

Karl Edward Wagner

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THE FINAL INTERVIEW

“Good morning, Mr. Stallings. I’m Dr. Marlowe. Do you remember me from the night you came here?”

“Yes sir, I sure do.” Stallings laughed and shook his head. “Man, I sure was out of my skull on something that night!”

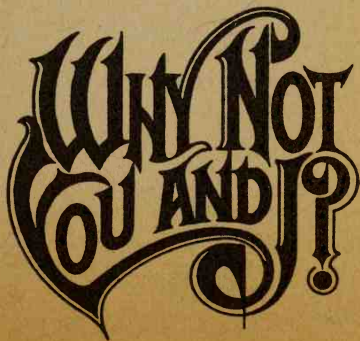
“What do you remember?”

“Well, I remember being carried in here by the deputies, and being tied down and all, and I was cussing and telling the whole world that I was Satan.”

“And did you believe that?” the doctor asked.

Stallings nodded in embarrassment, then looked earnestly into Marlowe’s eyes. “Yes sir, I sure did. And then you came into the room, and I looked into your face, and I knew that I was wrong, because I knew that *you* were Satan.”

“Mr. Stallings,” Dr. Marlowe smiled sadly, “you appear to have made a rapid recovery.”



Karl Edward Wagner

Why Not You And I?



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

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DEDICATION

To Kirby McCauley

*The best friend a writer
can have is an agent
who truly believes that
that writer is half as
good as he thinks he is.*

—Roger Wade,
interviewed by
Kent Allard in
Possible Dreams

*There is no trap so
deadly as the trap you
set for yourself.*

—Raymond Chandler,
The Long Good-Bye

INTO WHOSE HANDS

Originally, back during the War (which Marlowe understood to be World War II), Graceland State Psychiatric Hospital had been an army base, and some of the oldtimers still referred to the center as Camp Underhill. Marlowe was never certain whether there had been a town (named Underhill) here before the base was built, or whether the town had grown about the periphery of the base (named Underhill) at the time when it was carved out of the heart of the scrub-and-pine wilderness. Marlowe probably could have found out by asking one of the oldtimers, had he ever thought to do so, or had he even cared to know. It was more to the point that no wing of the red brick hospital was of more than two storeys: further, that each wing was connected to the next by a long corridor. This, so Marlowe had been told upon coming here, had been a precaution against an air raid—an enemy sneak attack could not annihilate the outspread base, with its absence of central structures and its easy evacuation. Marlowe was uncertain as to the means by which an Axis blitzkrieg might have struck this far inland, but it was a fact that the center contained seven miles

of corridors. This Marlowe had verified through many a weary weekend of walking to and fro and up and down through the complex, making rounds.

On this weekend Marlowe was feeding dimes into the slot of a vending machine chained to the tile wall of one labyrinthine corridor. After judicious nudges and kicks, the packet of crackers was spat from its mechanical womb in a flurry of crumbs. Marlowe eyed the tattered cellophane sourly. An industrious mouse had already gnawed across the pair on the end. He should have tried the machines in the staff lounge, but that meant another quarter-of-a-mile walk.

At his belt, the beeper uttered a rush of semicoherent static. Marlowe, shaking the nibbled crackers onto the tile floor, thumbed the beeper to silence with his other hand and plodded for the nearest nursing station. He swiped a cup of virulent coffee from the urn there, washed the crackers from his throat with a gulp of boiling fluid, and dialed the number to which he had been summoned.

"This is Dr. Marlowe."

"You have an involuntary admission on South Unit, Dr. Marlowe."

"I'll be down once I finish one on North."

The voice persisted. Marlowe sensed the speaker's anxiety. "The patient is combative, Doctor. He's delusional, obviously hallucinating. If you could give us an order . . ."

"What's the problem? Do we know anything about this one?"

"This is his first admission here, and all we have are the commitment papers the deputies

brought. He's obviously psychotic. He says he's Satan."

"Hell, that's my third this month. All right, seclude and restrain. I'm coming right down, and I'll sign the order when I get there."

Marlowe glanced at his watch. It was past ten, he still hadn't eaten dinner, and the deputies from Beacon City were due to arrive on East with that adolescent runaway who'd slashed her wrists. Best take care of South Unit quickly. The coffee was sour in his stomach, and he regretted discarding the mouse-chewed crackers.

He was in North Unit, which was actually Central, since the northernmost unit was the Alcoholic Rehab Unit, but the walk was going to be a brisk five minutes, in addition to the time lost in unlocking sectional doors. Marlowe, who showed a footsore limp under the best of circumstances, knew better than to wear himself out this early in the weekend. It was Friday night. Until eight o'clock Monday morning he would be the only doctor on the grounds at Graceland. In that time he might have twenty to thirty admissions, on an average, in addition to the task of overseeing the well-being of some five hundred patients within the state hospital complex. A demanding situation under the best of circumstances, and impossible without a capable staff. Marlowe often wished for a capable staff.

He was tall and lean, with a profile that might have made a good Holmes if the haphazardly trimmed beard and randomly combed black hair hadn't more suggested Moriarty. His eyes were so deep a blue as to seem almost black; one patient had told him he looked like Lord Byron,

but many patients had called him many names. In a three-piece suit Marlowe would have fit the tv-romantic ideal of the distinguished young physician; however, around the hospital he favored open-necked sportshirts of imaginative pattern, casual slacks, and scuffed Wallabies. The crepe soles of these last were generally overworn to one side, giving him almost a clubfooted stance, but tile corridors are not kind to feet, and Marlowe liked such comforts as were permitted.

He unlocked an outside door, stepped out to cut across a courtyard. The summer night was hot and still. Behind electrified grates, ultraviolet lamps lured nocturnal insects to their doom; harsh crackles made the only sound other than the soft crunch of gravel beneath Marlowe's crepe soles. There was a full moon, hot and electric itself, and Marlowe knew he would get little rest this weekend.

There was sound again when he unlocked the door to South Unit's admission ward. The door to a seclusion room stood open, and inside three attendants were just fastening the padded cuffs. Spreadeagled on the bed, a young black man struggled against the wrist and ankle restraints and screamed curses. At the end of the hallway, several of the ward patients hovered anxiously, until a nurse's assistant shooed them back to bed.

An attendant handed Marlowe the commitment papers. He glanced through them: *23-year-old black male, combative and threatening to life and person of family and neighbors since last night, apparently hallucinating, claimed to be*

Satan released from Hell. Today fired shotgun at neighbor's house, subdued by officers; involuntary commitment papers signed by family, no previous history of mental disorders.

Marlowe entered the seclusion room, studying his patient. His dress was flamboyant, his appearance well-groomed; he was lean but not emaciated, with prominent veins standing out from the straining muscles of his arms. Marlowe's initial impression was psychotic drug reaction, probably angel dust or amphetamines.

"Mr. Stallings, my name is Dr. Marlowe. I'm your physician, and I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"I am His Satanic Majesty, Lucifer God, Son of the Sun, Prince of Darkness and Power! Ye who seek to chain me in the Pit shall be utterly cast down! Bow down to me and worship, or feed the flames of my wrath!"

Marlowe played his stethoscope across his heaving chest. "Anyone able to get a blood pressure?"

The ward nurse handed him a sheet. "Don't know how good these vital stats are—he's been abusive and combative since the deputies brought him in. He's strong as a horse, I can tell you."

"These are about what they recorded at Frederick County when they examined him," Marlowe said. "We still don't have a chart on him?"

"First admission to Graceland, Dr. Marlowe."

The patient shouted obscenities, ignoring Marlowe's efforts to examine him. Verbal content was a jarring mixture of street slang and religious

phrases, frankly delusional. There seemed little point in continuing with the examination at this point.

Marlowe turned to the ward nurse, who was showing anger despite her experience with abusive patients. "Thorazine, 100 mgm IM."

Two attendants held the patient on his side, pants drawn down, while she gave him the injection. The graveyard shift would be coming on shortly, and they had work to finish before they could go off. Marlowe observed the familiar ritual in silence, studying his patient's reactions.

"Just make sure his blood pressure doesn't drop out," he told them. "I'll write out orders for another 100 IM PRN q 4 hours, if this doesn't do it. I'll finish my examination once he's quiet."

"Thank you, Doctor."

Marlowe's beeper summoned him while he was writing orders. "That's North Unit. Could you dial that for me, please?" He took the phone from the attendant and wedged it under his chin, one hand holding a Styrofoam coffee cup, the other scribbling an admission note.

"Dr. Marlowe, we have an unauthorized absence from North Unit. The patient is Billy Wilson. He is an involuntary admission."

Marlowe sipped his coffee. "Chronic schiz from Jefferson County? I've had him on my service a couple times. Better call the family and local sheriff. He usually hitches a ride home and tells people he's on the run from the CIA."

"We also have a voluntary admission here to see you."

"What's his problem?"

"He says he's depressed."

"I'll get over to see him when I can."

Marlowe finished his coffee and the conversation, placed cup and receiver in appropriate niches. His beeper wondered if he might phone the ARU. Marlowe thought he might.

"Dr. Marlowe, we have three unauthorized absences."

"These are . . . ?"

"Two voluntary, one involuntary. Jimmy Roberts and Willy Wilbertson from Adams County are voluntary; Freddie Lambert from Tarpon is involuntary."

"Those first two always check back in together as soon as they've gone through their Social Security checks. Lambert usually winds up under a bridge with a gallon of skull-rot; better notify family and sheriff on him."

He finished his admission notes, looked in on Stallings. The new admission was still raging against his restraints; shrill obscenities penetrated the seclusion room door. "Another 100 mgm Thorazine IM stat, I think," Marlowe decided. "I'd like a quiet night."

It was past midnight when Marlowe made it back to North Unit to interview the voluntary admission. As he sought to leave, the nurses' aide on South Unit had delayed him with a question about Dr. Kapoor's medication orders; the Pakistani resident had been eight weeks in the US and six weeks on South Unit, and still hadn't discovered the distinction between *q.i.d.*, *q.d.*, and *q.o.d.* when writing medication orders. Marlowe made hasty corrections, ordered stat lithium levels on one patient, and swore a little.

The graveyard shift came on at eleven, and no one knew anything about his voluntary on North. The same, seated beside a flight bag in the office area, regarded Marlowe with politely contained anger.

He wore Nike running shoes, Levi jeans, and an Izod knit shirt, all of it just starting to slide past the comfortably well-worn stage. His beard had reached that scraggly sort of seediness that usually breaks the resolve of its wearer and brings the razor back out of the medicine cabinet. The black hairline was beginning to recede, but there were no flecks of grey. He had a complex digital watch toward which he pointedly glanced. The eyes behind the designer frames were red-rimmed and puffy, despite the effort of the tinted lenses to mask them. Marlowe guessed him to be a grad student or junior faculty from the state university campus at Franklin, some thirty miles to the north, and he wondered why the patient had not availed himself of the posh psychiatric unit at the medical school there.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Marlowe. Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Frank Carnell." The handshake was accepted, but weak.

"Would you care to step into my office, Mr. Carnell?"

Each unit included an interview room for the on-call physician; however, as North Unit's attending, Marlowe had an office of his own on the unit. He ushered his patient into the cheap vinyl-upholstered chair beside his desk and eased himself into the often treacherous swivel chair behind the expanse of pea-grey enameled

metal littered with manila chart folders. The office furnishings were state-purchase, some of them going back to Graceland's army camp days. A filing cabinet and a pair of unlovely metal bookcases of brownish-grey enamel housed a disarray of books, journals, and drug company handouts. There was also a couch of cracked brown Naugahyde, a coffee table, two folding chairs, and a spindly rubber tree leaning against the Venetian blinds. Overhead fluorescent lamps hummed behind acoustic ceiling tiles and made all too evident the yellow wax-stains on the uncarpeted floor of worn asbestos tile. One wall boasted a plastic-framed imitation oil of a mountain landscape that might have been discarded by a Holiday Inn, but Carnell was devoting his attention to the framed diplomas and certificates that completed the room's decoration.

"Impressive credentials, Dr. Marlowe. I had the impression that our state hospitals were staffed entirely by foreign medical school graduates."

"An exaggeration. I'm not the only American-educated psychiatrist here at Graceland." There were, in fact, two others.

"From what I've seen, it makes me wonder what a psychiatrist of your training is doing here at Graceland State?"

"I think the question more properly, Mr. Carnell," said Marlowe evenly, "is why are you here?"

Carnell's eyes, behind the tinted glasses, shifted to his chewed fingernails. He fidgeted with the flight bag on his lap. "I suppose you could say I'm depressed."

“Depressed?”

“I haven’t been sleeping well. Can’t fall asleep until the late late show and half a bottle of vodka; sometimes I need pills. I wake up before dawn, just lie awake thinking about things that keep running through my mind. Tired all the time. No appetite. No energy. Used to jog to my classes; now I just cut them and lie about the apartment. Haven’t been able to study in weeks.” Carnell spoke slowly, and Marlowe sensed tears.

“When did all this begin?”

“This spring. I’m in journalism at State, trying to complete work on my doctorate before the funds all dry up. My wife said she’d had enough of floating around the secretarial pool to pay the bills while I played the eternal student. She’s shackled up with her old boss from central accounting, and the divorce is pending. I haven’t been able to adjust to that. My performance has been on the skids—I’m supposed to teach a class during summer session, but I’ve missed so many my students don’t bother either. I’ve been called on the carpet by the department twice. I’m broke, in debt, and now my fellowship has been canceled. It’s just that no matter how hard I try, it just keeps getting worse.”

Marlowe waited while Carnell worked to control his voice. “Mr. Carnell, I certainly understand that you have good reason to be undergoing a great deal of anxiety and depression. However, since this appears directly related to your present life situation, I feel confident that this disturbance is a transient one. This is a painful crisis in your life, and I appreciate the profound distress you are experiencing. Under

the circumstances, I definitely agree that you need professional counseling; however, I believe you would far better benefit from outpatient counseling rather than hospitalization at this time."

Carnell fumbled with his flight bag. "Am I to understand that you are refusing me psychiatric care?"

"Not at all!" Marlowe had seen patients produce knives and an occasional handgun from unscreened personal belongings, but he doubted that Carnell was likely to turn violent. "I very strongly urge you to accept professional counseling. In my opinion you will derive considerably greater benefits through outpatient therapy than as a hospitalized patient here at Graceland."

"In other words, in your opinion I'm better off seeing a shrink on the outside than I'd be if I entered Graceland State as a patient." There was a certain triumph in Carnell's voice. "Well, it happens that I'm broke. I can't afford to be psychoanalyzed by some hundred bucks an hour private shrink."

"That isn't necessary, Mr. Carnell. If you wish, I can make an appointment for you to be seen on a priority basis this Monday at your community mental health clinic in Franklin; Dr. Liebman there is an excellent therapist. Or if you prefer, I can make an appointment for you at the medical school to be seen by the psychiatric outpatient service."

"I'm a taxpaying citizen of this state, Dr. Marlowe. Why are you refusing me treatment in a state facility?"

"I'm not refusing you treatment, Mr. Carnell. I

frankly do not believe that hospitalization would be beneficial to you. If you would prefer to receive treatment at Graceland rather than in your local community, I will gladly make an appointment for you to be seen Monday in our outpatient clinic."

"Suppose I don't care to wait until Monday for medical attention."

"Mr. Carnell, you must understand that our facilities here are limited. Our primary task is to care for the severely disabled patient, the chronically ill. Patients whose problems can best be dealt with without hospitalization are directed toward more appropriate community programs."

"Dr. Marlowe, I can't wait until next week for you to shuffle me off to some community agency. I can't keep going on like I have these last weeks. If I don't get help now, I'm afraid . . ."

He paused to make certain Marlowe was giving his undivided attention.

"Well, I have quite a collection of sleeping pills. Tonight I feel like taking them all."

"I have some papers you'll need to sign," Marlowe said.

After 2:00 A.M. Marlowe let himself into the employees' snack bar. It was nothing more than a cinder-block room, walled with vending machines, furnished with plastic tables and chairs about the color of tomato soup that's been left too long to cool. It differed from the patients' snack bar in that the plastic tables and chairs were not bolted to the tiled floor, spectators did not gape at the machines in slack-jawed hopeful-

ness, and the drugs that changed hands were of better quality. There was also a microwave oven.

The oven was Marlowe's solace during hungry nights on call. Underhill was a town too small to support a single fast-food franchise—something of a blessing in that otherwise Allen's Eat Good Food would no longer be serving home-cooked meals at family prices (the last Blue Plate Special known to Marlowe), nor would the Ski-Hi Drive-Inn still be making malts out of real ice cream and frying greasy hamburgers made of hand-shaped patties (all in a decor that left Marlowe humming medleys of Andrews Sisters hits). Underhill was also a town small enough to retain a blue law, and on Sundays even the Fast Fare convenience store was closed. The employees' cafeteria, in any event, closed for the weekend, and the outer world was closed to Marlowe beyond range of his beeper. On occasion Marlowe might escape Graceland long enough to grab a meal at Allen's or the Ski-Hi, but on Sundays, the day Marlowe hated above all days, if he were to have a hot meal, he must cook it himself.

There was a stove and refrigerator for staff in North Unit's administrative section, but Marlowe was one of those bachelors for whom cooking was a forbidden art. Marlowe had only hazy memories of a youth before college and medical school, and whether the food put upon his plate was doled out or paid for, Marlowe regardless had had no thought to spare as to its conception. In his office Marlowe kept a hotplate and various cans, the sins of whose preparation were concealed by virtue of a large bottle of Tabasco

sauce. With the microwave oven, Marlowe felt a competence somewhat akin to the laboratory.

For this weekend, Fast Fare's frozen foods counter (Marlowe understood two classes of foods: canned or frozen) had supplied him with a carton of Western Steer's Hungry Cowhand Rib-Eye Filets. These Marlowe had retrieved from North Unit's refrigerator and now fed to the microwave. He punched buttons at random, drawing tired satisfaction as the blocks of frozen beef stuff turned a pallid grey and began to steam. A clatter of quarters excerpted the last two Reel-Keen Cheez-Burgers from a vending machine. Marlowe filled each stale bun with a partially thawed segment of Hungry Cowhand, placed his mutant creations within the microwave. The cheese-food was just starting to melt when his beeper interrupted.

Marlowe ignored its summons until the microwave's buzzer announced the perfection of his cooking artistry, then picked up the snack bar phone and dialed. It was North Unit, and he'd just made the seven-minute walk from there.

"Dr. Marlowe, this is Macafee on the admissions ward. I'm afraid we're having some problems with that patient you just admitted."

"Which one is that?" Marlowe had had eight admissions tonight, and they began to blur together.

"Frank Carnell, sir. The suicide attempt from Franklin."

"What's the difficulty?"

Macafee was a Nam vet and continued to regard doctors as officers. "Sir, this patient is noncooperative and abusive. He's objecting to

the suicide precautions you ordered, he claims someone has stolen a cassette recorder he had with him on admission, and he demands to speak with you immediately."

"*Did* he have a cassette recorder when he was admitted?"

"No sir. Only a small canvas bag containing clothing and personal articles."

Marlowe tried a mouthful of steaming steak-burger, decided it needed catsup. "I need to stop in at the med unit, then do an admission at the ARU. I'll try to look in on you in between. Meanwhile it might be best to place Carnell under sedation and seclude if necessary. I believe I wrote a PRN for p.o. Valium?"

"Yes sir, you did. However, Mr. Carnell has refused medication."

"Then write an order for Valium 10 mgm IM stat, then Valium 5 mgm IM q 3-4 hours times 48 hours PRN agitation and anxiety. I'll sign it when I stop by. You already have a PRN seclusion order with the suicide precautions."

"Dr. Marlowe, Mr. Carnell claims that as a voluntary patient he should not be on a locked ward and that we have no right to force him to take medications."

"An argument the patient advocates have often raised," Marlowe said. "However, Mr. Carnell is an involuntary admission. I suggest you observe him carefully for further signs of delusional behavior."

Late at night Marlowe owned the corridors. They stretched in fifty-yard sections from brick unit to brick unit. After 11:00 P.M. only every

third fluorescent ceiling fixture was left on, leaving the corridors hung with darkness in between the flickering islands of light. The corridors were entirely of tile: discolored acoustic tiles for the ceiling, glossy ceramic tiles for the walls, stained asbestos tiles for the floor. Marlowe wondered how such a manufactured environment could still stink of human filth and hopelessness.

Marlowe paused, not breathing. It was four in the morning, the hour of the cockroach, an hour before the keepers of the graveyard shift began to prompt their cares into a semblance of reality to greet their breakfast and the day shift at seven. He listened.

The roaches here were larger than any Marlowe had seen since an age when dinosaurs were but a fanciful gleam in a tree fern's eye. He could hear them as they scuttled along the worn tiles of the long, long corridor. Some, intent upon a smear of feces lodged within a missing bit of broken floor tile, were reluctant to flee his approach.

Marlowe stomped at them, withheld his foot at the last instant. The roaches scattered half-heartedly. It was, perhaps, an old game. Marlowe heard the silky rustle of their reconvergence as he silently passed by.

As he passed a snack vending machine, he could hear a mouse feasting within.

"Dr. Marlowe never sleeps."

"Can't spare the time, Mr. Habberly. Surely you've heard that there's no rest for the wicked."

Habberly chuckled. "Never going to sleep long's you keep drinking my coffee." He handed

Marlowe his cup—a gift from the Sandoz rep, featuring a smiling yellow Happyface and the wish to “Have a Happy Day” from “Mellaril.” Pudgy and greying, Habberly was nearing state retirement age; he had been an orderly and later ward supervisor at Graceland since it opened. He and an aging male nurse, occasionally joined by a ward attendant on break, were the only inhabitants of North Unit’s administrative section during the graveyard shift.

“Careful, Doctor—that’s fresh poured!”

Marlowe ignored his warning and swallowed without looking up from his admissions notes. “Thank you, Mr. Habberly.”

“Never could understand how some folks can drink coffee when it’s hot enough to scald your hand carrying it.”

“Practice deadens all feeling, Mr. Habberly, and because there’s too little time to wait for it to cool. But I can still taste: you brew the best cup of coffee in Graceland.”

“Thank you, sir. Well, now, that’s practice again. I don’t fool with that big urn the day shifts use. Got me a three–four cup percolator just right for night shift. Been using it for years. And I don’t fool with state-purchase coffee.”

Marlowe finished his coffee and handed Habberly a sheaf of triplicate forms. “Here’s the commitment papers for tonight’s involuntaries. With luck you won’t have any more admissions until day shift comes on in an hour.”

Habberly thumbed through the forms, making certain that all had been signed and notarized as the law required. A patient could only be committed involuntarily if he constituted an imme-

diate threat to others or to himself in the opinion of local magistrates and the admitting physician. Marlowe had had three involuntaries on North Unit tonight.

Habberly paused over the commitment papers for Frank Carnell. "Is this the patient who was causing the fuss about someone stealing his suitcase?"

Marlowe craned his neck to see which patient Habberly meant. "Yes. Which reminds me that I told Macafee I'd look in on him. By the way, you didn't happen to notice whether Carnell had any sort of bag or anything with him when he was admitted, did you?"

"Why, no sir. He didn't have any personal belongings with him at all. The deputies carried him up here straight from the emergency room at Franklin Memorial. I let them into the ward when they brought him here long about midnight."

The admitting ward for each unit was a locked ward, and it was hospital policy that every patient admitted after hours or on weekends must be kept on the admissions ward until such time as the psychiatrist to whose service he was assigned had had an opportunity to interview him. The rule applied to voluntary and involuntary patients alike. Patient advocates complained that this rule was only intended to discourage voluntary admissions after office hours, but hospital administration pointed out that the rule had come into being after a Korean resident blithely admitted a seemingly depressed voluntary patient to an open ward one night, who

quietly strangled and raped the retarded teenage boy who shared his room and passed it off the next morning as the work of Mafia hitmen.

Marlowe let himself into North Unit Admission Ward. It was, he reflected, a bit of a misuse of terms in that patients judged not suitable for the open wards might linger in a unit's admission ward for weeks until proper disposition could be made. Graceland did not treat dangerous psychotics in theory; the state maintained a hospital for the criminally insane, now euphemized as a forensic psychiatric facility, in conjunction with the state penitentiary at Russellville. A patient who required long-term hospitalization at Graceland was either found suitable for an open ward or transferred to a chronic-care ward, where long-term hospitalization usually meant lifetime.

Macafee nodded to him through the glass of the nurses' station, unlocked the door to let him enter. "Good morning, sir. Almost 600 hours; we'll be waking them soon. Care for some coffee, sir?"

"Yes, thank you." Marlowe looked through the glass. The nurses' station was a locked cubicle placed along one wall to give an aquarium resident's view of the communal ward. Already several of the patients were beginning to shuffle about between the close-spaced beds; it was close enough to breakfast, which arrived with the day shift, that minimal activity was permitted.

"Any problems?" Marlowe signed his telephone orders in the ward orders book.

"No sir. Not after we put Mr. Carnell to bed." Macafee sometimes confused the ward with training barracks, but it was usually quiet when

he was on night shift, and Marlowe disliked disturbances.

"How is Mr. Carnell?"

"Quiet, sir. Sawyer's checking on him just now."

"I'll just take a look myself."

A short hallway led from the communal ward to the outside corridors. Connected by a door to the nursing station was a small room for supplies and medications. There was an examining and treatment room farther along the hallway, then toilets, showers, a patients' lounge, and several seclusion rooms. Carnell was lying on the bed within one of these; a wooden night stand was the only other furnishing. Sawyer was just coming out of the room.

"Good evening, Dr. Marlowe—or good morning, it's getting to be."

"And let's hope it will be a good day, Mr. Sawyer. How is Mr. Carnell?"

"He's been resting quietly. Starting to wake up now." Sawyer had had ambitions of a pro football career before a high school knee injury scrubbed that as well as hopes for a college scholarship. He was ten years younger than Macafee and a good audience.

Carnell was muttering to himself when Marlowe bent over him. "Good morning, Mr. Carnell," Marlowe said, since his eyes were open. "How do you feel?"

"Damn you, Marlowe!" Carnell sat up sluggishly. "I've been locked up, robbed, drugged, I don't know what! Do you think you're running some sort of prison camp? I demand to be released from this zoo right now!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Carnell. Have you forgotten why you came here?" Marlowe's voice was patient. "Try to remember."

Carnell's face showed anger, then growing indecision. His eyes began to widen in fear.

"Mr. Sawyer, could we have that IM Valium order stat?"

"Yes sir. Five mgm, was it, Dr. Marlowe?"

"Better make it ten."

The chronic-care wards were always on the second storey of Graceland's far-flung units. Marlowe supposed this was because Graceland had no cellars. Presumably, had there been cellars the temptation to wall them off would have been irresistible. Marlowe supposed Graceland had never had cellars.

There were two basic divisions among the chronics: the ambulatory and the nonambulatory. The ambulatory could be trusted to leave their locked wards, perform acceptably under controlled situations, and return to their locked wards. The nonambulatory could not be trusted to function within acceptable guidelines. They remained in their wards, often in their beds, often only a dream from the chronic med care unit; spoon-fed gobs of pasty slop, when they could no longer handle spoons; moved to the chronic med unit when they could only be fed through tubes and IVs.

They fed the ambulatory chronics three times a day—breakfast, lunch, and dinner—the same as living souls. This meant they were herded from their wards three times a day, down the stairs (there was an elevator for each unit, and

those who could walk, but not negotiate stairs, were granted this) and along the tiled corridors to the patients' cafeteria. They moved along docilely enough, each regimented segment of quasi-humanity, herded along the long, long corridors by nurses and attendants.

Their clothes were shapeless garments that fit their shapeless bodies: not uniforms, only styleless wads of clothing donated by middle-class patrons who found salve for their consciences in charity bins for flotsam their guilt would not allow them to fling into trashcans. Some, who were habitually incontinent, might wear rubber (now vinyl) underpants, although it had been established with chronics that floors and clothing were more easily washed than could dermatitis and pustulant sores be cured; and so many, by chance or by choice, wore no underwear at all.

Marlowe, a microcassette recorder in one hand, a Powerhouse candy bar in the other, alternately dictating and chewing, stood against one wall as the chronics shuffled past him on their way to be fed. Their faces were as shapeless as their bodies: some smiling, some grimacing, some frozen from the effects of too many shock treatments, too many drugs. A few seemed to recognize Marlowe, and waved or winked or muttered. Some, Marlowe thought, had been in Graceland longer than Marlowe, and that was forever. A grey-mustached grandmother in a shapeless polyester sack dribbled excrement as she shuffled past. The corridor stank of urine and feces and unwashed living dead, and no antiseptic nor disinfectant would ever cleanse it. Marlowe finished his candy-bar breakfast, waiting for

them to pass before resuming dictation.

"If God exists," a patient had once told Marlowe, "then what sort of sadist is he to curse the elderly with the indignity of loss of sphincter control?"

"An angry god," Marlowe had replied with bitterness. "And vengeful."

By midmorning Saturday Marlowe decided he had completed Friday's tasks and it was time to recognize Saturday. He had contemplated napping on his couch, but there were two voluntary admissions waiting on West Unit, and the adolescent runaway on East had pulled her stitches out.

Marlowe dragged a toilet kit from his filing cabinet and paid a visit to the staff restroom, where he washed his face in cold water, brushed his teeth, gargled mouthwash, brushed his hair and beard. Returning to his office, he pulled off his red Hawaiian shirt, sprayed on deodorant, and changed into a blue Hawaiian shirt, also from his filing cabinet. Sleeping quarters were provided for on-call physicians in a cinder-block horror known as married residents' housing, but this was detached from the hospital unit, and after a night when it took Marlowe twelve minutes to respond to a cardiac arrest from there, he decided to take call from his office.

East and West Units cared for women patients, North and South Units for the men. Whatever symmetry had been intended by this plan had been completely obscured by the addition of the Adolescent Unit, the Med Unit, the Alcoholic Rehab Unit (again segregated by sexes and sepa-

rated by a five-minute walk), and Central Administration—not to mention the semiautonomous Taggart Center for Special Children (once known as the State Home for the Mentally Retarded), the Crawford Training School (the state had seen fit to include a center for juvenile offenders within Camp Underhill's disused facilities), and the P. Everett Amberson Clinic (a former hotel refurbished as a drying-out spot for the less shabby class of alcoholics and pill addicts). It took new psychiatric residents a few months to find their way around, and a car was necessary to reach the outlying centers—a complication in that many of the foreign residents had licenses to practice medicine but not to drive.

Marlowe, who was not moved by tears and found them a bit bothersome, considered East and West Units more than a little bothersome. Granted that tears were nonverbal communication, women patients tended to use them as dramatic expression or as means to terminate an interview. A generalization, but an accurate one, for Marlowe had timed things. Even allowing for the additional time entailed by a pelvic exam on new admissions, as opposed to a quick grope and cough to check for inguinal hernia, it took half again as long on the average to complete any task on the women's wards as on the men's. Marlowe compared notes with several of the women psychiatrists and found their experience to be the same. Marlowe saw the basis of an article for the journals in this business of tears, but he left it unwritten as he hated the journals. The crucial point was that, given too many tasks and too

little time to accomplish them, East and West Units demanded a disproportionate share of that nonexistent time.

Marlowe spent most of the day between East Unit and West Unit. It was a pleasant day, and families liked to carry their senile grandmothers and Valium-addicted aunts to the hospital on weekends. Everyone was off work, the children could come along, and it was a nice outing for Grannie or Noonie or Auntie or maybe Mom or Sis, who had begun to wander into traffic or seduce the paperboy after two bottles of vodka. Major holidays were worst of all, for then families liked to rid themselves of unwanted and incontinent organic old ladies, so they could enjoy Christmas or Easter without the pressure of an invalid. Graceland was cheaper than a rest home, and afterward, if conscience troubled, they could always take a drive and reclaim her. Best of all, on weekends they could drop a patient off and be miles away before the lone on-call physician had a chance to interview her. The worse the weather, the better Marlowe liked it: involuntary commitments might come in at any time, but it was unlikely that the family would decide to haul off Grandma when it looked like it might pour down all day.

By midnight Marlowe limped back to his office and collapsed on his couch. He had had fourteen admissions since morning, with more on the way. Most of the usual problems he had been able to deal with over the phone—too much medication, too little medication, extrapyramidal reactions to the medications. Marlowe ti-

trated and adjusted, switched from phenothiazines to Haldol or Navane or vice versa, dispensed Artane and Cogentin as required. Metal chains and straitjackets had required no such artistry, but the oldtimers told Marlowe of how they used to scream and howl on nights of the full moon in the days before major tranquilizers, and Marlowe kept it quiet the nights he was on call.

Marlowe's eyes stung. A Filipino resident had admitted a patient Thursday night and not noticed that he was a severe alcoholic; nor had the resident who inherited him in the morning and who transferred him to an open ward. When the patient went into DT's with paranoid delusions, it took security two full cans of Mace to convince him to drop the table leg he was swinging like a club at anything, real or delusional, that came within reach. Marlowe had had to examine the patient once subdued, and Mace was still running like sweat off the man's blistering skin.

The familiar coffee burn in his stomach reminded Marlowe that he hadn't eaten anything except a candy bar and a large tomato one of the nurses had carried in from her garden. Fast Fare had closed, even had Marlowe felt up to a short drive. Red-eyed ("Remember—*don't* rub your eyes," security had warned him.), Marlowe pawed through his filing cabinet and uncovered a can of ravioli. He managed to open it without cutting himself, found a plastic spoon, and fed himself cold ravioli from the can. He considered heating it on his hotplate, but lacked the time or ambition. He almost fell asleep while chewing,

but his beeper reminded him who and where he was.

At three in the morning Willy Winslow on South Unit smashed the saltshaker he had stolen earlier and sawed at his wrists with the jagged glass. He was quite pleased when he flailed his bleeding wrists against the nurses' station window, but neither the ward attendants nor Marlowe shared his amusement.

Winslow was a regular at Graceland, one of an undefined group of patients who enjoying staying in state institutions, constantly admitted and readmitted, either voluntarily or involuntarily, and constantly discharged again. Winslow was well known to all the staff at Graceland; if he could not con a resident into a voluntary admission, he would gash his wrists and gain an involuntary commitment thereby. During this, his seventeenth admission to Graceland, a concerned resident from one of the better private medical schools had devoted three months toward helping Winslow re-enter the community. Bolstered by an extensive outreach program, Winslow was to be discharged next week.

Marlowe, selecting from the suture tray, gazed at the masses of scar tissue upon each wrist and shook his head. "Mr. Winslow, you managed to do this without anesthetic, and I don't see why I should waste any in sewing you back together."

Winslow's eyes glittered, but he didn't reply. It was, perhaps, an old game.

"And how many times do I have to tell you," said Marlowe, drawing the curved needle with

difficulty through the layers of scar, "cut lengthwise down your wrist, just here below the thumb—not crosswise."

Frank Carnell was still in seclusion when Marlowe made rounds through North Unit on Sunday evening, but the ward attendants reported that he had been quiet throughout the day, and he appeared to be ready to come out into the ward. Marlowe found him sitting up on the edge of his bed, staring dazedly at his hands.

"Good evening, Mr. Carnell. How are you feeling today?"

"I'm sorry—I'm bad about names. You're Dr. . . . ?"

"Dr. Marlowe. Dr. Chris Marlowe."

Carnell struggled to recall. "I remember seeing you, of course. When I was . . . upset. And when they brought me here from the hospital."

"Do you remember coming here from the hospital?"

"I must have been completely irrational." Carnell smiled sheepishly at the memory. "I seemed to believe I had come here as a voluntary patient. I had a cassette recorder, and I was going to take firsthand notes for my dissertation on the inadequacies of our state mental hospitals. I'm a journalism student at State, but then you know all that."

