare temporarily from his mind.

'What am I going to do with you?' he inquired, turning to more immediate matters. 'I'm leaving here in a day or two and I can't take you along, you know. Where'd you come from in the first place?'

Again she shook her head.

'Not telling? Well, it's your own business. You can stay here until I give up the room. From then on you'll have to do your own worrying.'

He swung his feet to the floor and reached for his clothes.

Ten minutes later, slipping the heat-gun into its holster at his thigh, Smith turned to the girl. 'There's food-concentrate in that box on the table. It ought to hold you until I get back. And you'd better lock the door again after I've gone.'

Her wide, unwavering stare was his only answer, and he was not sure she had understood, but at any rate the lock clicked after him as before, and he went down the steps with a faint grin on his lips.

The memory of last night's extraordinary dream was slipping from him, as such memories do, and by the time he had reached the street the girl and the dream and all of yesterday's happenings were blotted out by the sharp necessities of the present.

Again the intricate business that had brought him here claimed his attention. He went about it to the exclusion of all else, and there was a good reason behind everything he did from the moment he stepped out into the street until the time when he turned back again at evening; though had one chosen to follow him during the day his apparently aimless rambling through Lakkdarol would have seemed very pointless.

He must have spent two hours at the least idling by the space-port, watching with sleepy, colourless eyes the ships that came and went, the passengers, the vessels lying at wait, the cargoes – particularly the cargoes. He made the rounds of the town's saloons once more, consuming many glasses of varied liquors in the course of the day and engaging in idle conversation with men of all races and worlds, usually in their own languages, for Smith was a linguist of repute among his contemporaries. He heard the gossip of the space-ways, news from a dozen planets of a thousand different events. He heard the latest joke about the Venusian Emperor and the latest report on the Chino-Aryan war and the latest song hot from the lips of Rose Robertson, whom every man on the civilized planets adored as 'the Georgia Rose'. He passed the day quite profitably, for his own purposes, which do not concern us now, and it was not until late

evening, when he turned homeward again, that the thought of the brown girl in his room took definite shape in his mind, though it had been lurking there, formless and submerged, all day.

He had no idea what comprised her usual diet, but he bought a can of New York roast beef and one of Venusian frog-broth and a dozen fresh canal-apples and two pounds of that Earth lettuce that grows so vigorously in the fertile canal-soil of Mars. He felt that she must surely find something to her liking in this broad variety of edibles, and – for his day had been very satisfactory – he hummed *The Green Hills of Earth* to himself in a surprisingly good baritone as he climbed the stairs.

The door was locked, as before, and he was reduced to kicking the lower panels gently with his boot, for his arms were full. She opened the door with that softness that was characteristic of her and stood regarding him in the semi-darkness as he stumbled to the table with his load. The room was unlit again.

‘Why don’t you turn on the lights?’ he demanded irritably after he had barked his shin on the chair by the table in an effort to deposit his burden there.

‘Light and – dark – they are alike – to me,’ she murmured.

‘Cat eyes, eh? Well, you look the part. Here, I’ve brought you some dinner. Take your choice. Fond of roast beef? Or how about a little frog-broth?’

She shook her head and backed away a step.

‘No,’ she said. ‘I can not – eat your food.’

Smith’s brows wrinkled. ‘Didn’t you have any of the food-tablets?’

Again the red turban shook negatively.

‘Then you haven’t had anything for – why, more than twenty-four hours! You must be starved.’

‘Not hungry,’ she denied.

‘What can I find for you to eat, then? There’s time yet if I hurry. You’ve got to eat, child.’

‘I shall – eat,’ she said softly. ‘Before long – I shall – feed. Have no – worry.’

She turned away then and stood at the window, looking out over the moonlit landscape as if to end the conversation. Smith cast her a puzzled glance as he opened the can of roast beef. There had been an odd undertone in that assurance that, undefinably, he did not like. And the girl had teeth and tongue and presumably a fairly human digestive system, to judge from her human form. It was nonsense for her to pretend that he could find nothing that she could eat. She must have had some of the food concentrate after all, he decided, prying up the thermos lid of the inner container to release the long-sealed savour of the hot meat inside.

'Well, if you won't eat, you won't,' he observed philosophically as he poured hot broth and diced beef into the dish-like lid of the thermos can and extracted the spoon from its hiding-place between the inner and outer receptacles. She turned a little to watch him as he pulled up a rickety chair and sat down to the food, and after a while the realization that her green gaze was fixed so unwinkingly upon him made the man nervous, and he said between bites of creamy canal-apple, 'Why don't you try a little of this? It's good.'

'The food - I eat is - better,' her soft voice told him in its hesitant murmur, and again he felt rather than heard a faint undertone of unpleasantness in the words. A sudden suspicion struck him as he pondered on that last remark - some vague memory of horror-tales told about campfires in the past - and he swung round in the chair to look at her, a tiny, creeping fear unaccountably arising. There had been that in her words - in her unspoken words, that menaced. . . .

She stood up beneath his gaze demurely, wide green eyes with their pulsing pupils meeting his without a falter. But her mouth was scarlet and her teeth were sharp. . . .

'What food do you eat?' he demanded. And then, after a pause, very softly, 'Blood?'

She stared at him for a moment, uncomprehending; then something like amusement curled her lips and she said scornfully, 'You think me - vampire, eh? No - I am Shambleau!'

Unmistakably there were scorn and amusement in her voice at the suggestion, but as unmistakably she knew what

he meant – accepted it as a logical suspicion – vampires! Fairy-tales – but fairy-tales this unhuman, outland creature was most familiar with. Smith was not a credulous man, nor a superstitious one, but he had seen too many strange things himself to doubt that the wildest legend might have a basis of fact. And there was something namelessly strange about her. . . .

He puzzled over it for a while between deep bites of the canal-apple. And though he wanted to question her about a great many things, he did not, for he knew how futile it would be.

He said nothing more until the meat was finished and another canal-apple had followed the first, and he had cleared away the meal by the simple expedient of tossing the empty can out of the window. Then he lay back in the chair and surveyed her from half-closed eyes, colourless in a face tanned like saddle-leather. And again he was conscious of the brown, soft curves of her, velvety – subtle arcs and planes of smooth flesh under the tatters of scarlet leather. Vampire she might be, unhuman she certainly was, but desirable beyond words as she sat submissive beneath his slow regard, her red-turbaned head bent, her clawed fingers lying in her lap. They sat very still for a while, and the silence throbbed between them.

She was so like a woman – an Earth woman – sweet and submissive and demure, and softer than soft fur, if he could forget the three-fingered claws and the pulsing eyes – and that deeper strangeness beyond words. . . . (Had he dreamed that red lock of hair that moved? Had it been *segir* that woke the wild revulsion he knew when he held her in his arms? Why had the mob so thirsted for her?) He sat and stared, and despite the mystery of her and the half-suspicions that thronged his mind – for she was so beautifully soft and curved under those revealing tatters – he slowly realized that his pulses were mounting, became aware of a kindling within . . . brown girl-creature with downcast eyes . . . and then the lids lifted and the green flatness of a cat's gaze met his, and last night's revulsion woke swiftly again,

like a warning bell that clanged as their eyes met – animal, after all, too sleek and soft for humanity, and that inner strangeness. . . .

Smith shrugged and sat up. His failings were legion, but the weakness of the flesh was not among the major ones. He motioned the girl to her pallet of blankets in the corner and turned to his own bed.

From deeps of sound sleep he awoke much later. He awoke suddenly and completely, and with that inner excitement that presages something momentous. He awoke to brilliant moonlight, turning the room so bright that he could see the scarlet of the girl's rags as she sat up on her pallet. She was awake, she was sitting with her shoulder half turned to him and her head bent, and some warning instinct crawled coldly up his spine as he watched what she was doing. And yet it was a very ordinary thing for a girl to do – any girl, anywhere. She was unbinding her turban. . . .

He watched, not breathing, a presentiment of something horrible stirring in his brain, inexplicably. . . . The red folds loosened, and – he knew then that he had not dreamed – again a scarlet lock swung down against her cheek . . . a hair, was it? a lock of hair? . . . thick as a thick worm it fell, plumply, against that smooth cheek . . . more scarlet than blood and thick as a crawling worm . . . and like a worm it crawled.

Smith rose on an elbow, not realizing the motion, and fixed an unwinking stare, with a sort of sick, fascinated incredulity, on that – that lock of hair. He had not dreamed. Until now he had taken it for granted that it was the *segir* which had made it seem to move on that evening before. But now . . . it was lengthening, stretching, moving of itself. It must be hair, but it *crawled*; with a sickening life of its own it squirmed down against her cheek, caressingly, revoltingly, impossibly. . . . Wet, it was, and round and thick and shining. . . .

She unfastened the last fold and whipped the turban off. From what he saw then Smith would have turned his eyes

away – and he had looked on dreadful things before, without flinching – but he could not stir. He could only lie there on his elbow staring at the mass of scarlet, squirming – worms, hairs, what? – that writhed over her head in a dreadful mockery of ringlets. And it was lengthening, falling, somehow growing before his eyes, down over her shoulders in a spilling cascade, a mass that even at the beginning could never have been hidden under the skull-tight turban she had worn. He was beyond wondering, but he realized that. And still it squirmed and lengthened and fell, and she shook it out in a horrible travesty of a woman shaking out her unbound hair – until the unspeakable tangle of it – twisting, writhing, obscenely scarlet – hung to her waist and beyond, and still lengthened, an endless mass of crawling horror that until now, somehow, impossibly, had been hidden under the tight-bound turban. It was like a nest of blind, restless red worms . . . it was – it was like naked entrails endowed with an unnatural aliveness, terrible beyond words.

Smith lay in the shadows, frozen without and within in a sick numbness that came of utter shock and revulsion.

She shook out the obscene, unspeakable tangle over her shoulders, and somehow he knew that she was going to turn in a moment and that he must meet her eyes. The thought of that meeting stopped his heart with dread, more awfully than anything else in this nightmare horror; for nightmare it must be, surely. But he knew without trying that he could not wrench his eyes away – the sickened fascination of that sight held him motionless, and somehow there was a certain beauty. . . .

Her head was turning. The crawling awfulnesses rippled and squirmed at the motion, writhing thick and wet and shining over the soft brown shoulders about which they fell now in obscene cascades that all but hid her body. Her head was turning. Smith lay numb. And very slowly he saw the round of her cheek foreshorten and her profile come into view, all the scarlet horrors twisting ominously, and the profile shortened in turn and her full face came slowly round towards the bed – moonlight shining brilliantly as day on the

pretty girl-face, demure and sweet, framed in tangled obscenity that crawled. . . .

The green eyes met his. He felt a perceptible shock, and a shudder rippled down his paralysed spine, leaving an icy numbness in its wake. He felt the goose-flesh rising. But that numbness and cold horror he scarcely realized, for the green eyes were locked with his in a long, long look that somehow presaged nameless things – not altogether unpleasant things – the voiceless voice of her mind assailing him with little murmurous promises. . . .

For a moment he went down into a blind abyss of submission; and then somehow the very sight of that obscenity in eyes that did not then realize they saw it, was dreadful enough to draw him out of the seductive darkness . . . the sight of her crawling and alive with unnamable horror.

She rose, and down about her in a cascade fell the squirming scarlet of – of what grew upon her head. It fell in a long, alive cloak to her bare feet on the floor, hiding her in a wave of dreadful, wet, writhing life. She put up her hands and like a swimmer she parted the waterfall of it, tossing the masses back over her shoulders to reveal her own brown body, sweetly curved. She smiled exquisitely, and in starting waves back from her forehead and down about her in a hideous background writhed the snaky wetness of her living tresses. And Smith knew that he looked upon Medusa.