"I'm sure there's more than sufficient material there for a number of dissertations," Marlowe agreed. "And was that actually your topic?"

"One of them," Carnell confessed. "I had plenty of ideas, just never followed up on them. Guess that was just another of the things that

helped my life slide downhill, until . . .”

He struggled to control his voice. “Well, until I finally pulled out all the pills I had on hand and gobbled them down like M&M’s. I remember getting sick and passing out, and then I guess I woke up there in the emergency room.”

“You *guess*?”

Carnell frowned, trying to recall. “To tell the truth, my memory is pretty hazy for the last day or so—all those pills, plus whatever medications you’ve been giving me. There must have been a time there in the emergency room when they were bringing me around after I took all those pills . . .”

Marlowe waited patiently while he tried to remember.

Carnell’s face began to twist with fear. “Dr. Marlowe, I can’t remember anything from the time I blacked out until when I was sitting there in your reception room and . . . Wait a minute, I was never brought here! I came voluntarily!”

“Indeed, you did.” Marlowe’s smile was almost sympathetic. “And voluntarily, I’m afraid, is unforgivable.”

Carnell started to rush for the door, but it was blocked by Macafee and Sawyer, and he was too weak to put up much of a struggle.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Carnell,” said Marlowe soothingly, as the needle plunged home. “It does take time at first to understand, and you have plenty of time.”

It was past 5:00 A.M. when Marlowe made rounds through South Unit. The sun would be creeping out soon, signaling the dawn of what

Marlowe knew would be another Friday, and he would be on call.

"Dr. Marlowe," suggested Wygul, the ward attendant on South, "maybe when you finish signing those ECT orders, could you take a look in on Mr. Stallings? He's been a lot calmer tonight, and we haven't had to restrain him since Saturday afternoon. I think he's ready to be let out of seclusion now so we can see how he does on the ward."

"Mr. Wygul," Marlowe finished his coffee, "I've never known your judgment to fail yet. Is the patient awake yet?"

"Yes, Doctor. He was sitting up in bed half an hour ago, and we'll be waking everybody up in just a minute."

"All right then, I'll talk to him."

Stallings gazed at Marlowe expectantly when he entered the seclusion room. He made no hostile moves.

"Good morning, Mr. Stallings. I'm Dr. Marlowe."

"How do you do, Dr. Marlowe." Stallings's manner was courteous, but in a friendly way, rather than cautious.

"Do you remember me from the night you came here, Mr. Stallings?"

"Yes sir, I sure do." Stallings laughed and shook his head. His hand seemed to want a cigarette to complete the gesture. "Man, I sure was out of my skull on something that night!"

"What do you remember?"

"Well, I remember being carried in here by the deputies, and being tied down and all, and I was

cussing and telling the whole world that I was Satan."

"And did you believe that?"

Stallings nodded in embarrassment, then looked earnestly into Marlowe's eyes. "Yes sir, I sure did. And then you came into the room, and I looked into your face, and I knew that I was wrong, because I knew that *you* were Satan."

"Mr. Stallings," Marlowe smiled sadly, "you appear to have made a rapid recovery."

OLD LOVES

He had loved her for twenty years, and today he would meet her for the first time. Her name was Elisabeth Kent, but to him she would always be Stacey Steele.

Alex Webley had been an undergraduate in the mid-1960s when *The Agency* premiered on night television. This had been at the height of the fad for spy shows—James Bond and imitations beyond counting, then countermoves toward either extreme of realism or parody. Upon such a full sea *The Agency* almost certainly would have sunk unnoticed, had it not been for the series' two stars—or more particularly, had it not been for Elisabeth Kent.

In the role of Stacey Steele she played the delightfully eccentric—"kooky" was the expression of the times—partner of secret agent Harrison Dane, portrayed by actor Garrett Channing—an aging matinee idol, to use the expression of an earlier time. The two were employed by an enigmatic organization referred to simply as The Agency, which dispatched Dane and Miss Steele off upon dangerous assignments throughout the world. Again, nothing in the formula to distinguish *The Agency* from the rest of the pack

—except for the charisma of its co-stars and for a certain stylish audacity to its scripts that became more outrageous as the series progressed.

Initially it was to have been a straight secret agent series: strong male lead assisted by curvaceous ingenue whose scatterbrained exploits would provide at least one good capture and rescue per episode. The role of Harrison Dane went to Garrett Channing—a fortuitous piece of contrary-to-type casting of an actor best remembered as the suave villain or debonair hero of various forgettable 1950s programmers. Channing had once been labeled “the poor man’s James Mason,” and perhaps the casting director had recalled that James Mason had been an early choice to portray James Bond. The son of a Bloomsbury greengrocer, Channing’s Hollywood-nurtured sophistication and charm seemed ideal for the role of American superspy, Harrison Dane.

Then, through a casting miracle that could only have been through chance and not genius, the role of Stacey Steele went to Elisabeth Kent. Miss Kent was a tall, leggy dancer whose acting experience consisted of several on-and-off-Broadway plays and a brief role in the most recent James Bond film. *Playboy*, as was its custom, ran a pictorial feature on the lovelies of the latest Bond film and devoted two full pages to the blonde Miss Kent—revealing rather more of her than was permitted in the movies of the day. It brought her to the attention of the casting director, and Elisabeth Kent became Stacey Steele.

Became Stacey Steele almost literally.

Later they would say that the role destroyed Elisabeth Kent. Her career dwindled miserably afterward. Some critics suggested that Miss Kent had been blackballed by the industry after her unexpected departure from the series resulted in *The Agency's* plummeting in the ratings and merciful cancellation after a partial season with a forgettable DD-cup Malibu blonde stuffed into the role of female lead. The consensus, however, pointed out that after her role in *The Agency*, it was Stacey Steele who was in demand, and not Elisabeth Kent. Once the fad for secret agent films passed, there were no more roles for Stacey Steele. Nor for Elisabeth Kent. A situation comedy series flopped after three episodes. Two films with her in straight dramatic roles were noteworthy bombs, and a third was never released. Even if Elisabeth Kent succeeded in convincing some producer or director that she was not Stacey Steele, her public remained adamant.

Her only film appearance within the past decade had been as the villainess in a Hong Kong chop-fooey opus, *Tiger Fists Against the Dragon*. Perhaps it lost some little in translation.

Inevitably, *The Agency* attracted a dedicated fan following, and Stacey Steele became a cult figure. The same was true to a lesser extent for Garrett Channing, although that actor's death not long after the series' cancellation spared him both the benefits and the hazards of such a status. The note he left upon his desk, "Goodbye, World—I can no longer accept your tedium," was considered an enviable exit line.

The Agency premiered in the mid-1960s, just

catching the crest of the Carnaby Street mod-look craze. Harrison Dane, suave superspy and mature man of the world though he was, was decidedly hip to today's swinging beat, and the promos boldly characterized him as a "mod James Bond." No business suits and narrow ties for Harrison Dane. "We want to take the stuffiness out of secret agenting," to quote one producer. As the sophisticated counterpart to the irrepressible Miss Steele, Dane saved the day once a week attired in various outfits consisting of bell-bottom trousers, paisley shirts, Nehru jackets, and lots of beads and badges. If one critic described Harrison Dane as "a middle-aged Beatle," the public applauded this "anti-establishment superspy."

No such criticism touched the image of Stacey Steele. Stacey Steele was the American viewing public's ideal of the Swinging London Bird—her long-legged physique perfectly suited to vinyl minidresses and thigh-high boots. Each episode became a showcase for her daring fashions—briefest of miniskirts, hip-hugging leather bell-bottoms, see-through (as much as the censors would permit) blouses, cut-out dresses, patent boots, psychedelic jewelry, groovy hats, all that was marvy, fab, and gear. There was talk of opening a franchise of Stacey Steele Boutiques, and Miss Steele became a featured model in various popular magazines seeking to portray the latest fashions for the Liberated Lady of the Sixties. By this time Elisabeth Kent's carefully modulated BBC accent would never betray her Long Island birthright to the unstudied ear.

Stacey Steele was instant pinup material, and

stills of the miniskirted secret agent covered many a dorm wall beside blowups of Bogie and black-light posters. Later detractors argued that *The Agency* would never have lasted its first season without Stacey Steele's legs, and that the series was little more than an American version of one of the imported British spy shows. Fans rebutted such charges with the assertion that it had all started with James Bond anyway, and *The Agency* proved that the Americans could do it best. Pinup photos of Stacey Steele continue to sell well twenty years after.

While *The Agency* may have been plainly derivative of a popular British series, American viewers made it their favorite show against formidable prime-time competition from the other two networks. For three glorious seasons *The Agency* ruled Saturday nights. Then, Elisabeth Kent's sudden departure from the series: catastrophe, mediocrity, cancellation. But not oblivion. The series passed into syndication and thus into the twilight zone of odd-hour reruns on local channels and independent networks. Old fans remembered, new fans were born. *The Agency* developed a cult following, and Stacey Steele became its goddess.

In that sense, among its priesthood was Alex Webley. He had begun his worship two decades ago in the tv lounge of a college dorm, amidst the incense of spilled beer and tobacco smoke and an inspired choir of whistles and guffaws. The first night he watched *The Agency* Webley had been blowing some tangerine with an old high school buddy who had brought a little down from Antioch. Webley didn't think he'd gotten off, but

when the miniskirted Miss Steele used dazzling karate chops to dispatch two baddies, he knew he was having a religious experience. After that, he watched *The Agency* every Saturday night without fail. It would have put a crimp in his dating, if Webley had been one who dated. His greatest moment in college was the night when he stood off two drunken jocks, either of whom could have folded Webley in half, who wanted to switch channels from *The Agency* to watch a basketball game. They might have stuffed Webley into a wastebasket, had not other *Agency* fans added their voices to his protest. Thus did Alex Webley learn the power of fans united.

It was a power he experienced again with news of Elisabeth Kent's departure from the series, and later when *The Agency* was canceled. Webley was one of the thousands of fans who wrote to the network demanding that Stacey Steele be brought back to the show (never mind how). With the show's cancellation, Webley helped circulate a petition that *The Agency* be continued, with or without Stacey Steele. The producers were impressed by such show of support, but the network pointed out that ten thousand signatures from the lunatic fringe do not cause a flicker on the Nielsen ratings. Without Stacey Steele, *The Agency* was out of business, and that was that. Besides, the fad for overdone spy shows was over and done.

Alex Webley kept a file of clippings and stills, promotional items, comic books and paperbacks, anything at all pertaining to *The Agency* and to the great love of his life, Elisabeth Kent. From the beginning there were fanzines

—crudely printed amateur publications devoted to *The Agency*—and one or two unofficial fan clubs. Webley joined and subscribed to them all. Undergraduate enthusiasms developed into a lifelong hobby. Corresponding with other die-hard fans and collecting *Agency* memorabilia became his preoccupying outside interest in the course of taking a doctorate in neurobiology. He was spared from Vietnam by high blood pressure, and from any long-term romantic involvement by a highly introverted nature. Following his doctorate, Webley landed a research position at one of the pharmaceutical laboratories, where he performed his duties efficiently and maintained an attitude of polite aloofness toward his co-workers. Someone there dubbed him “the Invisible Man,” but there was no malice to the *mot juste*.

At his condo, the door of the spare bedroom bore a brass-on-walnut plaque that read *HQ*. Webley had made it himself. Inside were filing cabinets, bookshelves, and his desk. The walls were papered with posters and stills, most of them photos of Stacey Steele. A glass-fronted cabinet held videocassettes of all *The Agency* episodes, painstakingly acquired through trades with other fans. The day he completed the set, Webley drank most of a bottle of Glenfiddich—Dane’s and Miss Steele’s favorite potation—and afterward became quite ill.

By now Webley’s enthusiasm had expanded to all of the spy shows and films of the period, but old loves die hard, and *The Agency* remained his chief interest. Webley was editor/publisher of *Special Assignment*, a quarterly amateur maga-

zine devoted to the spy craze of the sixties. *Special Assignment* was more than a cut above the mimeographed fanzines that Webley had first begun to collect; his magazine was computer-typeset and boasted slick paper and color covers. By its tenth issue, *Special Assignment* had a circulation of several thousand, with distribution through specialty bookshops here and abroad. It was a hobby project that took up all of Webley's free time and much of his living space, and Webley was content.

Almost content. *Special Assignment* carried photographs and articles on every aspect of the old spy shows, along with interviews of many of the actors and actresses. Webley, of course, devoted a good many pages of each issue to *The Agency* and to Stacey Steele—but to his chagrin he was unable to obtain an interview with Elisabeth Kent. Since her one disastrous comeback attempt, Miss Kent preferred the life of a recluse. There was some dignity to be salvaged in anonymity. Miss Kent did not grant interviews, she did not make public appearances, she did not answer fan mail. After ten years the world forgot Elisabeth Kent, but her fans still remembered Stacey Steele.

Webley had several years prior managed to secure Elisabeth Kent's address—no mean accomplishment in itself—but his rather gushing fan letters had not elicited any sort of reply. Not easily daunted, Webley faithfully sent Miss Kent each new issue of *Special Assignment* (personally inscribed to her), and with each issue he included a long letter of praise for her deathless characterization of Stacey Steele, along with a plea to be

granted an interview. Webley never gave up hope, despite Miss Kent's unbroken silence.

When he at last did receive a letter from Miss Kent graciously granting him the long-sought interview, Webley knew that life is just and that the faithful shall be rewarded.

He caught one of those red-eye special flights out to Los Angeles, but was too excited to catch any sleep on the way. Instead he reread a well-worn paperback novelization of one of his favorite *Agency* episodes, *The Chained Lightning Caper*, and mentally reviewed the questions he would ask Miss Kent—still not quite able to believe that he would be talking with her in another few hours.

Webley checked into a Thrifti-Family Motel near the airport, unpacked, tried without success to sleep, got up, showered and shaved. The economy flight he had taken hadn't served a meal, but then it had been all Webley could manage just to finish his complimentary soft beverage. The three-hour time change left his system rather disordered in any event, so that he wasn't certain whether he actually should feel tired or hungry were it not for his anxiousness over the coming interview. He pulled out his notes and looked over them again, managing to catch a fitful nap just before dawn. At daylight he made himself eat a dismal breakfast in the motel restaurant, then returned to his room to shave again and to put on the clothes he had brought along for the interview.

It was the best of Webley's several Harrison Dane costumes, carefully salvaged from various Thrift Shops and yard sales. Webley maintained

a wardrobe of vintage mod clothing, and he had twice won prizes at convention masquerades. The pointed-toe Italian boots were original to the period—a lovingly maintained treasure discovered ten years before at Goodwill Industries. The suede bell-bottoms were custom-made by an aging hippy at an aging leathercrafts shop that still had a few psychedelic posters tacked to its walls. Webley tried them on at least once a month and adjusted his diet according to snugness of fit. The jacket, a sort of lavender thing that lacked collar or lapels, was found at a vintage clothing store and altered to his measurements. The paisley shirt, mostly purples and greens, had been discovered at a yard sale, and the beads and medallions had come from here and there.

Webley was particularly proud of his Dane Cane, which he himself had constructed after the secret agent's famous weapon. It appeared to be a normal walking stick, but it contained Dane's arsenal of secret weapons and paraphernalia—including a radio transmitter, recording device, tear gas, and laser. Harrison Dane was never without his marvelous cane, and good thing, too. Alex Webley had caused rather a stir at the airport check-in, before airline officials finally permitted him to transport his Dane Cane via baggage.

Webley still clung to the modified Beatles haircut that Harrison Dane affected. He combed it now carefully, and he studied his reflection in the room's ripply mirror. The very image of Harrison Dane. Stacey Steele—Miss Kent—would no doubt be impressed by the pains he

had taken. It would have been great to drive out in a Shelby Cobra like Dane's, but instead he called for a cab.

Not a Beverly Hills address, Webley sadly noted, as the taxi drove him to one of those innumerable canyon neighborhoods tottering on steep hillsides and the brink of shabbiness. Her house was small and featureless, a little box propped up on the hillside beside a jagged row of others like it—distinguishable one from another chiefly by the degree of seediness and the cars parked in front. Some cheap development from the 1950s, Webley judged, and another ten years likely would see the ones still standing bought up and the land used for some cheap condo development. He felt increasingly sad about it all; he had been prepared to announce his arrival to some uniformed guard at the subdivision's entrance gate.

Well, if it were within his power to do so, Webley intended to bring to bear the might and majesty of *Special Assignment* to pressure these stupid producers into casting Elisabeth Kent in new and important roles. That made this interview more important than ever to Webley—and to Miss Kent.

He paid off the cab—tipping generously, as Harrison Dane would have done. This was perhaps fortunate, as the driver shouted after him that he had forgotten his attaché case. Webley wondered how Dane would have handled such an embarrassing lapse—of course, Dane would never have committed such a blunder. Webley's case—also modeled after Dane's secret agent attaché case, although Webley's lacked the built-

in machine gun—contained a bottle of Glenfiddich, his notes, cassette recorder, and camera. It was essential that he obtain some photographs of Miss Kent at home: since her appearance in the unfortunate *Tiger Fists* film, current photos of Elisabeth Kent were not made available. Webley had heard vicious rumors that the actress had lost her looks, but he put these down to typical show biz backstabbing, and he prayed it wasn't so.

He rang the doorbell, using the tip of his cane, just as Dane always did, and waited—posing jauntily against his cane, just as Dane always did. The seconds dragged on eternally, and there was no response. He rang again, and waited. Webley looked for a car in the driveway; saw none, but the carport was closed. He rang a third time.

This time the door opened.

And Alex Webley knew his worship had not been in vain.

"Hullo, Dane," she said. "I've been expecting you."

"How very good to see you, Miss Steele," said Webley. "I hope I haven't kept you waiting."

And she *was* Stacey Steele. Just like in *The Agency*. And Webley felt a thrill at knowing she had dressed the part just for the interview—just for him.

The Hollywood gossip had been all lies, because she hardly looked a day older—although part of that was no doubt due to her appearance today as Stacey Steele. It was perfect. It was all there, as it should be: the thigh-length boots of black patent leather, the red leather minidress with *LOVE* emblazoned across the breastline

(the center of the *O* was cut out, revealing a daring glimpse of braless cleavage), the blonde bangs-and-ironed-straight Mary Travers hair, the beads and bells. Time had rolled back, and she *was* Stacey Steele.

"Come on in, luv," Miss Steele invited, in her so-familiar throaty purr.

Aerobics really can do wonders, Webley thought as he followed her into her living room. Twenty years might have gone by, but if *The Agency* were to be revived today, Miss Kent could step right into her old role as the mod madcap Miss Steele. Exercise and diet, probably—he must find some discreet way of asking her how she kept her youthful figure.

The living room was a close replica of Stacey Steele's swinging London flat, enough so that Webley guessed she had removed much of the set from the Hollywood sound stage where the series was actually shot. He sat down, not without difficulty, on the inflatable Day-Glo orange chair—Dane's favorite—and opened his attaché case.

"I brought along a little libation," he said, presenting her with the Glenfiddich.

Miss Steele gladly accepted the dark-green triangular bottle. "Ah, luv! You always remember, don't you!"

She quickly poured a generous level of the pale-amber whisky into a pair of stemmed glasses and offered one to Webley. Webley wanted to protest that it was too early in the day for him to tackle straight scotch, but he decided he'd rather die than break the spell of this moment.

Instead, he said: "Cheers." And drank.

The whisky went down his throat smoothly and soared straight to his head. Webley blinked and set down his glass in order to paw through the contents of his case. Miss Steele had recharged his glass before he could protest, but already Webley was thinking how perfect this all was. This would be one to tell to those scoffers who had advised him against wearing his Harrison Dane costume to the interview.

"Here's a copy of our latest issue . . ." Webley hesitated only slightly ". . . Miss Steele."

She took the magazine from him. The cover was a still of Stacey Steele karate-chopping a heavy in a pink foil spacesuit. "Why, that's me! How groovy!"

"Yes. From *The Mod Martian Caper*, of course. And naturally you'll be featured on our next cover, along with the interview and all." The *our* was an editorial plural, inasmuch as Webley was the entire staff of *Special Assignment*.

"Fab!" said Miss Steele, paging through the magazine in search of more photos of herself.

Webley risked another sip of Glenfiddich while he glanced around the room. However the house might appear from the outside, inside Miss Kent had lovingly maintained the *ambiance* of *The Agency*. The black lights and pop-art posters, the psychedelic color schemes, the beaded curtains, the oriental rugs. Indian music was playing, and strewn beside the vintage KLH stereo Webley recognized early albums from the Beatles and the Stones, from the Who and the Yardbirds, from Ultimate Spinach and Thirteenth Floor Elevator. He drew in a deep breath; yes, that was

incense burning on the mantelpiece—cinnamon, Miss Steele's favorite.

"That's the platinum bird you used in *The Malted Falcon Caper*, isn't it?"

Miss Steele touched the silver falcon statuette Webley had spotted. "The very bird. Not really made of platinum, sorry to report."

"And that must be the chastity belt they locked you into in *The Medieval Mistress Caper*." Again Webley pointed.

"One and the same. And not very comfy on a cold day, I assure you."

Webley decided he was about to sound gushy, so he finished his second whisky. It didn't help collect his thoughts, but it did restore a little calmness. He decided not to argue when Miss Steele refreshed their drinks. His fingers itched for his camera, but his hands were trembling too much.

"You seem to have kept quite a few props from *The Agency*," he suggested. "Isn't that the steel mask they put over your head in *The Silent Cyborg Caper*? Not very comfortable either, I should imagine."

"At times I did find my part a trifle confining," Miss Steele admitted. "All those captures by the villains."

"With Harrison Dane always there in the nick of time," Webley said, raising his glass to her. If Miss Steele was in no hurry to get through the interview, then neither was he.

"It wasn't all that much fun waiting to be rescued every time," Miss Steele confided. "Tied out in the hot sun across a railroad track, or stretched out on a rack in a moldy old dungeon."

"*The Uncivil Engineer Caper*," Webley remembered, "and *The Dungeon To Let Caper*."

"Or being strapped to a log in a sawmill."

"*The Silver Scream Caper*."

"I was brushing sawdust out of my hair for a week."

"And in *The Missing Mermaid Caper* they handcuffed you to an anchor and tossed you overboard."

"Yes, and I still have my rubber fishtail from that one."

"Here?"

"Certainly. I've held on to a museum's worth of costumes and props. Would you like to see the lot of it?"

"Would I ever!" Webley prayed he had brought enough film.

"Then I'll just give us a refill."

"I really think I've had enough just now," Webley begged.

"Why, Dane! I never knew you to say no."

"But one more to top things off," agreed Webley, unable to tarnish the image of Harrison Dane.

Miss Steele poured. "Most of it's kept downstairs."

"After all, Miss Steele, this is a special occasion." Webley drank.

He had a little difficulty with the stairs—he vaguely felt he was floating downward, and the Dane Cane kept tripping him—but he made it to the lower level without disgracing himself. Once there, all he could manage was a breathless: "Out of sight!"

Presumably the downstairs had been designed

as a sort of large family room, complete with fireplace, cozy chairs, and at one time probably a Ping-Pong table or such. Miss Kent had refurnished the room with enough props and sets to reshoot the entire series. Webley could only stand and stare. It was as if an entire file of *Agency* stills had been scattered about and transformed into three-dimensional reality.

There was the stake the natives had tied her to in *The No Atoll At All Caper*, and there was the man-eating plant that had menaced her in *The Venusian Vegetarian Caper*. In one corner stood—surely a replica—Stacey Steele's marvelous VW Beetle, sporting its wild psychedelic paint scheme and harboring a Porsche engine and drivetrain. There was the E.V.O.L. interrogation chair from *The Earth's End Caper*, and behind it one of the murderous robots from *The Angry Android Caper*. Harrison Dane's circular bed, complete with television, stereo, bar, machine guns, and countless other built-in devices, was crowded beside the very same torture rack from *The Dungeon To Let Caper*. Cataloging just the major pieces would be an hour's work, even for Webley, and a full inventory of all the memorabilia would take at least a couple days.

"Impressed, luv?"

Webley closed his mouth. "It's like the entire *Agency* series come to life in one house," he finally said.

"Do browse about all you like, luv."

Webley stumbled across the room, trying not to touch any of the sacred relics, scarcely able to concentrate upon any one object for longer than its moment of recognition. It was all too over-

powering an assault upon his sensory mechanisms.

"A toast to us, luv."

Webley didn't remember whether Miss Steele had brought along their glasses or poured fresh drinks from Harrison Dane's art nouveau bar, shoved against one wall next to the mind transfer machine from *The Wild, Wild Bunch Caper*. He gulped his drink without thinking and moments later regretted it.

"I think I'd better sit down for a minute," Webley apologized.

"Drugged drinks!" Miss Steele said brightly. "Just like in *The Earth's End Caper*. Quick, Dane! Sit down here!"

Webley collapsed onto the interrogation chair as directed—it was closest, and he was about to make a scene if he didn't recover his balance. Automatic cuffs instantly secured his arms, legs, and body to the chair.

"Only in *The Earth's End Caper*," said Miss Steele, "I was the one they drugged and fastened into this chair. There to be horribly tortured, unless Harrison Dane came to the rescue."

Webley turned his head as much as the neck restraints would permit. Miss Steele was laying out an assortment of scalpels and less obvious instruments, recognized by Webley as props from the episode.

"Groovy," he managed to say.

Miss Steele was assembling some sort of dental drill. "I was always the victim." She smiled at him with that delightful madcap smile. "I was always the one being captured, humiliated, helplessly awaiting your last-minute mock heroics."

"Well, not all the time," Webley protested, going along with the joke. He hoped he wasn't going to be ill.

"Are these clamps very tight?"

"Yes. Very. The prop seems in perfect working order. I think I really ought to stretch out for a while. Most embarrassing, but I'm afraid that drinking this early . . ."

"It wasn't enough that you seduced me and insisted on the abortion for the sake of our careers. It was your egotistical jealousy that finally destroyed me. You couldn't stand the fact that Stacey Steele was the *real* star of *The Agency*, and not Harrison Dane. So you pulled strings until you got me written out of the series. Then you did your best to ruin my career afterward."

"I don't feel very good," Webley muttered. "I think I might be getting sick."

"Hoping for that last-second rescue?" Stacey Steele selected a scalpel from the tray, and bent over him.

Webley had a breathtaking glimpse through the cut-out of *LOVE*, and then the blade touched his eye.

The police were already there by the time Elisabeth Kent got home. Neighbors' dogs were barking at something in the brush below her house; some kids went to see what they were after, and then the police were called.

"Did you know the man, Miss Kent?"

Miss Kent nodded her double chins. She was concentrating on stocking her liquor cabinet with the case of generic gin she'd gone out to buy with the advance check Webley had mailed her.

She'd planned on fortifying herself for the interview that might mean her comeback, but her aging Nova had refused to start in the parking lot, and the road call had eaten up the remainder of the check that she'd hoped would go toward overdue rent for the one-storey frame dump. She sat down heavily on the best chair of her sparsely furnished living room.

"He was some fan from back east," she told the investigating officer. "Wanted to interview me for some fan magazine. I've got his letters somewhere. I used to be in films a few years back—maybe you remember."

"We'll need to get in touch with next of kin," the detective said. "Already found the cabbie who let him out here while you were off getting towed." He was wondering if he had ever seen her in anything. "At a guess, he waited around on your deck, probably leaned against the railing—got a little dizzy, and went over. Might have had a heart attack or something."

Elisabeth Kent was looking at the empty Glenfiddich bottle and the two glasses.

"Damn you, Stacey Steele," she whispered. "Goddamn you."

MORE SINNED AGAINST

Theirs was a story so commonplace that it balanced uneasily between the maudlin and the sordid—a cliché dipped in filth.

Her real name was Katharina Oglethorpe and she changed that to Candace Thornton when she moved to Los Angeles, but she was known as Candi Thorne in the few films she ever made—the ones that troubled to list credits. She came from some little Baptist-church-and-textile-mill town in eastern North Carolina, although later she said she came from Charlotte. She always insisted that her occasional and transient friends call her Candace, and she signed her name Candace in a large, legible hand for those occasional and compulsive autographs. She had lofty aspirations and only minimal talent. One of her former agents perhaps stated her *mot juste*: a lady with a lot of guts, but too much heart. The police records gave her name as Candy Thorne-ton.

There had been money once in her family, and with that the staunch pride that comes of having

more money than the other thousand or so inhabitants of the town put together. Foreign textiles eventually closed the mill; unfortunate investments leached the money. Pride of place remained.

By the time that any of her past really mattered, Candace had graduated from an area church-supported junior college, where she was homecoming queen, and she'd won one or two regional beauty contests and was almost a runner-up in the Miss North Carolina pageant. Her figure was good, although more for a truck-stop waitress than suited to a model's requirements, and her acting talents were wholehearted, if marginal. Her parents believed she was safely enrolled at U.C.L.A., and they never quite forgave her when they eventually learned otherwise.

Their tuition checks kept Candace afloat as an aspiring young actress/model through a succession of broken promises, phony deals, and predatory agents. Somewhere along the way she sacrificed her cherished virginity a dozen times over, enough so that it no longer pained her, even as the next day dulled the pain of the promised break that never materialized. Her family might have taken back, if not welcomed, their prodigal daughter, had Candace not begged them for money for her first abortion. They refused, Candace got the money anyway, and her family had no more to do with her ever.

He called himself Richards Justin, and there was as much truth to that as to anything else he ever said. He met Candace when she was just on the brink of putting her life together, although he never blamed himself for her subsequent crash.

He always said that he was a man who learned from the mistakes of others, and had he said "profited" instead, he might have told the truth for once.

They met because they were sleeping with the same producer, both of them assured of a part in his next film. The producer failed to honor either bargain, and he failed to honor payment for a kilo of coke, after which a South American entrepreneur emptied a Browning Hi-Power into him. Candace and Richards Justin consoled one another over lost opportunity, and afterward he moved in with her.

Candace was sharing a duplex in Venice with two cats and a few thousand roaches. It was a cottage of rotting pink stucco that resembled a gingerbread house left out in the rain. Beside it ran a refuse-choked ditch that had once been a canal. The shack two doors down had been burned out that spring in a shootout between rival gangs of bikers. The neighborhood was scheduled for gentrification, but no one had decided yet whether this should entail restoration or razing. The rent was cheaper than an apartment, and against the house grew a massive clump of jade plant that Candace liked to pause before and admire.

At this time Candace was on an upswing and reasonably confident of landing the part of a major victim in a minor stalk-and-slash film. Her face and teeth had always been good; afternoons in the sun and judicious use of rinses on her mousy hair had transformed her into a passable replica of a Malibu blonde. She had that sort of ample figure that looks better with less clothing

and best with none at all, and she managed quite well in a few photo spreads in some of the raunchier skin magazines. She was not to be trusted with a speaking part, but some voice and drama coaching might have improved that difficulty in time.

Richards Justin—Rick to his friends—very studiously was a hunk, to use the expression of the moment. He stood six-foot-four and packed about two hundred and fifteen pounds of health-club-nurtured muscle over wide shoulders and lean hips. His belly was quite hard and flat, his thighs strong from jogging, and an even tan set off the generous dark growth of body hair. His black hair was neatly permed, and the heavy mustache added virility to features that stopped just short of being pretty. He seemed designed for posing in tight jeans, muscular arms folded across hairy chest, and he often posed just so. He claimed to have had extensive acting experience in New York before moving to Los Angeles, but somehow his credentials were never subjected to verification.

Candace was a type who took in stray animals, and she took in Richards Justin. She had survived two years on the fringes of Hollywood, and Rick was new to Los Angeles—still vulnerable in his search for the elusive Big Break. She was confident that she knew some friends who could help him get started, and she really did need a roommate to help with the rent—once he found work, of course. Rick loaded his suitcase and possessions into her aging Rabbit, with room to spare, and moved in with Candace. He insisted that he pay his share of expenses, and borrowed

four hundred bucks to buy some clothes—first appearances count everything in an interview.

They were great together in bed, and Candace was in love. She recognized the sensitive, lonely soul of the artist hidden beneath his macho exterior. They were both painfully earnest about their acting careers—talking long through the nights of films and actors, great directors and theories of drama. They agreed that one must never compromise art for commercial considerations, but that sometimes it might be necessary to make small compromises in order to achieve the Big Break.

The producer of the stalk-and-slash flick decided that Candace retained too much southern accent for a major role. Having just gone through her savings, Candace spent a vigorous all-night interview with the producer and salvaged a minor role. It wasn't strictly nonspeaking, as she got to scream quite a lot while the deranged killer spiked her to a barn door with a pitchfork. It was quite effective, and a retouched still of her big scene was used for the posters of *Camp Hell!* It was the highwater mark of her career.

Rick found the Big Break even more elusive than a tough, cynical, street-wise hunk like himself had envisioned. It discouraged the artist within him, just as it embarrassed his virile nature to have to live off Candace's earnings continually. Fortunately coke helped restore his confidence, and unfortunately coke was expensive. They both agreed, however, that coke was a necessary expense, career-wise. Coke was both inspiration and encouragement; besides, an actor

who didn't have a few grams to flash around was as plausible as an outlaw biker who didn't drink beer.

Candace knew how discouraging this all must be for Rick. In many ways she was so much wiser and tougher than Rick. Her concern over his difficulties distracted her from the disappointment of her own faltering career. Granted, Rick's talents were a bit raw—he was a gem in need of polishing. Courses and workshops were available, but these cost money, too. Candace worked her contacts and changed her agent. If she didn't mind doing a little T & A, her new agent felt sure he could get her a small part or two in some soft-R films. It was money.

Candace played the dumb southern blonde in *Jiggle High* and she played the dumb southern cheerleader in *Cheerleader Superbowl* and she played the dumb southern stewardess in *First Class Only* and she played the dumb southern nurse in *Sex Clinic* and she played the dumb southern hooker in *Hard Streets*, but always this was Candi Thorne who played these roles, and not Candace Thornton, and somehow this made the transition from soft-R to hard-R films a little easier to bear.

They had their first big quarrel when Candace balked over her part in *Malibu Hustlers*. She hadn't realized they were shooting it in both R- and X-rated versions. Prancing about in the buff and faking torrid love scenes was one thing, but Candace drew the line at actually screwing for the close-up cameras. Her agent swore he was through if she backed out of the contract. Rick yelled at her and slapped her around a little, then

broke into tears. He hadn't meant to lose control—it was just that he was *so* close to getting his break, and without money all they'd worked so hard together for, all they'd hoped and prayed for . . .

Candace forgave him, and blamed herself for being thoughtless and selfish. If she could ball off camera to land a role, she could give the same performance on camera. This once.

Candace never did find out what her agent did with her check from *Malibu Hustlers*, nor did the police ever manage to find her agent. The producer was sympathetic, but not legally responsible. He did, however, hate to see a sweet kid burned like that, and he offered her a lead role in *Hot 'n' Horny*. This one would be straight X—or XXX, as they liked to call them now—but a lot of talented girls had made the big time doing their stuff for the screen, and Candi Thorne just might be the next super-X superstar. He had the right connections, and if she played it right with him . . .

It wasn't the Big Break Candace had dreamed of, but it was money. And they *did* need money. She worried that this would damage her chances for a legitimate acting career, but Rick told her to stop being a selfish prude and to think of their future together. His break was coming soon, and then they'd never have to worry again about money. Besides, audiences were already watching her perform in *Malibu Hustlers*, so what did she have left to be shy about?