The knowledge of that – the realization of vast backgrounds reaching into misted history – shook him out of his frozen horror for a moment, and in that moment he met her eyes again, smiling, green as glass in the moonlight, half hooded under drooping lids. Through the twisting scarlet she held out her arms. And there was something soul-shakingly desirable about her, so that all the blood surged to his head suddenly and he stumbled to his feet like a sleeper in a dream as she swayed towards him, infinitely graceful, infinitely sweet in her cloak of living horror.

And somehow there was beauty in it, the wet scarlet writhings with moonlight sliding and shining along the thick, worm-round tresses and losing itself in the masses only

to glint again and move silvery along writhing tendrils – an awful, shuddering beauty more dreadful than any ugliness could be.

But all this, again, he but half realized, for the insidious murmur was coiling again through his brain, promising, caressing, alluring, sweeter than honey; and the green eyes that held his were clear and burning like the depths of a jewel, and behind the pulsing slits of darkness he was staring into a greater dark that held all things. . . . He had known – dimly he had known when he first gazed into those flat animal shallows that behind them lay this – all beauty and terror, all horror and delight, in the infinite darkness upon which her eyes opened like windows, paned with emerald glass.

Her lips moved, and in a murmur that blended indistinguishably with the silence and the sway of her body and the dreadful sway of her – her hair – she whispered – very softly, very passionately, 'I shall – speak to you now – in my own tongue – oh, beloved!'

And in her living cloak she swayed to him, the murmur swelling seductive and caressing in his innermost brain – promising, compelling, sweeter than sweet. His flesh crawled to the horror of her, but it was a perverted revulsion that clasped what it loathed. His arms slid round her under the sliding cloak, wet, wet and warm and hideously alive – and the sweet velvet body was clinging to his, her arms locked about his neck – and with a whisper and a rush the unspeakable horror closed about them both.

In nightmares until he died he remembered that moment when the living tresses of Shambleau first folded him in their embrace. A nauseous, smothering odour as the wetness shut around him – thick, pulsing worms clasping every inch of his body, sliding, writhing, their wetness and warmth striking through his garments as if he stood naked to their embrace.

All this in a graven instant – and after that a tangled flash of conflicting sensation before oblivion closed over him. For he remembered the dream – and knew it for nightmare reality now, and the sliding, gently moving caresses of those

wet, warm worms upon his flesh was an ecstasy above words – that deeper ecstasy that strikes beyond the body and beyond the mind and tickles the very roots of the soul with unnatural delight. So he stood, rigid as marble, as helplessly stony as any of Medusa's victims in ancient legends were, while the terrible pleasure of Shambleau thrilled and shuddered through every fibre of him; through every atom of his body and the intangible atoms of what men call the soul, through all that was Smith the dreadful pleasure ran. And it was truly dreadful. Dimly he knew it, even as his body answered to the root-deep ecstasy, a foul and dreadful wooing from which his very soul shuddered away – and yet in the innermost depths of that soul some grinning traitor shivered with delight. But deeply, behind all this, he knew horror and revulsion and despair beyond telling, while the intimate caresses crawled obscenely in the secret places of his soul – knew that the soul should not be handled – and shook with the perilous pleasure through it all.

And this conflict and knowledge, this mingling of rapture and revulsion all took place in the flashing of a moment while the scarlet worms coiled and crawled upon him, sending deep, obscene tremors of that infinite pleasure into every atom that made up Smith. And he could not stir in that slimy, ecstatic embrace – and a weakness was flooding that grew deeper after each succeeding wave of intense delight, and the traitor in his soul strengthened and drowned out the revulsion – and something within him ceased to struggle as he sank wholly into a blazing darkness that was oblivion to all else but that devouring rapture. . . .

The young Venusian climbing the stairs to his friend's lodging-room pulled out his key absent-mindedly, a pucker forming between his fine brows. He was slim, as all Venusians are, as fair and sleek as any of them, and as with most of his countrymen the look of cherubic innocence on his face was wholly deceptive. He had the face of a fallen angel, without Lucifer's majesty to redeem it; for a black devil grinned in his eyes and there were faint lines of ruthlessness

and dissipation about his mouth to tell of the long years behind him that had run the gamut of experiences and made his name, next to Smith's, the most hated and the most respected in the records of the Patrol.

He mounted the stairs now with a puzzled frown between his eyes. He had come into Lakkdarol on the noon liner – the *Maid* in her hold very skilfully disguised with paint and otherwise – to find in lamentable disorder the affairs he had expected to be settled. And cautious inquiry elicited the information that Smith had not been seen for three days. That was not like his friend – he had never failed before, and the two stood to lose not only a large sum of money but also their personal safety by the inexplicable lapse on the part of Smith. Yarol could think of one solution only: fate had at last caught up with his friend. Nothing but physical disability could explain it.

Still puzzling, he fitted his key in the lock and swung the door open.

In that first moment, as the door opened, he sensed something very wrong. . . . The room was darkened, and for a while he could see nothing, but at the first breath he scented a strange, unnamable odour, half sickening, half sweet. And deep stirrings of ancestral memory awoke within him – ancient swamp-born memories from Venusian ancestors far away and long ago. . . .

Yarol laid his hand on his gun, lightly, and opened the door wider. In the dimness all he could see at first was a curious mound in the far corner. . . . Then his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, and he saw it more clearly, a mound that somehow heaved and stirred within itself. . . . A mound of – he caught his breath sharply – a mound like a mass of entrails, living, moving, writhing with an unspeakable aliveness. Then a hot Venusian oath broke from his lips and he cleared the door-sill in a swift stride, slammed the door and set his back against it, gun ready in his hand, although his flesh crawled – for he *knew*. . . .

'Smith!' he said softly, in a voice thick with horror. 'Northwest!'

The moving mass stirred – shuddered – sank back into crawling quiescence again.

‘Smith! Smith!’ The Venusian’s voice was gentle and insistent, and it quivered a little with terror.

An impatient ripple went over the whole mass of aliveness in the corner. It stirred again, reluctantly, and then tendril by writhing tendril it began to part itself and fall aside, and very slowly the brown of a spaceman’s leather appeared beneath it, all slimed and shining.

‘Smith! Northwest!’ Yarol’s persistent whisper came again, urgently, and with a dream-like slowness the leather garments moved . . . a man sat up in the midst of the writhing worms, a man who once, long ago, might have been Northwest Smith. From head to foot he was slimy from the embrace of the crawling horror about him. His face was that of some creature beyond humanity – dead-alive, fixed in a grey stare, and the look of terrible ecstasy that overspread it seemed to come from somewhere far within, a faint reflection from immeasurable distance beyond the flesh. And as there is mystery and magic in the moonlight which is after all but a reflection of the everyday sun, so in that grey face turned to the door was a terror unnamable and sweet, a reflection of ecstasy beyond the understanding of any who have known only earthly ecstasy themselves. And as he sat there turning a blank, eyeless face to Yarol the red worms writhed ceaselessly about him, very gently, with a soft, caressive motion that never slackened.

‘Smith . . . come here! Smith . . . get up . . . Smith, Smith!’ Yarol’s whisper hissed in the silence, commanding, urgent – but he made no move to leave the door.

And with a dreadful slowness, like a dead man rising, Smith stood up in the nest of slimy scarlet. He swayed drunkenly on his feet, and two or three crimson tendrils came writhing up his legs to the knees and wound themselves there, supportingly, moving with a ceaseless caress that seemed to give some hidden strength, for he said then, without inflection,

'Go away. Go away. Leave me alone.' And the dead ecstatic face never changed.

'Smith!' Yarol's voice was desperate. 'Smith, listen! Smith, can't you hear me?'

'Go away,' the monotonous voice said. 'Go away. Go away. Go—'

'Not unless you come too. Can't you hear? Smith! Smith! I'll—'

He hushed in mid-phrase, and once more the ancestral prickle of race-memory shivered down his back, for the scarlet mass was moving again, violently, rising. . . .

Yarol pressed back against the door and gripped his gun, and the name of a god he had forgotten years ago rose to his lips unbidden. For he knew what was coming next, and the knowledge was more dreadful than any ignorance could have been.

The red, writhing mass rose higher, and the tendrils parted and a human face looked out — no, half-human, with green cat eyes that shone in that dimness like lighted jewels, compellingly. . . .

Yarol breathed 'Shar!' again, and flung up an arm across his face, and the tingle of meeting the green gaze for even an instant went thrilling through him perilously.

'Smith!' he called in despair. 'Smith, can't you hear me?'

'Go away,' said that voice that was not Smith's. 'Go away.'

And somehow, although he dared not look, Yarol knew that the — other — had parted those worm-thick tresses and stood there in all the human sweetness of the brown, curved woman's body, cloaked in living horror. And he felt the eyes upon him, and something was crying insistently in his brain to lower that shielding arm. . . . He was lost — he knew it, and the knowledge gave him that courage which comes from despair. The voice in his brain was growing, swelling, deafening him with a roaring command that all but swept him before it — command to lower that arm — to meet the eyes that opened upon darkness — to submit — and a promise, murmur-

ous and sweet and evil beyond words, of pleasure to come. . . .

But somehow he kept his head – somehow, dizzily, he was gripping his gun in his upflung hand – somehow, incredibly, crossing the narrow room with averted face, groping for Smith's shoulder. There was a moment of blind fumbling in emptiness, and then he found it, and gripped the leather that was slimy and dreadful and wet – and simultaneously he felt something loop gently about his ankle and a shock of repulsive pleasure went through him, and then another coil, and another, wound about his feet. . . .

Yarol set his teeth and gripped the shoulder hard, and his hand shuddered of itself, for the feel of that leather was slimy as the worms about his ankles, and a faint tingle of obscene delight went through him from the contact.

That caressive pressure on his legs was all he could feel, and the voice in his brain drowned out all other sounds, and his body obeyed him reluctantly – but somehow he gave one heave of tremendous effort and swung Smith, stumbling, out of that nest of horror. The twining tendrils ripped loose with a little sucking sound, and the whole mass quivered and reached after, and then Yarol forgot his friend utterly and turned his whole being to the hopeless task of freeing himself. For only a part of him was fighting, now – only a part of him struggled against the twining obscenities, and in his innermost brain the sweet, seductive murmur sounded, and his body clamoured to surrender. . . .

'*Shar! Shar y'danis . . . Shar mor'la-rol—*' prayed Yarol, gasping and half unconscious that he spoke, boy's prayers that he had forgotten years ago, and with his back half turned to the central mass he kicked desperately with his heavy boots at the red, writhing worms about him. They gave back before him, quivering and curling themselves out of reach, and though he knew that more were reaching for his throat from behind, at least he could go on struggling until he was forced to meet those eyes. . . .

He stamped and kicked and stamped again, and for one instant he was free of the slimy grip as the bruised worms

curled back from his heavy feet, and he lurched away dizzily, sick with revulsion and despair as he fought off the coils, and then he lifted his eyes and saw the cracked mirror on the wall. Dimly in its reflection he could see the writhing scarlet horror behind him, cat face peering out with its demure girl-smile, dreadfully human, and all the red tendrils reaching after him. And remembrance of something he had read long ago swept incongruously over him, and the gasp of relief and hope that he gave shook for a moment the grip of the command in his brain.

Without pausing for a breath he swung the gun over his shoulder, the reflected barrel in line with the reflected horror in the mirror, and flicked the catch.

In the mirror he saw its blue flame leap in a dazzling spate across the dimness, full into the midst of that squirming, reaching mass behind him. There was a hiss and a blaze and a high, thin scream of inhuman malice and despair – the flame cut a wide arc and went out as the gun fell from his hand, and Yarol pitched forward to the floor.

Northwest Smith opened his eyes to Martian sunlight streaming thinly through the dingy window. Something wet and cold was slapping his face, and the familiar fiery sting of *segir*-whisky burnt his throat.

'Smith!' Yarol's voice was saying from far away. 'N. W.! Wake up, damn you! Wake up!'