The problem with coke was that Rick needed a lot of it to keep him and his macho image going. The trouble with a lot of coke was that Rick

tended to get wired a little too tight, and then he needed downers to mellow out. Smack worked best, but the trouble with smack was that it was even more expensive. Still, tomorrow's male sex symbol couldn't go about dropping ludes and barbs like some junior high punker. Smack was status in this game—everybody did coke. Not to worry: Rick had been doing a little heroin ever since his New York days—no needle work, just some to toot. He could handle it.

Candace could not—either the smack or the expense. Rick was gaining a lot of influential contacts. He had to dress well, show up at the right parties. Sometimes they decided it would be better for his career if he went alone. They really needed a better place to live, now that they could afford it.

After making *Wet 'n' Willing* Candace managed to rent a small house off North Beverly Glen Boulevard—not much of an improvement over her duplex in Venice, but the address was a quantum leap in class. Her biggest regret was having to leave her cats: no pets allowed. Her producer had advanced her some money to cover immediate expenses, and she knew he'd be getting it back in pounds of flesh. There were parties for important friends, and Candace felt quite casual about performing on camera after some of the things she'd been asked to do on those nights. And that made it easier when she was asked to do them again on camera.

Candace couldn't have endured it all if it weren't for her selfless love for Rick, and for the coke and smack and pills and booze. Rick expressed concern over her increasing use of drugs,

especially when they were down to their last few lines. Candace economized by shooting more —less waste and a purer high than snorting.

She was so stoned on the set for *Voodoo Vixens* that she could barely go through the motions of the minimal plot. The director complained; her producer reminded her that retakes cost money, and privately noted that her looks were distinctly taking a shopworn plunge. When she threw up in her co-star's lap, he decided that Candi Thorne really wasn't star material.

Rick explained that he was more disappointed than angry with her over getting canned, but this was after he'd bloodied her lip. It wasn't so much that this financial setback stood to wreck his career just as the breaks were falling in place for him, as it was that her drug habit had left them owing a couple thou to the man, and how were they going to pay that?

Candace still had a few contacts to fall back on, and she was back before the cameras before the bruises had disappeared. These weren't the films that made the adult theater circuits. These were the fifteen-minute-or-so single-takes shot in motel rooms for the 8-mm. home projector/porno peep-show audiences. Her contacts were pleased to get a semi-name porno queen, however semi and however shopworn, even if the films seldom bothered to list credits or titles. It was easier to work with a pro than some drugged-out runaway or amateur hooker, who might ruin a take if the action got rough or she had a phobia about Dobermans.

It was quick work and quick bucks. But not enough bucks.

Rick was panic-stricken when two large black gentlemen stopped him outside a singles bar one night to discuss his credit and to share ideas as to the need to maintain intact kneecaps in this cruel world. They understood a young actor's difficulties in meeting financial obligations, but felt certain Rick could make a substantial payment within forty-eight hours.

Candace hit the streets. It was that or see Rick maimed. After the casting couch and exotic partners under floodlights, somehow it seemed so commonplace doing quickies in motel rooms and car seats. She missed the cameras. It all seemed so transient without any playback.

The money was there, and Rick kept his kneecaps. Between her work on the streets and grinding out a few 8-mm. films each month, Candace could about meet expenses. The problem was that she really needed the drugs to keep her going, and the more drugs she needed meant the more work to pay for them. Candace knew her looks were slipping, and she appreciated Rick's concern for her health. But for Rick the Big Break was coming soon. She no longer minded when he had other women over while she was on the streets, or when he stayed away for a day or two without calling her. She was selling her body for his career, and she must understand that sometimes it was necessary for Rick, too, to sleep around. In the beginning, some small compromises are to be expected.

A pimp beat her up one night. He didn't like freelance chippies taking johns from his girls on his turf. He would have just scared her, had she agreed to become one of his string, but she

needed all her earnings for Rick, and the truth was the pimp considered her just a bit too far gone to be worth his trouble. So he worked her over but didn't mess up her face too badly, and Candace was able to work again after only about a week.

She tried another neighborhood and got busted the second night out; paid her own bail, got busted again a week later. Rick got her out of jail—she was coming apart without the H, and he couldn't risk being implicated. He had his career to think about, and it was thoughtless of Candace to jeopardize his chances through her own sordid lifestyle.

He would have thrown her out, but Candace paid the rent. Of course, he still loved her. But she really ought to take better care of herself. She was letting herself go. Since her herpes scare they seldom made love, although Candace understood that Rick was often emotionally and physically drained after concentrating his energy on some important interview or audition.

They had lived together almost two years, and Candace was almost twenty-five, but she looked almost forty. After a client broke her nose and a few teeth in a moment of playfulness, she lost what little remained of her actress/model good looks. They got the best cosmetic repair she could afford, but after that neither the johns nor the sleaze producers paid her much attention. When she saw herself on the screen at fifth-rate porno houses, in the glimpses between ducking below the rows of shabby seats, she no longer recognized herself.

But Rick's career was progressing all the while,

and that was what made her sacrifice worthwhile. A part of Candace realized now that her dreams of Hollywood stardom had long since washed down the gutter, but at least Rick was almost on the verge of big things. He'd landed a number of modeling jobs and already had made some commercials for local tv. Some recent roles in what Rick termed "experimental theater" promised to draw the attention of talent scouts. Neither of them doubted that the Big Break was an imminent certainty. Candace kept herself going through her faith in Rick's love and her confidence that better times lay ahead. Once Rick's career took off, she'd quit the streets, get off the drugs. She'd look ten years younger if she could just rest and eat right for a few months, get a better repair on her nose. By then Rick would be in a position to help her resume her own acting career.

Candace was not too surprised when Rick came in one morning and shook her awake with the news that he'd lined up a new film for her. It was something about devil worshipers called *Satan's Sluts*—X-rated, of course, but the money would be good, and Candace hadn't appeared even in a peep-show gangbang in a couple months. The producer, Rick explained, remembered her in *Camp Hell!* and was willing to take a chance on giving her a big role.

Candace might have been more concerned about filming a scene with so small a crew and in a cellar made over into a creepy B & D dungeon, but her last films had been shot in cheap motel rooms with a home video camera. She didn't like being strapped to an inverted cross and hung

before a black-draped altar, but Rick was there—snorting coke with the half-dozen members of the cast and crew.

When the first few whiplashes cut into her flesh, it took Candace's drugged consciousness several moments to be aware of the pain, and to understand the sort of film for which Rick had sold her. By the time they had heated the branding iron and brought in the black goat, Candace was giving the performance of her life.

She passed out eventually, awoke another day in their bed, vaguely surprised to be alive. It was a measure of Rick's control over Candace that they hadn't killed her. No one was going to pay much attention to anything Candace might say—a burned-out porno star and drug addict with an arrest record for prostitution. Rick had toyed with selling her for a snuff film, but his contacts there preferred anonymous runaways and wetbacks, and the backers of *Satan's Sluts* had paid extra to get a name actress, however faded, to add a little class to the production—especially a star who couldn't cause problems afterward.

Rick stayed with her just long enough to feel sure she wouldn't die from her torture, and to pack as many of his possessions as he considered worth keeping. Rick had been moving up in the world on Candace's earnings—meeting the right people, making the right connections. The money from *Satan's Sluts* had paid off his debts with enough left over for a quarter-ounce of some totally awesome rock, which had so impressed his friends at a party that a rising tv director wanted Rick to move in with her while

they discussed a part for him in a much talked-about new miniseries.

The pain when he left her was the worst of all. Rick had counted on this, and he left her with a gram of barely cut heroin, deciding to let nature take its course.

Candace had paid for it with her body and her soul, but at last this genuinely was the Big Break. The prime-time soaper miniseries, *Destiny's Fortune*, ran for five nights and topped the ratings each night. Rick's role as the tough steelworker who romanced the millowner's daughter in parts four and five, while not a major part, attracted considerable attention and benefited from the huge success of the series itself. Talent scouts saw a new hunk in Richards Justin, most talked-about young star from the all-time hit, *Destiny's Fortune*.

Rick's new agent knew how to hitch his Mercedes to a rising star. Richards Justin made the cover of *TV Guide* and *People*, the centerfold of *Playgirl*, and then the posters. Within a month it was evident from the response to *Destiny's Fortune* that Richards Justin was a hot property. It was only a matter of casting him for the right series. Network geniuses juggled together all the ingredients of recent hits and projected a winner for the new season—*Colt Savage*, *Soldier of Fortune*.

They ran the pilot as a two-hour special against a major soaper and a tv movie about teenage prostitutes, and *Colt Savage* blew the other two networks away in that night's ratings. *Colt Savage* was The New Hit, blasting to the top

of the Nielsens on its first regular night. The show borrowed from everything that had already been proven to work—"an homage to the great adventure classics of the thirties" was how its producers liked to describe it.

Colt Savage, as portrayed by Richards Justin, was a tough, cynical, broad-shouldered American adventurer who kept busy dashing about the cities and exotic places of the 1930s—finding lost treasures, battling spies and sinister cults, rescuing plucky young ladies from all manner of dire fates. Colt Savage was the protégé of a brilliant scientist who wished to devote his vast fortune and secret inventions to fighting Evil. He flew an autogiro and drove a streamlined speedster—both decked out with fantastic weapons and gimmickry rather in advance of the technology of the period. He had a number of exotic assistants and, inevitably, persistent enemies—villains who somehow managed to escape the explosion of their headquarters in time to pop up again two episodes later.

Colt Savage was pure B-movie corn. In a typical episode, Colt would meet a beautiful girl who would ask him for help, then be kidnapped. Following that there would be fights, car chases, air battles, captures and escapes, derring-do in exotic locales, rescues and romance—enough to fill an hour show. The public loved it. Richards Justin was a new hero for today's audiences—the new Bogart, a John Wayne for the eighties. The network promoted *Colt Savage* with every excess at its command. The merchandising rights alone were bringing in tens of millions.

Rick dumped the director who had given him

his start in *Destiny's Fortune* long before he moved into several million bucks worth of Beverly Hills real estate. The tabloids followed his numerous love affairs with compulsive and imaginative interest.

Candace blamed it all on the drugs. She couldn't bring herself to believe that Rick had never loved her, that he had simply used her until she had no more to give. Her mind refused to accept that. It was she who had let Rick down, let drugs poison his life and destroy hers. Drugs had ruined her acting career, had driven her onto the streets to pay for their habit. They could have made it, if she hadn't ruined everything for them.

So she quit, cold turkey. Broken in body and spirit, the miseries of withdrawal made little difference to her pain. She lived ten years of hell over the next few days, lying in an agonized delirium that barely distinguished consciousness from unconsciousness. Sometimes she managed to crawl to the bathroom or to the refrigerator, mostly she just curled herself into a fetal pose of pain and shivered beneath the sweaty sheets and bleeding sores. In her nightmares she drifted from lying in Rick's embrace to writhing in torture on Satan's altar, and the torment of either delirium was the same to her.

As soon as she was strong enough to face it, Candace cut the heroin Rick had left her to make five grams and sold it to one of her friends who liked to snort it and wouldn't mind the cut. It gave her enough money to cover bills until Candace was well enough to go back on the streets.

She located the pimp who had once beat her up; he didn't recognize her, and when Candace asked to work for him, he laughed her out of the bar.

After that she drifted around Los Angeles for a month or two, turning tricks whenever she could. She was no longer competitive, even without the scars, but she managed to scrape by, somehow making rent for the place on North Beverly Glen. It held her memories of Rick, and if she let that go, she would have lost even that shell of their love. She even refused to throw out any of his discarded clothing and possessions; his toothbrush and an old razor still lay by the sink.

The last time the cops busted her, Candace had herpes, a penicillin-resistant clap, and no way of posting bail. Jail meant losing her house and its memories of Rick, and there would be nothing left for her after that. Rick could help her now, but she couldn't manage to reach him. An old mutual friend finally did, but when he came to visit Candace he couldn't bear to give her Rick's message, and so he paid her bail himself and told her the money came from Rick, who didn't want to risk getting his name involved.

She had to have a legitimate job. The friend had a friend who owned interest in a plastic novelties plant, and they got Candace a factory job there. By now she had very little left of herself to sell in the streets, but at least she was off the drugs. Somewhat to the surprise of all concerned, Candace settled down on the line and turned out to be a good worker. Her job paid the bills, and at night she went home and read about Richards Justin in the papers and magazines,

played back videocassettes of his nights when he wasn't on live.

The cruelest thing was that Candace still nurtured the hope that she could win Rick back, once she got her own act together. Regular meals, decent hours, medication, and time healed some wounds. The face that looked back at her from mirrors no longer resembled a starved plague victim. Some of the men at the plant were beginning to stare after her, and a couple of times she'd been asked to go out. She might have got over Richards Justin in time, but probably not.

The friend of a friend pulled some strings and called in some favors, and so the plant where Candace worked secured the merchandising rights to the Colt Savage, Soldier of Fortune Action-Pak. This consisted of a plastic Colt Savage doll, complete with weapons and action costumes, along with models of Black Blaze, his supersonic autogiro, and Red Lightning, the supercar. The merchandising package also included dolls of his mentor and regular assistants, as well as several notable villains and their sinister weaponry. The plant geared into maximum production to handle the anticipated rush of orders for the Christmas market.

Candace found herself sitting at the assembly line, watching thousands of plastic replicas of Richards Justin roll past her.

She just had to see Rick, but the guards at the gate had instructions not to admit her. He wouldn't even talk to her over the phone or answer her letters. The way he must remember her, Candace couldn't really blame him. It would be different now.

His birthday was coming up, and she knew he would be having a party. She wrote him several times, sent messages via old contacts, begging Rick to let her come. When the printed invitation finally came, she'd already bought him a present. Candace knew that her confidence had not been a mistake, and she took a day off work to get ready for their evening together.

The party had been going strong for some time when Candace arrived, and Rick was flying high on coke and champagne. He hugged her around the shoulders but didn't kiss her, and half carried her over to where many of the guests were crowded around a projection television.

Ladies and gentlemen, here she is—our leading lady, the versatile Miss Candi Thorne.

All eyes flicked from the screen to Candace, long enough for recognition. Then the cheers and applause burst out across the room. Rick had been amusing his guests with some of her films. Just now they were watching the one with the donkey.

Candace didn't really remember how she managed to escape and find her way home.

She decided not to leave a note, and she was prying the blade out of Rick's old razor when the idea began to form. The razor was crudded with dried lather and bits of Rick's whiskers, and she wanted to get it clean before she used it on her wrists. A scene from another of her films, *Voodoo Vixens*, arose through the confusion of her thoughts. She set the razor aside carefully.

Candace made herself a cup of coffee and let the idea build in her head. She was dry-eyed now and quite calm—the hysterical energy that had

driven her to suicide now directed her disordered thoughts toward another course of action.

She still had all of her mementos of Rick, and throughout the night she went over them, one by one, coolly and meticulously. She scraped all the bits of beard and skin from his razor, collected hair and dandruff from his brush and comb, pared away his toothbrush bristles for the minute residues of blood and plaque. She found a discarded handkerchief, stained from a coke-induced nosebleed, and from the mattress liner came residues of their former lovemaking. Old clothes yielded bits of hair, stains of body oils and perspiration. Candace searched the house relentlessly, finding fragments of his nails, his hair, anything at all that retained physical residues of Rick's person.

The next day Candace called in sick. She spent the day browsing through Los Angeles's numerous occult bookshops, made a few purchases, and called up one or two of the contacts she'd made filming *Voodoo Vixens*. It all seemed straightforward enough. Even those who rationalized it all admitted that it was a matter of belief. And children have the purest belief in magic.

Candace ground up all her bits and scrapings of Richards Justin. It came to quite a pile and reminded her of a bag of Mexican heroin.

Candace returned to work and waited for her chance. When no one was watching, she dumped her powdered residue into the plastic muck destined to become Colt Savage dolls. Then she said a prayer—of sorts.

Beneath the Christmas tree, Joshua plays with

his new Colt Savage doll. *Pow!* An electron cannon knocks Colt out of the sky, crashes him to the rocks below!

Jason pits Colt Savage against his model dinosaurs. *Yahhh!* The dinosaur stomps him!

David is racing Colt Savage in his car, Red Lightning. *Kerblam!* Colt drives off the cliff at a hundred miles an hour!

Billy is still too young to play with his Colt Savage doll, but he likes to chew on it.

Mark decides to see if Colt Savage and Black Blaze can withstand the attack of his atomic bomb firecrackers.

Jessica is mad at her brother. She sees his Colt Savage doll and stomps on it as hard as she can.

Tyrone is bawling. He pulled the arms off his Colt Savage doll, and he can't make them go back on.

Richards Justin collapsed on set, and only heavy sedation finally stilled his screams. It quickly became apparent that his seizures were permanent, and he remains under sedation in a psychiatric institution. Doctors have attributed his psychotic break to long-term drug abuse.

Nothing excites the public more than a fallen hero. *Richards Justin: The Untold Story*, by Candace Thornton, rose quickly on the best-seller charts. Reportedly she was recently paid well over a million for the film rights to her book.

SHRAPNEL

It looked like the wreckage of a hundred stained-glass windows, strewn across a desolate tangle of wasteland in a schizophrenic kaleidoscope.

The hood of the '78 Marquis buckled in protest as Harmon shifted his not inconsiderable weight. He smeared sweat from his face with a sweatier arm and squinted against the piercing sunlight. Even from his vantage point atop the rusting Mercury, it was impossible to achieve any sense of direction amidst these thousands of wrecked cars.

At some point this had been farmland, although such was difficult to envision now. Whatever crops had once grown here had long ago leached the red clay of scant nutrients. Fallow acres had lapsed into wild pasture where enough soil remained; elsewhere erosion scourged the slopes with red gashes, and a scrub-growth of pine, sumac, honeysuckle, and briar grudgingly reclaimed the dead land. Grey knobs of limestone outcroppings could almost be mistaken for the shapeless hulls of someone's tragedy.

Harmon wished for a beer—a tall, dripping can of cold, cold beer. Six of them. He promised

himself a stop at the first convenience store on the highway, once he finished his business here. But first he needed a fender.

"Left front fender. 1970 or '71 Montego."

"I think it will interchange with a '70-'71 Torino," Harmon had offered—too tired to explain that the fender was actually needed for a 1970 Cyclone Spoiler, but that this was Mercury's muscle-car version of the Montego, which shared sheet metal with Ford's Torino, and anyway the woman who ran Pearson's Auto Yard probably knew all that sort of stuff already.

She had just a dusting of freckles and wheat-colored hair that would have looked striking in almost anything other than the regulation dyke haircut she had chosen. The name embroidered across the pocket of her freshly washed but forever grease-stained workshirt read *Shiloh*. Shiloh had just finished off a pair of redneck truckers in quest of certain axle parts incomprehensible to Harmon, and she was more than capable of dealing with Harmon.

"Most of the older Fords are off along the gully along the woods there," Shiloh had pointed. "If they haven't been hauled to the crusher. There's a row of fenders and quarter panels just beyond that. You wait a minute and Dillon or somebody'll be here to look for you."

The thundering air conditioner in the window of the cramped office might have been able to hold the room temperature at 80 if the door weren't constantly being opened. Harmon felt dizzy, and he further felt that fresh air, however searing, was a better bet than waiting on an office stool for Dillon or somebody.

"You watch out for the dogs," Shiloh had warned him. "If one of them comes after you, you just jump on top of something where they can't get at you until Dillon or somebody comes along."

Hardly comforting, but Harmon knew his way around junkyards. This was an acquaintance that had begun when Harmon had decided to keep the 1965 Mustang of his college days in running order. It had become part hobby, part rebellion against the look-alike econoboxes or the Volvos and BMWs that his fellow young suburban professionals drove each day from their energy-efficient homes in Brookwood or Brookcrest or Crestwood or wherever. Harmon happened to be an up-and-coming lawyer in his own right, thank you, and just now his pet project was restoring a vintage muscle car whose string of former owners had not been overly concerned with trees, ditches, and other obstacles, moving or stationary.

It was a better way to spend Saturday mornings than on the tennis court or golf course. Besides, and Harmon wiped his face again, it was good exercise. Harmon, over the past four years and at his wife's insistence, had enrolled in three different exercise programs and had managed to attend a total of two classes altogether. He kept telling himself to get in shape, once his schedule permitted.

Just now Harmon wished he could find Dillon or somebody. The day was too hot, the sun too unrelenting, for a comfortable stroll through this labyrinth of crumpled steel and shattered glass.

Harmon rocked back and forth on the hood of the Marquis, squinting against the glare.

"Yoo hoo! Mister Dillon! There's trouble brewin' on Front Street!"

Christ, enough of that! He was getting light-headed. That late-night pizza had been a mistake.

Harmon thought he saw movement farther down along the ravine. He started to call out in earnest, but decided that the general clatter and crash of the junkyard would smother his words. There was the intermittent mutter of the machine shop, and somewhere in the distance a tractor or towtruck, innocent of muffler, was dragging stripped hulks to their doom in the jaws of the yard's crusher. Grunting, Harmon climbed down from the wreck and plodded toward where he thought he'd glimpsed someone.

The heat seemed worse as he trudged along the rutted pathway. The rows of twisted sheet metal effectively stifled whatever breeze there might have been, at the same time acting as grotesque radiators of the sun's absorbed heat. Harmon wished he had worn a hat. He had always heard that a hat was a good thing to wear when out in the sun. He touched the spot on the top of his head where his sandy hair was inclining to thin. Unpleasant images of frying eggs came to him.

It *smelled* hot. The acres of rusted metal smelled like an unclean oven. There was the bitter smell of roasting vinyl, underscored by the musty stench of mildewed upholstery basted in stagnant rainwater. The palpable smell of hot metal vied with the noxious fumes of gasoline

and oil and grease—the dried blood of uncounted steel corpses. Underlying it all was a sickly sweet odor that Harmon didn't like to think about, because it reminded him of his small-town childhood and walking home on summer days through the alley behind the butcher shop. He supposed they hosed these wrecks down or something, before putting them on the yard, but nonetheless . . .

Harmon's gaze caught upon the sagging spiderweb of a windshield above a crumpled steering wheel. He shivered. Strange, to shiver when it was so hot. He seemed to feel his intestines wriggle like a nest of cold eels.

Harmon supposed he had better sit down for a moment.

He did.

"Morris?"

Harmon blinked. He must have dropped off.

"Hey, Morris—you OK?"

Where was he?

"Morris?" The voice was concerned and a hand was gently shaking him.

Harmon blinked again. He was sitting on a ruined front seat in the shade of an eviscerated Falcon van. He jerked upright with a guilty start, like a junior exec caught snoring during a senior staff meeting. Someone was standing over him, someone who knew his name.

"Morris?"

The voice became a face, and the face a person. Arnie Cranshaw. A client. Former client. Harmon decided to stop blinking and stand up.

On second try, he made it to his feet.

Cranshaw stared reproachfully. "Jesus! I thought maybe you were dead."

"A little too much sun," Harmon explained. "Thought I'd better sit down in the shade for a minute or two. I'm OK. Just dozed off is all."

"You sure?" Cranshaw wasn't so certain. "Maybe you ought to sit back down."

Harmon shook his head, feeling like a fool. "I'll be fine once I get out of this heat. Christ, I'd kill for a cold beer right now!"

Not a well chosen remark, Harmon suddenly reflected. Cranshaw had been his client not quite a year ago in a nasty sort of thing: head-on collision that had left a teenaged girl dead and her date hopelessly crippled. Cranshaw, the other driver involved, had been quite drunk at the time and escaped injury; he also escaped punishment, thanks to Harmon's legal talents. The other car *had* crossed the yellow line—no matter that its driver swore that he had lost control in trying to avoid Cranshaw, who had been swerving all over the road—and a technicality resulted in the DUI charges being thrown out as well. It was a victory that raised Harmon's stock in the estimation of his colleagues, but it was not a victory of which Harmon was overly proud.

"Anyway, Morris, what are you doing here?" Cranshaw asked. He was ten years younger than Harmon, had a jogger's legs, and worked out at his health club twice a week. Nonetheless, the prospect of lugging a semiconscious lawyer out of this metal wasteland was not to Cranshaw's liking.

"Looking for a fender for my car."

"Fender-bender?" Cranshaw was ready to show sympathy.

"Someone else's, and in days gone by. I'm trying to restore an old muscle car I bought back in the spring. Only way to find parts is to dig through junkyards. How about you?"

"Need a fender for the BMW."

Harmon declined to press for details, which spared Cranshaw any need to lie about his recent hit-and-run encounter. He knew a country body shop that would make repairs without asking questions, if he located some of the parts. A chop shop wasn't likely to respond to requests for information about cars with bloodstained fenders and such grisly trivia. They'd done business before.

Cranshaw felt quite remorseful over such incidents, but he certainly wasn't one to permit his life to be ruined over some momentary lapse.

"Do you know where we are?" asked Harmon. He wasn't feeling at all well, and just now he was thinking only of getting back into his little Japanese pickup and turning the air conditioner up to stun.

"Well. Pearson's Auto Yard, of course." Cranshaw eyed him suspiciously.

"No. I mean, do you know how to get out of here?"

"Why, back the way we came." Cranshaw decided the man was maybe drunk. "Just back-track is all."

Cranshaw followed Harmon's bewildered gaze, then said less confidently: "I see what you mean. Sort of like one of those maze things, isn't it. They ought to give you a set of directions or

something—like, ‘Turn left at the ’57 Chevy and keep straight on till you pass the burned-out VW bug.’”

“I was looking for one of the workers,” Harmon explained.

“So am I,” Cranshaw said. “Guy named Milton or something. He’ll know where to find our fenders, if they got any. Sort of like a Chinese librarian, these guys got to be.”

He walked on ahead, tanned legs pumping assertively beneath jogging shorts. Harmon felt encouraged and fell in behind him. “I thought I saw somebody working on down the ravine a ways,” he suggested to Cranshaw’s back.

They seemed to be getting closer to the crusher, to judge by the sound. At intervals someone’s discarded dream machine gave up its last vestiges of identity in great screams of rending, crumpling steel. Harmon winced each time he heard those death-cries. The last remaining left front fender for a ’70 Cyclone might be passing into recycled oblivion even as he marched to its rescue.

“I don’t think this is where I want to be going,” Cranshaw said, pausing to look around. “These are pretty much stripped and ready for the crusher. And they’re mostly Ford makes.”

“Yes. Well, that’s what I’m trying to find.” Harmon brightened. “Do you see a ’70 or ’71 Montego or Torino in any of these?”

“Christ, Morris! I wouldn’t know one of those from a Model T. I need to find where they keep their late-model imports. You going to be all right if I go on and leave you here to poke around?”

"Sure," Harmon told him. The heat was worse, if anything, but he was damned if he'd ask Cranshaw to nursemaid him.

Cranshaw was shading his eyes with his hand. "Hey, you were right. There *is* somebody working down there. I'm going to ask directions."

"Wait up," Harmon protested. *He'd* seen the workman first.

Cranshaw was walking briskly toward an intersection in the rows of twisted hulks. "Hey, you!" Harmon heard him call above the din of the crusher. "Hey, Milton!"

Cranshaw turned the corner and disappeared from view for a moment. Harmon made his legs plod faster, and he almost collided with Cranshaw when he came around the corner of stacked cars.

Cranshaw was standing in the middle of the rutted pathway, staring at the mangled remains of a Pinto station wagon. His face looked unhealthy beneath its tan.

"Shit, Morris! That's the car that I . . ."

"Don't be ridiculous, Arnie. All burned-out wrecks look alike."

"No. It's the same one. See that porthole window in back. They didn't make very many of that model. Shit!"

Harmon had studied photos of the wreck in preparing his defense. "Well, so what if it is the car. It had to end up in a junkyard somewhere. Anyway, I don't think this is the same car."

"Shit!" Cranshaw repeated, starting to back away.

"Hey, wait!" Harmon insisted.

A workman had materialized from the rusting

labyrinth. His greasy commonplaceness was initially reassuring. He wore faded work clothes, filthy with unguessable stains, and a billed cap too dirty for its insignia patch to be deciphered. He was tall and thin, and his face and hands were so smeared and stained that Harmon wasn't at first certain as to his race. The workman carried a battered tool box in one hand, while in the other he dragged a shapeless bag of filthy canvas. The eyes that stared back at Harmon were curiously intent above an expressionless face.

"Are you Dillon?" Harmon hoped they weren't trespassing. He could hear a dog barking furiously not far away.

The workman looked past Harmon and fixed his eyes on Cranshaw. His examination of the other man seemed frankly rude.

"Are you Milton?" Cranshaw demanded. The workman's name across his breast pocket was obscured by grease and dirt. "Where do you keep your late-model imports?"

The workman set down his tool box and dug a limp notebook from a greasy shirt pocket. Licking his fingers, he paged through it in silence. After a moment, he found the desired entry. His eyes flicked from the page to Cranshaw and back again.

"Yep," he concluded, speaking for the first time, and he made a checkmark with a well-chewed pencil stub. Returning notebook and pencil to shirt pocket, the workman knelt down and began to unlatch his tool box.

Harmon wanted to say something, but his mouth was too dry to speak, and he knew he was very much afraid, and he wished with all his

heart that his legs were not rooted to the ground.

Ahead of him, Cranshaw appeared to be similarly incapable of movement, although from the expression on his face he clearly seemed to wish he were any place else but here.

The tool chest was open now, and the workman expertly made his selection from within. The tool chest appeared to contain mainly an assortment of knives and scalpels, all very dirty and showing evidence of considerable use. If the large knife that the workman had selected was a fair sample, their blades were all very sharp and serviceable.

The canvas bag had fallen open, enough so that Harmon could get a glimpse of its contents. A glimpse was enough. The arm seemed to be a woman's, but there was no way of telling if the heart with its dangling assortment of vessels had come from the same body.

Curiously, once Harmon recognized that many of the stains were blood, it seemed quite evident that much of the dirt was not grease, but soot.

The sound of an approaching motor was only a moment's cause for hope. A decrepit Cadillac hearse wallowed down the rutted trail toward them, as the workman tested the edge of his knife. The hearse, converted into a work truck, was rusted out and so battered that only its vintage tailfins gave it identity. Red dust would have completely masked the chipped black paint, if there hadn't been an overlay of soot as well. The loud exhaust belched blue smoke that smelled less of oil than of sulfur.

Another grimy workman was at the wheel.

Except for the greasy straw cowboy hat, he might have been a double for the other workman. The doors were off the hearse, so it was easy to see what was piled inside.

The hearse rolled to a stop, and the driver stuck out his head.

"Another pick-up?"

"Yeah. Better get out and give me a hand here. They want both right and left leg assemblies, and then we need to strip the face. You got a three-inch flaying knife in there? I left mine somewhere."

Then they lifted Cranshaw, grunting a little at the effort, and laid him out across the hood.

"Anything we need off the other?" the driver wondered.

"I don't know. I'll check my list."

It was very, very hot, and Harmon heard nothing more.

Someone was tugging at his head, and Harmon started to scream. He choked on a mouthful of cold R.C. and sputtered foam on the chest of the man who was holding the can to his lips. Harmon's eyes popped open, and he started to scream again when he saw the greasy work clothes. But this black face was naturally so, the workman's eyes showed kindly concern, and the name on his pocket plainly read *Dillon*.

"Just sip on this and take it easy, mister," Dillon said reassuringly. "You had a touch of the sun, but you're going to be just fine now."

Harmon stared about him. He was back in the office, and Shiloh was speaking with considerable agitation into the phone. Several other peo-

ple stood about, offering conflicting suggestions for treating heat stroke or sunstroke or both.

"Found you passed out on the road out there in the yard," Dillon told him. "Carried you back inside here where we got the air conditioner running."

Harmon became aware of the stuttering howl of an approaching siren. "I won't need an ambulance," he protested. "I just had a dizzy spell is all."

"That ambulance ain't coming for you," Dillon explained. "We had a bad accident at the crusher. Some customer got himself caught."

Shiloh slammed down the phone. "There'll be hell to pay!" she snapped.

"There always is," Harmon agreed.

THE LAST WOLF

The last writer sat alone in his study.

There was a knock at his door.

But it was only his agent. A tired, weathered old man like himself. It seemed not long ago that he had thought the man quite young.

"I phoned you I was coming," explained his agent, as if to apologize for the writer's surprised greeting.

Of course . . . he had forgotten. He concealed the vague annoyance he felt at being interrupted in his work.

Nervously the agent entered his study. He gripped his attaché case firmly before him, thrusting it into the room as if it were a shield against the perilously stacked shelves and shelves of musty books. Clearing a drift of worn volumes from the cracked leather couch, he seated himself amidst a puff of dust from the ancient cushions.

The writer returned to the chair at his desk, swiveling to face his guest. His gnarled fingers gripped the chair arms; his black eyes, bright beneath a craggy brow, bored searchingly into the agent's face. He was proud and wary as an aging wolf. Time had weathered his body and

frosted his hair. No one had drawn his fangs.

The agent shifted against the deep cushions and erased the dusty film on his attaché case. His palms left sweat smears on the vinyl. He cleared his throat, subconsciously striving to clear his thoughts from the writer's spell. It would be easier if he could see him just as another client, as nothing more than a worn-out old man. Just another tired old man, as he himself had become.

"I haven't had any success with your manuscripts," he said softly. "No luck at all."

There was pain in his eyes, but the writer nodded stiffly. "No, it was obvious from your manner that you hadn't been successful this time." He added: "This time either."

"Your last seven novels," the agent counted. "Nothing."

"They were good books," the writer murmured, like a parent recalling a lost child. "Not great books, for all my efforts, but they were good. Someone would have enjoyed reading them."

His eyes fell upon the freshly typed pages stacked on his desk, the newest page just curling from his ancient mechanical typewriter. "This one will be better," he stated.

"That's not the problem," his agent wearily told him. He had told him before. "No one's saying that you haven't written well—it's just . . . Who's going to print them?"

"There are still one or two publishers left, I believe."

"Well, yes. But they don't publish books like this anymore."

"What do they publish then?" The writer's voice was bitter.

"Magazines, mostly—like these." The agent hurriedly drew a pair of flimsy periodicals from his case.

The writer accepted them with a wry smile and thumbed through the pages of bright photographs. He snorted. "Pretty pictures, advertisements mostly, and a few paragraphs of captions. Like the newspapers. Not even real paper anymore."

He gestured toward the shelves of age-yellowed spines. "Those are magazines. *Saturday Review*. *Saturday Evening Post*. *Playboy*. *Kenyon Review*. *Weird Tales*. *Argosy*. And the others that have passed. Do you remember them? They contained stories, essays, articles, criticism. A lot of garbage, and a lot of things worthwhile. They contained thoughts."

"Still, there's some writing in the few periodicals that we have left," the agent pointed out. "You could do that sort of thing."

"That sort of thing? That's not writing! Since the learned journals all went to computerized tapes, the only excuse for a periodical that's left are these mindless picture brochures the ad companies publish. Damned if I'll write copy for Madison Avenue!

"But what are you trying to get to?" he scowled.

The plastic pages of smiling young consumers fluttered back into the attaché case. "I'm trying to say it's impossible to sell your books. Any books. No one publishes them. No one reads this

sort of thing anymore.”

“What do they read instead?”

The agent waved his hands in a vague gesture. “Well, there’s these magazines. One or two newspapers are still around.”

“They’re just transcripts of the television news,” the writer scoffed. “Pieced together by faceless technicians, slanted and censored to make it acceptable, and then gravely presented by some television father image. What about books?”

“Well, there are a few houses that still print the old classics—for school kids and people who still go to libraries. But all that’s been made into movies, put on television—available on cassettes to view whenever you like. Not much reason to read those—not when everybody’s already seen it on tv.”

The writer made a disgusted noise.