'I'm – awake,' Smith managed to articulate thickly. 'Wha's matter?'

Then a cup-rim was thrust against his teeth and Yarol said irritably, 'Drink it, you fool!'

Smith swallowed obediently and more of the fire-hot *segir* flowed down his grateful throat. It spread a warmth through his body that awakened him from the numbness that had gripped him until now, and helped a little towards driving out the all-devouring weakness he was becoming aware of slowly. He lay still for a few minutes while the warmth of the whisky went through him, and memory sluggishly began to permeate his brain with the spread of the *segir*. Nightmare memories . . . sweet and terrible . . . memories of—

'God!' gasped Smith suddenly, and tried to sit up. Weakness smote him like a blow, and for an instant the room wheeled as he fell back against something firm and warm – Yarol's shoulder. The Venusian's arm supported him while the room steadied, and after a while he twisted a little and stared into the other's black gaze.

Yarol was holding him with one arm and finishing the mug of *segir* himself, and the black eyes met his over the rim and crinkled into sudden laughter, half hysterical after that terror that was passed.

'By *Pharol*!' gasped Yarol, choking into his mug. 'By *Pharol*, N. W.! I'm never gonna let you forget this! Next time you have to drag me out of a mess I'll say—'

'Let it go,' said Smith. 'What's been going on? How—'

'Shambleau.' Yarol's laughter died. 'Shambleau! What were you doing with a thing like that?'

'What was it?' Smith asked soberly.

'Mean to say you didn't know? But where'd you find it? How—'

'Suppose you tell me first what you know,' said Smith firmly. 'And another swig of that *segir*, too, please. I need it.'

'Can you hold the mug now? Feel better?'

'Yeah – some. I can hold it – thanks. Now go on.'

'Well – I don't know just where to start. They call them Shambleau—'

'Good God, is there more than one?'

'It's a – a sort of race, I think, one of the very oldest. Where they come from nobody knows. The name sounds a little French, doesn't it? But it goes back beyond the start of history. There have always been Shambleau.'

'I never heard of 'em.'

'Not many people have. And those who know don't care to talk about it much.'

'Well, half this town knows. I hadn't any idea what they were talking about, then. And I still don't understand, but—'

'Yes, it happens like this, sometimes. They'll appear, and the news will spread and the town will get together and hunt

them down, and after that – well, the story doesn't get around very far. It's too – too unbelievable.'

'But – my God, Yarol! – what was it? Where'd it come from? How—'

'Nobody knows just where they come from. Another planet – maybe some undiscovered one. Some say Venus – I know there are some rather awful legends of them handed down in our family – that's how I've heard about it. And the minute I opened that door, awhile back – I – I think I knew that smell. . . .'

'But – what *are* they?'

'God knows. Not human, though they have the human form. Or that may be only an illusion . . . or maybe I'm crazy. I don't know. They're a species of the vampire – or maybe the vampire is a species of – of them. Their normal form must be that – that mass, and in that form they draw nourishment from the – I suppose the life-forces of men. And they take some form – usually a woman form, I think, and key you up to the highest pitch of emotion before they – begin. That's to work the life-force up to intensity so it'll be easier. . . . And they give, always, that horrible, foul pleasure as they – feed. There are some men who, if they survive the first experience, take to it like a drug – can't give it up – keep the thing with them all their lives – which isn't long – feeding it for that ghastly satisfaction. Worse than smoking *ming* or – or "praying to *Pharol*." '

'Yes,' said Smith. 'I'm beginning to understand why that crowd was so surprised and – and disgusted when I said – well, never mind. Go on.'

'Did you get to talk to – to it?' asked Yarol.

'I tried to. It couldn't speak very well. I asked it where it came from and it said – "from far away and long ago" – something like that.'

'I wonder. Possibly some unknown planet – but I think not. You know there are so many wild stories with some basis of fact to start from, that I've sometimes wondered – mightn't there be a lot more of even worse and wilder superstitions we've never even heard of? Things like this, blas-

phemous and foul, that those who know have to keep still about? Awful, fantastic things running around loose that we never hear rumours of at all!

'These things – they've been in existence for countless ages. No one knows when or where they first appeared. Those who've seen them, as we saw this one, don't talk about it. It's just one of those vague, misty rumours you find half hinted at in old books sometimes. . . . I believe they are an older race than man, spawned from ancient seed in times before ours, perhaps on planets that have gone to dust, and so horrible to man that when they are discovered the discoverers keep still about it – forget them again as quickly as they can.

'And they go back to time immemorial. I suppose you recognized the legend of Medusa? There isn't any question that the ancient Greeks knew of them. Does it mean that there have been civilizations before yours that set out from Earth and explored other planets? Or did one of the Shambleau somehow make its way into Greece three thousand years ago? If you think about it long enough you'll go off your head! I wonder how many other legends are based on things like this – things we don't suspect, things we'll never know.

'The Gorgon, Medusa, a beautiful woman with – with snakes for hair, and a gaze that turned men to stone, and Perseus finally killed her – I remembered this just by accident, N. W., and it saved your life and mine – Perseus killed her by using a mirror as he fought to reflect what he dared not look at directly. I wonder what the old Greek who first started that legend would have thought if he'd known that three thousand years later his story would save the lives of two men on another planet. I wonder what that Greek's own story was, and how he met the thing, and what happened. . . .

'Well, there's a lot we'll never know. Wouldn't the records of that race of – of *things*, whatever they are, be worth reading! Records of other planets and other ages and all the beginnings of mankind! But I don't suppose they've kept any

records. I don't suppose they've even any place to keep them – from what little I know, or anyone knows about it, they're like the Wandering Jew, just bobbing up here and there at long intervals, and where they stay in the meantime I'd give my eyes to know! But I don't believe that terribly hypnotic power they have indicates any superhuman intelligence. It's their means of getting food – just like a frog's long tongue or a carnivorous flower's odour. Those are physical because the frog and the flower eat physical food. The Shambleau uses a – a mental reach to get mental food. I don't quite know how to put it. And just as a beast that eats the bodies of other animals acquires with each meal greater power over the bodies of the rest, so the Shambleau, stoking itself up with the life-forces of men, increases its power over the minds and the souls of other men. But I'm talking about things I can't define – things I'm not sure exist.

'I only know that when I felt – when those tentacles closed around my legs – I didn't want to pull loose, I felt sensations that – that – oh, I'm fouled and filthy to the very deepest part of me by that – pleasure – and yet—'

'I know,' said Smith slowly. The effect of the *segit* was beginning to wear off, and weakness was washing back over him in waves, and when he spoke he was half meditating in a low voice, scarcely realizing that Yarol listened. 'I know it – much better than you do – and there's something so indescribably awful that the thing emanates, something so utterly at odds with everything human – there aren't any words to say it. For a while I was a part of it literally, sharing its thoughts and memories and emotions and hungers, and – well, it's over now and I don't remember very clearly, but the only part left free was that part of me that was all but insane from the – the obscenity of the thing. And yet it was a pleasure so sweet – I think there must be some nucleus of utter evil in me – in everyone – that needs only the proper stimulus to get complete control; because even while I was sick all through from the touch of those – things – there was something in me that was – was simply gibbering with delight. . . . Because of that I saw things – and knew things –

horrible, wild things I can't quite remember – visited unbelievable places, looked backward through the memory of that – creature – I was one with, and saw – God, I wish I could remember!

'You ought to thank your God you can't,' said Yarol soberly.

His voice roused Smith from the half-trance he had fallen into, and he rose on his elbow, swaying a little from weakness. The room was wavering before him, and he closed his eyes, not to see it, but he asked, 'You say they – they don't turn up again? No way of finding – another?'

Yarol did not answer for a moment. He laid his hands on the other man's shoulders and pressed him back, and then sat staring down into the dark, ravaged face with a new, strange, undefinable look upon it that he had never seen there before – whose meaning he knew, too well.

'Smith,' he said finally, and his black eyes for once were steady and serious, and the little grinning devil had vanished from behind them, 'Smith, I've never asked your word on anything before, but I've – I've earned the right to do it now, and I'm asking you to promise me one thing.'

Smith's colourless eyes met the black gaze unsteadily. Irresolution was in them, and a little fear of what that promise might be. And for just a moment Yarol was looking, not into his friend's familiar eyes, but into a wide grey blankness that held all horror and delight – a pale sea with unspeakable pleasures sunk beneath it. Then the wide stare focused again and Smith's eyes met his squarely and Smith's voice said, 'Go ahead. I'll promise.'

'That if you ever should meet a Shambleau again – ever, anywhere – you'll draw your gun and burn it to hell the instant you realize what it is. Will you promise me that?'

There was a long silence. Yarol's sombre black eyes bored relentlessly into the colourless ones of Smith, not wavering. And the veins stood out on Smith's tanned forehead. He never broke his word – he had given it perhaps half a dozen times in his life, but once he had given it, he was incapable of

breaking it. And once more the grey seas flooded in a dim tide of memories, sweet and horrible beyond dreams. Once more Yarol was staring into blankness that hid nameless things. The room was very still.

The grey tide ebbed. Smith's eyes, pale and resolute as steel, met Yarol's levelly.

'I'll - try,' he said. And his voice wavered.

JENNY CUT-THROAT

by John Blackburn

WEREFORD is an obscure village and Jennifer Thorne, Jenny Cut-throat, is an obscure murderess. Her case never aroused much public interest, though it was fairly spectacular. Maybe lack of newspaper space was the main reason, because the Crimean War had just started. Maybe the reporters played down the story, because two of the men involved had wives and children and there was no point in rubbing salt into their wounds. Maybe Jenny was regarded more as an object of pity than horror; a maniac, who killed herself in a fit of remorse.

Whatever the reasons, Jenny Thorne didn't make the headlines, and apart from local people, nobody remembers her today. Even the locals would have forgotten her without the tombstone to jog their memories. A simple granite slab near the churchyard gate with no name, no date, not even a cross. The stone has a legend which some of us kids believed however. If you ran five times round the church and then knelt down beside the slab and held your breath, you'd hear Jenny sharpening her knife. I tried the experiment quite often when I was a young girl, but all I heard was the pounding of my own heart. Understandable, because one had to run fast, though disappointing. I really had hoped to experience something. I felt it was my right because I'm a direct descendant of Jenny's. She's my great ... great ... great ...

No, I can't remember what the actual relationship is, though I'm some kind of niece. My memory is rather poor and I can't think as clearly as I used to. My partner does

most of the thinking for me nowadays, which is a blessing. I've never been very good at figures, though I can read and write, and I remember that report on the Probation Officer's desk. 'Mentally and emotionally retarded; possible psychosis.' I looked up the last word in a dictionary and it means *nuts*.

But, though I lack brains, I've got physical compensations, and make good use of them. After I left Weyford and went to London, I had no difficulty in finding a job. Billy Gold signed me up immediately and for almost a year I was second leading lady at his 'Beat the Boys Club'. *Madame Hercules*, *Lola the Lion-Tamer*, *The Countess de Sade* were a few of my roles and, though I say it myself, I was damned good. I could have been Bill's first lead if he hadn't made a pass at me.

Silly Billy! He was a smart operator, but no judge of character. He didn't realize that I found the very idea of sex with a man revolting. He hadn't guessed I was a virgin; which I still am. He never suspected that every time I strutted onto the stage looking like a drag artiste in my thigh boots, leopard-skin girdle and wire-mesh bra', I despised myself. That I hated my audience; those sad, guilty, half-men craving for pain and humiliation.

How I hated them! I loathed the whole mob of them, though I didn't really hate Billy Gold. He showed me that I was wasting my talents and he wasn't a complete fool. He didn't charge me with Grievous Bodily Harm, though the Countess's riding crop knocked out his front teeth and a kick from my left boot almost cost him an eye. In his own words Billy, 'didn't want no troubles from no policemen', and there were no hard feelings. After the doctor patched him up, Bill paid me a month's salary, in lieu of notice, and told me that I'd do better on my own. He even advised me how to start my business and wrote out the advertisement. A decent little bloke and, like his clients, a masochist. If my reaction to his pass had been slightly less violent I think he'd have enjoyed himself. Decent, but bent; as bent as they come, and they come in droves. They swarm like locusts . . . they're as repulsive as lepers . . . Men - bent men.

'EXPERIENCED FEMALE TEACHER AVAILABLE. ONLY PUPILS IN NEED OF STRICT DISCIPLINE SHOULD APPLY.' That was how the business started and the publicity didn't cost much. Cards in shop windows and the odd magazine small ad'. A profitable business and before long I had as many clients as I could handle. Two maids, three horses, four delinquent schoolboys, a brace of Roman slaves and an early Christian Martyr were just a few of them.

Not a bad selection of serfs. They all paid in advance and they all arrived on the dot, bringing their fancy dresses with them. The maids' briefcases contained crisply-starched uniforms, the horses produced bridles and saddles and bearing reins, the slaves and schoolboys had their own shackles and regulation blazers. Only the martyr was troublesome. Some of his equipment was a bit bulky and I had to store it for him. An embarrassment if the police had raided the flat. Whips are one thing; a whipping post and a rack quite another. I did make him hang on to his thumb screws, however. They were light plastic, Hong Kong toys and easily carried in a pocket.

A good business at first, but it soon started to flag, and that was my fault. I've got a sense of humour and am easily bored. My maids sulked when I sniggered after telling them that the floor had not been polished to Madam's satisfaction. The horses didn't respond to the whip because I couldn't help chuckling while I plied it. I don't blame my clients, but nor do I blame myself. It is funny to see a middle-aged man on his knees in cap and apron. Funny, to watch a member of parliament, bending down to be caned. Funny, to hear a prominent industrialist and a Shakespearian actor clanking fetters and jingling harness. I just couldn't help laughing and trade suffered accordingly. The schoolboys played truant, the slaves escaped, the horses stampeded and the maids transferred their allegiance to sterner mistresses. After a month or two the martyr was my only regular customer and one of his thumb screws lost me that custom; Hong Kong, Empire-made, shoddy. He was really enjoying himself and preparing to renounce the faith when the damn

thing broke without even bruising his little finger. How I giggled; how he scurried away.

Very amusing, but you can't live on laughter unless you're a professional comedian. I had to discipline myself, and learn to be stern and forbidding. I had to stop laughing and become grim and humourless, so I drew out my savings and went to the grimmest place I could think of. Wereford – my home.

Wereford is in Weredale; a dull, little village surrounded by small, brown moors that look slightly sinister just before nightfall and merely drab in daylight. Drab and dull, but also threatening and that was what I wanted; though I didn't really know why it gave me the shivers . . . why it always had. Nor did I know why I thought I'd find inspiration there. I was an only child, my parents were dead and my childhood had been unhappy. I'd made no friends with the dull people of Wereford, though they remembered me alright and I could sense their resentment when I went into the bar of the Black Bear Hotel after supper. 'That darned lass back from Lon'on. A bad'un from birth. A ruddy tart with a killer's blood in 'er.'

Pigs . . . Men-pigs, but valuable instructors. Their dislike was so apparent that it told me where I had to go. Where I could find guidance and the way to punish them.

Though it was dark when I left the hotel, I knew the churchyard much better than I know the back of my hand and I didn't stumble once during my circuits of the building. Nor did my heart beats trouble me when I knelt down beside the grave of a supposed murderess and laid my ear against the rough granite. I heard nothing except an owl hooting for a few seconds and then the sound I'd longed for. The *whit-whit-whit* of steel on stone. After a few more seconds the sound changed and I heard voices. I also saw a picture; a series of pictures.

Jennifer Thorne, or Jenny Cut-throat, as she was called later, was supposed to have been mad when she killed her husband and his fellow louts, but that's wrong. She was as sane as I and my partner are, and just as chaste. God knows

why Jenny married a brute like Peter Thorne, but she did. Yes, the poor little lamb wedded her Peter and how she paid for that one stupid act. Peter was a boozier and he didn't appreciate his wife's efforts to reform him. It was Peter who went insane, and one night he came back from the pub and brought three other drunken swine home with him. I know ... I saw the whole scene clearly. As clearly as I saw the hand coming up from a hole in the ground and reaching for mine.

They raped Jenny. The whole four of them raped her and then they told her to fill their glasses and be quick about it or she'd get a thump from Peter's fist. They were so drunk that they didn't notice her drop laudanum into their beer. They were asleep and snoring before she sharpened the carving knife. They'd bled to death before she cut her own throat; poor lamb.

Yes, poor Jenny Thorne, though she's happier now. I'm certainly happier because I needed a partner to manage my affairs and a friend with a shoulder to cry on. That's what I've got. The dearest friend in the world, and so efficient. I never laugh at my clients these days and they get splendid treatment. All gentlemen in the twenty-thousand-a-year class and all in need of correction.

Nice gentlemen, though they have a joint failing. They only visit us once and they don't leave the house. The entertainment is so enthralling that they've signed on as permanent guests and we can't get rid of them.

Understandable, I suppose. My partner doesn't approve of toys and games; silly charades with rubber switches, strips of leather, plastic thumb screws. Only the best is good enough for our customers and they get the best.

We use knives; Jenny Cut-Throat and I.

THE OTHER WOMAN

by Ramsey Campbell

OUTSIDE the window, in the park, the trees were glossy with June sunlight. The sky floated in the lake; branches were rooted in the water, deep and still. Phil gazed out, then he glanced back at the strangled woman and pushed her aside. He had painted her before. She wouldn't do.

He read the publisher's brief again. *Throttle* ('racing driver by day, strangler by night!') You could see the sunlit racing car, and the moon sailing in a splotch of night, behind the woman. But that was it exactly: it was the detail that caught your eye, the woman wasn't at all compelling. She looked like just another murder victim on the cover of another book.

And why shouldn't she? Art didn't sell books – not this kind of book, anyway. People looked for the familiar, the predictable, the guaranteed product. There would be tense scenes on the racetrack, a girl with her dress ripped away from one nipple would be strangled (and probably more that the cover couldn't show); that was enough for the commuters glancing hastily at the station bookstall. But it wasn't enough for Phil. He'd painted this victim before, on *Her Dear Dead Body*. He was copying himself.

All right, so he was. There was one way to halt that tendency, and he had the time. He'd left the rest of the day clear so that he wouldn't be tired tomorrow in London. Two satisfying cheques had arrived that morning. He felt more than equal to the task. Gazing out of the window, he began to rethink the cover, and to sketch.

A woman screaming at a hand groping into the picture –

no; he tore that up impatiently. A corpse with a bruised throat – no, too static. A woman's throat working between intrusive thumbs – no! He'd just painted that! 'God's bloody teeth!' he shouted, hurling the crumpled sketch across the room. 'God damned bleeding—' He went on at length, until he began to repeat himself. Thank heaven Hilary was at work. If she had been here he would only have found an excuse to lose his temper with her, wasting half his energy.

When he'd calmed down he stared at the branches hanging limply into the depths of the lake. He felt himself draining into the view. Suddenly he closed his eyes and tried to imagine what it would be like to strangle a woman.

You would throw her down on the floor. You'd lie on top of her so that she couldn't kick, you'd pin her flailing forearms down with your elbows. You'd lean your weight on your thumbs at her throat. Her throat would struggle wildly as a trapped bird. Her eyes would widen, trying to spring free of the vice: one blue eye, one brown.

At once she was there in his mind, complete. Her lips were a natural dark red and very full; they strained back now from her large white perfectly even teeth. Her nose and cheeks were long and thin, gracefully simple. Her red hair rippled as her head swung violently from side to side, uncovering her small delicate ears. He had never seen her before in his life.

He was painting furiously, without wasting time on a preliminary sketch. She wasn't Hilary. Some of his women were: Hilary running in terror across a moor on *Murder by Moonlight*, Hilary suspended in the plight of falling in front of a train (though looking unfortunately like a displaced angel) on *Mind the Doors*. It didn't matter who this woman was. Because she wasn't anybody, of course: she was a fantasy his imagination had released at last, when he needed her. He painted.

When he'd finished he stepped back. It was good, no doubt about it. She lay between the patches of day and moony night. She might be dead, or might be writhing in the clutch of an invisible attacker; though she was corpse-like,

there was still a suggestion of life in her. Standing back, Phil realized that whoever looked at her became the attacker; that was why he'd painted her alone. Her legs were wide beneath the thin dress, her heels digging into invisible ground; her nipples strained at the white fabric. It was as though she were offering herself for choking.

Eventually he looked away, confused. Usually when he'd finished a cover he felt lightened, hungry, freed of the painting. Now he felt inexplicably tense, and the presence of the painting loitered in his mind, nagging him. He signed that painting 'Phil', and his attention wandered from the corner back to the woman. Perhaps it was that she was so alluring; his covers of Hilary never had been. He felt an irrational conviction that the woman had somehow been put into his mind, at the precise moment when he was susceptible to her. And why shouldn't it turn me on? he shouted himself down. Only hope it does the same to the readers.

He was still musing vaguely when Hilary came home. 'That's good,' she said, looking at the cover. 'It's really good. But frightening.'

'What do you mean, *but* frightening?' he demanded.

He ate dinner tensely. Hilary read his mood and tried to soothe him with her talk, her movements, her silences. Awareness of what she was doing made him more tense. He found he was anxious to photograph the *Throttle* cover and develop the slide with the rest. Of course, that was what was keeping him on edge: the thought of meeting publishers tomorrow. Yet he'd met one of them before; he hadn't been tense then. It must be the anticipated strain of meeting two in one day. He gazed at the victim as he photographed her, and felt his tension ease. With her to show to the publishers he had nothing to worry about. Gladdened and relieved, he hurried to make love to Hilary.

He couldn't raise an erection. He'd masturbated on Friday, when she'd begun her period, but it was Monday now. 'Never mind,' she said, pushing his head gently away from her thighs. 'Tell me about what you did today.'

'What do you mean, what I did today? You've seen it, for

God's sake! You don't want to hear what a bloody strain it was to paint, do you?"

'If you want to tell me.'

'I'd rather forget, thanks.' He crawled into bed. 'Surely to God you can understand that.'

'There was a woman in the shop today wanting to know the best vintages for claret,' Hilary said after a while. 'I said I'd get the manageress, but she kept saying I ought to know.' She went on, something about the end of the year, while a woman reached up to Phil. He tried to make out her face, but she was growing larger, spreading through him, dissolving into his sleep.

'That was remarkable, that murder victim,' Damien Smiles said. 'Let's see her again.'

Phil recalled the slide of the cover for *Throttle*. 'That's amazing,' Damien said. 'If you do anything as good as that for us you'll be our star artist. Listen, if Crescent don't use it we'll get someone to write a book around it.'

He switched on the light and the basement office flooded back around Phil, startling him out of his euphoria. He wished he hadn't to go on to Crescent Books. Apollo Books were offering him better rates and the security of a series all to himself; even the lunch Damien had bought him was better than Crescent's. But at least Apollo were offering him all the work he could handle. If Crescent didn't increase their offers, they'd had him.

'Something else you might think about,' Damien said. 'We'll be going in for black magic next year. Take this one to read and see what you can get out of it, no hurry. Awful writing but good sales.'

The Truth about Witches and Devils. Phil read snatches of it in the Underground, smiling indulgently. That foulest of secret societies, the coven. Every possible filthy excess diseased minds could conceive. Are today's hippies and beatniks so different? They could have a point there, Phil conceded, with abnormal people like that. Satan's slaves, human and inhuman. The vampire, the werewolf. The succubus. Here

was the station for Crescent Books. Phil hurried off, almost leaving the book on the seat.