“Well, damn it, man!” the agent blurted in exasperation. “Marshall McLuhan spoke for your generation. You must have understood what was coming.”

“He didn’t speak for my generation,” the writer growled. “What about those last three novels that you did sell? Somebody must have read those.”

“Well, maybe not,” explained the other delicately. “It was pure luck I found a publisher for them anyway. Two of them the publisher used just as a vehicle for Berryhill to illustrate—he has quite a following, you know. Collectors bought them for his artwork—but maybe some read the books. And the last one I sold . . . Well,

that was to a publisher who wanted it for the nostalgia market. Maybe somebody read it while that fad lasted."

Beneath his white mustache, the writer's lips clamped tightly over words that would be ill-bred to use to a guest.

"Anyway, both publishers are defunct now," his agent went on. "Printing costs are just too high. For the price of half a dozen books, you can buy a tv. Books just cost too much, take too much time, for what you can get out of them."

"So where does that leave me?"

There was genuine sympathy, if not understanding, in the agent's voice. He had known his client for a long while. "There just doesn't seem to be any way I can sell your manuscripts. I'm sorry—truly sorry. Feel free to try another agent, if you want. I honestly don't know one to recommend, and I honestly doubt that he'll have any better success.

"There just isn't any market for books in today's world. You're like a minstrel when all the castles have fallen, or a silent film star after the talkies took over. You've got to change, that's all."

More than ever the writer seemed a wolf at bay. The last wolf. They were all gone too. Just the broken-spirited creatures born in cages to amuse the gawking, mindless world on the other side of the bars.

"But I do have some other prospects for you," the agent announced, trying to muster a bright smile.

"Prospects?" The writer's shaggy brows rose dubiously.

"Sure. Books may have outlived their day, but today's writers still have plenty to keep them busy. I think a few of your old crowd may even still be around, writing for television and the movies."

The writer's face was dangerous.

"I've talked with the producers of two new shows—one of them even remembered that best-seller you had years back. They both said they'd take a close look at anything you have to show. Quite a break, considering you've never written a script before. Ought to be right in your line though—both shows are set back in your salad days.

"One's a sitcom about a screwball gang of American soldiers in a POW camp back in the Indo-China wars. Dorina Vallecia plays the commandant's daughter, and she's a hot property right now. The other's a sitcom about two hapless beatnik drug pushers back in the Love Generation days. This one looks like a sure hit for next season. It's got Garry Simson as the blundering redneck chief of police. He's a good audience draw, and they've got a new black girl, Livia Stone, to play the bomb-throwing activist girl friend."

"No," said the writer in a tight voice.

"Now wait a minute," protested the agent. "There's good money in this—especially if the show hits it off. And it wasn't easy talking to these guys, let me tell you!"

"No. It isn't the money."

"Then what is it, for Christ's sake! I'm telling you, there's a bunch of old-time writers who've made it big in television."

"No."

"Well, there's an outside chance I can get you on the script team for a new daytime gothic soaper. You've always had a fondness for that creepy stuff."

"Yes. I always have had. No."

The agent grimaced unhappily. "I don't know what I can do for you. I really don't. I tell you there's no market for your stuff, and you tell me you won't write for the markets that are there."

"Maybe something will come up."

"I tell you, it's hopeless."

"Then there's nothing more to say."

The agent fidgeted with the fastenings of his attaché case. "We've been friends a long time, you know. Damn it, why won't you at least try a few scripts? I'm not wanting to pry, but the money must look good to you. I mean, it's been a long dry spell since your last sale."

"I won't say I can't use the money. But I'm a writer, not a hired flunky who hacks out formula scripts according to the latest idiot fads of a tasteless media."

"Well, at least the new social security guarantees an income for everyone these days."

The writer's lined face drew cold and white. "I've never bothered to apply for the government's dole. Turning my personal life over to the computers for a share of another man's wages seems to me a rather dismal bargain."

"Oh." The agent felt embarrassed. "Well, I suppose you could always sell some of these books—if things got tight, I mean. Some of these editions ought to be worth plenty to a rare book collector, wouldn't they?"

"Good night," said the writer.

Like a friend who has just discharged his deathbed obligations, the agent rose to his feet and shook hands with the writer. "You really ought to keep up with today's trends, you know. Like television—watch some of the new shows, why don't you? It's not so bad. Maybe you'll change your mind, and give me a call?"

"I don't think so."

"You even got a television in this house? Come to think, I don't remember seeing a screen anywhere. Does that antique really work?" He pointed to an ancient fishbowl Stromberg-Carlson, crushed in a corner, its mahogany console stacked with crumbling comic books.

"Of course not," said the writer, as he ushered him to the door. "That's why I keep it here."

The last writer sat alone in his study.

There was a knock at his door.

His stiff joints complained audibly as he left his desk, and the cocked revolver that lay there. He swung open the door.

Only shadows waited on his threshold.

The writer blinked his eyes, found them dry and burning from the hours he had spent at his manuscript. How many hours? He had lost all count of time. He passed a weary hand over his face and crossed the study to the bourbon decanter that stood, amber spirits, scintillant crystal, in its nook, as always.

He silently toasted a departed friend and drank. His gaze fell upon a familiar volume, and he pulled it down with affection. It was a tattered asbestos-cloth first of Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*.

"Thank God you're dead and gone," he murmured. "Never knew how close you were—or how cruelly wrong your guess was. It wasn't government tyranny that killed us. It was public indifference."

He replaced the yellowed book. When he turned around, he was not alone.

A thousand phantoms drifted about his study. Spectral figures in a thousand costumes, faces that told a thousand stories. Through their swirling ranks the writer could see the crowded shelves of his books, his desk, substantial.

Or were they? When he looked more closely, the walls of his study seemed to recede. Perhaps instead he was the phantom, for through the ghostly walls of books, he began to see strange cities rising. Pre-Babylonian towers washed by a silent sea. Medieval castles lost within thick forests. Frontier forts standing guard beside unknown rivers. He recognized London, New York, Paris—but their images shimmered in a constant flux of change.

The writer watched in silence, his black eyes searching the faces of the throng that moved about him. Now and again he thought he glimpsed a face that he recognized, but he could not call their names. It was like meeting the brother of an old friend, for certain familiar lines to these faces suggested that he should know them. But he had never seen their faces before. No one had.

A heavy-set man in ragged outdoor clothing passed close to him. The writer thought his virile features familiar. "Don't I know you?" he asked

in wonder, and his voice was like speaking aloud from a dream.

"I doubt it," replied the young man. "I'm Ethan Blackdaw. You would know me only if you had read Jack London's *Spell of the Snows*."

"I'm not familiar with that book, though I know London well."

"He discarded me after writing only a fragment."

The writer called to another visitant, a powerful swordsman in antediluvian armor: "Surely I've met you."

"I think not," the barbarian answered. "I am Cromach. Robert E. Howard would have written my saga, had he not ended his life."

A lean-faced man in dirty fatigues nodded sourly. "Hemingway doomed me to limbo in the same way."

"We are the lost books," murmured a Berber girl, sternly beautiful in medieval war dress. "Some writer's imagination gave us our souls, but none of us was ever given substance by his pen."

The writer stared in wonder.

A young girl in the dress of a flapper smiled at him wistfully. "Jessica Tilman wanted to write about me. Instead she married and forgot her dream to write."

"Ben Pruitt didn't forget about me," growled a tall black in torn fieldhand's overalls. "But no publishers wanted his manuscript. The flophouse owner tossed me out with the rest of Pruitt's belongings that night when he died."

A slim girl in hoopskirts sighed. "Barry Shef-

field meant to write a sonnet about me. He had four lines completed when a Yankee bullet took him at Shiloh."

"I was Zane Grey's first book," drawled a rangy frontier marshal. "Or at least, the first one he tried to write."

A bleary-eyed lawyer adjusted his stained vest and grumbled, "William Faulkner always meant to get started on my book."

"Thomas Wolfe died before he started me," commiserated a long-legged mountain girl.

The walls of his study had almost vanished. A thousand, ten thousand phantoms passed about him. Gothic heroines and brooding figures in dark cloaks. Cowboys, detectives, spacemen and superheros in strange costumes. Soldiers of a thousand battles, statesmen and explorers. Fat-cheeked tradesmen and matrons in shapeless dresses. Roman emperors and Egyptian slaves. Warriors of an unhistoried past, children of a lost future. Sinister faces, kindly faces, comic and tragic, brave men and cowards, the strong and the weak. There seemed no end to their number.

He saw a fierce Nordic warrior—a companion to Beowulf, had a waraxe not ended his stave. There were countless phantoms of famous men of history—each subtly altered after the conception of a would-be biographer. He saw half-formed images of beauty, whose author had died heartbroken that his genius was insufficient to transform his vision into poetry. A stone-age hunter stalked by, gripping his flint axe—as if seeking the mammoth that had stolen from mankind his first saga.

And then the writer saw faces that he recognized. They were from his own imagination. Phantoms from uncounted fragments and forgotten ideas. Characters from the unsold novels that yellowed in his files. And from the unfinished manuscript that lay beside his typewriter.

"Why are you here?" the writer demanded. "Did you think that I, too, was dead?"

The sad-eyed heroine of his present novel touched his arm. "You are the last writer. This new age of man has forgotten you. Come join us instead in this limbo of unrealized creation. Let this ugly world that has grown about you sink into the dull mire of its machine imagination. Come with us into our world of lost dreams."

The writer gazed at the phantom myriads, at the spectral cities and forests and seas. He remembered the dismal reality of the faceless, plastic world he had grown old in. No one would mark his passing . . .

"No." He shook his head and politely disengaged her hand. "No, I'm not quite ready for limbo. Not now. Not ever."

And the book-lined walls of his study rose solid about him once more.

The last writer sits alone in his study.

His eyes glow bright, and his gnarled fingers labor tirelessly to transform the pictures of his imagination into the symbolism of the page. His muscles feel cold, his bones are ice, and sometimes he thinks he can see through his hands to the page beneath.

There will be a knock at his door.

Maybe it will be death.
Or a raven, knelling "Nevermore."
Maybe it will be the last reader.

NEITHER BRUTE NOR HUMAN

The first time that Damon Harrington saw Trevor Nordgren was in 1974 at Discon II in Washington, D.C. It was the Thirty-second World Science Fiction Convention, and Harrington's first convention of any sort. He and four friends had piled into a chugging VW van (still bearing a faded psychedelic paint job and inevitably dubbed "The Magic Bus") and driven approximately nonstop from Los Angeles; they were living out of the van in the parking lot of someone's brother who had an apartment on Ordway Street, a short walk from the con hotel.

They had been reading each other's name badges, and their eyes met. Harrington was of average height and build, with wheat-colored hair and a healthy California tan and good enough features to fit the Hollywood image of the leading man's best buddy. He had entered adolescence as a James Dean look-alike, emerged as a Beach Boy, and presently clung to the beard and ponytail of the fading hippy years. Nordgren was half a head taller and probably ten

pounds heavier, and only regular sit-ups could have kept his abdomen so flat. He was clean-shaven, with a tousled nimbus of bright blond hair, and blue eyes of almost unsettling intensity dominated a face that might have belonged to a visionary or a fallen angel. They were both wearing bell-bottomed jeans; Harrington sandals and a tie-dyed T-shirt, Nordgren cowboy boots and a blue chambray workshirt with hand-embroidered marijuana leaves.

Damon Harrington smiled, feeling extremely foolish in the silly Styrofoam boater that the con committee had given them to wear for the meet-the-pros party. Discon with its thousands of fans and frenetic pace was a bit overawing to the author of half a dozen published stories. He'd had to show his S.F.W.A. card to get his pro hat and free drink voucher, and already Harrington was kicking himself for not staying in the hucksters' room. He'd carried along a near-mint run of the first dozen issues of *The Fantastic Four*, saved from high school days, and if he could coax one of the dealers out of a hundred bucks for the lot, he could about cover his expenses for the trip.

"Hey, look," Harrington protested, "I'm only doing this for the free drink they gave us for being put on display."

Trevor Nordgren tipped his Styrofoam boater. "Don't forget this nifty ice bucket."

Harrington swirled the ice cubes in his near-empty plastic cup, trying to think whether Trevor Nordgren should mean anything to him, painfully aware that Nordgren was puzzling over his name as well. An overweight teenage fan, collect-

ing autographs on her program book, squinted closely at each of their badges, stumped away with the air of someone who had just been offered a swell deal for the Washington Monument. She joined a mass of autograph seekers clumped about a bewhiskered Big Name Author.

"God, I hate this!" Nordgren crunched his ice cubes. He glowered at the knots of fans who mobbed the famous authors. In between these continents of humanity, islands of fans milled about the many not-quite-so-big-name authors, while other fans stalked the drifting Styrofoam hats of no-name authors such as Harrington and Nordgren. An ersatz Mr. Spock darted up to them, peered at their name badges, then hurried away.

"It would help if they just would give us T-shirts with our names printed across the back," Harrington suggested. "That way they could tell from a distance whether we were worth attention."

A well-built brunette, braless in a T-shirt and tight jeans, approached them purposefully, selecting a copy of the latest *Orbit* from a stack of books cradled against her hip. "Mr. Nordgren? Mr. Harrington? Would you two mind autographing your stories in *Orbit* for me?"

"My pleasure," said Nordgren, accepting her book. He scribbled busily.

Harrington struggled over being "Mistered" by someone who was obviously of his own age group. He hadn't read Nordgren's story in the book—had only reread his own story in search of typos—and he felt rather foolish.

"Please, call me Trevor," Nordgren said,

handing the book to Harrington. "Did you read 'The Electric Dream'?"

"I thought it was the best thing in the book." She added: "I liked your story, too, Mr. Harrington."

"Is this your first con?" Nordgren asked.

"First one. Me and my old man rode down from Baltimore." She inclined her head toward a hulking red-bearded biker who had materialized behind Nordgren and Harrington, a beer bottle lost in one hairy fist. "This is Clay."

She retrieved her book, and Clay retrieved her.

"My first autograph," Harrington commented.

Nordgren was gloomily watching her departure. "I signed a copy of *Acid Test* about half an hour ago."

Recognition clicked in Harrington's memory: a Lancer paperback, badly drawn psychedelic cover, bought from a bin at Woolworth's, read one weekend when a friend brought over some Panama red.

"I've got a copy of that back in L.A. That was one far-out book!"

"You must have one of the twelve copies that were sold." Nordgren's mood openly brightened.

"Look, you want to pay for a drink from these suckers, or run up to my room for a shot of Jack Daniel's?"

"Is the bear Catholic?"

When Nordgren poured them each a second drink, they agreed wholeheartedly that there was no point in returning to the ordeal of the meet-the-pros party. Nordgren had actually read Harrington's story in *Orbit* and pronounced it

extremely good of its type; they commiserated in both having been among the "and others" on the cover blurb. They were both products of the immediate postwar baby boom; incredibly, both had been in Chicago for the bloody demonstrations during the Democratic primary, though neither had been wounded or arrested. Nordgren was in the aftermath of an unpleasant divorce; Harrington's lover of the Flower Children years had lately returned to Boston and a job with the family law firm. Nordgren preferred Chandler to Hammett, Harrington preferred Chandler's turn of a phrase; they agreed modern science fiction writers were nothing more than products of the market. The Stones and the Who were better than the Beatles, who actually weren't innovative at all, and listening to Pink Floyd while tripping had inspired at least one story from them both. Val Lewton was an unsung genius, to which ranks Nordgren added Nicholas Ray and Harrington Mario Bava, and Aldrich had peaked with *Kiss Me Deadly*.

They hit it off rather well.

Nordgren punished the bottle, but Harrington decided three drinks were his limit on an empty stomach, and concentrated on rolling joints from some leafy Mexican Nordgren had brought down from New York. They had both sold stories to *Cavalier*, and Harrington favorably remembered Nordgren's one about the kid and the rubber machine in the redneck filling station. Harrington scraped along as cashier at an all-night self-service gas station, which afforded him lonely hours to write. Nordgren had been writing full time up until the divorce (he admitted to a

possible cause-effect relationship here), and he was just completing his tenth novel—the second under his real name. Nordgren confessed to having paid the bills by writing several porno novels for Bee Line and Essex House, under the unsubtle pseudonym, Mike Hunt.

He was quite proud of the Essex House novels, which he said developed science fiction themes that Britain's New Wave would have deemed far too outrageous, and he produced a copy of *Time's Wanton* and incomprehensibly inscribed it to Harrington. It was about a woman who used her psychic powers to project her consciousness through time, Nordgren explained, emptying the bottle, and took possession of various important historical personages and goaded them through extravagant sexual excesses that changed the course of history. It was, said Nordgren, a theme not dissimilar to his almost completed novel, *Out of the Past*, in which a Victorian medium projected her consciousness into the present day to control a teenage girl's mind. Harrington warned Nordgren that the market for fantasy novels was about nil, but Nordgren thought he could push the psychic powers angle enough to qualify as science fiction. Harrington allowed that his only novel to date had been a near miss—a post-nuclear holocaust thing sold to Powell Publications, a Los Angeles shoestring operation that folded with his *Iron Night* already in galleys.

It was a tough game, and they both agreed they considered themselves outlaws. Nordgren suggested they check out the parties for some free drinks, and Harrington suggested they look for

something to eat. Somewhere along the way Nordgren ran into some New York friends and was carried off, and Harrington wandered into the night in search of a cheap pizza.

They managed to get together several more times in the course of the convention. Harrington found a three-year-old copy of *F & SF* containing what he considered his best story published to date, and he presented it to Nordgren in return for *Time's Wanton*. They exchanged addresses, agreed to stay in touch, and parted on the best of terms.

They actually did stay in touch, although correspondence was sporadic. Nordgren wrote long letters of comment on books and films he'd caught; Harrington was inclined to talk shop and discuss possible fiction markets. Nordgren kept him posted about his progress on *Out of the Past*, its completion, its rejection by various publishers. Harrington sold a short story to *F & SF* and was contemplating a major revision of *Iron Night* after having had it rejected by every publisher in the English-speaking world. Nordgren asked to read the manuscript, offered some badly needed criticisms ("Writing a short story all in present tense may be artsy as hell, but an *entire* novel?"), and grudgingly Harrington followed some of his advice.

On its second time out, the newly revised *Iron Night* sold to Fairlane, who expressed interest in an immediate sequel. The twenty-five-hundred-dollar advance was rather more than the sum total of Harrington's career earnings as an author up until then, and he was sufficiently assured of

financial success to quit his job at the U-Sav-Here and send tidings to Nordgren that he was now a full-time professional writer. His letter crossed in the mail with Nordgren's; Trevor had just sold *Out of the Past* to McGinnis & Parry.

McGinnis & Parry elected to change the title to *The Sending* and went on to market it as "an occult thriller that out-chills *The Exorcist*!" They also proclaimed it to be Nordgren's first novel, but it was after all his first hardcover. Harrington received an advance copy (sent by Nordgren) and took personally Trevor's dedication to "all my fellow laborers in the vineyard." He really did intend to read it sometime soon.

They were very much a pair of young lions at the Second World Fantasy Convention in New York in 1976. Harrington decided to attend it after Nordgren's invitation to put him up for a few days afterward at his place (an appalling dump in Greenwich Village which Trevor swore was haunted by the ghost of Lenny Bruce) and show him around. Nordgren himself was a native of Wisconsin who had been living in The City (he managed to pronounce the capitals) since student days at Columbia; he professed no desire to return to the Midwest.

They were together on a panel—Harrington's first—designated "Fantasy's New Faces"—although privately comparing notes with the other panelists revealed that their mean date of first publication was about eight years past. The panel was rather a dismal affair. The moderator had obviously never heard of Damon Harrington, introduced him as "our new Robert E. Howard," and referred to him as David Harring-

ton throughout the panel. Most of the discussion was taken over by something called Martin E. Binkley, who had managed to publish three stories in minor fanzines and to insinuate himself onto the panel. Nordgren was quite drunk at the outset and continued to coax fresh Jack Daniel's and ice from a pretty blonde in the audience. By the end of the hour he was offering outrageous rebuttals to Binkley's self-serving pontification; the fans were loudly applauding, the moderator lost all control, and the panel nearly finished with a brawl.

That evening found Nordgren's state of mind somewhat mellower, if no closer to sobriety. He and Harrington slouched together behind a folding table at the meet-the-pros autographing party, while Nordgren's blonde cupbearer proudly continued her service.

"Together again!" Harrington toasted, raising the drink Nordgren had paid for.

"The show must go on," Nordgren rejoined. He looked about the same as he had two years ago, although the straining pearl buttons on his denim shirt bespoke a burgeoning beerbelly. Harrington had in the interim shaved his beard, trimmed his hair to the parted-in-the-middle-blown-dry look, and just now he was wearing a new denim leisure suit.

Fairlane had contributed two dozen copies of *Iron Night*, free to the first lucky autograph seekers, so for about fifteen minutes Harrington was kept busy. He grew tired of explaining to unconcerned fans that the novel was set in a post-nuclear holocaust future, and that it was not at all "In the Conan Tradition!" as the cover

proclaimed. After that, he managed to inscribe two copies of *New Dimensions* and three of *Orbit* over the next half hour.

Nordgren did quite a brisk trade in comparison, autographing a dozen copies of *The Sending* (on sale in the hucksters' room), as many copies of *Acid Test* (which had begun to gather a cult reputation), and a surprising number of short stories and essays from various magazines and anthologies. The room was crowded, hot, and after an hour Nordgren was patently bored and restive. In the jostled intervals between callers at their table, he stared moodily at the long lines queued up before the tables of the mighty.

"Do you ever wonder why we do this?" he asked Harrington.

"For fame, acclaim—not to mention a free drink?"

"Piss on it. Why do we put ourselves on display just so an effusive mob of lunatic-fringe fans can gape at us and tell us how great we are and beg an autograph and ask about our theories of politics and religion?"

"You swiped that last from the Kinks," Damon accused.

"Rock stars. Movie stars. *Sci-fi* stars. What's the difference? We're all hustling for as much acclaim and attention as we can wring out of the masses. Admit it! If we were pure artists, you and I and the rest of this grasping lot would be home sweating over a typewriter tonight. Why aren't we?"

"Is that intended to be rhetorical?"

"All right, I'll tell you why, said he, finishing his drink." Nordgren finished his drink, dug

another ten-dollar bill out of his jeans, and poked it toward his cupbearer.

"It's because we're all vampires."

"Sweetheart, better make that two Bloody Marys!" Harrington called after her.

"I'm serious, Damon," Nordgren persisted, pausing to scrawl something across a copy of *The Sending*. "We're the psychic vampires beloved of fiction. We *need* all these fans, all this gaudy adulation. We derive energy from it all."

He handed the book back to its owner. "Have you read this?"

The fan was embarrassed. "No, sir—I just today bought it." He continued bravely: "But a friend of mine sat up all night reading it, and she said it gave her nightmares for a week!"

"So you see, Damon," Nordgren nodded. He pointed a finger at the fan. "I now possess a bit of your frightened friend's soul. And when *you* read *The Sending*, I shall possess a fragment of your soul as well."

The blonde returned bearing drinks, and the stricken fan made his escape.

"So you see, Damon," Nordgren asserted. "They read our books, and all their attention is directed toward the creations of our hungry imaginations. We absorb a little psychic energy each time they read us; we grow stronger and stronger with each new book, each new printing, each new victim. And see—like proper vampire fodder, our victims adore us and beg for more."

Trevor squinted at the blonde's name badge. "Julie, my love, how long have I known you?"

"Since we met in the elevator this morning," she remembered.

"Julie, my love. Would you like to drop up to my room with me now and peruse my erotic etchings?"

"OK. You going to sign your book for me?"

"As you see, Damon." Nordgren pushed back his chair. "The vampire's victims are most willing. I hereby appoint you my proxy and empower you to sign anything that crosses this table in my name. Good night."

Harrington found himself staring at two Bloody Marys.

The visit with Nordgren in New York was a lot of fun, and Damon promised to return Trevor's hospitality when the World Fantasy Convention came to Los Angeles the following year. Aside from the convention, Harrington's visit was chiefly remarkable for two other things—Nordgren's almost embroiling them in a street fight with a youth gang in front of the Hilton, and their mutual acquisition of an agent.

"Damon, my man," Nordgren introduced them. "Someone I'd like you to meet. A boxer needs a manager, and a writer needs an agent. There is Helen Hohenstein, and she's the god-damn smartest, meanest, and best looking agent in New York. Helen, love, this is our young Robert E. Howard."

"I saw your panel," she said.

"Sorry about that," Harrington said.

Helen Hohenstein was a petite woman of about forty whose doll-like face was offset by shrewd eyes—Harrington balked at deeming them predatory. She had passed through the revolving door in various editorial positions at

various publishers, and she was now starting her own literary agency, specializing in science fiction and fantasy. She looked as if she could handle herself well under about any situation and probably already had. Harrington felt almost intimidated by her, besides not especially willing to sacrifice 10 percent of his meager earnings, but Nordgren was insistent.

"All kidding aside, Damon. Helen's the sharpest mind in the game today. She's worked her way up through the ranks, and she knows every crooked kink of a publisher's subnormal brain. She's already got a couple of major paperback publishers interested in *The Sending*—and, baby, we're talking five figures! It's a break for us she's just starting out and hungry for clients—and I've sold her on you, baby! Hey, think about it—she'll buy all those stamps and manila envelopes, and collect all those rejection slips for you!"

That last sold Harrington. They celebrated with lunch at the Four Winds, and when Hohenstein revealed that she had read most of Harrington's scattered short fiction and that she considered him to be a writer of unrealized genius, Damon knew he had hitched his wagon to the proper star.

A month later, Harrington knew so for a certainty. Hohenstein tore up Fairlane's contract for the sequel to *Iron Night*, wrote up a new one that did not include such pitfalls (unnoticed by Damon in his ecstasy to be published) as world rights forever, and jumped the advance to thirty-five hundred dollars payable on acceptance instead of on publication. Fairlane responded by

requesting four books a year in the Saga of Desmond Killstar series, as they now designated it, and promised not to say a word about Conan. Damon, who would have been panic-stricken had he known of Helen's machinations beforehand, now considered his literary career assured throughout his lifetime.

He splurged on a weekend phone call to Nordgren to tell him of his success. Nordgren concurred that Hohenstein was a genius; she had just sold paperback rights to *The Sending* to Warwick Books for \$100,000, and the contract included an option for his next novel.

The Sending had topped the paperback best-seller lists for three straight weeks, when Trevor Nordgren flew first-class to Los Angeles that next World Fantasy Convention. He took a suite at the con hotel and begged off Harrington's invitation to put him up at his two-room cottage in Venice afterward. Helen was flying out and wanted him to talk with some Hollywood contacts while he was out there, so he wouldn't have time for Damon to show him the sights. He knew Damon would understand, and anyway it was due to be announced soon, but Warwick had just signed a \$250,000 paperback deal for *The Sending*, so Trevor had to get back to New York to finish the final draft. McGinnis & Parry had put up another \$100,000 for hardcover rights, and Helen had slammed the door on any option for Nordgren's next—that one would be up for bid.

Harrington could hear the clatter of loud voices as he approached Nordgren's suite. A pretty redhead in a tank top answered his knock,

sizing him up with the door half open.

"Hey, it's Damon!" Nordgren's voice cut above the uproar. "Come on in, baby! The party's already started!"

Nordgren rose out of the melee and gave him a sloshing hug. He was apparently drinking straight Jack Daniel's out of a pewter mug. He was wearing a loose shirt of soft suede, open at the throat to set off the gold chains about a neck that was starting to soften beneath a double chin, and a silver concho belt and black leather trousers that had been custom tailored when he was twenty pounds lighter.

Harrington could not resist. "Christ, you look like a peroxide Jim Morrison!"

"Yeah—Jimbo left me his wardrobe in his will. What you drinking? JD, still? Hey, Mitzi! Bring my friend James Dean a gallon of Jack Daniel's with an ice cube in it! Come on, Damon—got some people I want you to meet."

The redhead caught up with them. "Here you are, Mr. Dean."

It was a stronger drink than Damon liked to risk this early in the afternoon, but Trevor swept him along. Most of the people he knew, at least recognized their faces. There was a mixed bag of name authors, various degrees of editors and publishers, a few people Harrington recognized from his own Hollywood contacts, and a mixture of friends, fans, groupies, and civilians. Helen Hohenstein was talking in one corner with Alberta Dawson of Warwick Books, and she waved to Damon, which gave him an excuse to break away from Trevor's dizzying round of introductions.

"I must confess I've never read any of your

Killstar books," Ms. Dawson felt she must confess, "although I understand they're very good for their type. Helen tells me that you and Trevor go way back together; do you ever write occult fiction?"

"I suppose you could call my story in the new *Black Dawns* anthology that Helen is editing a horror story. I really prefer to think of myself as a fantasy writer, as opposed to being categorized as a specialist in some particular sub-subgenre."

"Not much profit to be made in short stories." Ms. Dawson seemed wistful. "And none at all with horror fiction."

"I gather *The Sending* is doing all right for you."

"But *The Sending* is mainstream fiction, of course," she said almost primly, then conceded: "Well, *occult* mainstream fiction."

The Rending, it developed, was about a small New York bedroom community terrorized by werewolves. Nordgren's startling twist was that the werewolves were actually the town children, who had passed the curse among themselves through a seemingly innocent secret kids' gang. However Alberta Dawson would categorize the novel, *The Rending* went through three printings before publication at McGinnis & Parry, and the Warwick paperback topped the best-seller charts for twenty-three weeks. Harrington was no little amused to discover that the terrorized community included a hack gothics writer named David Harrison.

Fairlane Books filed for bankruptcy, still owing the advance for Harrington's latest Kill-

star opus and most of the royalties for the previous six.

"This," said Damon, when Helen phoned him the news, "is where I came in."

In point of fact, he was growing heartily sick of Desmond Killstar and his never-ending battles against the evil mutant hordes of The Blighted Earth, and had been at a loss as to which new or revived menace to pit him against in #8.

"We'll sue the bastards for whatever we can salvage," Helen promised him. "But for the good news: Julie Kriegman is the new science fiction editor at Summit, and she said she'd like to see a new fantasy-adventure series from you—something on the lines of Killstar, but with a touch of myths and sorcery. She thought the series ought to center around a strong female character—an enchantress, or maybe a swordswoman."

"How about a little of both?" Harrington suggested, glancing at the first draft of Killstar #8. "I think I can show her something in a few weeks. Who's this Kriegman woman, and why is she such a fan of mine?"

"Christ, I thought you knew her. She says she knows you and Trevor from way back. She remembers that you drink Bloody Marys."

Death's Dark Mistress, the first of the Krystel Firewind series, was good for a quick five-grand advance and a contract for two more over the next year. The paperback's cover was a real eye-catcher, displaying Krystel Firewind astride her flying dragon and brandishing her enchanted broadsword at a horde of evil dwarves. That the

artist had chosen to portray her nude except for a few certainly uncomfortable bits of baubles, while Harrington had described her as wearing plate armor for this particular battle, seemed a minor quibble. Damon was less pleased with the cover blurb that proclaimed him "America's Michael Moorcock!"

But Summit paid promptly.

Trevor Nordgren was Guest of Honor at CajunCon VII in New Orleans in 1979, and Harrington (he later learned it was at Trevor's suggestion) was Master of Ceremonies. It was one of those annual regional conventions that normally draw three to five hundred fans, but this year over a thousand came to see Trevor Nordgren.

The film of *The Sending* had already grossed over forty million, and Max de Lawrence was rumored to have purchased film rights to *The Rending* for an even million. Shaftesbury had outbid McGinnis & Parry, paying out five hundred thousand dollars for hardcover rights to Nordgren's latest, *The Etching*, and Warwick Books was paying a record two million for a package deal that gave them paperback rights to *The Etching*, Nordgren's next novel, and a series of five paperback reissues of his earlier work.

Nordgren was tied up with a barrage of newspaper and television interviews when Harrington checked into the Monteleone, but by late afternoon he phoned Damon to meet him in the lobby for a quick look at the French Quarter. Harrington was just out of the shower, and by the time he reached the lobby, Nordgren had been cornered by a mob of arriving fans. He was

busily signing books, and for every one he handed back, two more were thrust toward him. He saw Damon, waved, and made a quick escape.

They fled to Bourbon Street and ducked into the Old Absinthe House, where they found seats at the hollow-square bar. Nordgren ordered two Sazeracs. "Always wanted to try one. Used to be made with bourbon and absinthe, or brandy and absinthe, or rye and absinthe—anyway, it was made with absinthe. Now they use Pernod or Herbsaint or something instead of absinthe. Seems like they still ought to use absinthe in the Old Absinthe House."

Harrington watched with interest the bartender's intricate preparation. "Thought they were going to eat you alive back there in the lobby."

"Hell, let them have their fun. They pay the bills—they and a few million who stay at home."

Nordgren sipped the dark red cocktail that filled the lower part of a highball glass. "Hey, not bad. Beats a Manhattan. Let's have two more—these'll be gone by the time the next round's ready. So tell me, Damon—how you been?"

"Things are going pretty well. Summit has accepted *Swords of Red Vengeance*, and I'm hard at work on a third."

"You're too good a writer to waste your energy on that sort of stuff."

"Pays the bills." Damon swallowed his Sazerac before he reminded Trevor that not all writers were overnight millionaires. "So what's after *The Etching*?"

Nordgren was already on his second Sazerac. "This one's called *The Bending*. No—just kid-

ding! Christ, these little devils have a kick to them. Don't know what they'll want me to title it. It's about a naive young American secretary, who marries an older Englishman whose previous wife was lost when their yacht sank. They return to his vast estate, where the housekeeper makes life miserable for her because she's obsessed with her worship of the previous wife, and . . ."

"Was her name Rebecca?"

"Damn! You mean somebody beat me to the idea? Well, back to square one. Let's have another of these and go grab a quick bite."

"My round, I believe."

"Forget it—my treat. You can buy us dinner."

"Then how about a po' boy?"

"Seriously—I'd like that. Not really very hungry, but I know I've got to keep something in my stomach, or I'll be dead before the con is half over."

At a hole-in-the-wall sandwich shop they picked up a couple meatball po' boys to go. Harrington wanted to try the red beans and rice, but Nordgren was in a hurry to get back to the Monteleone. Fans spotted Nordgren as they entered the hotel, but they caught an elevator just in time and retreated to Trevor's room, where he ordered a dozen bottles of Dixie beer.

Nordgren managed half his sandwich by the time room service brought the beer. "Want the rest of this, Damon? I'm not all that hungry."

"Sure!" Harrington's last meal had been plastic chicken on the flight from Los Angeles. "Say, you're losing weight, aren't you?"

"My special diet plan." Nordgren unlocked his

suitcase and dug out a chamois wallet, from which he produced a polished slab of agate and a plastic bag of cocaine. "Care for a little toot before we meet the masses?"

"For sure!" Damon said through a mouthful of sandwich. "Hey, I brought along a little Colombian for the weekend. Want me to run get it?"

"Got some Thai stick in the suitcase." Trevor was sifting coke onto the agate. "Take a look at these boulders, man! This shit has not been stepped on."

"Nice work if you can get it."

Nordgren cut lines with a silver razor blade and handed the matching tooter to Harrington. "Here. Courtesy of all those hot-blooded little fans out there, standing in line to buy the next best-selling thriller from that master of chills—yours truly, Trev the Ripper."

Trevor did look a good deal thinner, Damon thought, and he seemed to have abandoned the rock star look. His hair was trimmed, and he wore an expensive-looking silk sport coat over an open-collared shirt. Put on the designer sunglasses, and welcome to Miami. Wealth evidently agreed with Nordgren.

"You're looking fit these days," Harrington observed between snuffles. Damon himself was worrying about a distinct mid-thirties bulge, discovered when he shopped for a new sport coat for the trip. He was considering taking up jogging.

"Cutting down on my drinking." Nordgren cut some more lines. "I was knocking back two or three fifths a day and chasing it with a case or so of brew."

"Surprised you could write like that." Privately, Harrington had thought *The Etching* little more than a two-hundred-thousand-word rewrite of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, served up with enough sex and gore to keep the twentieth-century reader turning the pages.

"Coke's been my salvation. I feel better. I write better. It's all that psychic energy I'm drawing in from all those millions of readers out there."

"Are you still on about that?" Damon finished his lines. "Can't say I've absorbed any energy from my dozens of fans."

"It's exponential," Nordgren explained, sifting busily. "You ought to try to reach the greater audience, instead of catering to the cape-and-pimples set. You're getting labeled as a thud-and-blunder hack, and as long as publishers can buy you for a few grand a book, that's all they'll ever see in you."

Damon was stoned enough not to take offense. "Yeah, well, tell that to Helen. She's been trying to peddle a collection of my fantasy stories for the last couple years."

"Are these some of the ones you were writing for *Cavalier* and so on? Christ, I'll have to ask her to show me a copy. You were doing some good stuff back then."

"And pumping gas."

"Hey, your time is coming, baby. Just think about what I've said. You wrote a couple of nice horror stories a few years back. Take a shot at a novel."

"If I did, the horror fad would have peaked and passed."

The phone rang. The con chairman wanted

them to come down for the official opening ceremonies. Nordgren laid out a couple monster lines to get them primed, and they left to greet their public.

Later that evening Nordgren made friends with an energetic blonde from the local fan group, who promised to show him the sights of New Orleans. When it appeared that most of these sights were for Trevor's eyes only, Damon wandered off with a couple of the local S.C.A. bunch to explore the fleshpots and low dives of the French Quarter.

Soon after, much to Harrington's amazement, Warwick Books bought his short story collection, *Dark Dreams*. They had rejected it a year before, but now Trevor Nordgren had written a twenty-page introduction to the book. Helen as much as admitted that Warwick had taken the collection only after some heavy pressure from Nordgren.

As it was, *Dark Dreams* came out uniformly packaged with Warwick's much-heralded Trevor Nordgren reprint series. *TREVOR NORDGREN Introduces* got Nordgren's name across the cover in letters twice the size of Harrington's name, and only a second glance would indicate that the book was anything other than the latest Trevor Nordgren novel. But *Dark Dreams* was the first of Harrington's books ever to go into a second printing, and Damon tore up the several letters of protest he composed.

He was astonished by Nordgren's versatility. The Warwick package included a new, expanded edition of *Time's Wanton*, a reprint of *Acid Test* (with a long, nostalgic introduction), a collection

of Nordgren's early short fiction entitled *Electric Dreams* (with accompanying introductions by the author), as well as *Doors of Perception* and *Younger Than Yesterday*—two anthologies of essays and criticism selected from Nordgren's writings for the *Chicago Seed*, *East Village Other*, *Berkeley Barb*, and other underground newspapers of the sixties.

Nordgren had by now gathered a dedicated cult following, in addition to the millions who snapped up his books from the checkout counter racks. Virtually any publication with a vintage Trevor Nordgren item in its pages began to command top collector's prices, Harrington noticed upon browsing through the hucksters' room at the occasional conventions he attended. Trevor Nordgren had become the subject of interviews, articles, and critical essays in everything from mimeographed fanzines to *People* to *Time*. Harrington was amused to find a Trevor Nordgren interview headlining one of the men's magazines that used to reject stories from them both.

Warwick was delighted with sales figures from the Trevor Nordgren Retrospective, as the reprint package was now dignified, and proudly announced the purchase of five additional titles—two new collections of his short fiction and expanded revisions of his other three Essex House novels. In addition (and in conjunction with McGinnis & Parry as part of a complicated contractual buy-out) Nordgren was to edit an anthology of his favorite horror stories (*Trevor Nordgren Presents*) and would prepare a nonfiction book discussing his personal opinions and

theories of horror as a popular genre (*The View Through The Glass Darkly*).

The Max de Lawrence film of *The Rending* grossed sixty million in its first summer of release, and *The Etching* was still on the paperback top ten lists when *The Dwelling* topped the best-seller charts in the first week. Nordgren's latest concerned a huge Victorian castle in a small New England town; presumably the mansion was haunted, but Nordgren's twist was that the mansion had a life of its own and was itself haunting the community. The idea was good for a quarter of a million words, several million dollars, and a complete tax write-off of the huge Victorian castle on the Hudson that Nordgren had refurbished and moved into.

Julie Kriegman was fired by the new corporate owners of Summit Books, and the new editor called Krystel Firewind sexist trash and killed the series with #5. Helen Hohenstein broke the news to Harrington somewhat more gently.

"At least Summit paid you."

Damon's only immediate consolation was that the call was on Helen's dime. "Can we sell the series someplace else, or do I wrap sandwiches with the first draft of #6?" Thank God he hadn't sprung for that word processor Nordgren had urged upon him.

"It doesn't look good. Problem is that every paperback house that wants to already has one or two swords-and-sorcery series going. Do you think you could write high fantasy? That's getting to be big just now. You know—lighten up a little on the violence and bare tits, give your

imaginary world more of a fairy-tale atmosphere, maybe link in a bunch of Celtic myths and that sort of thing.”

“I can try it.” Harrington imagined Krystel Firewind stripped of sword and armor and a few inches of bustline, gowned in shimmering damask or maybe flowing priestess’ robes.

“Great! Keep this to yourself for now, but Columbine has hired Alberta Dawson away from Warwick to be their senior editor and try to rejuvenate their paperback line. She’s looking for new material, and she owes me. So get me some chapters and a prospectus soonest. OK?”

“Will do.”

“Oh—and Damon. Plan this as a trilogy, could you?”

Harrington read over a few popular works on Celtic mythology and ancient European history to get some names and plot ideas, then started the rewrite of Krystel Firewind #6. This he was able to flesh out into a trilogy without much difficulty by basing his overall theme on the struggle of Roman Britain against the Saxon invasions. After her sex-change from Desmond Killstar, it was simple enough to transform Krystel Firewind into a half-elfin Druidic priestess. All that was needed was to change names, plug in his characters, and toss in a little magic.

Alberta Dawson was delighted with *Tallyssa’s Quest: Book One of The Fall of the Golden Isles*. She agreed to a contract for the entire trilogy, and confided to Hohenstein that she’d sensed all along that Damon Harrington was a major liter-

ary talent. *Tallyssa's Quest* was launched with a major promotional campaign, complete with dump bins and color posters of the book's cover. The cover, a wraparound by some Italian artist, was a rather ethereal thing depicting a billowing berobed Tallyssa astride her flying unicorn and brandishing her Star of Life amulet to defend her elfin companions from a horde of bestial Kralkings. Harrington would much rather the cover hadn't billed him as "The New Tolkien," but Columbine had paid him his first five-figure advance.

Nordgren phoned him up at two in the morning, coked out of his skull, and razzed him about it mercilessly. He was just coming out of a messy paternity suit involving a minor he'd shacked up with at some convention, so Damon gave him an hour of his patience. Since *Tallyssa's Quest* had gone into a third printing in its first month, Harrington was not to be baited.

When *The Dwelling* premiered as a television miniseries, Nordgren was a guest on *The Tonight Show*. He was obviously wired and kept breaking up the audience with his off-the-wall responses to the standard where-do-you-get-your-ideas sort of questions. Trevor had taken to smoking a pipe, perhaps to keep his hands from shaking, and the designer sunglasses were *de rigueur*. Damon was startled to see how much weight he'd lost. Nordgren managed to get in enough plugs for his new opus, *The Coming*, to have qualified as a paid political announcement. Harrington had skimmed an advance copy of the thing—it appeared to be a three-hundred-thousand-word re-

write of Lovecraft's "The Outsider"—and had pondered the dangers of mixing cocaine and word processors.

There was a major problem with crowd control at the World Science Fiction Convention in Minneapolis, so that they were forced to abandon their tradition of signing books together. The con committee had had to set a special room aside just for Trevor Nordgren. At one point a news reporter counted over seven hundred fifty fans standing in line to enter the signing room, many with shopping bags filled with Trevor Nordgren books and magazine appearances. Con committee members tried in vain to enforce the one-person-one-autograph rule, and a near riot broke out when uniformed hotel security guards finally escorted Nordgren to his suite after two and a half hours of signing books. Nordgren placated them by promising to set up a second autographing session the next day.

Something that looked like an ex-linebacker in a three-piece suit greeted Harrington when he knocked on the door of Nordgren's suite. After all the Hammett and Chandler he'd read, Damon felt cheated that he couldn't see the bulge of a roscoe beneath the polyester, but he surmised one was there.

"Damon Harrington to see Mr. Nordgren," he said to the stony face, feeling very much like a character in a Chandler novel. He wished he had a fedora to doff.

"That's OK, John. He's a lodge brother."

Evidently Nordgren was unscarred by last year's lawsuit, since neither of the girls who were

cutting lines on the glass-topped table were as old as Trevor if they could have combined both their ages. Nordgren had lately taken to wearing his hair slicked and combed straight back, and he reminded Harrington of a dissolute Helmut Berger posing for a men's fashion spread in *Esquire*.

"After meeting your bodyguard there, I fully expected to find you seated in a wheelchair, wearing a silk dressing robe, and smoking Russian cigarettes through a long amber holder."

"Melody. Heather. Meet my esteemed friend and drinking buddy, Damon Harrington. Damon, join us."

"Weren't you in *Apocalypse Now*?" one of them asked brightly.

"Quite right," Nordgren assured her. "And turn a deaf ear when he promises to get you a role in his next film."

They were almost certain Nordgren was kidding them, but not quite, and kept a speculative watch on Damon.

"The big party isn't until later tonight," Nordgren said, handing him the tooter, "but I felt I must unwind after sustaining terminal writer's cramp from all those autographs. Why not get a good buzz with us now, then rejoin the party after ten?"

"Can't see how you can go through all that."

"All that psychic energy, baby."

"All that money, you mean."

"A little PR never hurt anyone. Speaking of which, Damon—I noticed quite a number of little darlings decked out in flowing bedsheets and pointed ears and carrying about boxed sets of *The Fall of the Golden Isles* in ardent quest of

your signature. Is rumor true that Columbine has just sprung for a second trilogy in the series?"

"Helen has just about got them to agree to our terms."

"Christ, Damon! We're better than this shit!" Nordgren banged his fist on the table and sent half a gram onto the carpet. One of the girls started to go after it, but Trevor shook his head and muttered that he bought it by the kilo.

"You don't look particularly ready to go back to the good old days of three cents a word on publication," Damon suggested.

"And paying the bills with those wonderful one-thousand-dollar checks from Bee Line for sixty thousand words worth of wet dreams. Did I tell you that a kid came up to me with a copy of *Stud Road* to sign, and he'd paid some huckster \$150 for the thing!"

Damon almost choked on his line. "Remind me to put my copy of *Time's Wanton* in a safe deposit box. Christ, Trevor—you've got enough money from all this to write anything you damn well please."

"But we somehow write what the public wants from us instead. Or do you get off by being followed about by teenage fans in farcical medieval drag with plastic pointy ears and begging to know whether Wyndlunne the Fey is going to be rescued from Grimdooms's Black Tower in *Book Four of The Trilogy of Trilogies*?"

"We both have our fans," Damon said pointedly. "And what dire horrors lie in wait for some small suburban community in *your* next megaword chart-buster?"

"Elves," said Nordgren.

* * *

The last time that Damon Harrington saw Trevor Nordgren was at the World Fantasy Convention in Miami. Because of crowd problems, Nordgren had stopped going to cons, but a Guest of Honor invitation lured him forth from his castle on the Hudson. He had avoided such public appearances for over a year, and there were lurid rumors of nervous breakdown, alcoholism, drug addiction, or possibly AIDS.

The Changeling, Nordgren's latest and biggest, concerned an evil race of elves who lurked in hidden dens beneath a small suburban community, and who were systematically exchanging elfin babies for the town's human infants. *The Changeling* was dedicated to Damon Harrington—"in remembrance of Styrofoam boaters." The novel dominated the best-seller lists for six months, before finally being nudged from first place by *The Return of Tallyssa: Book Six of The Fall of the Golden Isles*.

Harrington squeezed onto an elevator already packed with fans. A chubby teenager in a *Spock Lives!* T-shirt was complaining in an uncouth New York accent: "So I ran up to him when the limo pulled up, and I said to him 'Mr. Nordgren, would you please sign my copy of *The Changeling*,' and he said 'I'd love to, sweetheart, but I don't have the time,' and I said 'But it's just this one book,' and he said 'If I stop for you, there are twenty invisible fans lined up behind you right now with their books,' and I thought 'You conceited turkey and after I've read every one of your books!'"

The elevator door opened on her floor, and she

and most of her sympathetic audience got off. As the door closed, Harrington caught an exclamation: "Hey, wasn't that . . .?"

A hotel security guard stopped him as he entered the hallway toward his room, and Harrington had to show him his room key and explain that he had the suite opposite Trevor Nordgren's. The guard was scrupulously polite, and explained that earlier fans had been lining up outside Nordgren's door with armloads of books. Damon then understood why the hotel desk had asked him if he minded having a free drink in the lounge until they had prepared his suite after some minor vandalism wrought by the previous guests.

A bell captain appeared with his baggage finally, and then room service stocked his bar. Harrington unpacked a few things, then phoned Nordgren's suite. A not very friendly male voice answered, and refused to do more than take a message. Harrington asked him to tell Mr. Nordgren that Mike Hunt wished to have a drink with him in the suite opposite. Thirty seconds later Nordgren was kicking at his door.

"Gee, Mr. Hunt!" Nordgren gushed in falsetto. "Would you please sign my copy of *The Other Woman*? Huh? Huh? Would you?"

He looked terrible. He was far thinner than when they'd first met, and his skin seemed to hang loose and pallid over his shrunken flesh—reminding Harrington of a snake about to shed its skin. His blue eyes seemed too large for his sallow face, and their familiar arrogance was shadowed by a noticeable haunted look. Harrington

ton thought of some *fin de siècle* poet dying of consumption.

"Jack Daniel's, as usual? Or would you like a Heineken?"

"I'd like just some Perrier water, if you have it there. Cutting down on my vices."

"Sure thing." Damon thought about the rumors. "Hey, brought along some pearl that you won't believe!"

"I'll taste a line of it, then," Nordgren brightened, allowing Damon to bring him his glass of Perrier. "Been a while since I've done any toot. Decided I didn't need a Teflon septum."

When Nordgren actually did take only one line, Harrington began to get really concerned. He fiddled with his glass of Jack Daniel's, then managed: "Trevor, I'm only asking as an old friend—but are you all right?"

"Flight down tired me out, that's all. Got to save up my energy for that signing thing to-night."

Damon spent undue attention upon cutting fresh lines. "Yeah, well. I mean, you look a little thin, is all."

Instead of taking offense, Trevor seemed wearily amused. "No, I'm not strung out on coke or smack or uppers or downers or any and all drugs. No, I don't have cancer or some horrid wasting disease. Thank you for your concern."

"Didn't mean to pry." Damon was embarrassed. "Just concerned, is all."

"Thanks, Damon. But I'm off the booze and drugs, and I've had a complete checkup. Frankly, I've been burning the old candle at both ends and

in the middle for too long. I'm exhausted body and soul, and I'm planning on treating myself to a long R & R while the royalties roll in."

"Super! Why not plan on spending a couple weeks knocking around down on the coast with me, then? We'll go down to Ensenada."

A flash of Nordgren's bitter humor returned. "Well, I'd sure like to, young feller," he rasped. "But I figger on writin' me one last big book—just one last book. Then I'll take all the money I got put aside, and buy me a little spread down in Texas—hang up my word processor and settle down to raise cattle. Just this one last book is all I need."

The signing party was a complete disaster. The con committee hadn't counted on Nordgren's public and simply put him at a table in the hotel ballroom with the rest of the numerous pros in attendance. The ballroom was totally swamped by Nordgren's fans—many from the Miami area who forced their way into the hotel without registering for the convention. Attempts to control the crowd led to several scuffles; the hotel overreacted and ordered security to clear the ballroom, and numerous fights and acts of vandalism followed before order could be restored. Nordgren was escorted to his suite, where a state of siege existed.

Completely sickened by the disgusting spectacle, Harrington afterward retreated to the Columbine Books party, where he was thoroughly lionized, and where he discovered an astonishing number of fellow writers who had known all along that he had the stuff of genius in him, and

who were overjoyed that one of their comrades who had paid his dues at last was rewarded with the overdue recognition and prosperity he so deserved. Harrington decided to get knee-walking, commode-hugging drunk, but he was still able to walk, assisted by the wall, when he finally left the party.

Standing with the other sardines awaiting to be packed into the elevator, Harrington listened to the nasal whine of the acne farm with the shopping bag full of books who had just pushed in front of him: "So all my friends who couldn't afford to make the trip from Des Moines gave me their books to get him to autograph too, and I promised them I would, and then they announced His Highness would sign only three books for each fan, and *then* they closed the autographing party with me still standing in line and for an hour and a half! I mean, I'm never buying another book by that creep! Nordgren doesn't care shit about his fans!"

"I know!" complained another. "I wrote him an eight-page fan letter, and all I got back was a postcard!"

Harrington managed to get most of the vomit into the shopping bag, and as the crowd cringed away and the elevator door opened, he stumbled inside and made good his escape.

His next memory was of bouncing along the wall of the corridor that led to his room and hearing sounds of a party at full tilt in Nordgren's suite. Harrington was surprised that Trevor had felt up to throwing a party after the debacle earlier that evening, but old habits must die hard, and Damon thought that a few more

drinks were definitely called for after the elevator experience.

The door to Nordgren's suite was open, so Harrington shouldered his way inside. The place was solidly packed with bodies, and Harrington clumsily pushed a route between them, intent on reaching the bar. By the time he was halfway into the party, it struck him that he didn't know any of the people here—somewhat odd in that he and Nordgren generally partied with the same mob of writers and professionals who showed up at the major cons each time. The suite seemed to be packed entirely with fans, and Harrington supposed that they had crashed Nordgren's party, presumably driving the pros into another room or onto the balcony.

Harrington decided the crowd was too intense, the room too claustrophobic. He gave up on reaching the bar and decided to try to find Nordgren and see if he wanted to duck over to his suite for a quick toot and a chance to relax. Peering drunkenly about the crowded room, Harrington noticed for the first time that everyone's attention seemed to be focused toward the center. And there he recognized Nordgren.

"Trevor, my man!" Damon's voice sounded unnaturally loud and clear above the unintelligible murmur of the crowd.

He jostled his way toward Nordgren, beginning to get angry that none of the people seemed inclined to move aside despite his mumbled excuse-me's and sorry's. Nordgren might as well have been mired in quicksand, so tightly ringed in by fans as he was, and only Trevor's height

allowed Harrington to spot him. Damon thought he looked awful, far worse than earlier in the day.

Nordgren stretched out his hand to Harrington, and Damon's first thought was that he meant to wave or to shake hands, but suddenly it reminded him more of a drowning victim making one last hopeless clutching for help. Shoving through to him, Harrington clasped hands.

Nordgren's handgrip felt very loose, with a scaly dryness that made Damon think of the brittle rustle of overlong fingernails. Harrington shook his hand firmly and tried to draw Nordgren toward him so they could speak together. Nordgren's arm broke off at his shoulder like a stick of dry-rotted wood.

For a long breathless moment Harrington just stood there, gaping stupidly, Nordgren's arm still in his grasp, the crowd silent, Nordgren's expression as immobile as that of a crucified Christ. Then, ever so slowly, ever so reluctantly, as if there were too little left to drain, a few dark drops of blood began to trickle from the torn stump of Nordgren's shoulder.

The crowd's eyes began to turn upon Harrington, as Nordgren ever so slowly began to collapse like an unstrung marionette.

Harrington awoke the following noon, sprawled fully dressed across a couch in his own suite. He had a poisonous hangover and shuddered at the reflection of his face in the bathroom mirror. He made himself a breakfast of vitamin pills, aspirin, and Valium, then set about cutting a few wake-up lines to get him through the day.

Harrington was not really surprised to learn that Trevor Nordgren had died in his sleep sometime during the night before. Everyone knew it was a drug overdose, but the medical examiner's report ruled heart failure subsequent to extreme physical exhaustion and chronic substance abuse.

Several of the science fiction news magazines asked Harrington to write an obituary for Trevor Nordgren, but Harrington declined. He similarly declined offers from several fan presses to write a biography or critical survey of Nordgren, or to edit proposed anthologies of Nordgren's uncollected writings, and he declined Warwick's suggestion that he complete Nordgren's final unfinished novel. Martin E. Binkley, in his *Reader's Guide to Trevor Nordgren*, attributed this reticence to "Harrington's longtime love-hate relationship with Nordgren that crystalized into professional jealousy with final rejection."

Damon Harrington no longer attends conventions, nor does he autograph books. He does not answer his mail, and he has had his telephone disconnected.

Columbine Books offered Harrington a fat one million advance for a third trilogy in the best-selling *Fall of the Golden Isles* series. When Harrington returned the contract unsigned to Helen Hohenstein, she was able to get Columbine to increase the advance to one and a half million. Harrington threw the contract into the trash.

In his dreams Harrington still sees the faceless mass of hungry eyes, eyes turning from their drained victim and gazing now at him. Drugs

seem to help a little, and friends have begun to express concern over his health.

The mystery of Damon Harrington's sudden reclusion has excited the imagination of his public. As a consequence, sales of all of his books are presently at an all-time high.

SIGN OF THE SALAMANDER

By Curtiss Stryker

With an Introduction by Kent Allard

One seeks hard with Curtiss Stryker for a mot juste. Let us say that he was an enigma to all, perhaps most of all to himself.

While many of the pulp writers of the 1930s had survived improbable and checkered pasts before merging their careers into fiction, Curtiss Stryker begs the extreme. Sailor, soldier-of-fortune, gun-runner, World War I hero, aviator, bootlegger, big-game hunter, member of a dozen secret cults: If even half of his boasts were true, it would be too much for any one man—to say nothing of a writer who drifted from the pulps into hackwork obscurity. And yet . . .

Stryker brought a distinct and convincing verisimilitude to all genres in which he wrote, present through the excesses of the pulp formula and the demands of deadlines. A fellow pulp writer once remarked: "Sure, I've never been to Asia or Africa even though I write yarns about those places. I've never been to Hell, either—but I still write about it." With Curtiss Stryker one wonders.

This is most evident in Stryker's best known work, a series of stories involving the battles of occult investigator, John Chance, against his evil

counterpart, Dread, master of black magic. These episodic novellas (billed, as the pulps liked to do, as "A Complete Novel In Every Issue!") began in the January 1934 issue of Black Circle Mystery and ran monthly until that pulp folded in June 1936. Part of the notorious Black Circle Publishing Group, Black Circle Mystery was not one of the higher paying pulps, nor did the series begin to attract the readership of such character pulps as Doc Savage, The Shadow, or The Spider. Nonetheless, John Chance vs. Dread was one of the longer-lived minor pulp series, and the stories eventually acquired a cult following among pulp collectors. "Sign of the Salamander," the first episode of the series, is here reprinted for the first time.

The novella is typical of the series, displaying the eccentricities of Stryker's style. One senses immediately that he is striving to break away from the confines of the pulp formula, all the while restrained by the editorial considerations of his day.

An author is invariably accused of identifying with his characters—of projecting his idealized self-image into his heros. I rather think that both John Chance and Dread were a part of Curtiss Stryker—and I hesitate to believe that Stryker's visions of Hell were taken exclusively from guide-books.

—Kent Allard, author of
Drive-Thru Fiction,
The Futility of Awareness,
etc.

* * *

I. Breath of the Salamander

Fog hung like a dismal mask over the small mountain town. The headlamps of the Packard roadster poked yellow beams through the grey blanket, probing recklessly up the narrow road that climbed Laurel Mountain. The car scarcely slowed as it reached the gap that enclosed the town of Dillon, and its headlights picked out the main street with its double row of storefronts.

Its cream finish ghostly in the mist-hung night, the powerful roadster moved past the darkened storefronts, many with windows boarded and an NRA eagle peering from the murky panes. A few lights shone from outlying houses, and on ahead a big puddle of light spread out from a pair of gas pumps. The Packard braked and pulled into the station.

The stenciled lettering on the dusty windows read Martin's General Merchandise and below that, in a different stencil, & Service Station. It was past ten o'clock, but this one place of business remained open. Half a dozen overalled patrons lounged about the pair of benches that flanked the screened doorway, chewing tobacco and furtively passing a quart fruit jar whose contents warded off the late evening chill. They watched with careful curiosity as the Packard drove up. Behind the storefront windows, other blurred faces craned inquisitively.

The roadster looked sleek and new and expensive. Despite the chill mountain air, its top was down, suggesting it had been driven hard up

from the summer heat of the lowlands that evening. A girl reclined easily on the leather cushions of the passenger side, looking sleek and expensive herself with a fox fur wrap drawn over the trim shoulders of her summer frock. Blonde hair was marcelled beneath a white beret, and there was a pleasant windblown effect that offset her patrician features. The driver was a dark, athletically built young man with that sort of tan that makes one think of tennis courts and swimming pools. He wore casual evening dress, but was hatless. Leisurely he stepped down from the car, tossed his coat over the seat and stretched taut limbs.

"Evening, folks." A heavy-set figure emerged from the screened door. "Can I help you?"

"A tank of ethyl for the car, if you please," the driver told him. "And some information for me."

The attendant busied himself with the pump. "Sure. What can I help you all with?"

"You got a phone in here?"

"Got a public phone there at the back."

"A gentleman phoned Knoxville from there this afternoon," the young man explained. "Asked to speak with John Chance. Very important, he said."

"Well, it's a public telephone, but there's a door on the booth," the attendant said testily.

"The fellow said he was calling from Martin's Store," the other continued. "Said he'd meet us here tonight. Said his name was Cullin Shelton. We had rather a late start, so I wondered whether he'd grown tired of waiting. Perhaps I might phone him, if he's not here now."

"That's two-fifty," said the attendant, cutting off the pump. "Shelton was around here most of the evening, Mr. Chance. I reckon he's gone back to his place over at the hotel by now, seeing as he's not here."

"And which hotel is that?"

"There's only one, the Dillon Hotel," replied the other with ponderous patience. "On down the street there's the sign."

"Then I'll go look him up."

"Doubt you'll get much use out of that," the attendant advised. "Shelton was hitting it pretty hard all day."

"Well, he said it was important," said the driver, climbing back into the roadster. He cranked the engine.

"Must be to make you all drive all this way from Knoxville," hazarded the beefy proprietor.

"Good night." The Packard slipped smoothly into gear and rolled away from the pumps. The idlers at Martin's Store watched it drive away with cool appraisal.

"I wonder if we should have phoned," suggested the girl, speaking in a faintly accented voice.

"Oh, leave it to me, Kirsten," her companion assured her. "It was worth the wild-goose chase just to get away from the muggy heat of the city."

"The way they watched us . . ." she began. "There's evil here."

"Rot. Mountaineers are a close-lipped lot. Did you see them hide that moonshine when we drove up? Good job you were along, or they'd have marked me down for a revenuer."

"I rather think we should have waited—or phoned," she persisted.

"But you were the one in so great a hurry. Hello—here it is."

The Packard turned in before a two-storey structure of dark mountain stone. A sign out front of the wide veranda said Dillon Hotel and Vacancy. Only a few lights burned in the shaded windows.

"Honeymoon Hotel, here we are," laughed the driver.

"Oh, stop it." Penciled brows drew in a frown of annoyance. She peered anxiously at the darkened hotel to her right.

A lean figure suddenly lurched forth from the shadows of the porch, overturning a rocker with a startling crash. He shambled across the veranda, half-fell down the wide steps to the ground. He wore surveyor's boots and field dress, and a canvas coat that flapped about his gaunt frame. Supporting himself against the banister, he stared back at them through red-rimmed eyes.

"John Chance." Raw whiskey wafted along with his hoarse whisper. "John Chance—is that you?"

"Are you Mr. Cullin Shelton?" demanded the other man smoothly.

"Oh, God!" the drunken man moaned. "Let's get away from here!" He staggered across the walk for the car.

"Now see here, old fellow!" protested the driver, as the girl shrank away from the door. "Can't we talk right here?"

"No!" A bony hand fumbled for the door latch. "Let's get away!"

The night mists flickered with a sudden, eerie glare—like heat lightning behind distant clouds.

Shelton screamed and fell back from the running board. "Too late!" he bawled in terror. "Get away!"

The light flickered again—closer, more intense—dazzling their eyes like a magnesium flare. Its sudden brilliance made the fog opaque, blinding them. And with the white glare, a sudden hiss like escaping steam.

Shelton had started to run. Now he recoiled, screaming hideously. "No, Dread! No!" He fell back against the car.

The girl screamed as the man's flailing arms hooked over her door, his face turned toward them—sagging below the level of the sill as he crumpled.

His hands were shriveled stumps, the flesh of his face seared and shrunken to his skull—charring and peeling even as they watched. Cullin Shelton was being burned to a crisp in the passage of seconds, before their horrified gaze—but his clothing was untouched, nor could they feel a trace of the intolerable heat that was burning flesh to cinder in a matter of seconds.

The scream rasped silent as vocal cords seared and cracked. The nightmare face and blackened arms fell away from the sill, trailing a sooty smear down the cream finish of the door. Then the Packard was tearing away from the curb, and Shelton's corpse was flung aside like a smouldering scarecrow.

The Packard roared headlong down the steep slope of Laurel Mountain, and the town and its

horror vanished into the mist. Tires moaned as the heavy roadster skidded dangerously on the sharp curves. The driver's tanned face was set in a pallid grimace of unreasoning fear.

"John! For God's sake, slow down! We'll be killed!"

The girl's sharp exclamation broke through his panic, and he braked the car's suicidal speed. "God! Sorry, Kirsten!" he murmured shakily. "That—that thing back there—God! That's the worst scare I've had in my life! Didn't stop to think what I was doing!"

He slowed the car to a near crawl, searched the fog-hidden shoulder of the road.

"What are you doing?" she asked uneasily.

"Help me find a place to turn around," he told her, his voice steadier. "We've got to go back."

"Why?" she demanded in a note of panic. "There's nothing we can do for that man."

"Of course not, poor devil. But we were witnesses—and we've got to warn the rest before someone else dies like that."

"But what happened?"

His self-assurance was returning. "Electrocuted, of course. Had to be. Maybe a freak lightning discharge—St. Elmo's fire or something like that. But probably there's a high-power line come down there or something of the sort. Poor drunken fool blundered into it trying to run from his pink elephants, and we were in too great a funk by it all to realize what was happening."

He pulled the Packard onto a turnout.

"I don't want to go back there," the girl said resolutely.

"Well, I'm not relishing it myself," he mut-

tered, starting to back the car.

"No! There's danger there you don't understand!"

"Rot, Kirsten. Stop acting like a frightened child."

The mist shimmered with a blue-white glow. Kirsten screamed.

"More lightning!" he growled, hitting the accelerator. The roadster slung gravel and lurched back onto the roadway.

Lambent flame in the mist ahead of them—harsh incandescence that burned through the fog. Floating on the white-opaque mist—a pair of eyes, glowing like white-hot steel. Materializing in front of them—an obscene phantom of flame—a fantastic lizard-shape. Its jaws gape wide—a sudden shrill hiss . . .

The driver howled in death-agony, throwing stumps of hands in front of seared and blackened face.

The Packard hurtled from the road—snapping the guardrail. The cacophony of splintered trees, smashing boulders, and tearing metal drowned out all else and seemed to go on forever.

II. Absinthe and Death

In a rundown stucco cottage in Vestal, Compton Moore sat with a glass of absinthe in one hand and a Luger in the other. He considered the tall glass with its opalescent liqueur, then the cold black automatic with its walnut grips. It was fitting, he thought, with that somber and poetic introspection that comes upon a man late at

night and deep in drink.

Yes, it was all entirely fitting. Vestal, unwanted stepchild of Knoxville, half-caste bastard community the city would not annex, instead grew around and ignored. This tawdry house, part of a cheap suburban development project that went bust in the Depression along with everyone else. Half the houses remained unfinished in their gullied and weedgrown lots, shunned even by vagrants. This one had been finished—a shabby stucco eyesore of what the developers had called variously Roman or Moorish architecture, and named the rutted dirt lanes things like “Via Roma” or “Castille Lane.” The shoddy structure was already falling apart, going the way of all bright and glittering dreams.

And here he sat in a broken-sprung chair, in a dirty room with crumbling plaster and threadbare fake-oriental carpet. His blond hair turned prematurely thin, a stained lounging jacket covering an athletically slim frame that had gone softly to seed. Only these two objects had substance and reality: Absinthe, that slow, insidious poison, a taste for which he had cultivated in the old days of wealth and refined decadence. The Luger, sleek and deadly, all that remained of his days of courage and glory, a winged knight fighting the Hun dragon in the skies of France to win the war that would end all wars.

God, but wasn't it fitting! “*Dulce et decorum est . . .*” he quoted to himself, taking another long sip of absinthe. A witchery of distilled dream in the bitter, heavy sweetness of anise perfume. With practiced ease he pressed the

magazine release catch of the Luger, examined the clip with its eight 9 mm. cartridges, replaced the magazine. One would be enough; he wouldn't miss.

His shadowed blue eyes again stared at the evening *News-Sentinel*, lying crumpled on the dirty carpet beside his chair. At this distance his vision was no longer keen enough to read beyond the headlines, but he had long since committed every word to memory.

FIERY CRASH CLAIMS NOTED OCCULTIST AND FIANCEE

DILLON, N.C. The brilliant career of noted occultist, John Chance, ended tragically yesterday in a late night auto crash not far from this small mountain community. The tragedy also claimed the life of Miss Kirsten von Brocken, Dr. Chance's fiancée and research assistant.

There were no witnesses to the crash, which local authorities estimate to have occurred shortly before midnight. Apparently Chance, who was driving Miss von Brocken's late model Packard, lost control on a curve and plunged down the steep mountain slope. While thick fog delayed discovery of the accident for several hours, local authorities state that the couple was killed instantly. Their automobile was totally demolished and the bodies burned beyond recognition. Identification was made from personal effects.

Chance, 37, was a native of Knoxville who spent much of his life abroad. Prior to Amer-

ica's active entry in the World War, he flew for the R.F.C. and was credited with 18 victories before crashing behind lines. Reported dead, he survived German prison hospitals to escape shortly before Armistice. In 1920, sole heir to the Chance estate, he liquidated his family's extensive holdings in the munitions industry with the avowed intention to devote his life and fortune in the study of the underlying causes that drive men to make war. In the years of globetrotting that followed, he earned doctorate degrees in Anthropology and Psychology, and studied in numerous prestigious universities and institutes. He was considered one of the world's foremost authorities in the esoteric realms of parapsychology and legitimate occult phenomena, as well as a scholar of folk myths and superstitions. He was the author of several books, among them *Supernatural or Paranormal?* and *The Veil of Superstition*.

Miss von Brocken, 30, was the daughter of an ancient and distinguished Prussian house. She became a naturalized American citizen following the recent move to the political forefront of National-Socialism in Germany. Miss von Brocken, considered herself to have significant clairvoyant abilities, had for several years assisted Dr. Chance in his research. The couple met in Berlin while Dr. Chance was studying there and had traveled extensively. They only recently had returned to Knoxville to announce their engagement.