Crescent Books took the *Throttle* cover and fed him drinks. They were sorry they couldn't increase his fees, sorry to see him go – hoped he would have every success. Phil didn't care that they were lying. He meandered back eventually to Lancaster Gate. With the money that was coming to him he could have afforded a better hotel, if he'd known. Still, all he needed was a bed.

Surveying the rest of his room, he decided the curtains must have been bought second-hand; they were extravagantly thick. He struggled with the window until it developed lockjaw, but the room's heat leaned inertly against the heat outside. He found that if he left even a crack between the curtains, an unerring glare of light from a street-lamp would reach for his face on the immovable bed. He lay naked on top of the bed, amid the hot dense cloud of darkness that filled the room, smelling heavily of cloth and, somewhere, dust. Once or twice a feeble gleam crept between the curtains and was immediately stifled.

It might have been the alcohol, or the disorienting blackout, or the heat: quite possibly all of them. Whatever the reason, the darkness felt as if it were rubbing itself slowly, hotly over him, like a seducer. His penis levered itself jerkily erect. He reached for it, then restrained himself. If he held back now he would have no problem with Hilary tomorrow – except haste, maybe! He smiled at the dark, ignoring his slight discomfort, hoping his erection would subside.

The darkness moved on him, waiting to be noticed. His penis twitched impatiently. Still no, he insisted. He continued to smile, reminiscing; he refused to be distracted from his contentment. And all thanks to the *Throttle* cover, he thought. That was what had sold Apollo on him. At once the slide clicked brightly into place in his mind: the limp helpless body beneath the thin dress. The blue eye and the brown gazed up at him. In his mind he picked up the slide and gratefully kissed the tiny face. Somehow it was like kissing a fairy, except that the face was cold and still. She was re-

ceding from him, growing more tiny, drawing him down into darkness, into sleep.

It must be sleep, for suddenly she was struggling beneath the full length of his body. She was trying to drive her knees into his groin, but his thighs had forced her legs wide. His elbows knelt on her forearms; her hands wriggled as though impaled. His hands were at her throat, squeezing, and her eyes welcomed him, urging him on. He closed his mouth over hers as she choked; her tongue struggled wildly beneath his. He drove himself urgently between her legs. As he entered her, her genitals gave the gasp for which her mouth was striving. He drove deep half-a-dozen times, then was trying to hold back, remembering Hilary: too late, too late. He bit the pillow savagely as he came.

Next day, on the train home to Liverpool, he was pre-occupied. Trees sailed by, turning to display further intricacies, slowly glittering green in the sunlight. He should have saved his orgasm for Hilary. He was sure she looked forward to sex; they were closest then, when he could give all his time to her. He had the impression, from odd things that she'd said but which he couldn't now remember, that she wasn't entirely happy working at the wine shop – all the more reason for her to value sex. But he couldn't always manage two erections in twenty-four hours: particularly when, now he tested himself, even the most elaborate fantasy of Hilary couldn't arouse him. Still, there was no point in blaming himself. After all, he had been half-asleep, susceptible. The theme of last night's fantasy didn't bother him; it wasn't as if it had been real. In fact, that was all the more a tribute to the conviction of his painting. Unzipping his case, he turned from the streaming grain of the fields to *The Truth about Witches and Devils*.

A few miles later the cover was ready in his mind: a nude woman resting one hand on the head of a smouldering gleeful snake. Her genitals were hidden by something akin to the reptilian stage of a human embryo, appearing between her legs, conceivably being born between them. In her free hand she held a wand with a tip like a sparkling glans. He read the

briefs on the Apollo crime series and began to plan the covers, though he had yet to see the books. His mind urged the scurrying of the wheels as he finished each cover: hurry up quick, hurry up quick.

Hilary must have been watching for him; she opened the door of the flat. 'Did it go well?' she asked eagerly, already having read his face.

'Yes, very well,' he said. 'Very well,' and hurried into his studio.

He was painting by the time she brought the coffee; she stood watching, hovering at the edge of his attention, nagging silently at him like a difficult statement whose difficulty grew with silence. Perhaps something of the sort was keeping her there but for God's sake, he hadn't time now. 'Thanks,' he said for the coffee. 'Just put it there. Not there, damn it, there!' He could feel his temper slipping. Not now, please not now, not when he had so much to paint: bloody woman, get out. He painted with deliberate intensity for a minute, then he realized with relief that Hilary had gone.

If she had wanted to say something she didn't take the chance to say it at dinner, which had to be postponed twice while he painted out the last of his ideas. 'Sorry I spoilt dinner,' he said, then tried to step back from his faux pas: 'I mean, it's very good. Sorry I kept you waiting.' He told her about Crescent and Apollo, but didn't quote Damien Smiles; he realized he would be embarrassed to repeat the praise to anyone, except to himself as encouragement. 'What did he say?' she asked, and Phil said 'That he wanted me to do some work for them.'

As he'd feared, he couldn't summon an erection. When Hilary realized she ceased caressing him. Her genitals subsided, and she lay quiet. Come on, help me, he thought, good God! No wonder he couldn't will life into his penis. At that moment there seemed to be less life in Hilary than in the strangled woman. She turned on her side above the sheets to sleep, holding his hand on her stomach. With his free hand he turned out the light. Once she was asleep he rolled quickly away from her. He heard their bodies separate stick-

ily. In the summer humidity she'd felt hot and swollen, tacky, actually repulsive.

When he entered his studio next morning to photograph the covers, he gasped. The woman with the blue and brown eyes was waiting for him, four of her.

He had painted so intensely that he hadn't realized what he'd done. He was bewildered, unnerved. She gazed at him four times simultaneously: wicked, submissive, murderous, cunning. So why need he feel disturbed? He wasn't repeating himself at all. The woman brought life to his paintings, but also infinite variety. The ease with which he'd painted these covers proved that.

He photographed a group of earlier unpublished covers to show Damien next time they met, then he went into his darkroom, behind the partition, to develop the slides. The red glow hung darkly about him like the essence of the summer heat made visible, not like light at all. The tiny faces swam up from it, gazing at Phil. He remembered kissing the slide. That was the truth of the woman, that cover; all the others were derivations. He remembered strangling her.

He was strangling her. Her body raised itself to meet him, almost lifting him from the floor; her throat arched up towards him, offering itself. The breathless working of her mouth sucked his tongue deeper, her struggles drew his penis into her. Suddenly all of her went limp. That's it, he thought, stop now, wait for tonight, for Hilary. But he had only begun to stoop to peer at the slides, in order to distract himself, when the orgasm flooded him.

He leaned weakly against the partition. This must stop. It wasn't fair to Hilary. But how could he stop it, without risking his new and better work? Depression was thickening about him when the doorbell rang. It was the postman.

The parcel contained five American crime novels. We're considering reprints, Damien's letter told him. If you can give us your best for them that should swing it. Phil shook his head, amazed and pleased. He made himself coffee before sitting down to read the first of the books. He took the letter

into his studio, then carried it back into the living-room: Hilary might like to see it.

'That's good, isn't it?' she said when she came home.

'It's promising,' he said. 'I'll be with you in a few minutes. Just let me finish this chapter.'

He was painting the second of the covers, afternoons later, when the underbelly of a storm filled the sky. He painted rapidly, squinting, too impatient to leave the painting in order to switch on the light. But the marshy dark swallowed the cover, as if someone were standing behind him, deliberately throwing a shadow to force him to notice them.

As he hurried irritably to the light-switch he realized that was no use; if he switched on the light now he wouldn't be able to paint. There was something he had to do first, an insistent demand deep in his mind. What, then? What, for God's sake? The limp body rose towards him, offering its throat. Don't be absurd, he thought. But he couldn't argue with his intuition, not while he was painting. He took hold of his penis, which stiffened at once. Afterward he painted easily, swiftly, as the storm plodded crashing away beyond his light.

The August evening faded gently: gold, then pearl, merging with night. Hilary was reading *Forum*, the sex education magazine, which she had recently taken to buying. Phil was dutifully finishing *Necromancers in the Night*. When he glanced up, he realized that Hilary had been gazing at him for some time. 'Aren't you ever going to paint anyone except that woman?' she said.

'There's bound to be a book sometime that needs a man.'

When he looked up again impatiently she said 'Aren't we going to have a holiday this year?'

'Depends on whether the work eases off. I don't want to leave it when it's going so well.'

'The atmosphere at the shop's terrible. It's getting worse.'

'Well, we'll see,' he said, to satisfy her.

'Don't you want to go away with me?'

'If you let me finish my work! Jesus!' All right, he

thought. Let's talk this out once and for all. 'I want to finish what I'm doing before I see Damien next month,' he said. 'He likes my stuff. The more I can show him the better. I've got some ideas he might be able to use. He was talking before about getting writers to do books around covers. Right? So don't say I never tell you about my work. Just let me finish what I'm doing, all right? I'd like a chance to relax some-time too, you know.'

'You don't even talk to me at week-ends now,' she said.

Well, go on, he thought irritably. She said nothing more, but gazed at him. 'This is the week-end!' he shouted. 'Have I just been talking to myself? Jesus!' He stormed away, into his studio.

But Hilary was there too; her photograph was, gazing at him mildly, tenderly. He avoided the unassailable gaze. He knew what was wrong, of course. They hadn't had sex for almost three months.

He threw the book into his chair. God knows he'd tried with Hilary. Perhaps he'd tried too hard. Each time there had been a grey weight in his mind, weighing down his limp penis. As the weeks passed Hilary had herself become less and less aroused; she'd lain slack on the bed, waiting to be certain she could say 'never mind' without enraging him. Occasionally she'd been violently passionate, but he had been sure she was manufacturing passion, and the feeling had simply made him more irritable. For the last few weeks they hadn't even bothered with the motions; she had begun reading *Forum*. All right, he thought, if it kept her happy.

He was happy enough. Each time he failed with her he would masturbate later. He needed only a hint to bring him to the boil: the sleek submissive throat, the thin dress ready to be torn down, the struggling body beneath him, the invitation hidden in the blue eye and the brown, hardly hidden now. The first time he had masturbated wildly in bed; he had been on the brink of orgasm when Hilary had moaned and rolled over, groping for his hand. He'd held his twitching penis as if it were a struggling creature that might break free and betray him. When she'd quietened he had inched

his hand out of hers and had hastened to the bathroom, barely in time. He always crept there now when Hilary was asleep, carrying his victim with him, in the dark.

He felt no guilt. If he were frustrated he couldn't paint. He'd felt guilty the first time; the next night he'd failed with Hilary he'd lain for hours, refusing to think of the woman in his dream, trying to clear his mind, to let sleep in. In the morning he'd been on edge, had spilled paint, had broken a brush; the inside of his head had felt like dull slippery tin. He had never risked controlling himself after that, nor could his work afford the luxury of guilt.

But he did feel guilty. He was lying to himself, and that was no use; the lurking guilt would only spoil his work eventually – sometimes he felt he was painting to outrun it. Hilary made him feel guilty, with her issues of *Forum*. You read those things as a substitute, he told himself. But that wasn't why she left them lying around. She scattered them in the hope that he would read them, learn what was wrong with him. Nothing was wrong with him! Sex wasn't everything, Jesus! He was rushing from success to success, why couldn't she just share in that? Why was she threatening to spoil it, by her pleading silence?

As he glared at her, at her tenderness trapped beneath glazed light, he remembered kissing the slide.

He had never kissed Hilary's photograph. Yet she was at least as responsible for his success. It was she who made the effort to stay out of his way while he was working, so as not to distract him; and the job she'd taken for this reason was clearly less enjoyable than his. Yet he had never thanked her. He stepped forward awkwardly and resting his palms against the wall, kissed her photograph. The glass flattened his lips coldly. He stepped back, feeling thoroughly absurd.