Funeral arrangements are incomplete.

Moore took another long sip of absinthe, letting its licorice fire blaze through his senses. Yes, incomplete, he thought with a bitter smile. But not for long. He glared at the newspaper photo of Chance, standing big and uncomfortable in dinner dress, with Kirsten on his arm, a poised blonde goddess in her daring black evening gown. God, why had he stayed in Knoxville . . .

He set aside the tall glass, gripped the knurled knobs of the Luger's toggle joint in his free hand, pulled back sharply and released—watching the gleam of brass as the 9 mm. cartridge was driven into the firing chamber. *Geladen.*

Moore recovered his glass and grimly considered the loaded automatic. He remembered the day he had claimed the Luger from the broken body of the Fokker pilot whose triplane he had sent spinning broken-winged to earth on the Allied side. Kill number ten for him. He and Chance had gotten gloriously drunk.

What friends they had been—two idealistic scions of American industrial wealth, off on a lark to destroy the Hun—before the War changed them both. He remembered the shock of their reunion after Chance had crawled through Hell to escape from that German prison hospital. It was a haggard, demon-haunted John Chance who had returned from that ordeal—a driven man, obsessed with half-mad theories and vaguely hinted-at memories of his experiences. Moore in those intervening months had followed his natural talents toward dissipation, and in the whirl of alcohol, drugs, and women was scarcely bothered with the knowledge that for him killing had become the greatest thrill of all.

Strangely, they had not drifted apart entirely after the war. While Chance went from university to university, and Moore squandered his family fortune in the casinos and vice dens of the world, their paths occasionally crossed. So it was in Berlin in 1929.

Moore had been drawn to Berlin by the splendid decadence of that city's frenzied bacchanalia, where the vices of the old aristocracy and the new intelligentsia promised surcease from even his ennui. Chance had gravitated there in his peripatetic quest from one intellectual center to another, searching for answers that seemed forever hidden. It was Moore who introduced Chance to Kirsten von Brocken.

The Gräfin von Brocken had a wide circle of admirers, of whom Compton Moore was perhaps most ardent. She was a spiritualist, a crystal-gazer—whose aristocratic beauty was all the more sensational for the aura of mysticism in which she cloaked herself. Men hovered moth-like about her presence when she appeared at the cabaret or theatre, at Bohemian revels or dinner parties of the social elite. With that hint of notoriety that guaranteed social triumph, the Gräfin had conquered Berlin that summer, and to be permitted to attend a séance at her apartment was an honor jealously sought after by the blood and chivalry of the city.

Moore had spent many long summer evenings hovering near the Gräfin's flame. Did she love him? She invited; she retreated—as with all the others. *He* was certain he was in love with her. All of her admirers, after all, were in love with

her—from stolid old General von Hoffmannsthal to that consumptive Austrian artist Meier.

Then a sudden encounter with John Chance, and in a gush of enthusiasm Moore had described Kirsten and invited him along to a séance. Chance went along solemnly skeptical, came away thoughtful and impressed. She and Chance saw more of one another thereafter, soon to the exclusion of Kirsten's previous admirers—Moore as well.

The summer burned away. Chance was a fascinating man and could speak with calm authority on esoteric and recondite matters wherein he and Kirsten shared interest. Moore never learned who it was that told Kirsten about the Luger and holster where dark stains could still be seen of her brother's blood.

Eventually frantic telegrams from the States had forced him back to Knoxville to give belated attention to his family investments. The Crash did its work too well for his distracted and incapable management. Enough remained to keep him out of the bread lines, but not much more. Ten years of frenzied dissipation had left him with a legacy of debts and bitter memories. Work was out of the question, assuming employment were available—or that he desired it. Moore was a first-rate combat pilot, but other than his wartime experience the closest he had come to working for a living involved no more physical effort than the clipping of stock coupons.

The contents of his safe deposit vault and the sale of family property had allowed him to drift

along for a few years—"a gentleman of the world in reduced circumstances." From time to time he received a letter from old acquaintances, read an item in the papers—enough to know Kirsten von Brocken and John Chance had not outgrown their fascination for one another. When Chance recently returned to Knoxville with news of their engagement, Moore had not troubled to call upon them.

Well that was all over with now, too. Moore drained the last swallow of the pungent liqueur. He reflected that he had gone on living these last few years solely from inertia anyway—that and the faint hope of the gambler that his luck would change. It hadn't.

He tossed the empty glass at the living room's nonoperable fireplace. As he raised the Luger to his temple he wondered if the pistol's former owner would rest more easily in his grave knowing his weapon had at last avenged him.

Moore pulled the trigger.

The blast was deafening in the small room, but he never fully heard it. The high-velocity jacketed slug tore through his right temple, barely expanding as it pulped his brain and blew out the left side of his skull. The Luger recoiled from nerveless fingers, as the shock of the bullet flung him sidewise in the overstuffed chair, sprawling him in a heap on the rug.

From a disembodied vantage he seemed to look down over his corpse—blood and gore matting the thin blond hair, the pale blue eyes staring dreamily at nothing, the aquiline features set in a startled grimace, the long-limbed frame sprawled ludicrously half in and half out of the

chair, soaking the red carpet with a darker stain. It looked very little like the alert, rangy young man in aviator's togs who smiled down from the old photograph on the mantel.

The door swung silently open. Silent as a shadow, a figure entered. A man dressed entirely in black. Unhurriedly he crossed the shabby living room, looked down at the grotesquely sprawled corpse.

"Get up," the figure commanded.

Compton Moore picked himself up, slumped back in the chair—stared at the figure in fear. "Are you death?" he asked in an awestricken whisper.

"I am Dread."

Shakily Moore raised a hand to his temple. There was no pain, no blood, no wound. In stunned bewilderment he stared at his uncanny visitor.

The stranger stood well over six feet in height and was clad solely in black from boots to turtleneck jersey. Powerful muscles flexed beneath the close-fitting garments, belying the silver-white of his combed-back hair and trim beard. His features were hidden behind a mask of black metal that concealed the upper portion of his face from high forehead to just below the cheekbone. The featureless metal mask reminded Moore suddenly of the robot's face in that strange movie he had seen in Berlin—*Metropolis*. The mouth beneath the mask was thin-lipped, the bearded jaw almost pointed. Through slits in the mask, eyes so dark as to

seem almost entirely pupil regarded him with unwavering intensity. Moore thought of a cat's stare across a darkened room.

"I don't understand," Moore managed to stammer. "What's happened? Who are you? I thought . . ."

The figure extended a black-gloved hand. The long fingers held out a small metallic object, gleaming like gold. It was a copper-jacketed 9 mm. slug, grooved from the rifling of a gun barrel.

Moore reached uncertainly for the bullet. The black fist closed over it, and a cruel laugh stopped his movement.

"That bullet killed you, Compton Moore," came a mocking whisper. "Have you forgotten?"

"Killed . . .?"

"You no longer wanted your life, Compton Moore," the derisive voice continued. "You threw it away. But I have use for your life, Compton Moore—and so I have claimed you."

Moore felt his brain whirling in a vortex of madness. He remembered—vividly remembered—the black despair, the decision, the gun against his temple, the shot exploding his consciousness into dissolving agony, the disembodied vision of his corpse . . . His fingers clutched the arms of his chair, clinging to reality.

"What are you!"

"But I've already told you, Compton Moore. I am Dread. And you are my creature."

The masked face gazed down at him, lips drawn in a demonic smile. "You thought to die, but I forbade it. What you would cast away, I

have claimed. You are mine, Compton Moore. You will obey me without fail—whenever and whatsoever I command. My will is yours and your life is mine, nor shall you again die except by my will.”

The gloved fingers held the grooved bullet before his swimming vision. “Through my power I have altered fate,” the sibilant voice continued. “Fate ordained that this bullet should blow out your pitiful brains. But the hand of Dread has halted fate and plucked the fatal bullet from its course. For so long as it is my will, this bullet shall remain in timeless limbo. For that space, Compton Moore, you shall live to serve me well.

“But listen well, Compton Moore! Fail to obey me—let your heart even think of rebellion—and this bullet will complete the fatal mission on which you yourself have sent it!”

A sudden flame of desperate rebellion stirred through him, and Moore recoiled like a cornered, terror-stricken animal. Clumsily he grabbed for the bullet. Satanic laughter mocked him, as the black-gloved fist checked his lunge with a numbing blow—and Compton Moore sprawled into oblivion.

A knocking at the door aroused him. Automatically Moore picked himself up, pulled his thoughts together. He ran his fingers unthinkingly through his disarranged blond hair—then with a start glanced at his hand. No—no blood, no gobbets of brain and shattered bone.

His head ached. The liqueur? Absinthe was treacherous. On the tile hearth lay the broken

glass. The ice cubes were only starting to melt. Beside the chair lay the Luger. Its barrel felt warm. Shuddering, he dropped it into the pocket of his lounge jacket—not daring to check the clip.

The knocking persisted, more forcefully.

Dully he turned toward the door. Something rolled beneath his slipper. Something brass-bright. It was a fired 9 mm. Parabellum case.

“Oh, my God . . .” Moore swayed, caught himself.

The knocking was louder.

Like an automaton, Moore stumbled to the door. His mind refused to grapple with anything more than the need to answer that summons. He fumbled with the knob.

The door swung open. The full moon was bright in the yard.

John Chance stood on his threshold.

III. Resurrection

Compton Moore uttered a strangled cry, and the cold circle of the moon swung like a pendulum. He would have fallen—but John Chance leapt forward and caught him.

“Steady, old fellow!” muttered Chance, supporting him as he crumpled. “I’m sorry—I should have prepared you for the shock!” Like a bouncer with a belligerent drunk, he swung the loose-kneed man around and marched him to the chair he had just quit.

Moore collapsed where he left him—slumped

in shock, his soul tottering on the edge of madness. Even the most ordered mind can endure only so much stress before fragmenting into gibbering insanity, and Moore had never been considered a stable personality. Without recognition, his staring eyes watched Chance fumble through the clutter of empty bottles about the liquor cabinet.

"Oh." Moore heard his voice speak in slow tones of understanding. "Oh. So you're dead too, John. Is Kirsten here with us?"

Chance looked up at him in sharp concern, finally found a passed-over bottle of cheap scotch and sloshed its oily contents into a dirty tumbler. Tennessee had never repealed the Prohibition, but from the array of bottles he saw that Moore was an old and valued customer of the area's still thriving bootleggers.

"Here! Drink it down!" Chance held the full tumbler to the other's lips, and Moore automatically gulped it down.

It must have been half paint thinner, but Moore drank it like milk. "Wouldn't he let you die either, John?" he asked calmly—his voice steadier.

Chance emptied the dregs of the scotch into the glass, handed it again to Moore, who swallowed it without flinching. He lay back in the chair, closed his eyes and gave a shuddering sigh. "Is Kirsten coming in, too?"

But Chance had caught the scent of anise on his breath, noted the shattered tumbler with its spatter of melting ice. He examined the empty absinthe bottle. Opalescent dreams and green

venom in 170 proof. He watched the raw scotch cut through its grey mists, wondering what madness lurked behind.

"I'm as alive as you are, Compton," he began. Badly.

Moore caught his breath in a sob, not opening his eyes. "Am I alive, then?" he laughed bitterly.

Chance sighed wearily and dropped into a chair to wait. He was a big man, though it took a second glance to realize that—for his two hundred pounds were compactly distributed over his big-boned six-foot frame, hard muscle and sinew without apparent bulk. Too, he moved with the quick stride and gestures of a smaller, more wiry man, rather than the ponderous self-assuredness usually associated with strength and bulk. The suns and winds of seven continents and at least as many oceans had weathered his skin to a worn, leathery brown, flawed with sudden streaks of pale scar. His hair was black and straight and thick, and always seemed in need of trimming. His forehead was wide and intelligent despite the rawboned quality of his features. A second glance would also notice that the straight nose and square jaw were somehow not right, and a third glance might note the fine scars of reconstructive surgery. Deep-set eyes of startling blue were watchful beneath thick brows.

Moore's breath came less ragged.

"I'm sorry. I wish I could have given you some sort of warning," Chance repeated, judging that the sedative effect of the alcohol had finally dulled the shock. "Of course I'm still alive. The radio carried a late bulletin—I thought you

would have heard. I'd have phoned, but you don't have a line." Looking about the dingy room, he didn't see a radio either.

"I thought we were all dead," said Moore, eyes still closed.

Chance cut him off. "Kirsten's alive, too—at least I think she's still alive!"

Moore's eyes snapped open. "Alive?" he whispered.

"She's in danger, Compton. Deadly danger. But I know for certain she didn't die in that crash last night! Compton, you've got to help me find her!"

"I've got to help you?" Compton muttered thickly.

"There's something at work here that I can't attempt to explain to the police!" Chance pressed him, reaching out to shake him to alertness. "Something sinister—an evil whose nature and extent their workaday minds could never begin to grasp. They'd call me a madman or hophead—at best make routine and useless inquiries. Damn you, Compton—you're the only man here I can turn to if Kirsten can be saved!"

With sudden strength, Moore pushed the other man's hands away from his shoulders. "John, this is all moving just a little too fast for my brain, and even for a nightmare this is making no sense. Who *is* dead, then?"

"John Wingfield and some girl I can't identify—but I know it isn't Kirsten. And probably a mining engineer named Cullin Shelton was killed too."

"I think you'd better start at the beginning," Moore said, getting to his feet uncertainly. "There's coffee in the kitchen. Who's John Wingfield?"

"A friend from New York—or rather, a friend of Kirsten's," Chance amended, following him into the cramped kitchen-dinette. "I didn't know him all that well. He was one of her former satellites—part of a mixed bag of old acquaintances we'd had down for the week for a homecoming-engagement party sort of affair."

Moore boiled water. He remembered tearing the invitation into tiny fragments and burning them into fine white ash.

"Wingfield hung around awhile after the general festivities—still not giving up the chase, I suppose. But Kirsten knows so few friends here, and she enjoyed the attention. Yesterday I drove over to Cherokee to try to follow up some bits of Indian legend concerning the lost mines of the Ancients that are said to lie hidden in the mountains here. As luck had it, an afternoon shower left me mired to the door latches on some God-forsaken trail I had no business attempting by car. Eventually I hiked out to a phone, called Kirsten the news—then spent the evening and half this morning slogging the machine out to the road with a team of mules. I limped back to Knoxville by afternoon to learn I was supposed to be dead."

Chance frowned and went on. "On my desk there was a quick note from Kirsten to the effect that a man named Cullin Shelton, a mining engineer, had phoned yesterday evening from

Dillon. Sounded like he had his wind up, and he begged for me to drive over to meet him right away. Said he had the information I'd been asking around about. Kirsten thought it was important, and talked Wingfield into driving her up to Dillon in the middle of the night. Doubt it took much persuading him."

Moore poured out black coffee into a pair of cracked cups. "And Wingfield drove off the road in the fog and killed them both," he finished for him. "The car identified Kirsten, and with the connection what was left of Wingfield looked enough like you to fool some backwoods medical examiner."

Not seeming to notice the scalding heat, Chance swallowed the sour java. "I drove up to Dillon as soon as I found out," he stated. "That took some people by surprise."

"I imagine."

"The Packard was a total wreck, but it didn't burn—not at the crash site. There was a lot of mashed-up rhododendron, but not a single scorched blossom on the slope. Oh, somebody had set fire to the wreck afterward—after it had been towed up the ridge—but the tank had punctured, and there was barely enough gas to peel the finish and scorch the upholstery."

Moore refilled his cup. The coffee set his teeth on edge, but cleared his head. "I thought the bodies were burned beyond recognition."

"They were." Chance's seamed brow furrowed at the memory. "The corpses looked like they'd been through an electric-arc furnace. Remember the poor burned devils we saw in the War?

Remember how clothing cakes into the melting flesh and forms a sort of scab? Well, they've got some nice and clean charred clothing in the morgue there, but it still smells of the gasoline someone sloshed on the heap to ignite it. Hell—heat intense enough to burn bone to near ash—and there's still sections of unmelted elastic left!"

Choking down a third cup of coffee, Moore felt his thoughts begin to steady. He forced himself to concentrate on Chance's incredible account. "Electricity can play tricks like that," he suggested. "I saw a man hit by lightning once—barely raised a blister on his skin, but he was charred meat inside. Did they hit a power line?"

Chance swore. "That's what the local constabulary said when I pointed out the discrepancy in the degree of incineration. And when I pointed out that there were no power lines where the car went over, they told me it must have been lightning. Lots of freak lightning in the hills this season, it seems."

"Well, maybe it was lightning."

"There's too many things that still don't follow. Like the identification of the bodies."

"Well, surely with your logic you convinced them you weren't one of the victims," Moore commented acidly. His head was throbbing suddenly and his stomach was knotting itself.

"On going back over the crash site we found Wingfield's dinner jacket with his billfold inside—must have had it off, and it flew off under the rhododendron when they rolled. That might have been an honest mistake in identification."

"Kirsten?" Moore asked finally.

"The girl they say is Kirsten—well, there's not much left to identify. Skull and jaw were completely crushed—forget dental work." Chance drew a breath and thrust his hands in the pockets of his rumpled tweeds. "But they'd made a token effort at autopsy there. They'd opened the chest and abdominal cavities. Heat may char limbs to ashes and bone to cinder—but the internal organs maintain relative integrity. At least their positions don't shift."

Chance paused for understanding to light. Moore had been one of Kirsten's intimate circle of friends, and this had been an amusement to her.

"Good lord!" Moore exploded in sudden awareness. "Kirsten had complete *situs inversus*! Her heart was on the *right* side of her body—she always thought it was a fine jest!"

Chance nodded. "This girl's body had the heart on the left side. It was a blunder they couldn't possibly have allowed for."

"But why! Why this ghastly charade!"

"Because Kirsten is still alive—and she knows something important enough to kill for!" said Chance grimly. "Cullin Shelton 'left town' last night, no forwarding address. No one knows a thing. But there's a sooty smear of burned animal grease on the curb in front of the Dillon Hotel where Shelton had his room. And wedged between the passenger door and the running board of the wreck I found this." Chance tossed a knotted handkerchief to the kitchen table.

Gingerly Moore unwrapped it. Inside was a

charred human finger—a man's gold wedding band fixed into the cindered flesh.

“Wingfield's?”

“Not hardly.”

Moore pushed the thing away. His stomach had endured enough.

Chance struggled to pull together the pieces of the puzzle for him. “Ever since I've been back I've been hearing vague hints of trouble in the mountains—strange things you can't quite pin down. I wouldn't have paid attention if it weren't my life's work to note and study the inexplicable and the unusual. Lately I've learned someone has been making serious efforts to learn the secrets of the lost mines of the Ancients. Sure there have been a lot of people interested in this legend—except there appears to be a sinister purpose behind this exploration. Shelton was a mining engineer hired by someone to delve into this matter. Shelton, I'm convinced, is dead.

“Cullin Shelton had something to tell me,” Chance counted it off. “Something important enough that he died horribly trying to tell it. He met Kirsten and Wingfield—they must have discovered something from him. So the thing killed again—whoever and whatever it is. But somehow Kirsten escaped. To prevent a search for her, someone went to a great deal of effort to make it appear she had died in the crash along with, supposedly, me.”

“But why haven't you heard from Kirsten in all this time?”

Chance's blue eyes smouldered. “Because she's either trapped somewhere hiding from

them—or else they've got her and . . .”

No need to finish that, assuming Chance's logic, Moore reflected. “But why all this inhuman murder and mysterious plotting?” he protested. “Who would do it?”

Chance sighed and dug out a cheroot. “I suppose it's time to try to tell you about a creature who calls himself Dread.”

Moore choked on a sudden rush of bile and collapsed on the floor.

IV. Hunted

Kirsten von Brocken pressed her slim body closer against the angle of the rock, staring back toward the direction of the sound. It had come from back upstream, an eerie ululation echoing down the boulder-strewn ravine. The small mountain stream along which she fled roared and rushed down its rocky bed, making it difficult to hear sounds of pursuit.

There—again. That uncanny howl, closer now at hand.

Kirsten shivered. Her bruised and weary limbs were barely capable of holding her erect after hours of clambering over rocks and tree trunks. She pulled herself further into the crevice of overturned boulders, knowing there possibly was no hope either of eluding or hiding from the thing that hunted her in the deepening twilight.

The night before was impressed in her memory with the blurred unreality of a nightmare.

The moment of horror on the mountain road

—the salamander glowing in its elemental flame
—John Wingfield's hideous death as the fire-elemental turned its wrath on him. Kirsten's inbred fear of fire made the terror of the crash dwindle in comparison—for she had escaped Wingfield's fate by an instant when the Packard veered and hurtled from the roadway.

The heavy roadster had clipped the guardrail and pitched nose-first down the steep incline. A tree smashed into its hood almost instantly, overturning the Packard and sending it rolling and bounding over the rocky slope. That first collision threw Kirsten from the open car and into the dense thicket of rhododendron that covered the mountainside. The resilient tangle of rhododendron cushioned her impact as the car bounded and flung itself past her, narrowly missing her limp form. The girl's head struck the soft earth with stunning force. Blackness engulfed her terror and pain, and she never heard the heavy car careen past her and smash itself into twisted wreckage down the slopes of the ravine far below.

After an indefinite space of deep blackness, Kirsten awoke to the sound of distant voices. Men's voices, calling back and forth. Slowly she opened her eyes, trying to collect her thoughts. From instinct she remained still.

Her forehead ached terribly and she seemed bruised in every limb, but the thick branches of the rhododendron had broken her fall onto the dense leafmold of the hillside. Carefully she touched her fingers to her forehead. She winced. A branch had left a bad bruise there, but she was

lucky she hadn't broken her neck. Gingerly she moved her other limbs. She was sore, but no bones seemed broken.

Memory came back to her in a rush of horror. The salamander—was it . . .? But no. The night was chill and dark. No loathsome creature of flame sought her through its mists. The elemental had vanished, and instead men's voices pierced the mists. Someone had found the wreck; they would help her.

Kirsten started to call out, but her voice felt too shaky for words. She paused a moment to compose herself—and had time to grasp the words of the unseen searchers.

"Chance is finished right enough!" someone shouted nasally from the slope far below. "What's left of him is jammed against the steering column like a piece of shish kebab! No sign of the skirt though!"

"Sure she's not in the wreckage?" another voice demanded, not too many yards from where she lay.

"Damn right I'm sure!" came the answer. "Ain't nowhere in this heap of scrap iron she could be stuck! Ain't even any blood I can see!"

The nearer voice swore. "Then she must've been thrown out when they rolled. Bring your lights back up and look careful for the body. We got to find it before anyone else stops to see about that busted guardrail."

"What if she's still alive?" a third voice from below wanted to know. The new voice had a mountain twang.

"Bust her head in with a rock or something. If

we go back and she's still alive, Dread will feed *us* to that pet of his!"

Kirsten's heart stopped at the sound of that name. These weren't rescuers. They were some of Dread's henchmen. And she had almost called out to them . . .

She had to get away. Already she could see the yellow beams of electric torches searching through the fog below. They were backtracking along the path torn through the undergrowth by the car's plunge. The dense leaves and blossoms of the rhododendron thicket had hidden her unconscious body from them minutes before, but now they were searching carefully through the broken branches.

The afternoon rain had left the ground spongy and damp. No leaves cracked as Kirsten stealthily edged away from the path of the wreck. The twisted loops of rhododendron branches made a labyrinthine crawlspace beneath their dense outer foliage. As quickly as she dared, the girl slithered away beneath their shelter.

She could glimpse the murky figures of the searchers as they climbed toward her. She prayed that a chance beam of light wouldn't pick out her white body beneath the leaves. Twigs tore at her silk frock, and in her haste branches shook and stones scraped as she wriggled to escape. It seemed impossible that they hadn't heard her—but there were several men noisily stamping about along the slope, and the fog muffled her furtive movements.

"No sign of her!" the nasal voice bawled out, more distant now. She had made considerable

progress through the sheltering underbrush.

"Well, she's got to be here somewhere!" cursed the man who seemed to be in charge. His tone sounded round and soft. "Spread out and find her!"

Kirsten crawled several yards farther from the searchers. But now the rhododendron bank was thinning out, and in a moment she broke into open forest. Rising to her feet, she saw the lights of the searchers in the distance—perhaps a hundred yards away. It hurt to stand and her side ached, but fright dulled her pain. She only knew she must get away from this place and these men. Quickly.

Her heels catching in the loose soil, Kirsten fled stumbling down the mountainside. The night became delirium fraught with panic. In the thick mist she could only dimly see her way. Time and again an unseen root or clutching tree branch caught at her, sent her reeling to the ground. The agony in her skull throbbed ever more intensely, bursting to white pain each time she fell. Vaguely she realized that she was completely lost, that she ought to stop and make some effort to get her bearings, wait for help to come. But always she remembered who else sought her in the fog-hidden mountains, and fear sent her stumbling onward.

Until, finally, when she fell and tried to rise, her legs were too exhausted for terror to lend further strength. Gasping for breath, Kirsten had managed to drag herself into the cover of another rhododendron bank before consciousness left her.

She had lain there in a stupor until dawn. With daylight Kirsten awoke from her nightmare-haunted sleep to stare about her in confused fear. Memory returned, and with it the realization that she was totally lost in these desolate mountains where horror yet stalked her. The purling of a stream close by made her aware of her intense thirst. Unsteadily she hauled herself to her feet and made her way down the bank of rhododendron to the small stream that cascaded along the bottom of the ravine.

The tumbling stream was cold and clear as ice, and a thin mist hovered over it in the early morning light. Its rocky bed, a chaotic jumble of polished boulders and gravel, made a thousand tiny waterfalls and pools. Kirsten was reminded of her native Harz Mountains, as she knelt to suck in the crystal water.

Her body felt lame and sore, and she was covered with dirt and dried blood. Her green silk dress was stained and ragged, and somewhere in the night she had lost one shoe entirely and snapped the heel off the other. Kirsten grimaced at her reflection and splashed water on her bruised and grimy face. The cold water stung her skin and drove the clouds of night-horror from her hair. Quickly she pulled off her torn frock and lacy silk shimmy, kicked off her remaining shoe and peeled off her tattered stockings—then waded into the pool. The icy stream took her breath away as she briskly splashed about.

Moments later when she stepped out, her skin was numb and tingling, but she felt refreshed. Washed clean, her white figure was marred with

purple-green bruises and livid red scratches. But she at least had a whole skin, Kirsten mused grimly—so far.

She felt a pang of sorrow over Wingfield's hideous death, now that the shock of it was receding enough for thought of anything other than panic-spurred flight. Poor Wingfield had been a persistent admirer, though she had never cared for him except as a social partner. Her expressed concern over Cullin Shelton's phone call had spurred him to take over Chance's role and investigate for her sake. In an indirect manner, Kirsten felt responsible for his death. But for the moment her own danger demanded full attention.

Making a bundle of her shredded stockings and broken-heeled shoe, Kirsten waded back out to hide them under a rock at the bottom of the pool. Shaking herself dry, she rested on a smooth boulder and finger-combed her short blonde hair—looking like a bobbed and battered Lorelei in the midst of the cascading stream. The morning chill covered her lithe body with goose-pimples, and the sun was driving off the mists. Again she remembered the wild forests of the Harz Mountains. It seemed impossible that a supernatural horror of another age could shadow the unspoiled freedom of this mountain wilderness . . . Kirsten knew otherwise.

She wriggled her silken shimmy onto her still damp skin, fastidiously brushed dirt and leaves from her torn frock before getting dressed. The rounded gravel bruised her bare feet, but there was no help for that. Someone had once told her

that the thing to do when lost was to find a river or such and follow it downstream, as it would eventually go past some habitation. Having no other ideas, Kirsten had decided to put this advice to the test. Resolutely she began to make her way along the streambed.

The sun appeared over the tops of the trees, grew high overhead, then began its decline. Kirsten was exhausted and hungry, the soles of her tiny feet were bruised and sore from clambering over the rocks. Twice she had come upon major forks in the stream; once she took the left branch, next time the right. She must have wandered for miles along the streambed without catching sight of any sign of civilization.

Bleakly she had forced herself to keep moving, frequently wading along the shallows to throw off pursuit. If Dread suspected she had lived, Kirsten knew he would seek her. Chance had only begun to grasp the extent of Dread's powers—only had recently found confirmation of his vague suspicions of Dread's presence in these mountains. But Kirsten realized that if Dread were hunting her, it would take more than running water to hide her trail.

Her knowledge of American history and geography was spotty—learned from books rather than culturally acquired. She knew the southern Appalachians were a desolate region. The Depression had sent a good number of its inhabitants elsewhere in a hopeless search for security, and the Rockefellers had recently bought up vast stretches of the mountains to turn into a national park. While she was aware that marauding Indi-

ans no longer hunted white men here as they did in Karl May's thrilling novels, nonetheless, it still was very possible to get lost in these mountains and never be found. And there were bears, probably mountain lions . . . Kirsten kept moving.

As twilight overtook her, the girl paused to rest her fatigued limbs. Each step had been agony for her stone-bruised feet. She had munched handfuls of blackberries from the thickets that grew along the streambed. Blackberries had been her only nourishment, and they barely assuaged her hunger. The sun had been warm on her shoulders, but now with twilight the chill mountain breeze was biting through her thin silk dress. Kirsten shivered and wished again for the lighter in her lost handbag. She hated fire, but right now a fire would have been welcome.

Then she heard the eerie howl, echoing along the rocky streambed. She froze in terror. The sound came from back along the direction she had wandered. Could it have been the wind?

Again the ululant cry, closer.

Desperately Kirsten forced her overtaxed legs to stumble a few score yards farther downstream. The pain of her feet made her gasp through clenched teeth. Her knees were rubbery with exhaustion. Flight was hopeless.

Dragging her fatigue-racked body into the damp shadow where two massive boulders leaned together, Kirsten waited in heart-stopping fear for her pursuer to appear.

The howling came closer. She could hear the crunch of a heavy tread on the polished gravel, approaching her refuge.

V. Shadow of Dread

John Chance stood pensively gazing at Moore's bookshelves, waiting for the other man to return. From the bathroom, sounds of dry-retching no longer grated, and he could hear water running in the sink. Chance drew down a thick black volume stamped in red and gold. He was paging through it when Moore returned.

"I see you have Guy Endore's new translation of Hanns Heinz Ewers' *Alraune*," Chance commented. "Do you know Ewers?"

Moore found a cigarette and struggled to light it. His face was drawn and pallid, his lips a bloodless line. The hand that held the match shook a little, but his red-rimmed eyes were sober.

"I met Ewers socially in Berlin," he answered. "At Kirsten's mostly. We hit it off pretty well, but I wouldn't call him a bosom friend."

Chance nodded. "He's a fascinating man—a genius, however twisted. We've talked together throughout the night a time or two. I've never been sure where the line between genius and madness lies with Ewers."

He read aloud from the opening lines of *Alraune*:

"'You cannot deny, my dear friend, that there are in existence creatures who are neither man nor beast, but strange unearthly creations, born of the nefarious passions that arise in distorted minds.'"

Chance thoughtfully closed the book and returned it to the shelf. "I've often thought of those lines," he said, "as an apt portrayal of Dread."

Producing a lighter from the pocket of his tweed trousers, Chance reignited the cheroot he'd set aside an hour earlier when Moore had collapsed. Harsh whiskey and strong coffee had first rallied his old friend's sanity, then purged his benumbed senses. Chance judged Moore to be rational enough now, though not long ago he had conjectured whether or not this time the man had pushed himself past the brink.

But then, Chance reflected, he had himself been past the brink. And, after a fashion, he had returned.

"I don't remember very much of the first few months after the crash," he began, involuntarily rubbing his artist's fingers over the hairline scars that seamed his face. "You were there when that Fokker dropped onto my tail out of the sun over the Somme. Ironically it was ground fire that did it for me—after I leveled off from the dive that tore the tripe's wings off. I got hit over the trenches and went into a spin. Low. Full engine. Hit the mud like a shell going off. Reported dead.

"Instead I went out of the cockpit into mud hip-deep when I smashed. The Huns were amazed when they pulled what was left of me out of the slime and found I was still alive. It was novelty enough to rate evacuation from the field hospital to a special hospital deep in the Harz Mountains.

"Jerry was interested even then in 'superior beings'—wondered what made a fellow tick who

could survive all I'd been through. I won't attempt to go into the things that were done—a lot of it I have no memory of myself, thank God! They rebuilt me from the scrap parts I was—stuck me back together, taking microscope slides and lab notes each step of the way. I suppose I should be grateful to those soulless doctors for saving my life. I'm not, really.

“There were others of us there—other ‘experimental subjects.’ I think most of them died—or I hope they did. I later learned that the Germans had destroyed all records of that hospital shortly before the Armistice.

“I became friends of a sort with one of my fellow inmates—a Dr. Gerhard Modred. I never learned all that much about his life before the War—we were all a bit distant and reticent. But I gathered he'd been an up-and-coming physician and researchist. Volunteered as a battlefront surgeon. Shells don't recognize red crosses, and the Huns picked what was left of him up after a successful push.

“Dr. Modred was not one of their most successful reconstructions. I never saw him except with his upper face enswathed in bandages. I think he rather resented the fact that the surgeons used techniques perfected on such as him to reconstruct my own physiognomy.

“The hospital was in an old half-ruined castle—isolated in the Harz. The Huns didn't want publicity. There were certain experiments . . . But I'd rather not dwell on it. Many of us died and were better so. It was somewhat like a transition back into the dark ages . . .

“Dr. Modred and I used to discuss this at length. Oh, they gave us some little freedom—liberty to bemoan our plight among ourselves. I’m certain none of us were ever intended to be released, regardless of the outcome of the War. Modred was an incredibly well-read, erudite person. In my sophomoric flush, I felt rather his disciple. Modred would go on for hours on his pet subjects. I always wondered how such a medievalist of Modred’s brilliance ever ended up in the area of medical research. Lord, the things we’d lie there in the darkness carrying on about—quite mad, most of it. Here in this hell-world of barbed wire, machine guns, poison gas, tanks, dysentery, aeroplanes, mud and patriotism and wholesale slaughter—Modred would rant on and on about a spiritual Hell: a Hell of actual demons and devils and elemental creatures and dark forces who shaped man’s destiny . . .

“‘Why talk of reason and free will!’ Dr. Modred would shout. ‘I’ll show you artists and accountants, Calvinists and drunkards, beggars and baronets—name the class and intellect—who’ll rise from vermin-infested trenches and march like puppets into machine gun and shell! Why? *Why!* Out of reason? Out of free will?’

“‘Damn it, man! We are not creatures of reason and of free will! We are prisoners of nameless powers and hidden forces who move us about like chess pieces! What do *they* care of our suffering? With a yawn, *they* can scrap the whole board and begin the game anew!’

“As I say, we were all a bit mad there. Dr. Modred more so than most of us, perhaps. But I

agreed with him—and that bound us together. For among these drudges, Modred and I had, in theory, volunteered to die for our personal ethical rationale. And neither of us was pleased with the blow our high aspirations had dealt us. When one seeks martyrdom, after having seen the pious smiles of the saints, it comes as a shock to see the reality of pain and death . . .

“So we were agreed on the insane injustice, the evil portent of it all. Man, we agreed, has little or no idea of the hostile cosmic forces that play with him. He believes himself to be rational, and his universe to be logical and bound by laws of science—but this is a lie. Mankind is but a struggling swimmer, perilously floating over a vortex whose depths and currents are beyond his comprehension.

“Modred and I were of like mind in these dark and pessimistic philosophies. And then we differed:

“I vowed to learn to understand these forces, so that I might combat them . . .