So he'd kissed her photograph. Well done. Now go to her. But he knew what frustration that would lead to. He couldn't give up the victim of his dream; even if he did, there was no reason to suppose that would reunite him with Hilary. Maybe, he thought – no more directly involved with the idea than he had been with the novels of which it was a cliché – he could see an analyst, have Hilary substituted back

in his mind. But not now, when he needed his dream for his work. Which meant that he couldn't go to Hilary. He had learned that he couldn't have both Hilary and his dream.

Then his eyes opened wider than her eyes beneath the glass. Unless he had Hilary and the dream simultaneously.

The solution was so simple it took his mind a moment to catch up. Then he hurried out of the studio, down the hall. He knew he could do it; the strength of his imagination would carry him through. As he hurried, he realized that his haste wasn't like the urgency of needing to paint; it was more as if he had to act swiftly, before someone noticed. That slowed him for a moment, but then he was in the living-room. 'Come on,' he said to Hilary.

She looked up from her magazine, puzzled but ready to understand. 'What is it?' she said.

'Come on,' he said rapidly, 'please.'

He propped himself beside her on the bed and began to caress her. The intermittent breathing of the curtains gently imitated his fumbling. When she lay smiling hopefully, knees up and wide – smiling bravely, infuriatingly, he thought – he began again, systematically stroking her: her neck, her back, her buttocks, her breasts. Veins trailed beneath the pale skin of her breasts, like traces of trickles of ink; a hair grew from one aureole. At last she began to respond.

He stroked her thighs, thinking: woman struggling beneath me, eager to be choked. He coaxed out Hilary's clitoris. Her thighs rolled, revealing blue veins. He thought: sleek throat straining up for my hands. It wasn't going to work. All he could see was Hilary. When she reached for his limp penis her hand was hard, rough, rubbing insensitively, unpleasantly. He almost pushed her hand away to make room for his own.

Suddenly he said 'Wait, I'll turn out the light.'

'Don't you want to see me?'

'Not that,' he said urgently, irritably. He hadn't much time, he didn't know why. He must be near orgasm without feeling so. 'It might help,' he said.

The dark gave him the woman at once. She was lying helpless, and immediately was fighting him off to draw him

on. Her tongue was writhing about her lips, eager to be squeezed out further; her dress slipped back over her stomach as her hips clutched high for him. She struggled violently as his penis found her. Somewhere else he could feel himself working within Hilary. The sense of division distracted him. There was a barrier between him and his orgasm. He was going to fail.

Then he felt himself thrusting deep within the woman. Her throat was still; so was the rest of her. Only his furious excitement moved her, making her roll slackly around his penis as he quickened. Yet he knew there was life within her somewhere, for otherwise she couldn't return to him, as she always did. The thought made her lifelessness all the more exciting; he drove brutally into her, challenging her to stay lifeless. But she was still limp when he came. When he heard himself shouting, he became aware of Hilary's gasps too.

She didn't even blink when he switched on the light. She was staring up at him in exhausted gratitude. He felt enormously pleased with himself. He loved her.

When Phil boarded the Underground train he was preoccupied.

There was a tension in him somewhere. There had been since he'd succeeded with Hilary. Since that night he had determined never to masturbate. But the first time he had entered his darkroom he'd succumbed. Since then he had used a commercial firm of developers, though it was more costly, and had restricted his dream to his sex with Hilary. The woman was still there in his new paintings, of course, though she had begun to look more purposeful, consistently menacing.

Perhaps that was the source of his tension. No, it wasn't that. He suspected the source was Hilary. He was sure she was happy now he could make love to her; certainly he was. But he'd sensed a tension in her whenever he'd mentioned this trip to London, as if she disliked the idea, almost as if she were suspicious of him. He'd begun to feel something disturbing would happen to him in London. Rubbish. She felt

he shouldn't be going away so much when he hadn't promised her a holiday, that was all. Well, maybe they could manage one after all.

He glanced up, and discovered that in his preoccupation he'd sat opposite a girl in an otherwise empty carriage.

She was staring at him. Her head swayed with the rocking of the carriage, her glossy black shoulder-length hair swung against her cheeks, but her brown eyes were still. They stared at him in undisguised challenge. You dare, they threatened. Within the sheath of her thin short skirt her thighs clung together, clipped but rubbing softly, inadvertently. She reminded him – her expression particularly – of the woman in his dream.

He couldn't get up now. That would look even more suspicious. Besides, she had no reason to suspect him; he wasn't going to let her will him to move. He felt uncomfortably hot, frustratingly tense. The wind through the Underground seemed to touch the September heat of the train not at all; the heat pressed on him, oppressive as the grimy yellow light. He toyed with the zipper of his case, gladly aware of the slides within, while the girl gazed at him. He was still distracting himself when, at the edge of his eye, a shape leapt past him and then past the girl.

He started and met her gaze. She must have seen what it was, although he had seen nothing but movement. But the challenge in her eyes remained unchanged, and he felt she wasn't pretending not to have noticed. Perhaps the movement had been an aberration of the lights. As he thought so, the lights of the carriage went out.

Phil grabbed his case to him with both hands. He was rushing forward, borne by clattering hollow darkness. For the first time he was aware of the girl's breathing, rapid, harsh. It was near his face, too near. He had just realized that when her nails jabbed into his shoulders.

She was struggling with him. She was fighting him off. Yet he knew that if she were genuinely afraid of him she would have groped away down the carriage, however painfully. She was fighting him so that he could find her. The

force of her struggles, or the jerking of the train, threw him on top of her on the seat. Her arms were flailing at his face, but not so viciously that he couldn't trap her wrists in one hand. His penis was pounding. With his free hand he dragged up her skirt.

He could see her now, could see the welcome in the blue eye and the brown. That wasn't her. It didn't matter. That was the woman he was raping. The swaying of the train rolled her violently on his penis. He came almost at once.

He was lying face down on the seat, and she had somehow vanished from beneath him, when the lights flickered on.

He was still gasping, but the girl was standing at the other end of the carriage, gazing at him in open disgust. Her hand was on the communication cord. It didn't seem possible that she could have moved so far so quickly. At the next station she left the train, or at least changed carriages, leaving him a last contemptuous glance.

He sat with his case on his lap, retrieving his emotions. He was stunned. He'd read of women who needed to pretend to be raped, in Hilary's *Forum*, but he had never expected to encounter one. It could only happen in London, he thought.

He didn't feel ashamed. Why should he? Once she'd touched him his orgasm had been inevitable; he couldn't have prevented it. If anything, he felt self-righteously pleased. Despite her pretence of contempt, it had been she who had approached him. She hadn't been a fantasy, a self-indulgence, but a real woman. He was concerned only that she might have infected him. But he didn't think so; she had looked clean, no doubt she needed to be especially clean to keep up her pretence. When he reached the station for Apollo Books he was smiling. There was no need for Hilary to know; he would be able to satisfy her too.

'Here are some of your covers printed,' Damien said. 'People have been saying good things about them.'

Phil smiled and admired the covers while Damien examined the new slides. 'I'm sure we can get some books for these,' Damien said. 'They're the Phil woman again, I see.'

Phil smiled more broadly, amazed at himself. He'd always

tried to paint as well as he could, but he'd never realized that he wanted to be recognized for a personal style. Now Damien had shown him – no, the woman of his dream had shown him. He was kissing the slide.

'Will you have time to see a film tomorrow?' Damien said. 'I want to get a book out of it, and I'd like you to do the cover. I'll fix it with the film people for you to go. *Father Malarkey's Succubus*, it's called. It's French.'

They went out to a nearby pub. Phil was pleased he got on so well with Damien, despite the man's long hair and mauve silk shirt. Afterwards Phil wandered about the shops, buying himself a book of nudes, and an Indian necklace for Hilary; she liked Indian paintings. Then he had dinner at his hotel, after enjoying his private shower-bath.

Oddly, he found that most of all about his room he enjoyed the light which penetrated the pale curtains. Indeed, he left the bedside lamp on that night. He was unwilling to sleep in the dark. Perhaps it was just the strangeness of luxury. He felt too euphoric to spoil his mood by pondering. He lay smiling, remembering the girl in the train, until he fell asleep.

Next morning he misjudged the trains; the supporting film was under way when he arrived at the cinema. He could no more piece a film together that way than he would begin reading a book in the middle; he strolled around Soho, and bought the latest *Forum*. Hilary wouldn't have been able to buy it yet in their local newsagent's.

'I'm Phil Barker,' he told the girl in the pay-box. 'You're expecting me.' She called a doorman to usher him past the queue, to the manager's office. This treatment pleased him immensely; it was part of his success. The manager, a dapper man with a black moustache shiny as his dress shoes, gave Phil a glossy folder of information about the film, which had originally been called *Le Succube du Père Michel* and had run four minutes longer, revised in ballpoint. The director had previously made *Le Chant des Petomanes*. The manager asked Phil about his work. 'I'm best known for my women,' Phil began. Eventually it was time for the film.

It took place in a small rather featureless film studio, scattered with stateless anachronisms. Father Malarkey, a French priest translated into American Irish, was lusting after the nuns in the nearby convent. Frustrated, he began to masturbate. Stop that, the censor said, snipping. Afterwards, when the priest went to bathe, his stained robe started jiggling about his room; eventually a girl's face faded into the cowl, grinning gleefully. Bejasus, now what's this, he said the first time she visited him in bed. I want to confess, she said. Not here, he protested, huddling beneath the blankets. But otherwise I'll have nothing to confess, she pouted, slipping her hand under the uncontrollably rising blankets. That's enough, the censor said. Her name was Lilith; she visited him every night, encouraging him to rape her, spank her, and so on. Later, when he succeeded in sneaking into the convent, she forced her way between him and his unseeing bedmates. Eventually the priest entered the cell of two entangled nuns. Now look here, the censor said. Discovered, the priest and the Mother Superior were defrocked and, disapprovingly, married. But Lilith clung to his other arm. As far as Phil was concerned she had one blue eye and one brown. He could see the cover now.

He sat and waited for *The Fall of the Roman Knickers*. An usherette was chasing a cat which persisted in sharpening its claws on the purple furry walls. Though it was a small cinema, one of a unit of four, the cat was eluding pursuit. An old man snarled and hurled an ice-cream carton at it. The usherette stopped to remonstrate, and Phil began to leaf through *Forum*. The secret sexuality of the outsize woman. Sex can prevent heart attacks. Rub him up the right way. He turned to the letters, which he liked reading best; they made him glad to be normal. A heading caught his attention at once: *Promiscuous painter?*

My husband paints pictures. Until recently he used to paint me. Then he began painting a woman I have never met, and now he paints nobody else. He often goes away on business trips, and I'm sure he met this woman on the

last one he took before he began to paint her. I know it is a real woman, because her eyes are different colours

No, Phil thought numbly. No, no.

and he must have based that on someone real. He still makes love to me – more passionately, if anything – although he was impotent for a while after meeting her, which must have been caused by guilt. Now I feel he is thinking of her even when he makes love to me. What can I do to keep him? I would never leave him.

H. B.

(Address withheld by request)

Oh Christ, Phil thought. Tell her it isn't true. Don't make her believe it. She's wrong, tell her. The lights were fading. He peered desperately at the reply.

If you have no more evidence of your husband's 'affair' than you describe in your letter, I really don't think you have much to worry about. You say you are sure he is thinking of the woman in his paintings when he makes love to you; does this really mean that you feel estranged from him when he paints? Perhaps, since apparently you can't ask him where he got the idea for his paintings, you need to involve yourself more in his work. (I assume it is his work, rather than a hobby.)