“Modred swore to do the same—so that he might control them.

“We escaped together one night . . . and separated. I never knew for certain whether Dr. Gerhard Modred survived the morass of mud and barbed wire and machine guns. Somehow I did make it through.”

Chance looked into the smoke of his cigar. After a moment he began again. “You know most of the rest. Later I became a student of the occult, of the paranormal—of the dark, undefined forces that move mankind and his world in

defiance of all sane logic. The obsession drove me to strange places here and abroad, to study at the feet of madmen and geniuses. And as I searched through the shadows, I now and again encountered whispers of another demon-driven madman such as I—a sinister, masked creature who called himself Dread.”

Moore dragged on his cigarette and stared at him, listening in silence. He seemed to have aged a century that night—from the bitter, self-indulgent *bon vivant* who had sought death in the face of failure and self-pity, to a man cut adrift from all certainty who now clung to life with the hopeless tenacity of a castaway holding to his broken bit of wreckage in a growing hurricane. He had sought oblivion and found instead horror.

What wonder that his closest friend whom he had grown to hate had returned to him from the dead? What marvel that this man whom the world proclaimed a brilliant scientist talked to him now in sober tones of medieval witchcraft and elder sorceries, of creatures from time’s dawn and monstrosities of depraved science, of Carsultyal and Carcosa and those who dwelt there, of the Somme and Verdun and those who died there, of ancient grimoires and suppressed tomes of forbidden research, of fiends from blackest Hell and demons spawned by man himself.

The night was haunted with soulless horror, for Chance spoke to him of Dread. And Compton Moore could only listen and believe, for earlier he had examined the Luger’s magazine and found only seven bright bullets, and he knew

that even in death there was no refuge from Dread.

VI. Death by Moonlight

The clatter of spurned gravel was a death-knell to her terrified senses. Kirsten bit her lips to stifle a scream. Polished bits of river gravel sifted down from on top of the boulder beneath which she crouched. Her keen nostrils caught an animal stench on the mountain air—then a sudden frantic scramble as something heavy slid down the smooth rock.

A black muzzle thrust into her refuge, foul breath and gnashing teeth inches from her cringing flesh. A fierce growling ululation deafened her. Kirsten screamed. The muzzle lunged closer.

Booted feet hit the gravel bar. "Hold him, Ben!" a hoarse voice yelled. "Hold him, boy!"

A beefy hand dragged at the Plott hound's collar, pulling him back from the crevice. An unshaven face peered in at her. The eyes beneath the slouch hat were round and black and nearly as close-set as the double barrels of the ten-gauge shotgun whose muzzle replaced that of the hound at the opening.

"All right now!" The voice warned, undercutting the bearhound's growl. "I reckon you'd best skin out of there!"

A human face was a relief to Kirsten—whose terror of the salamander outweighed all other fears. Friend, or one of Dread's henchmen, mattered little in that instant of relief. The barrel of

the shotgun gestured impatiently, and the girl obediently crawled out from her useless concealment.

"Well, I'll be damned!" The mountaineer whistled—then hastily: "Begging your pardon, ma'am."

Kirsten was glad at this touch of courtesy, for she was very conscious of the man's open stare. Barefoot and tousled, the falling sun made witchery of her slim figure through the torn frock of thin green silk, as she emerged like a bedraggled woodsprite from beneath the boulders. The big mountain man, roughly dressed in flannel shirt, overalls, and boots, might have been an ogre from her native Harz Mountains. He could be worse than an ogre if so inclined, Kirsten reflected, grimly aware that this was a very lonely place.

But the mountaineer lowered his stare and touched his slouch hat in rough gallantry. There was a touch of grey in his slicked-back hair, and his face was big and square. "Begging your pardon for the fright I set you, ma'am," he rumbled awkwardly. "I didn't know what old Ben was onto."

The bright black eyes studied her face. "Ma'am, I don't allow as you're any ghost since old Ben sure enough tracked you. But aren't you Kirsten von Brocken?"

His puzzled tone reassured her. "Yes, I'm Kirsten von Brocken," she smiled, pronouncing it "Kursten" as he did so as not to appear punctilious.

She stuck out her hand in the American fashion, and he clumsily shook it in his spade-like

paw. The touch seemed to relieve his aloofness.

"My name's Hampton Wells, Miss von Brock-en," he told her. "And I guess your folks'll be pleased to know that you're still alive, inasmuch as the papers all are saying you ain't. Your picture's in there right on the front page, though I don't guess I'd of called your name right off if I hadn't seen you drive up last night at Jack Martin's store."

Kirsten wondered who among the idlers he had been, puzzled at his talk of ghosts. "And I'm very glad you've found me, Mr. Wells. I've been hobbling about all day, quite lost. If there were search parties about, I'm afraid I wasn't very helpful."

There was shrewed intelligence in the eyes that studied her from beneath the hatbrim. "Weren't no search parties, Miss von Brocken," he said carefully. "There was sure enough two bodies found all burnt up in that wreck. They say one was John Chance and they say the other was you. Ain't nobody been searching for you."

He added: "Or nobody I guess you'd want finding you."

Kirsten's green eyes stared at him. She said nothing—poised like some wild creature uncertain which way to leap from the deadly danger she sensed was closing in upon her.

"There's some mistake," she stammered, knowing the evil that lurked behind the lies in the newspaper. "That wasn't John Chance who was driving—it was a friend, John Wingfield. And there was no one else with us in the car . . ."

Wells studied her for a long silent interval.

The girl was in a frightened quandary. She was

uncertain how much to confide. Would this stolid mountain man think her a raving fool if she dared be frank? Dared she trust him? And how much did Wells himself suspect of the evil that cast its dark shadow over these mountains?

Wells seemed to read her anxious thoughts. "Seems to me, Miss von Brocken," he said gently, "like someone ain't anxious that you be found. Maybe you know why that would be. I know about John Chance what they print in the papers, and I reckon could be a man like him would be interested in some of the things been happening around here lately."

"Go on," she prodded when he paused.

"Always assuming," he carefully qualified. "But if someone didn't want John Chance butt-in on something . . . Well, I guess you could better tell me just what kind of accident that was last night, and maybe why hadn't nothing been seen of Cullin Shelton since you went looking for him from Martin's. So they pulled two bodies out of that wreck, and the sheriff is satisfied—but you tell me one wasn't John Chance and you're here to show the other one wasn't you. Now then it follows that there's someone who maybe don't know that one of them ain't Chance's body—but who sure to God knows that the other one ain't your body what was put there to find. And that somebody wouldn't be planning on your showing up otherwise. And so, Miss von Brocken, you'd be well advised to take care just who you let find out you're still alive . . ."

Wells waited to see the effect of his words.

Kirsten fought to keep her face a mask. "You

are a detective, Mr. Wells," she said with brittle levity. "To have guessed so much, you must know still more."

A wide-armed gesture took in the darkening slopes. "This here's Split-Fork Creek on Walnut Mountain, and it's been Wells land ever since white folk settled. We don't make a quarrel over what don't concern us; the right sort know and respect us, and the wrong sort don't trouble to call. We go about our business and the law don't much come around."

Kirsten nodded, but had not understood the inferences.

"So today I'm curious to know why there's some folks using around these parts like they was sure enough hunting for something. I seen their tracks going up this ridge and down—and I'm here to find out who it is, and why they're snooping around where they ain't been asked."

"You say there are men who search . . ." Kirsten demanded, losing her composure.

"That's what I figured I was after finding out when Ben tore off tracking you," Wells told her. "But now I'm thinking there's something worse than revenueurs poking about here."

A low growl cut him short. The Plott hound's nose snuffled the breeze that carried downstream. His hackles made a ridge along his thick, black neck.

"Miss von Brocken," said Wells, "I think you'd best slip back behind that big twisty hemlock over yonder."

They made their way confidently down the streambed. Three men, Kirsten saw from where

she crouched behind the dead hemlock—three men and an ugly, black hound whose pointed snout hovered inches above the rocks. Two of the men wore outdoor clothing that looked like it had been recently purchased from a hunting goods store. The third wore faded overalls and looked skinny without any shirt; he carried a scoped hunting rifle that looked new. The hound was of a breed unlike Kirsten had ever seen. It was dark and shaggy and rawboned; its legs were too long and there was something repulsive about the way its joints splayed out to let it run close to the ground.

Then Hampton Wells stepped out from the shadow of a boulder and faced them, shotgun ready. They halted at his appearance, imperceptibly fanned out. The shaggy hound darted into the underbrush and vanished.

“Stand there, Ford Colby,” Wells called out. “And tell me where you stole that rifle, and what you’re doing on my land where you know you got a standing dare to set foot.”

They stood there in the mist-hung streambed with shadows deepening about them and cloaking the ridges in grey moss, and the clear water purling past their feet. Over the left of the ravine the full moon had risen and shone bright enough to turn the still pools silver. The two men in city-bought clothes glanced at the third, wanting him to show them how to play it. One looked plump and red-faced and slow; the other was tall and straight as a stiletto and wore a hat whose brim appeared wider than his shoulders.

“Now don’t you fret yourself none, Hampton,” inveigled the man addressed as Colby.

"We're not fixing to bother about that still you're running back up there on the ridge."

"We're hunters," explained the red-faced man glibly. "We've hired Mr. Colby here as guide."

His was the soft voice she had heard giving orders last night, Kirsten recognized with a sick chill—just as Colby's had been the mountain twang that had answered from below.

"Whatever it is you're hunting, you'd best be doing your hunting on somebody else's land," Wells growled. He nudged the shotgun muzzle a fraction higher. His eyes never wavered from the rifle Colby cradled in his arms. "Now get on out of here the way you come."

The thin man's nasal voice cut like a knife. "Don't deal in when you don't know the stakes, redneck. This is none of your business."

He started forward, but Colby warned him back. "That scatter-gun'll cut you in half!"

Wells declined to contradict him.

"Be reasonable, Mr. Wells," argued the plump man, who seemed to know the mountaineer's name. "We'll gladly pay for the unintended trespass."

"Don't want your money," Wells grated. "Just get off my land. Right now."

The tableau held for a breathless interval—tension straining to an unendurable silent scream.

Beside Kirsten's place of concealment something rustled in the rhododendron thicket. She tore her stare away from the impasse in the streambed. A few feet from where she crouched, the heavy foliage parted. A pointed, yellow-fanged muzzle poked through the long waxy

leaves and pink blossoms. Eyes large and round as an owl's stared back at her.

Their hound . . . thought Kirsten. Then the animal raised itself on its hindlegs, and she saw that it wasn't a hound. Its front paws were spade-nailed and long-toed, and they gripped the branches like hands to push them aside. The possum muzzle grinned to show double rows of sharp-pointed teeth.

Kirsten's nerve broke in that instant. A frightened cry escaped her tight-pressed lips.

Then a sudden rush from the other side of the dead hemlock trunk, and Ben launched himself for the creature's throat. The bearhound struck the animal like a black thunderbolt of muscle and snarling fangs, driving it back into the rhododendron bank. Floral branches lashed to hide their combat.

In that same instant Kirsten's sharp outcry broke the tableau, as heads jumped toward the sound. Colby saw his chance and jerked his rifle into line.

The blast from Wells's ten-gauge thundered in the ravine. Colby squawled like a stepped-on toad and flipped a broken somersault—the rifle flung from his grip by the charge of leaden shot that caved in his chest.

Already the thin man had jerked a .45 Colt automatic from the holster at the small of his back. His shot ricocheted wild as the second shotgun blast caught him at beltline. The ten-gauge was long-barreled and full-choked, and Colby had not exaggerated.

Echoes walloped and rolled down the stream-

bed, and in the moonlight the silvered water showed tarnish.

The plump man was slower than he looked. It saved his life. On the far side of the stream only a few pellets splattered past him. The .45 Colt New Service he'd dug out of his waistband looked too big for his chubby fist. His round face was cruel and colorless from the close brush of death.

"That's both barrels, redneck," he sneered, raising his revolver. "Want to try to reload?"

Brandishing the empty shotgun, Wells stood on the blood-tainted water, waiting for death.

"You can live if you just show me where you got her hid, redneck," the fat man hissed. "You know who I mean. We all heard her yell. Just call her to come out."

Wells gauged the distance to cover, didn't like the odds. "You can go right to hell," he told him.

The plump face twisted in a grin. "First one goes right through your belly button."

"Wait! I'll come out!"

The big revolver didn't waver from Wells's midriff, but he shot a glance in the direction of the sound. The fat man's grin grew broader. From the hound's angry baying, fast growing distant, he judged that Dread's stalker had fled—and he knew his chances of finding the girl by himself in the gathering darkness were nil. The chance that she was still close enough to see her defender's plight—and would be fool enough to think her surrender could save him—was all that had kept Wells alive for a few minutes longer.

"That's smart, sister," he barked. "Come on over here with your big friend."

The full moon bathed the water with silver light. *Too bright*, thought Wells, blinking his eyes. The water cascaded in droplets of bright silver, the rushing stream was a torrent of silver light, the quiet pools were vast mirrors of blinding silver-white. He wanted to shout to the girl to run, not to throw her life away in a useless effort to save his. His head felt dizzy. The words would not come.

"Here I am," sang Kirsten, stepping into the moonlight. "Come to me."

She had slipped out of her clothing. Her body was silver-white in the moonlight as she stood at the edge of the stream. Her eyes were a lambent green glow.

"Come to me," Kirsten purred. "Come to me." Her smiling lips were red as blood, and her teeth were white and sharp.

The pudgy face went slack. The hand with the revolver drooped. Vacant-eyed, the man took a step toward her. Another step. His feet reached the edge of a deep, silvery pool. He stumbled forward woodenly, like a sleepwalker—except the icy water would awaken any sleeper.

"Come to me," Kirsten crooned.

The water rose over his waist. He staggered as his feet groped over the uneven bottom. He reeled drunkenly.

There must have been a deep hole, or maybe he lost footing on the slippery-smooth boulders that pieced together the streambed. The fat man staggered another step, and suddenly the water was up around his double-chin. Silver water ran into his gaping mouth.

It couldn't have been silver-white arms that rose from the water to embrace the gunman, to drag him under in a sudden swirl of ripples . . . It was only a trick of the moonlight, Wells told himself. Silver-white moonlight reflecting on the drowning man's splashes. Ripples raced across the pool for a moment. Then the silver-white mirror was smooth once more.

Wells shook his head, blinking the moon-dazzle from his eyes. Mists trailed down over the ridges, night was deepening in the ravine, and it was a very ordinary full moon that shone its pale light on the two gory bodies sprawled over the polished boulders. Of the third gunman there was no trace.

Kirsten touched his arm and Wells jumped. But she was dressed in her tattered frock and looked like a smudged woodsprite, and not a silver-white Lorelei whose consuming beauty was deadly sorcery.

"Are you all right?"

Wells shook his head. Had it been a dream? Not likely. "What—what was that!" he managed to reply.

"Call it hypnotism, Mr. Wells," the girl told him. "A very old form of hypnotism—but I think you'd better just call it hypnotism."

Wells shrugged, his self-presence returning. "Lady, I'll call it whatever you say, because I don't rightly know what else there is to call it. And, because I've seen some other things in these hills that it's best you just put some scientific name on it, and let the matter rest without thinking on it."

"Like that—that *teufelhund*—that hound-thing they were stalking me with?"

Wells broke open his shotgun, extracted the spent shells and replaced them with two new ones from his pocket. "Did you get a close look at it, then? Well, as to that, Miss von Brocken, let's just say it was a kind of hound most folks never see—and thank your lucky stars they couldn't use the thing until it got dark enough for its eyes to stand being out in places where it don't normal belong."

The Plott hound loped back to join them, sniffed the corpses curiously. His black fur was streaked in places with blood, but from his evident satisfaction not all of it was his own.

The mountaineer whistled to him, closed the shotgun with a snap. "Guns can fight guns," he mused, "and teeth can fight against teeth. I may look like a ignorant old hill-billy to you, but I was a sergeant overseas in the War, and I still read books and the papers. I can make sense out of words like 'clairvoyant' and 'occult research' and maybe read between the lines of what they print about such things."

Kirsten looked at him expectantly. "And so."

"And so I reckon I can guess why this fellow Dread is so hot after killing you and John Chance first chance he gets," Wells said. "And now that we've said what we're both of us fighting against, we'd best be getting up to my place and think about what we're going to have to do next. These boys here can wait till morning, but I got a feeling Dread won't."

"No," said Kirsten. "He won't."

VII. Visions in Crystal

Chance's Duesenberg SJ bored into the night. Slumped in the seat beside him, Moore felt the wind rush past them. Its cool blast whipped over the windshield, reviving him fully from the horror and shock he had endured earlier. The lighted clock on the dash read not much after ten.

God, was that all the late it was! It seemed to Moore that it must be close to dawn. Would this night ever end? For him, perhaps not . . .

Was he mad? Surely this was madness. It was all a dream of absinthe and hashish. Doubtless Chance could explain it to him, but then Chance too was possibly part of the dream. But his head throbbed with the surge of the SJ's powerful supercharged engine, and his knotted stomach cringed each time Chance took a curve or dip at daredevil speed. If he could feel pain and cold, sickness and fear, then he must be awake—and alive.

The suicide? Moore pushed it from his thoughts, or tried to. He was alive, therefore he had not killed himself that evening. *Cogito ergo sum*, or perhaps the reverse, and damn the fired cartridge. If his suicide had all been a mad nightmare, then why trust his memory as to the number of bullets in the clip? Or maybe he'd fired the gun unconsciously under the spell of absinthe, and tomorrow he'd find a small round hole in the floor or wall. Absinthe is a strange

liqueur, and God knows his nerves were strained beyond endurance . . .

But the appearance of Dread—had Dread been a part of the nightmare? And how could that be? Until less than an hour or so ago, Compton Moore had never heard of this uncanny creature. Even now he scarcely knew whether he dared believe the fantastic tale John Chance had unfolded. Call it prescience? Chance perhaps could explain that too; it would interest him. Moore thought about telling him, decided against it. He couldn't think why. Another time he'd tell him.

Chance's insane tale. Somehow Chance had dragged him back from the black abyss of horror and despair, sobered him up, stuffed him into his unpressed linen suit, flung him still dazed into the seat beside him. Now he tore along with Chance at a suicidal clip on a madman's mission to save the woman he had loved for the friend he hated. All because of Chance's insane tale . . .

"You're the only man I can rely on to help me in time!" Chance had argued. "The local police are either fools or under Dread's influence! By the time I could convince the state or federal authorities to start an investigation, it will be too late to save Kirsten! It's been almost twenty-four hours since the wreck, and there's still no word from her—she's in deadly danger if she's still alive at all!"

And thus Moore let himself be dragged into the night. Chance's plans were at best sketchy. Mainly he wanted someone he could trust to back him up in a dangerous game. Just how dangerous, Moore was only beginning to realize.

The Duesenberg sped down Cherokee Boulevard and slewed into the drive of Chance's sprawling Tudor estate. Chance meant to gather together such supplies and paraphernalia as he deemed of possible use to them, before setting out for Dillon that night. He knew enough already to realize that Dread's hold over the mountain region was deeply rooted and insidious—presumably reaching into levels of local government. If Kirsten still lived, Chance reasoned, then she must either be Dread's captive or else lost somewhere in the wild desolation of the mountains. Either way, it was a question first of finding her—and that meant personal search and investigation.

"Any word?" demanded Chance, as Reynolds, his majordomo, met them at the door.

"No word from Miss von Brocken, sir," the hulking red-haired butler informed him. "Good evening, Mr. Moore. How good to see you here once again."

Moore nodded. "Evening, Reynolds. Been a few years, hasn't it." He glanced around. There were changes—mostly exotic souvenirs of Chance's travels that had replaced the mansion's staid Edwardian furnishings.

Reynolds followed them into the huge library that served as Chance's study. "There have been a number of calls and inquiries, of course, sir. From friends, the press and such. I've answered them as best I could with the information you left me, and told them you were unavailable for the present yourself, sir. You'll find notations of all communications here on your desk."

"That's fine, Reynolds," Chance said distract-

edly, glancing over the notes. "Damn! De Grandin can't be reached! Is everything packed?"

"Yes sir. Blankets and camping gear, your clothes and other items. Also as requested the Winchester Model 12 and the .416 Rigby, along with ammunition."

"Fine. Throw in a few boxes of 9 mm. Parabellum for Compton's Luger as well. Pack whatever will fit into the SJ, and don't bother too much with clothing—we'll buy what we need in Dillon. We'll be down as soon as I pull together some material here. Oh—and a thermos of coffee."

"Already prepared, sir." Reynolds bowed and left the room.

"I see you have Kirsten's crystal," observed Moore.

Chance was paging through a yellowed quarto volume. He looked down at the crystal—a translucent globe of emerald-green crystal some six inches across. In its silver tripod mounting, it rested on a small ebony table beside the alcove window. If Kirsten herself knew what manner of crystal the globe was fashioned from, she kept that knowledge to herself.

"Yes," Chance acknowledged. "Kirsten keeps it with her wherever she travels, of course. She likes to sit along the window there at night and gaze into the crystal."

Moore reached out to touch its murky green smoothness. The globe flickered with a pulse of light. Moore leapt back as if shocked.

"Good lord! Kirsten!" Chance exploded. "She's trying to reach us!" He pounced upon the suddenly alive crystal.

"But how . . .?"

Chance peered into the globe. "You attended her séances in Berlin, man! You know that wasn't sham—that Kirsten actually has powers of crystalomancy!"

"I knew she wasn't fake," Moore protested, recalling numerous frustrated attempts by skeptics to find hidden electric wires. "But I thought it was showmanship. Mass suggestion or hypnosis—coupled with a dash of true clairvoyance."

"God! And you wonder why Kirsten grew bored with all her friends there!"

Moore colored and clenched his fists—but if Chance was too distracted to be tactful, Moore was too bewildered to take offense. "Good lord, John!" he burst out. "What you're proposing isn't paranormal psychic phenomena! It's frank black magic—sorcery!"

"So they called it when they burned Kirsten's ancestress for witchcraft," Chance told him levelly. "Today we live in a so-called enlightened age and use different terms to safely categorize what we cannot explain—and Kirsten is less overt about her powers than was her unfortunate ancestress."

"Then you're seriously saying that Kirsten . . ."

"In terms of another age—is a witch, a sorceress, an enchantress," Chance finished for him. "But to conform to modern rationality, let's simply call her a psychic adept who uses objects such as globes, prisms, mirrors, reflecting surfaces, or the like to focus her occult powers into

observable phenomena. And while you're grappling with that, be still and let me concentrate on her crystal."

Moore bit his lip and subsided. Tomorrow he would perhaps laugh about this night of madness and sorcery. Tonight he had little choice but to accept matters as they presented.

Chance seated himself beside the ebony table, hunched his big shoulders forward over the sphere. Concentration creased his brow and accented the tiny surgical scars that lined his face. He had only minor ability at crystal-gazing himself—only his latent psychic talents trained and molded during his studies, augmented by what Kirsten had taught him. But Kirsten was projecting most of the power here—reaching out to the focus of her crystal globe—and Chance need be little more than the equivalent of a trained technician who adjusts his radio apparatus to receive a distant transmission.

The green sphere waxed to an intense glow, making Moore think of Kirsten's green eyes as he had so often seen them reflected over her crystal. In a near-trance, Chance stared into its swirling depths.

Images took shape in the globe. Moore watched them appear and understood with a chill that this was indeed sorcery from another age.

The images were confused—dreamlike as they flashed from nebulous blur to sudden clarity, then dissolved again. There were mountains, dark trees, a sense of danger and flight. Kirsten's face flashed into focus time and again, and

Moore could read the terror there. Then a view of a mountain cove, and a two-storey log cabin with barn and outbuildings. The cabin was half-hidden back against the ridge near the head of the cove, and in the level extent where the tiny valley fanned out, he could see vegetable gardens and a grassy stretch of pasture.

New figures appeared. On the cabin porch, peering anxiously into the darkened cove—a blocky man in overalls with a rifle, beside him a black hound that snarled at the darkness. Kirsten stood with them, disheveled but unharmed, her attitude one of fear.

Quickly another image. A tall figure in black, his features hidden behind a sculptured metal mask. Then a sudden swirl of light and a vision of horror. A bloated lizard-shape swam in the crystal—its huge form bathed in flame, its obscene head searching about in hellish hunger. Flame oozed from its gaping maw . . .

Then the scene dissolved, and the globe became once again a sphere of translucent crystal, though it glowed still with pale emerald fire.

Chance swore and drew his hand over his strained features. He looked like a man awakening from a deep dream.

“What does it mean?” Moore demanded, shaking his shoulder. “What was that . . . that lizard-thing!”

“A salamander,” Chance told him grimly. “A fire-elemental. I’d suspected this from something I found at the crash site, and from the condition of those bodies—they’d been touched by elemental fire. Somehow Dread has gained control

of the creature. He'll send it for Kirsten once he knows how to find her—and she can't remain hidden from Dread! We've got to get to her—and soon! Lord—it's an hour of midnight!"

Moore groaned and knotted his fists. "But how!" he shouted. "Do you know where that cabin is where she's hiding? Damn it, John! It's over a hundred miles from Knoxville to those mountains! Not even your Duesenberg can travel those mountain roads in less than several hours—assuming we could even find the place!"

"We'll find it," Chance assured him, touching the glowing sphere. "Kirsten's crystal will guide us there."

"But to get there in time . . ."

"We'll have to fly." Chance's voice was deadly calm. "I have a plane at the airfield only a few miles from here."

Moore choked. "John—you're mad! Land in the mountains at night!"

"We saw a pasture there—and I have parachute flares. A light plane like my Stinson Reliant might make it—if the pilot was good enough. I've seen you land your Camel under worse conditions."

Moore remembered dead engines and shell-torn patches of field. "That was fifteen years ago, and I was damn lucky to walk away from some of those."

"I'll have to give full concentration to the crystal," Chance argued. "You'll have to fly us there. Just get us down in time. We'll worry about taking off again once we're there."

"It's suicide!"

"It's death for Kirsten otherwise! She can't defend herself from Dread's salamander. I'm not even certain I can. But we've got to try!"

Moore reflected that he had planned to throw away his life a few hours earlier. Why scruple over crashing into the side of a mountain now?

"All right," he shrugged. "I'm with you."

VIII. Flight into Fear

The lights of Knoxville dropped quickly away below them, and in minutes they were flying over darkened countryside where only an occasional light yet shone. Overhead it was cloudless and clear beneath the full moon—perfect for night flying, and Chance's new Stinson Reliant responded agilely to the controls.

She was a sweet craft to fly, Moore concluded. He had flown a Reliant a few times before—courtesy of a wealthy acquaintance who got a thrill over having a famous ace for his pilot—so he was familiar with the controls. It felt good to fly again, and Moore let the powerful Lycoming radial full out. The highwing monoplane droned rapidly toward the black mountains ahead.

In the seat beside him in the four-passenger cabin, John Chance cradled the glowing crystal. Its soft luminance seemed to grow brighter as the miles fled past below them.

"We should make it there by midnight," Chance judged, glancing at his watch. The mountains were coming up fast, and the Reliant climbed to meet them.

"If we can find wherever it is we're going," Moore commented, watching the moonlit countryside for landmarks. "That's Newport coming up on the horizon now. This time of night we'll be lucky to catch the lights in any of these mountain towns until we get to Asheville."

"We'll pick up the French Broad River after Newport," Chance assured him. "With this moon it should show up quite clearly. The French Broad flows past Dillon, and if we fly along the river, we'll pass straight overhead, lights or no. Kirsten can't have gotten too far away from that general area, so we just need to circle and watch the crystal."

Moore grunted. "And when we get there?"

"If you can land us in one piece, we'll pick up Kirsten and take off again. Dread has so far shown no desire to attack us on my own ground. We'll be safe for the moment if we can get back to my house."

"What about the salamander? Can you do anything against a creature like that?"

Chance shook his head uncertainly. "I don't know. A fire-elemental has enormous power. It's an awesome accomplishment that Dread can even control one."

He touched the inside pocket of his tweed jacket to make certain of the folded envelope with the object he had discovered that afternoon at the site of the wreck. If his reasoning was correct, it held the secret to Dread's control of the elemental. Chance prayed he wouldn't be forced to put his deductions to the test.

"Assuming one is an adept," Chance went on,

"it isn't too major a conjuration to evoke a salamander. But the distinction between holding a salamander for a few moments safely imprisoned in a pentagram, as opposed to actually releasing the creature to send it forth against those you wish to destroy—it's like the difference between just looking at a picture of a tiger in a magazine, and hauling one out of its den by the scruff of its neck to take home to chase mice in your kitchen. You can't just conjure forth something this powerful and turn it loose—the more so because any such creature bears malice toward the practitioner who has evoked it from its plane. Dread has discovered some means to control the salamander. I'm gambling that I understand his secret, and that I can reverse his sending."

"Then why bring along the assortment of firepower?" Moore asked, jerking a thumb at the rifle and shotgun. "Will that high-power rifle drop a salamander?"

"No." Chance grinned mirthlessly. "But I don't think even Dread is proof against a .416 Rigby. There's a good chance we'll catch him off guard by breaking in on him like this."

Moore felt sudden uneasiness. There was something he ought to tell Chance. What was it? He'd been thinking about it just a second ago . . . Best concentrate on flying.

The mountains lay below them like worn black teeth. Moonlight made a twisting silver ribbon of the French Broad. Moore flew a course that followed the river's deep valley. He checked his watch. It was getting on toward midnight.

"That's probably Dillon coming up now," he judged. "We'll know damn soon how good a gambler you are."

The glow from the crystal waxed brighter, filling the cabin with soft emerald radiance. Chance concentrated on its shimmering light.

IX. Marked to Die

High on the side of Walnut Mountain the mists that flowed along the streams and rivers had not crept. The night was crisp and clear without the rain and cloud cover of the previous evening. Looming overhead the full moon shone so brightly as to dim the stars that flecked the sky. In the cove where Wells's cabin lay, sharp moon-shadows pooled beneath the trees and rocks. If danger prowled in the moonlit hollow, it would make a target as it crossed the clearing.

Wells leaned back in his chair beside the cracked-open cabin door, wishing he could light his pipe. Not wanting to show fire as he waited in the shadows of the porch, he contented himself with chewing on the pipestem. In his lap he cradled his old Winchester Model 95 .45-70, and the shotgun stood in easy reach just around inside the door. In the moonlight he could watch the wagon trail that crawled up to his cabin, and the pasture and garden that fanned out from the head of the cove. Beside his chair stretched a blacker patch of darkness that was Ben. The Plott hound sensed the danger that waited beyond the clearing and watched with his master.

Inside the cabin a single kerosene lamp made a

soft yellow glow on the smooth-hewn log walls. There was a massive stone fireplace at one end of the front room, and two small windows piercing the wall at the other end. A kitchen jutted off back, and overhead were two low-ceilinged bedrooms. Wells's wife and youngest daughter had earlier that day taken the truck down to Canton where the middle daughter had just presented him with a grandson. They'd be gone till the first of the week, and Wells was glad that they at least were beyond the evil that closed in upon the cabin.

Where the moonlight lanced past the curtained window, Kirsten crouched on the puncheon floor. The girl had carried down the heavy beveled-glass mirror that had been his wife's wedding gift from her grandmother. Laying the mirror flat where the moonlight touched the floor, Kirsten knelt motionless beside it. Her green eyes stared without wavering into the reflected moonlight. Once Wells had asked her whether she wanted a sweater, but she remained silent. When he glanced at the mirror he saw no reflection other than the green glow of her eyes. Quickly he returned to his station on the porch.

"Good evening, Hampton Wells."

The mountaineer all but fell out of his chair. By reflex his thumb hauled back the hammer of the Winchester. Ben showed his teeth in a sudden low snarl. Then neither man nor hound moved.

Standing where the shadow of the porch spilled out into the yard was a tall figure dressed in black. Above the featureless metal mask the silver hair was frost in the moonlight, and the

thin-lipped smile was not a pleasant thing to see at night.

Wells would have staked his life that no man could have stolen upon him like that without warning. And indeed, he had staked his life on that firm belief.

Behind the mask, eyes black as chipped flint regarded him. "Sometimes it is necessary to attend to matters for yourself in order to be certain they're concluded to satisfaction, don't you agree," the derisive voice goaded him.

Wells wanted to leap to his feet, level his rifle on that arrogant figure in black—pump lead into it as fast as his hand could lever the shells. He might have done so had he not looked into those pupilless eyes. Instead he remained in his chair, sweat twitching on his straining muscles.

Dread set a black boot on the porchstep, then drew it back. "Forgive my bad manners—I haven't been invited in. And how quaint! Someone's drawn a Solomon's Seal on your threshold. The Gräfin von Brocken has learned much from John Chance. A pity she didn't think more closely on her ancestress' fate when she became Chance's protégée."

Far away in the silence of the night they could hear the throbbing drone of an aircraft engine.

"John Chance is punctual," Dread exulted. "Very thoughtful for the condemned not to keep his executioner waiting. This time I think there will be no problem over mistaken identities—assuming my pet leaves enough when he's through to tell one pile of ashes from another."

The sinister intruder withdrew something

from his trousers pocket. "Come here," he commanded.

Wells came to his feet, walked woodenly across the porch. The Winchester clattered to the planks beside the motionless hound.

Dread extended a black-gloved fist. "Take this," he ordered.

Though he fought to hold his arm at his side, Wells could only obey. He held out his open palm. Dread opened his fist. A bright flicker of red—like a drop of blood—fell from the black-gloved fingers and into Wells's calloused palm.

"Give that to the Gräfin von Brocken with my compliments," Dread sneered.

The roar of the plane's engine pierced the star-flecked darkness directly overhead now. The sound passed over, circled and returned. A sudden burst of white exploded against the stars, throwing stark shadows on the open ground as it drifted down over the hollow.

The harsh brilliance of the parachute flare momentarily blinded Wells's eyes. When his dazzled vision cleared, he saw that he stood alone on the porch steps.

Whining dismally, Ben slunk over to his feet. The Plott hound was shaking like a dog badly scared in a thunderstorm—though Wells had never seen him spooked before in his life. The mountain man knew how the bearhound felt. He was shaking too.

A stirring from behind, and Kirsten emerged from the cabin door. Her face was pale, and she looked like someone who has just started up from a deep sleep.

"John! John Chance is here!" she exclaimed, joining Wells at the porch step. "Where . . .?"

A second parachute flare burst overhead. By its glare they could see the monoplane low over the treetops in a flat circle as it glided down for the short stretch of open pasture.

Kirsten threw her fist to her mouth. "*Herr Gott!* He'll crash!"

Sideslipping to lose speed, the Reliant cleared the treetops close enough for the highest branches to slap at the landing gear. Then the plane straightened out and floated down onto the pasture, its tail well down as it pancaked onto the grassy field. The landing was jolting, but the grass was cropped close and the thin soil hard beneath. The landing gear took the shock and kept rolling. Tall weeds and bushes smacked at the undercarriage, but the high wings cleared potential snags. Bouncing and shaking, the Stinson somehow dodged the limestone boulders that poked like dragons' teeth through the rocky soil. The plane rolled to a halt with ten yards to spare of the rail fence at the head of the pasture, then taxied to face about in the direction it had landed. The radial engine throttled down and idled.

The door on the left of the fuselage opened. Twisting his big frame past the door and ducking the wing strut, John Chance dropped to the ground. Warily he crossed the split-rail fence and came toward the cabin. The porch lay in shadow, but he could see the two figures who stood there. Chance wondered at their silence.

"John!" he heard Kirsten's choked cry.

Chance sprinted to the porch. "Come on!" he

called. "Compton's holding her revved up. Let's get out of here before Dread comes calling!"