As for the woman herself – our artists tell me they would be very surprised and bewildered if anyone thought they had affairs with all the women they paint! Doesn't your husband use his imagination in his work? Then why, if he's had a particularly good inspiration and wants to make the most of it, does it have to be based on some unknown rival? I suspect that you see the woman as a rival simply because she is unlike you, or unlike your image of yourself (the two aren't always the same, you know). If you are sure your husband isn't involved with you in your love-making, perhaps sameness is to blame. Is there some fantasy he would like you to act out? If you become

But the page had dragged his head forward and down into darkness. He started, completely disoriented. He was floating forward on the darkness, sailing towards a band of chattering men running through dark Roman streets. He clung to *Forum*, to his case, anything. He was at the mercy of the waves of darkness. He couldn't think. He must get out. He was preparing to stand up when something caught at his leg.

He looked down. In the dark, amid the crumpled cartons and the spilled ash sticking to stains of orange juice, a woman was reaching up to him. Her nails tore at his hands pulling him down among the cigarette-butts, into the secret darkness. Her dress was up; her thighs yawned on the dusty floorboards; her head lolled on the bruised snapped neck. 'Jesus!' he screamed. 'Get away!'

The usherette's torch-beam swung towards him along the row. At his feet the floor was bare; nothing moved but the shadows of rubbish. 'It was the cat,' he stammered. 'I didn't know what it was.' He stumbled out. Of course it had been the cat; no wonder he had turned it into his dream, after what he'd read. He'd dropped *Forum* beneath the seat. Thank God, he thought. He must reach Hilary before it did. She mustn't think he'd read it and was taking her on holiday to deceive her. There was time.

The train was nearing Liverpool when Phil realized how like the succubus his experience had been.

Exactly like. Well, no, not exactly: of course there weren't such things. But his dream had come between him and Hilary, just as the succubus had behaved in the film. It was almost as if it had been deliberately blinding him to her. When he tried to visualize Hilary he could reach nothing but a dull blank in his mind.

The dream had come from inside him. He had to remember that. The notion he had had originally, that it had been put into his mind, was nonsense. That must have been his mind, trying not to admit the truth. Since the dream had come from him, he could destroy it. What they advised in

Forum was wrong, that you should act out your fantasies; that was wrong.

All at once he saw how much of a mute appeal Hilary's issues of *Forum* had been. He felt admiration and compassion; she suffered a good deal, without burdening him with it. Only because he wouldn't let her speak! My God, he thought numbly. With that insight came another. She didn't go out to work so that he could paint undisturbed. That was a sentimental lie. She went out in order to stay away from his temper. He'd driven her out of the house.

He felt lightened by his insights, buoyant, capable of anything. At last he could see Hilary as she was. But he couldn't; still there was only the dull blank. Overhead the rush-hour traffic clogged a bridge. Deep in his mind there seemed to be a grey vague weight, waiting. Never mind. Once they were on holiday the last of his depression would lift. No time to think further. Here was Lime Street Station, home.

At the flat he packed their cases. He'd booked their hotel before leaving London. When he'd finished he glanced at his watch. Hilary would finish work in an hour; tonight was early closing. They could catch a train at once. He took a taxi to the shop, amid the Jaguars and Japanese front gardens.

The shop was open for half an hour yet. He was sure they'd let Hilary go when they saw the taxi waiting. He could see her behind the counter, watching a woman who was talking to the manageress. Good; he wouldn't have to wait to speak to Hilary. He strode into the shop.

'This is absolutely ridiculous,' the woman was saying loudly. 'That woman knows nothing about her job. If you're so hard up for staff my daughter is looking for work.'

Only when he saw Hilary's expression – mutely furious, ashamed – did he realize the woman was talking about her. 'That's my wife you're insulting,' he said.

The woman turned to examine him. 'Then your wife is ignorant,' she said.

'Not ignorant where it counts, like you.' He tried to hold on to his temper, but couldn't deny himself the pleasure. 'Go on, you fucking old whore,' he shouted.

The woman whirled and stalked out. 'There's the taxi,' he told Hilary. 'Your holiday begins right now.'

'Do you want me to lose this job?'

'We can do without it. Come on,' he said, restraining his irritability. 'Don't you want to go to the Lakes?'

She smiled as broadly as she could. 'Yes, I do,' she said. She was about to speak to the manageress, but he headed her off. 'The least you could have done was stick up for her,' he told the woman. 'You've been paying her little enough, God knows.'

In the taxi Hilary said 'I told you I was going to give that job until the end of the year.'

'I never heard you.'

'You never hear anything I say.'

He gazed at the taxi-driver's attentive neck and succeeded in focusing his irritability there. 'I know I've been drifting away,' he told Hilary. 'I'm sorry.' He said loudly, 'I'm going to get close to you tonight.'

It was still light when they reached the hotel. Streamers of mist were caught in branches on the hilltops; a mass of mist was groping down towards the nearby lake. From their window Phil could see perfect trees in the lake, reaching down into the sunset water. The corridors were thickly carpeted: hushed, gentle. He read the same feelings in Hilary. He felt she had had to make an effort to be happy – to forget the scene in the shop, of course. Never mind; she was happy now.

They were late for dinner, but somebody cooked them a meal. They had a cobwebbed bottle of wine. Afterwards they drank in the bar and played billiards, which they hadn't played since before their marriage. When the bar closed they went up to their room. The corridor closed softly about them.

Phil gazed into the night. The mist had reached the road now, greedy for headlights. It felt like the grey blank that was still in his mind. He tried to grasp the blank, but it wouldn't come out until it was ready. He turned as Hilary emerged from the bathroom naked and lay down on the bed.

Quickly drawing the curtains, he smiled at her. He smiled. He smiled. He felt no desire at all.

'Are you going to get close to me now?' she said.

He nodded. 'Yes, I am,' he said hurriedly, lest she sense his mood. Undressing, he gazed at her. Her breasts lay slack, faintly blue-veined; the golden hair still grew from one. The grey blank hung between his penis and his mind. He had to make love to her without the dream. If he relied on the dream it would estrange them further, he was sure. But so, he realized miserably, would failure.

'Will you leave the light on?' she said.

'Of course I will,' he said, but not for her reason.

She smiled up at him. 'Do you want to do anything different?' she said.

'Like what?'

'I don't know. I just thought you might.'

At once he knew what he'd seen back home at the flat as he'd packed: a copy of *Forum* lying on the settee. It had been a copy of the issue he had bought in London. In his hurry he hadn't realized. She had read the reply to her letter.

She gazed up, waiting. His mouth worked, suddenly dry. Should he tell her he knew? Then he would have to explain about the dream – to tell her everything. He couldn't; it would hurt her, he was sure. And he didn't need to. She had already suggested the solution. His penis was stirring, and so was the grey blank. 'I'll rape you,' he told Hilary.

He knelt above her. 'Go on, then,' she said, laughing.

That wasn't right. If she laughed it wouldn't work. 'Put your legs together,' he said. 'Fight. Try as hard as you can to stop me.'

'I don't want to hurt you.'

The grey was returning, seeping through his mind; his penis was shrinking. 'Don't worry about that,' he said urgently. 'Defend yourself any way you can.' His penis was hanging down. God, no. He pinched her nipple sharply. As she cried out and brought her hands down to protect it, he seized both her wrists. 'Now then,' he said, already inflamed again, thrusting his knees between hers.

She was struggling now. The bed creaked wildly; the sheets snapped taut beneath them as her heels sought purchase. She had ceased playing; she was trying to free her hands, gasping. His hand plunged roughly between her legs. In a moment she was ready. This was the way she liked it, he thought, and he'd never known.

On the lip of her, he hesitated. The grey blank was still there in his mind, like a threat. He could hear people in the corridor, the television in the next room, the cars setting off into the mist, intruding on his passion, distracting him. He was sure his penis was about to dwindle.

Then he knew what he'd omitted. He dragged Hilary's hands up to her shoulders and digging his elbows into her forearms, closed his fingers lightly on her throat. She was panting harshly. The sound of her breath tugged him violently into her. The presence was gone from his mind at once. His penis pulsed faster with each stroke, his fingers pressed, her eyes widened as his penis throbbed, her hands fluttered. He strained his head back, gasping.

Like the sound of a branch underfoot betraying the presence of an intruder, there was a sharp snap.

He came immediately, lengthily. His breath shuddered out of him. His hands let go of Hilary and clawed at the sheets. He closed his eyes as he finished, drawing deep breaths.

When he looked down Hilary was gazing at the wall. One cheek rested on the sheet; her head hung askew on her broken neck.

Phil began to sob. He took her cheeks in both hands and turned her face up to him. He rubbed her cheeks, trying to warm life back into her eyes. He stroked her hair back from her eyes, for it lay uncomfortably over them. He grasped her shoulders, shaking them. When her head rolled back on to its cheek he slumped on her body, grinding his fists into his eyes, moaning.

Then her legs closed over his, and he stared down to see her eyes gazing up at him: one blue eye, one brown.

BOXED IN

by Chris Miller

'I THINK she's really stuck on you,' said Mr. Kornfeld to Benny. He made a face and placed both hands on his ample stomach, as if the idea gave him indigestion. 'You're a pretty lucky guy, to have a girl like my daughter.'

Benny never knew what to say when Mr. Kornfeld started talking man-to-man to him about Suzette. Discussing a girl friend with the girl friend's father made him feel weird and uncomfortable and he wished Mr. Kornfeld would knock it off. What was more, Benny was not at all sure to what extent he could still be said to 'have' Suzette. He had just returned from three months at college and had no idea what she might have been up to in his absence. He wished Suzette and her mother would hurry up with the dinner dishes and join them, or, better yet, that both parents would go upstairs to bed and leave the living room to him and Suzette. He was extremely curious about how this night would turn out.

'I see the girls around today,' Mr. Kornfeld continued. 'I'm not blind. They're all over the place and they look terrific. But you know what? In my opinion, not one of them holds a candle to my Suzette in the looks department.' He took Benny's bicep in his meaty grasp and leaned closer. 'For instance, have you ever noticed Suzette's tushie?'

'Her . . . tushie?' He had noticed it, of course. In fact, he had noticed the hell out of it. It was a ripe, rounded, completely wonderful tushie, much like the rest of Suzette. But Mr. Kornfeld had never asked him anything like this before. Benny was shocked.

'Sure, her behind. Her ass, y'know?' He was squeezing

Benny's arm a little harder than necessary, Benny thought.

'Well, yes, I've noticed it. You know, every time she turns around, there it is.'

'Pretty nice, huh?' A strange gleam had entered Mr. Kornfeld's eyes. He licked his lips, suspending bits of foam at the corners. 'Listen, I have to ask you this. I know you kids are a lot different today than we were. Do you ever . . . squeeze her tushie?'

'Hey, take it easy, Mr. Kornfeld.' The man's thumb and forefinger were almost touching each other through Benny's bicep. He began trying to pull free.

Mr. Kornfeld seemed not to notice. 'What I mean is, do you ever sort of just work your hand right in there, between the buns where it's all sweaty and hot? And then give your hand sort of a half-turn so that the cheeks spread right apart and . . . ?'

'All finished,' cried Suzette brightly, pushing through the kitchen door. 'Having a nice chat?'

As if some offstage technician had suddenly thrown a switch, Mr. Kornfeld's face abruptly lost its frightening leer and reassumed its usual look of bemused tolerance. 'Lovely chat, dear.' He released Benny, stood and placed a paternal arm around Suzette. 'Benny's a very nice young man.'

'He certainly is.' Puffing, Mrs. Kornfeld entered the room, taking slow steps within the confines of her aluminium walk-aid structure. She was 85 per cent paralysed from the waist down and 'walked' mostly by placing the aluminium structure a few feet in front of her and dragging her legs to catch up. 'And I think it's time you and I went upstairs and left these nice young people some time to themselves.'

'Yeah, huh?' Mr. Kornfeld appeared less than delighted at the prospect. 'Well, I guess you're right.' He turned to Suzette. 'Good night, sweetheart.' He opened his arms for a hug.

'Good night, Daddy.' Suzette put her arms around her father and embraced him.

Then, for the briefest second, Mr. Kornfeld made a ter-

rible face at Benny and squeezed one of the cheeks of Suzette's ass.

'Daddy!' Giggling, Suzette pulled away.

Benny, already taken aback by Mr. Kornfeld's behaviour, was now flabbergasted by Suzette's apparent participation in this flirtation. Why, she was encouraging him! He would have to talk to her about this.

Mrs. Kornfeld had already started up the stairs. It would take her five minutes. She sounded like a slow, heavy robot.

'Well, I better go give Ol' Superstructure a hand.' Mr. Kornfeld turned to go. 'Oh, wait. I just remembered.' Turning back to them, brightening visibly, he slipped his hand into a pocket, then held it out, knuckles up, fingers wrapped into a tunnel around something. 'Benny, my boy, insert a finger into each side of my fist. I want to show you a trick.'

Benny looked suspiciously at him.

'Come on, it won't hurt you. It's an *educational* trick.'

Benny shrugged. Anything to hurry the man on his way. He inserted an index finger into each side of Mr. Kornfeld's fist.

'HA!' Mr. Kornfeld pulled away his hand.

Benny found his fingers encased in a colourful cylinder of interwoven straw. He tried to pull them out. Stretched, the cylinder grew snug, then tight. He was caught.

'It's a Chinese finger trap,' called Mr. Kornfeld delightedly from the stairs. 'And the lesson is, never get yourself caught in anything you can't get out of.' Laughing uproariously, he disappeared from view.

'For Christ's sake,' said Benny. The harder he tried to pull free, the more firmly his fingers were held.

Suzette tsk-tsked and held the cylinder to its original circumference so he could get out. 'I hope you don't let Daddy get under your skin with his practical jokes. You should have seen some of the things he pulled on the boys I saw while you were away.'

Oh, great, thought Benny. So that was what she had been up to in his absence. Well, she could do what she wanted. It wasn't like he owned her. Only, why did she always have to

remind him of that fact? Between Suzette and her father, he hardly knew why he bothered to come here. Although, actually, he did know. He stole a glance at the sofa and a small thrill, like the shiver of a young trout, occurred in the river of his groin.

'No, I don't let your father get under my skin with his practical jokes. What gets under my skin is . . .' He had been about to say 'that he's hot for your body'. But that would be dumb. Suzette would merely think him crude. She was very easily offended, having, for instance, immediately hated his fraternity merely because one or another of the brothers would stick an occasional cock in a girl's ear or pee through a hole in the bar on to the leg of someone's mother. How could he approach her, then, on this extremely delicate subject?

'Come on, silly. You look so serious.' Suzette put her arms around Benny and brushed his chin with her sensational lips. She had remembered to wear Shalimar. Shalimar, to Benny, was what the voices of the Sirens had been to Ulysses. Abruptly, he remembered why he was here: not to take Suzette's games seriously; not to get involved with a crazy man; not to probe the possibly unsettling depths of a suspicious father-daughter relationship; but to probe the presumably delightful depths of Suzette – if she'd ever let him – *that* was why he was here. He allowed himself to be led to the sofa.

Ah, the sofa. It was huge, old-fashioned, and overstuffed, strewn with soft pillows. It had warm, wine-coloured slip-covers and fat, cushiony arms. It never slid on the floor and it never creaked. It had cradled Benny and Suzette during untold hours of making out. Benny had no special thing for furniture but this sofa bore such a warm spot in his heart he almost considered it a friend.

Suzette looked wonderful. In some ways, she was much like the sofa – soft, rounded, wonderful to roll around on, with large breasts that pushed the front of her sweater into two firm orange cushions. Now *this* sofa he wouldn't mind having sit in *his* face. Woo woo! He threw his arms around Suzette and planted his mouth flat on her ripe, pouty lips.

Suzette responded. For a moment. Just long enough to remind Benny how good a kisser she really was. Then she broke the contact, pulled away slightly and regarded him through lowered lashes.

Oh Christ, thought Benny, here it comes.

'D'ja miss me?' asked Suzette in her little girl voice.

Yup, thought Benny, there it was. Why did she have to put him through this crap?

'Of course I missed you. I thought about you all the time.' He tried to pull her face back, to continue the kiss.

'Well, if you missed me, why didn't you write me?' Suzette's face would not be pulled. Benny knew this routine well. Suzette would delay the onset of making out as long as she could, perhaps until eleven-thirty. Then she would begin gradually to yield ascending sexual favours: first half hour, kissing and hugging; second half hour, feeling above the waist; third half hour, grudging admission to the zone beneath her skirt but outside – definitely outside – the panties. Then, just as Benny would try to slip his hand under the silk, Suzette's bedtime would arrive and Benny would be turned out into the night to walk home with his throbbing testicles and dolefully beat the meat in the loneliness of his room.

'I *did* write you,' Benny lied. 'You didn't get the letter? It was seven pages long, all about how much I missed you.' He tried again to kiss her but she averted her lips.

'Well, I never got any letter. How am I supposed to know you're missing me if I don't get any letters from you?'

Benny suppressed a groan of frustration. He couldn't stand going through shit like this. He felt like a car in a traffic jam, allowed to proceed only in fits and starts, never to reach his goal. His only hope was to get her turned on enough that she'd become more interested in receiving his tongue than in exercising her own.

He decided to try a left-handed fake-out.

'But I was missing you all the time,' he said. His left arm was around her shoulders. He began to inch the hand towards her left breast. 'I missed you during classes, at the fraternity house, hangin' round the quad. . . .' She was sharp

tonight; he had barely reached the foothills when she brought her left hand up to counter his move. Now came the crucial phase of the manoeuvre – temporary resistance. ‘In fact, I dreamed about you. See, I was even missing you while I was *asleep*.’ His left hand, undaunted by hers, continued to push for the high ground. Would she take the bait? Yes! Her right hand was coming up to join forces with her left, leaving her right breast completely unguarded and waiting to be *grabbed*!

‘Benny!’ Both Suzette’s hands flew startled to her captured fortress, and now her *left* breast was defenceless. Second front!

‘Benny . . .’ Her face was softening, eyes glazing over, lips going slack. ‘Oh, Benny. . . .’

Victory!

He slid a hand up under her sweater to begin dealing with the lock-clamps of her bra. To Benny, there was no sound in the world quite so awe-inspiring as the sudden *whuff* of an unsnapped bra. It was a sound you almost felt rather than heard, like a deep bass note from a fine speaker system. The third and final clasp detached and there was a sense of divine give, of unimaginable energies being unshielded. He slid his hand around to her front and accepted a palmful of heavenly, meaty weight. Beneath the crotch of his chinos, a power plant was aborning. He caught one of Suzette’s hard, fat nipples between his thumb and forefinger and rolled it, as if inspecting a grape.

‘Ohhhh,’ said Suzette. ‘Ohhhh. Ohhhh.’

Hey, she was really responding tonight! Instead of presenting him with the usual slow, grudging retreat, she had abruptly capitulated. Her head was rolling wildly back and forth on the sofa back, a giant parody of the nipple he rolled between his fingers. A sheen of sweat glistened on her forehead. Well, this was way off schedule, but it actually seemed to be time to attempt penetration of her furred citadel. How about that!

So he slid the hand from beneath her sweater and walked his fingers slowly up her thigh. Ordinarily, she would push

his hand away at least twenty times before letting it rest on her nest. That would usually occur about five minutes before she would announce her bedtime, and be, in effect, his good night kiss. But tonight continued to be different. He poised his fingers on the brink of her quim, waited for resistance . . . and none came! She wasn't even pressing her thighs together!

Haltingly, he began with his thumb to stroke her ensilked slot.

'Ohhhhhhhhh, Benny, I . . .' Her eyes closed and her head rolled to one side. *She was swooning with rapture!*

Now *this*, thought Benny, was more like it. This was the way these matters were meant to be conducted, just as described in the many magazines piled beneath his bed at school. Slowly and carefully, as if it might break something, he slid his hand up, over around, and into Suzette's panties. He was touching her bush! *Now* would she stop him? He glanced at her face. Her lips were very full, almost swollen-looking. Her tongue flicked rapidly in and out of her mouth to wet them. She was breathing very deeply, causing a strange, seductive rasp to sound in her throat.

Well, thought Benny, I guess it's now or never. He flopped his hand over and slid his middle finger right up her willie.

'Wuh!' said Suzette. And did nothing to stop him.

Holding his breath, Benny began to move the finger. He moved it slowly at first, then with growing confidence, ultimately zooping it every which way, like a high-spirited seal.

'Wuh-uh-uh-uh-uh,' said Suzette. Her face was flushed vivid red and her eyes were bugging out. What passion! What a woman! She must be waiting for him to undress her. In his sex life so far, the couple of whores he'd been with had handled all the undressing, and most of the rest of it as well, so he wasn't completely sure what was called for. But, yes, undressing seemed right. He withdrew his finger from Suzette's funky fastnesses and lifted her sweater over her head. Her bra hung crumbled before her breasts, looking strangely useless, like a broken kite. When her arms came down, it

drifted from her shoulders and fluttered slowly to the floor. Benny caught his breath. They were even bigger than he'd imagined, with nipples big as noses. Oh, majestic breasts! They hove with the deepness of her breathing, so that ripples like water before the wind surged across their over-swell.

From Benny's groin, an irresistible force was clamouring for attention. Fuck trying to get off the skirt. It looked too complicated anyway. Just tilt her bottom up ... slide the panties down ... and push the skirt ... out ... of ... the ... way! Benny's heart leapt. Oh, most perfect of equilateral triangles! Capping what mad, pink ecstasy beneath?

'Use me!' his penis bellowed at him. 'Use me! Use me!'

'I'm not sure I know how,' Benny thought desperately back.

'Schmuck!' screamed his penis. 'You'll figure it out!'

The debate might have raged longer but at that point Suzette slumped sideways so that she was lying on her back with one leg on the sofa and the other off. Her labia split slightly, exuding a pleasing musk. Benny felt like a starving man suddenly confronted with the half-open door of a gourmet kitchen. Pushing his pants to his knees, he plunged his soup spoon deeply into her bubbling bouillabaisse.

'Whhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh ...' Suzette's moan rose chromatically over several octaves, finally disappearing into frequencies only dogs could hear. She shook and shivered. Expressions of pleasure so intense as to seem almost like pain flickered in jump cuts across her face. She certainly had ... capacities. He increased his tempo.

'Wah! Ah! Ah!' Her mouth was open very wide. Her thighs twitched and spasmed, like nervous parentheses around his hips. *Wow*, thought Benny. He buried his face in her neck and shifted his piston to overdrive in her velvet cylinder.

'GNURG! ZUK!' Suzette began to writhe furiously beneath him, then arched into a rigid bow that held him easily a foot off the sofa. God, what a girl he had! Magnificent! He thrust himself fully into her and started to come.

'FNORK!' hooted Suzette. In an abrupt muscular spasm, her labia slammed shut like the grip of a gorilla around his shaft. His come, suddenly stemmed, backed up into his balls with spectacularly painful results.

'Yow!' cried Benny. 'Hey, Suzy, relax a little. You're killing me.'

He tried to pull free. His dong wouldn't budge. It was caught tightly as the leg of a fox in a steel-jaw trap.

'Suzy, you gotta *relax* down there, baby.'

Suzette didn't answer.

'Hey, talk to me.'

'She can't talk to you,' said a voice behind him. 'I put poison in her dinner tonight. She's dead.'

Benny spun his head around. Mr. Kornfeld stood by the side of the sofa. He was naked and he held a meat cleaver.

'Well, Benny, my boy,' he said, 'I warned you about getting stuck in things.'

Benny pulled with all his might. He couldn't move a millimetre.

'What are you going to do to me?' he asked.

Mr. Kornfeld just smiled.

THE END

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