Kirsten's voice was frightened. She held out her hand to him. "Dread has already been here."

In the moonlight there seemed to be a droplet of bright blood on her white palm. It was a dime-sized seal of carved red stone, probably carnelian. Its device was an equilateral triangle from which spread a nimbus of flame. Within the triangle curled a salamander, its tiny jaws wrathfully agape with a breath of flame.

"He was here just a minute before you landed," Wells explained, still shaken. "Just all of a sudden there Dread was, standing right where you are like he'd dropped down out of a tree. I sat here like a bird that's been hypnotized by a snake, and I guess if Dread had told me to crawl down his throat, I'd've had to try, because I was like a stranger in my own body. He handed me that little chip of stone and directed me to give it to Miss von Brocken with his respects, and I couldn't do otherwise even though when I looked again Dread had fair disappeared."

"I'm sure you couldn't," Chance nodded grimly. "Not if Dread caught you staring out here into moonlight and shadow. His hypnotic powers are enormous."

"I was inside," Kirsten added. "Using a mirror to call you here. I'd drawn a Solomon's Seal across the doorway."

"Protection against some of Dread's creatures, though not against Dread himself," Chance told her.

"This is Hampton Wells," Kirsten remem-

bered to introduce them. "And John Chance. Mr. Wells killed two of Dread's hirelings when they were hunting me this evening."

Chance offered his hand. "Mr. Wells, I'm in your debt. But I'm afraid you've cut yourself in on a deadly piece of business."

The mountaineer's handshake was firm. "Guess I thought it was a fight worth winning, Mr. Chance. Been trouble in these parts since this spring when this devil Dread sent his people prying about for information on the lost mines of the Ancients."

Chance gauged the man. "I found out some little about that just lately. I'd guess I'd have found out a good bit more if Cullin Shelton had lived to tell what he knew."

The circle of red stone glinted evilly in the moonlight. In the pasture the Stinson's engine throbbed impatiently.

"We'll have to hurry," Chance warned. "Dread must only have held his hand until he had us all together."

"What is it?" Kirsten asked, staring fixedly at the stone sigil.

"The sign of the salamander," Chance said tensely. "Dread has marked you for its victim."

Wells moved faster than thought. His big hand lashed out and slapped the deadly sigil from the girl's grasp—like brushing off a crawling spider. The carnelian seal fell to the puncheon floor, and Wells's heavy boot stamped hard—as a man stamps his heel at the striking head of a venomous snake.

"Don't!" Chance shouted in horror. He lunged

for Wells, knocking him off-balance. The boot heel smashed inches away from the skittering bit of red stone.

Wells staggered for balance, goggled at the other man.

"Why did you do that?" Chance demanded, swiftly retrieving the salamander carving.

Wells shook his head. "Why, I don't know. The thought just came to me . . ."

"Dread's thought came to you is more likely," Chance supplied. "This talisman explains Dread's control over the salamander. He marks his intended victim with the sign of the salamander, then sends his elemental seeking the person who bears the sigil."

"Then destroy the thing!" Wells argued.

"A spell doesn't work that way!" Chance insisted. "The only release will be to give the sigil back to Dread. If it's destroyed, that's impossible—and the salamander will still seek its prey!"

"But last night . . .?" Kirsten began.

"Dread must have somehow found a way to pass the salamander sign to Shelton—and to Wingfield—and to any other victims of his sorcery."

"But John never received any such talisman."

"Yes, he did." Chance dug out the rolled envelope from his inside pocket, tore it open. A mate to the first sinister stone carving slid onto his palm.

"I found this near where your Packard smashed to a stop," he explained. "I wasn't certain what it meant until Dread took such pains to present you with this one here tonight."

My guess is Dread had one of them placed in your car at some point."

"I was thrown clear just as we went over," Kirsten filled in. "Knocked unconscious."

"Doubtless saved your life. Presumably Dread's salamander would have attacked any living presence in the immediate circle of the sign's influence."

"Then why are you carrying that thing, John? It's deadly!"

"Because I'd hoped to find Dread here and return the sigil to him. Then his spell would have backfired on him. It seemed worth the gamble."

"Suppose we just leave these devil's signs setting here on the stoop and make a run for it," Wells suggested in a practical tone.

"It won't help Kirsten. Dread personally presented her with the sigil. Unless she finds a way to give it back to Dread, the salamander will come for her regardless—according to the laws of magic, she and the sign of the salamander are bound together because she accepted it. Our best chance is to get back to Knoxville with this sigil and use the facilities I have at my disposal there in an effort to break the spell and exorcise Dread's sending before the salamander seeks us out even there."

"You're forgetting," Wells stated. "Dread didn't give Kirsten that salamander sign-thing. I did. And now, ma'am, I'll be obliged if you'll return that devil sign to me."

"Brave of you, Wells," Chance clapped his shoulder. "But no use. You were acting under Dread's influence at the time—so in a sense you

were only an extension of Dread himself."

Wells set his jaw. "All the same, give it back to me. Then you two make a dash for it in your plane. That'll split the trail, and besides which I'm not going to be run off from my own house and land by any kind of low witchery."

Chance started to protest further. A sudden roar of the aircraft engine spun him around.

"Moore!" he yelled. "You fool!"

Silver in the moonlight, the monoplane jerked into forward motion. Engine building power, it jolted across the rocky pasture—gathering speed. The high wings barely cleared sudden outcrops of limestone as it lurched toward the mouth of the cove.

"The madman! He'll never reach flying speed in time to clear the trees!" Kirsten moaned.

A silver-winged juggernaut, the Stinson raced suicidally toward the tree line. With a quick rush the plane was airborne. The Lycoming radial poured on power. It headed straight for the waiting trees.

Then with inches to spare the plane staggered for altitude—clearing the treetops at the last instant. For a moment they saw it hover ghostlike over the ridges—then the monoplane disappeared into the night—taking with it Chance's equipment and their only means to escape.

"Forget that one," Chance growled. "We're stuck here on our own!"

"I don't understand . . ." Kirsten stammered. "Compton deserted us!"

"I don't get it either. I can't believe Moore's nerve broke. Either I misjudged the man and the

depth of his jealousy—or Dread has shown his hand again.”

The night about them flickered, as if from distant lightning. The skies were cloudless.

Kirsten’s face twisted in fear. “John! That’s the way it came upon us last night!”

“Will walls hold the thing out?” Wells broke in. “These logs are a foot thick or better, and seasoned hardwood.”

“No protection from a fire-elemental!” Chance advised bleakly. “But Kirsten’s Solomon’s Seal may slow it for the moment.”

“Against a salamander!” Kirsten scoffed.

“We’ve no choice! We haven’t a chance if we try to run! Inside, quick!”

Silent lightning flashed again. Closer.

Together they retreated into Wells’s cabin, dragging the snarling Plott hound with them. At the threshold, Chance paused to study Kirsten’s Solomon’s Seal. He nodded approval. The girl had constructed it carefully despite her haste—using some old paint Wells had saved to draw the erect triangle in red and the inverse triangle in blue. In the center she had drawn a *crux ansata*. Chance pulled an artist’s pencil from his shirt pocket and hurriedly added certain Names of Power in a circle about the ankh. Stepping around the figure, he joined the others and helped bolt the heavy door.

“Got a rifle or a shotgun, whichever you like,” Wells told him. “Maybe honest lead won’t do nothing against this salamander-thing—but I’m sure for giving it a hard try.”

Chance thanked him, not bothering to explain

that shooting at the salamander would be about as effective as tossing mudballs at a tank. But at least having a gun in your hands made things appear less hopeless.

"Kirsten, we might try forming a large pentacle on the floor here," he suggested. "One we could stand in as a sort of redoubt."

The girl stooped to lay out the angles with practiced skill. It would keep her occupied, Chance figured. With his entire library at his disposal—along with access to all manner of esoteric paraphernalia, and the entire night to work in—they might contrive a protective pentacle of the necessary potency to withstand a salamander.

But they weren't going to have all night. A sudden electric glare shone eerily across the clearing about the cabin. The salamander was getting nearer, writhing up from the nether abysses whence Dread's sorcery had compelled it.

Chance groaned inwardly, cursing his own unpreparedness. He should have taken precautions the very instant he first had suspected Dread's involvement in the wave of inexplicable events that had recently centered on this mountain region. Bitterly he considered the deadly salamander sigils he still clenched in his fist. Little chance of returning these messengers of death to Dread now—although he was certainly out there in the dark, exulting over his trapped enemies as they helplessly awaited death. Chance only wished Dread would show himself to them now—no feat of mesmerism would hold

Chance's finger from the trigger.

Chance looked again at the shotgun Wells had offered him.

"That's a ten-gauge, right?"

Wells nodded from where he peered through the window. "Had her a long time, and I wouldn't trade her for any two of your twelve-gauge pumps. She'll just about tear your shoulder off, but both barrels together will sure clear off the front porch."

"You got rifled slugs for it?"

"Box in the drawer bottom of the gun cabinet there," Wells indicated. "Nothing like them big slugs of lead to cut through brush for a sure knockdown on a deer."

Chance dove for the cabinet drawer, dug out the box of shells. There were half a dozen left. More than enough either way—whether this mad scheme worked or not. He broke open the shotgun, extracted the buckshot shells—then pulled open his pocket knife and sat down on the floor with the box of rifled slugs.

Another blast of lightning. Chance tensed, expecting thunder that never boomed.

"Oh, Lord!" Wells gasped. "It's here!"

Kirsten leapt to her feet, too terrified to continue her efforts on the pentacle. The threat of fire would make a mad thing of her, Chance knew from experience.

"Kirsten! Keep working on the pentacle! Don't look outside!" he shouted, snapping her back from panic. Her face a marble mask, the girl bent back to her hopeless task—fear making her usually nimble movements clumsy.

At the window, Wells yelled defiance. His

.45-70 boomed deafeningly in the tiny cabin. Again and again he levered new shells into the Winchester's chamber, firing at the thing he saw in the cabin yard. White light glared through the windows, stabbed past chinks in the log walls. The Plott hound howled and flung itself at the door.

Desperately Chance broke open the crimping of the shotgun shells and dug out the heavy rifled slugs from two of them. The Solomon's Seal would hold the fire-elemental for only a moment—while it gathered into itself power to overwhelm and then to cross its protective barrier.

Wells stubbornly reloaded his rifle, unable to convince himself of its uselessness. Or perhaps it was that final defiance that makes a cornered animal turn and fight against hopeless odds. The .45-70 opened up again.

Not wasting a glance outside to see what he knew must be out there, Chance carved into the inverted conical bases of the rifled slugs. His pocket knife gouged out fat slivers of the soft lead. The ten-gauge slugs were massive blobs of about an ounce-and-a-half of lead—their sides rifled so that they would pick up spin in passing through the shotgun's smooth bore. Charged with these, the huge ten-gauge was in effect a hand-held cannon.

Forcing his fingers to work swiftly despite his growing panic, Chance inserted the fingernail-sized carnelian sigils into the hollowed-out bases of the two slugs. Carefully he jammed torn wadding over them to protect the deadly bits of carved stone and secure them in place.

Needles of hellish-bright incandescence

pierced the cabin's front wall in a thousand stinging rays—seeking past every crack and loose chinking. Ben retreated from the door and backed to the wall with frothing jaws.

Kirsten, wild-eyed as the maddened hound, abandoned her distracted attempts to complete the pentacle. Her fists pressed to her chin, she crouched in abject terror, staring at the door.

Wells swore and mechanically reloaded his rifle—pivoting toward the door from his post at the window.

The door was beginning to exude smoke.

Frantically Chance replaced the modified slugs in their cardboard shells, reset the crimping.

The thick planks of the door were warping and sagging from intolerable heat. Cracks edged in glowing coal opened with fatal progression. Streamers of blue-white brilliance stabbed past the crumbling barrier—a dozen too-bright searchlights to pick out the tableau of fear within.

Chance jammed the shells into the double-barrel, slammed shut its breech. He brought the weapon to his shoulder.

On the threshold the power of the Solomon's Seal crumbled beneath the relentless onslaught of the fire-elemental. The cabin door collapsed in a tumble of glowing ashes.

Across the open doorway crouched the salamander—a squatting lizard-shape larger than a lion, as it drew into itself the limitless power of elemental flame. Its fat tail lashed in anger, and its eyes were blinding coals of wrath. Great wreaths of blue-white flame bathed its

obscene bulk, somehow not scorching the wood of the porch. Incandescent spittle drooled from its wide jaws—as the elemental opened them to feed . . .

At point-blank range, Chance fired both barrels into the opening maw. The recoil sent him backward against the wall.

In that instant of horror when time slowed to eternity, it seemed they could see the massive lead slugs as they blasted into the elemental's opening jaws. A pair of flashes marked the instantaneous transmuting of solid lead to molten to vapor. Two bright bits of red continued their path into the waiting throat.

The salamander screamed—a cry like a ton of white-hot steel dumped into the sea. Writhing back in rage—or agony—it flung itself away from the smouldering doorway, out into the night.

It raked its foreclaws into its jaws, tearing at its throat—vomiting great gouts of flame. Its hissing roar pierced the night, as the elemental rolled and bucked across the clearing. Still writhing in great spasms, the salamander turned and crawled like a broken-backed thing into the forested ridge beyond the clearing.

For a minute they saw its eerie brilliance flashing along the ridge, then the trees completely hid the creature.

Wells finished dumping water onto the smouldering wreckage of his doorway. He produced a crockery jug of his own blockade whiskey and took a long pull.

"I told you that shotgun would sure enough

clear off the porch," he managed to say, handing the jug to Chance.

High up on the mountainside, a blue-white volcano burst upward for an instant against the night—then faded slowly out.

John Chance took a deep drink.

BLUE LADY, COME BACK

I.

This one starts with a blazing bright day and a trim split-level house looking woodsy against the pines.

"Wind shrieked a howling tocsin as John Chance slewed his Duesenberg Torpedo down the streaming mountain road. A sudden burst of lightning picked out the sinister silhouette of legend-haunted Corrington Manor, hunched starkly against the storm-swept Adirondacks. John Chance's square jaw was grim-set as he scowled at the Georgian mansion just ahead. Why had lovely Gayle Corrington's hysterical phone call been broken off in the midst of her plea for help? Could even John Chance thwart the horror of the Corrington Curse from striking terror on the eve of Gayle and young Hartley's wedding?"

"Humph," was the sour comment of Curtiss Stryker, who four decades previous had thrilled thousands of pulp readers with his yarns of John Chance, psychic detective. He stretched his bony legs from the cramped interior of his friend's brand-new Jensen Interceptor and stood scowling through the blacktop's heat.

"Well, seems like that's the way a haunted

house *ought* to be approached," Mandarin went on, joining him on the sticky asphalt driveway.

Stryker twitched a grin. Sixty years had left his tall, spare frame gristled and knobby, like an old pine on a rocky slope. His face was tanned and seamed, set off the bristling white mustache and close-cut hair that had once been blond. Mandarin always thought he looked like an old sea captain—and recalled that Stryker had sailed on a Norwegian whaler in his youth.

"Yeah, and here comes the snarling mastiff," Stryker obliged him.

A curious border collie peered out from around the Corvette in the carport, wondered if it ought to bark. Russ whistled, and the dog wagged over to be petted.

The yard was just mowed, and someone had put a lot of care into the rose beds that bordered the flagstone walk. That and the pine woods gave the place a cool, inviting atmosphere—more like a mountain cabin than a house only minutes outside Knoxville's sooty reach. The house had an expensive feel about it. Someone had hired an architect—and a good one—to do the design. Mountain stone and untreated redwood on the outside walls; cedar shakes on the roof; copper flashing; long areas of glass. Its split-level design adapted to the gentle hillside, seemed to curl around the grey outcroppings of limestone.

"Nice place to haunt," Mandarin reflected.

"I hope you're going to keep a straight face once we get inside," his friend admonished gruffly. "Mrs. Corrington was a little reluctant to have us come here at all. Doesn't want folks laughing, calling her a kook. People from all over descend-

ing on her to investigate her haunted house. You know what it'd be like."

"I'll maintain my best professional decorum."

Stryker grunted. He could trust Russ, or he wouldn't have invited him along. A psychiatrist at least knew how to listen, ask questions without making his informant shut up in embarrassment. And Russ's opinion of Gayle Corrington's emotional stability would be valuable—Stryker had wasted too many interviews with cranks and would-be psychics whose hauntings derived from their own troubled minds. Besides, he knew Mandarin was interested in this sort of thing and would welcome a diversion from his own difficulties.

"Well, let's go inside before we boil over," Stryker decided.

Russ straightened from petting the dog, carelessly wiped his long-fingered hands on his lightweight sport coat. About half the writer's age, he was shorter by a couple inches, heavier by forty pounds. He wore his bright-black hair fashionably long for the time, and occasionally trimmed his long mustache. Piercing blue eyes beneath a prominent brow dominated his thin face. Movie-minded patients had told him variously that he reminded them of Terence Stamp or Bruce Dern, and Russ asked them how they felt about that.

On the flagstone walk the heady scent of warm roses washed out the taint of the asphalt. Russ thought he heard the murmur of a heat pump from around back. It would be cool inside, then—earlier he had envied Stryker for his open-collar sportshirt.

The paneled door had a bell push, but Stryker

crisply struck the brass knocker. The door quickly swung open, and Russ guessed their hostess had been politely waiting for their knock.

Cool air and a faint perfume swirled from within. "Please come in," Mrs. Corrington invited.

She was blonde and freckled, had stayed away from the sun enough so that her skin still looked fresh at the shadow of forty. Enough of her figure was displayed by the backless hostess ensemble she wore to prove she had taken care of herself in other respects as well. It made both men remember that she was divorced.

"Mrs. Corrington? I'm Curtiss Stryker."

"Please call me Gayle. I've read enough of your books to feel like an old friend."

Stryker beamed and bent low over her hand in the continental mannerism Russ always wished he was old enough to pull off. "Then make it Curt, Gayle. And this is Dr. Russell Mandarin."

"Russ," said Mandarin, shaking her hand.

"Dr. Mandarin is interested in this sort of thing, too," Stryker explained. "I wanted him to come along so a man of science could add his thoughts to what you have to tell us."

"Oh, are you with the university center here, Dr. Mandarin?"

"Please—Russ. No, not any longer." He kept the bitterness from his voice. "I'm in private practice in the university area."

"Your practice is . . .?"

"I'm a psychiatrist."

Her green eyes widened, then grew wary—the usual response—but she recovered easily. "Can I fix something for you gentlemen? Or is it too

early in the afternoon for drinks? I've got ice tea."

"Sun's past the yardarm," Stryker told her quickly. "Gin and tonic for me."

"Scotch for you, Russ?" she asked.

"Bourbon and ice, if you have it."

"Well, you must be a southern psychiatrist."

"Russ is from way out west," Stryker filled in smoothly. "But he's lived around here a good long while. I met him when he was doing an internship at the Center here, and I had an appendix that had waited fifty years to go bad. Found out he was an old fan—even had a bunch of my old pulp yarns on his shelves alongside my later books. Showed me a fan letter one magazine had published: he'd written it when he was about twelve asking that they print more of my John Chance stories. Kept tabs on each other ever since."

She handed them their drinks, poured a bourbon and ginger ale for herself.

"Well, of course I've only read your serious stuff. The mysteries you've had in paperback, and the two books on the occult."

"Do you like to read up on the occult?" Russ asked, mentally correcting her—*three* books on the occult.

"Well, I never have . . . you know . . . believed in ghosts and like that. But when all this started, I began to wonder—so I checked out a few books. I'd always liked Mr. Stryker's mystery novels, so I was especially interested to read what he had to say on the subject of hauntings. Then, when I found out that he was a local author, and that he was looking for material for a

new book—well, I got up my courage and wrote to him. I hope you didn't think I was some sort of nut."

"Not at all!" Stryker assured her. "But suppose we sit down and have you tell us about it. From your letter and our conversation on the phone, I gather this is mostly poltergeist-like phenomena."

Gayle Corrington's flair-legged gown brushed against the varnished hardwood floor as she led them to her living room. A stone fireplace with raised hearth of used brick made up one wall. Odd bits of antique ironware were arranged along the hearth; above the mantelpiece hung an engraved double-barreled shotgun. Walnut paneling enclosed the remainder of the room—paneling, not plywood, Russ noted. Chairs and a sofa were arranged informally about the Couristan carpet. Russ dropped onto a cream leather couch and looked for a place to set his drink.

Stryker was digging a handful of salted nuts from the wooden bowl on the low table beside his chair. "Suppose you start with the history of the house?" he suggested.

Sipping nervously from her glass, Gayle settled crosslegged next to the hearth. Opposite her a large area of sliding glass panels opened onto the sun-bright backyard. A multitude of birds and two fat squirrels worked at the feeders positioned beneath the pines. The dog sat on the patio expectantly, staring back at them through the glass door.

Gayle drew up her freckled shoulders and began. "Well, the house was put up about ten

years back by two career girls."

"Must have had some money," Russ interposed.

"They were sort of in your line of work—they were medical secretaries at the psychiatric unit. And they had, well, a relationship together."

"How do you mean that?" Stryker asked, opening his notepad.

Mrs. Corrington blushed. "They were lesbians."

This was heavy going for a Southern Belle, and she glanced at their composed expressions, then continued. "So they built this place under peculiar conditions—sort of man and wife, if you follow. No legal agreement as to what belonged to whom. That became important afterward.

"Listen, this is, well, personal information. Will it be OK for me to use just first names?"

"I promise you this will be completely confidential," Stryker told her gravely.

"I was worried about your using this in your new book on haunted houses of the South."

"If I can't preserve your confidence, then I promise you I won't use it at all."

"All right then. The two women were Libby and Cass."

Mandarin made a mental note.

"They lived together here for about three years. Then Libby died. She was only about thirty."

"Do you know what she died of?" Russ asked.

"I found out after I got interested in this. How's the song go—'too much pills and liquor.'"

"Seems awfully young."

"She hadn't been taking care of herself. One night she passed out after tying one on, and she died in the hospital emergency room."

"Did the hauntings start then?"

"Well, there's no way to be sure. The house stood empty for a couple of years afterward. Legal problems. Libby's father hadn't cared for her lifestyle, and when she died he saw to it that Cass couldn't buy Libby's share of the house and property. That made Cass angry, so she wouldn't sell out her share. It was months before their lawyers reached a settlement. Finally they agreed on selling the house and land, lock, stock, and barrel, and dividing the payment. That's when I bought it."

"No one else has ever lived here, then?"

Gayle hesitated a moment. "No—except for a third girl they had here once—a nurse. They rented a third bedroom to her. But that didn't work out, and she left after a few months. Otherwise, I'm the only other person to live here."

"It seems a little large for one person," Stryker observed.

"Not really. I have a son in college now who stays here over breaks. And now and then a niece comes to visit. So the spare rooms are handy."

"Well, what happened after you moved in?"

She wrinkled her forehead. "Just . . . well, a series of things. Just strange things . . .

"Lights wouldn't stay on or off. I used to think I was just getting absent-minded, but then I began to pay careful attention. Like I'd got off to a movie, then come back and find the carport light off—when the switch was inside. It really scared me. There's other houses closer now, but

this is a rural area pretty much. Prissy's company, but I don't know if she could fight off a prowler. I keep a gun."

"Has an electrician ever checked your wiring?"

"No. It was OK'd originally, of course."

"Can anyone break in without your having realized it?"

"No. You see, I'm worried about break-ins, as I say. I've got double locks on all the doors, and the windows have special locks. Someone would have to break the glass, or pry open the woodwork around the doors—leave marks. That's never happened.

"And other things seem to turn on and off. My electric toothbrush, for instance. I told my son and he laughed—then one night the light beside his bed flashed off."

"Presumably you could trace all this to electrical disturbances," Russ pointed out.

Gayle gestured toward the corner of the living room. "All right. See that windup Victrola? No electricity. Yet the damn thing turns itself on. Several times at night I've heard it playing—that old song, you know . . ."

She sang a line or two: "Come back, blue lady, come back. Don't be blue anymore . . ."

Stryker quickly moved to the machine. It was an old Victrola walnut veneer console model, with speaker and record storage in the lower cabinet. He lifted the hinged lid. It was heavy. Inside, the huge tonearm was swung back on its pivot.

"Do you keep a record on the turntable normally?"

"Yes. I like to show the thing off. But I'm certain I haven't left *Blue Skirt Waltz* on every time."

"It's on now."

"Yes, I leave it there now."

"Why not get rid of the record as an experiment?"

"What could I think if I found it back again?"

Stryker grinned. He moved the starting lever with his finger. The turntable began to spin.

"You keep this thing wound?" Russ asked.

"Yes," Gayle answered uneasily.

Curtiss swung the hinged tonearm down, rested the thick steel needle on the shellac disk.

I dream of that night with you

Darling, when first we met . . .

"Turn it off again—please!"

II.

Stryker hastily complied. "Just wanted to see what was involved in turning it on."

"Sorry," Gayle apologized. "The thing *has* gotten on my nerves, I guess. How about refills all around?"

"Fine," Stryker agreed, taking a final chew on his lime twist.

When their hostess had disappeared into the kitchen with their glasses, he murmured aside to Mandarin: "What do you think?"

Russ shrugged. "What can I say from a few minutes talking, listening to her? There's no blatant elevation of her porcelain titer, if that's what you mean."

"What's that mean?" the writer asked, annoyed.

"She doesn't come on as an outright crock."

Stryker's mustache twitched. "Think I'll write that down."

He did.

"Useful for rounds," Russ explained in apology. "What about the occult angle? So far I'm betting on screwy electrical wiring and vibrations from passing trucks or something."

Stryker started to reply, but then Gayle Corrington rustled back, three glasses and a wedge of cheese on a tray.

"I've been told most of this can be explained by wiring problems or vibrations," she was saying. "Like when the house settles on its foundation."

Russ accepted his drink with aplomb—wondering if she had overheard.

"But I asked the real estate man about that," she went on, "and he told me the house rests on bedrock. You've seen the limestone outcroppings in the yard. They even had to use dynamite putting down the foundation footings."

"Is there a cellar?"

"No. Not even a crawlspace. But I have storage in the carport and in the spare rooms. There's a gardening shed out back, you'll notice—by the crepe myrtle. Libby liked to garden. All these roses were her doing. I pay a man from the nursery to keep them up for me. Seems like Libby would be sad if I just let them go to pot."

"Do you feel like Libby is still here?" Russ asked casually.

She hadn't missed the implication, and Russ

wished again Curtiss hadn't introduced him as a psychiatrist. "Well, yes," she answered cautiously. "I hope that doesn't sound neurotic."

"Has anything happened that you feel can't be explained—well, by the usual explanations?" Curtiss asked, steering the interview toward safer waters.

"Poltergeist phenomena, you mean? Well, I've only touched on that. One night the phone cord started swinging back and forth. All by itself—nothing near it. I was sitting out here reading when I saw that happen. Then my maid was here one afternoon when all the paper cups dropped out of the dispenser and started rolling up and down the kitchen counter. Another night that brass table lamp there started rocking back and forth on its base—just like someone had struck it. Of course, I was the only one here. Christ, I felt like yelling, 'Libby! Cut it out!'"

"Is there much truck traffic on the highway out front?" Stryker asked. "Stone transmits vibrations a long way, and if the house rests on bedrock . . ."

"No truck traffic to speak of—not since the Interstates were completed through Knoxville. Maybe a pickup or that sort of thing drives by. I've thought of that angle, too."

"But, darn it—there's too many other things." Her face seemed defiant. She's thought a lot about this, Russ surmised—and now that she's decided to tell someone else about it, she doesn't want to be taken for a credulous fool.

"Like my television." She pointed to the color portable resting on one end of the long raised hearth. "If you've ever tried to lug one of these

things around, you know how portable they really are. I keep it here because I can watch it either from that chair or when I'm out sunning on the patio. Twice though I've come back and found it's somehow slid down the hearth a foot or so. I noticed because the picture was blocked by the edge of that end table when I tried to watch from my lounge chair on the patio. And I know the other furniture wasn't out of place, because I line the set up with that cracked brick there—so I know I can see it from the patio, in case I've moved it around someplace else. Both times it was several inches past that brick."

Russ examined the set, a recent portable model. One edge of its simulated walnut chassis was lined up one row of bricks down from where a crack caused by heat expansion crossed the hearth. He pushed at the set experimentally. It wouldn't slide.

"Tell me truck vibrations were responsible for *this*," Gayle challenged.

"Your cleaning maid . . .?"

"Had not been in either time. Nor had anyone else in the time between when I noticed it and when I'd last watched it from outside."

"No one else that you knew of."

"No one at all. I could have told if there'd been a break-in. Besides, a burglar would have stolen the darn thing."

Russ smoothed his mustache thoughtfully. Stryker was scribbling energetically on his notepad.

Gayle pressed home her advantage. "I asked Cass about it once. She looked at me funny and said they used to keep their tv on the hearth,

too—only over a foot or so, because the furniture was arranged differently.”

Stryker’s grey eyes seemed to glow beneath his shaggy eyebrows. Russ knew the signs—Curtiss was on the scent.

Trying to control his own interest, Russ asked: “Cass is still in Knoxville, then?”

Gayle appeared annoyed with herself. “Yes, that’s why I wanted to keep this confidential. She and another girl have set up together in an old farmhouse they’ve redone—out toward Norris.”

“There’s no need for me to mention names or details of personal life,” Curtiss reassured her. “But I take it you’ve said something to Cass about these happenings?”

“Well, yes. She had a few things stored out in the garden shed that she finally came over to pick up. Most of the furnishings were jointly owned—I bought them with the house—but there was some personal property, items I didn’t want.” She said the last with a nervous grimace.

“So I came flat out and said to her: ‘Cass, did you ever think this house was haunted?’ and she looked at me and said quite seriously: ‘Libby?’”

“She didn’t seem incredulous?”

“No. Just like that. She said: ‘Libby?’ Didn’t sound surprised—a little shaken maybe. I told her about some of the things here, and she just shrugged. I didn’t need her to think I was out of my mind, so I left off. But that’s when I started to think about Libby’s spirit lingering on here.”

“She seemed to take it rather matter-of-factly,” Russ suggested.

“I think she and Libby liked to dabble in the occult. There were a few books of that sort that

Cass picked up—a Ouija board, tarot deck, black candles, a few other things like that. And I believe there was something said about Libby's dying on April the 30th—that's Walpurgis Night, I learned from my reading."

Witches' Sabbat, Russ reflected. So he was going to find his gothic trappings after all.

It must have showed on his face. "Nothing sinister about her death," Gayle told him quickly. "Sordid maybe, but thoroughly prosaic. She was dead by the time they got her to the emergency room, and a check of her bloodstream showed toxic levels of alcohol and barbs. Took a little prying to get the facts on that. Family likes the version where she died of a heart attack or something while the doctors worked over her.

"But let me freshen those ice cubes for you. This show-and-tell session is murder on the throat."

Stryker hopped out of his chair. "Here, we'll carry our own glasses."

Smiling, she led them into the kitchen. Russ lagged behind to work at the cheese. He hadn't taken time for lunch, and he'd better put something in his stomach besides bourbon.

"There's another thing," Gayle was saying when he joined them. "The antique clocks."

Russ followed her gesture. The ornate dial of a pendulum wall clock stared back at him from the dining room wall. He remembered the huge walnut grandfather's clock striking solemnly in the corner of the living room.

"Came back one night and found both cabinets wide open. And you have to turn a key to open the cabinets."

"Like this?" Stryker demonstrated on the wall clock.

"Yes. I keep the keys in the locks because I need to reset the pendulum weights. But as you see, it takes a sharp twist to turn the lock. Explain that one for me."

Russ sipped his drink. She must have poured him a good double. "Have you ever thought that someone might have a duplicate key to one of the doors?" he asked.

"Yes," Gayle answered, following his train of thought. "That occurred to me some time ago—though God knows what reason there might be to pull stunts like these. But I had every lock in the house changed—that was after I had come back and found lights on or off that had been left off or on one time too many to call it absent-mindedness. It made no difference, and both the tv and the clock incidents took place since then."

"You know, this is really intriguing!" Curtiss exclaimed, beaming over his notepad.

Gayle smiled back, seemed to be fully at ease for the first time. "Well, I'll tell you it has me baffled. Here, let me show you the rest of the house."

A hallway led off from the open space between living room and dining area. There was a study off one side, another room beyond, and two bedrooms opposite. A rather large tile bath with sunken tub opened at the far end.

"The study's a mess, I'm afraid," she apologized, closing the door on an agreeably unkempt room that seemed chiefly cluttered with fashion magazines and bits of dress material. "And the spare bedroom I only use for storage." She

indicated the adjoining room, but did not offer to open it. "My son sleeps here when he's home."

"You keep it locked?" Russ asked, noting the outdoor-type lock.

"No." Gayle hastily turned the knob for them, opened the door on a room cluttered with far more of the same as her study. There was a chain lock inside, another door on the outside wall. "As you see, this room has a private entrance. This is the room they rented out."

"Their boarder must have felt threatened," Russ remarked. He received a frown that made him regret his levity.

"These are the bedrooms." She turned to the hallway opposite. "This was Cass's." A rather masculine room with knotty pine paneling, a large brass bed, cherry furnishings, and an oriental throw rug on the hardwood floor. "And this was Libby's." Blue walls, white ceiling, white deep-pile carpet, queen-sized bed with a blue quilted spread touching the floor on three sides. In both rooms sliding glass doors opened onto the backyard.

"Where do you sleep?" Russ wanted to know.

"In the other bedroom. I find this one a bit too frilly."

"Have you ever, well, seen anything—any sort of, say, spiritual manifestations?" Stryker asked.

"Myself, no," Gayle told them. "Though there are a few things. My niece was staying with me one night not long after I'd moved in—sleeping in Libby's room. Next morning she said to me: 'Gayle, that room's haunted. All night I kept waking up thinking someone else was there with me.' I laughed, but she was serious."

"Is that when you started thinking in terms of ghosts?"

"Well, there had been a few things before that," she admitted. "But I suppose that was when I really started noticing things."

Russ chalked up a point for his side.

"But another time a friend of mine dropped by to visit. I was out of town, so no one answered her ring. Anyway, she heard voices and figured I was in back watching tv, with the set drowning out the doorbell. So she walked around back. I wasn't here, of course. No one was here. And when she looked inside from the patio, she could see that my set was turned off. She was rather puzzled when she told me about it. I told her a radio was left on—only that wasn't true."

"The dog ever act strangely?" Stryker asked.

"Not really. A few times she seems a little nervous is all. She's a good watchdog though—barks at strangers. That's one reason why I don't suspect prowlers. Prissy lets me know when something's going on that she doesn't like.

"Aside from that, the only other thing I can think of is one night when my son was here alone. I got back late and he was sitting in the living room awake. Said he'd seen a sort of blue mist taking shape in the darkness of his bedroom—like a naked woman. Well, the only mist was the smoke you could still smell from the pot party he and his friends had had here earlier. We had a long talk about that little matter."

Stryker studied his notepad. "I'd like to suggest a minor experiment of sorts, if you don't mind. I'd like for Russ and myself to take a turn just sitting alone in Libby's room for a few

minutes. See what impressions we have—if any.”

“I’ll take first watch,” Russ decided, at their hostess’s expression of consent.

Curtiss shot him a warning glance and returned with Gayle to the living room.

Waiting until they were around the corner, Mandarin stepped into the room now occupied by Gayle Corrington. Cass’s room. There was a scent of perfume and such, a soft aura of femininity that he hadn’t noticed from the hallway. It softened the masculine feel of the room somewhat, gave it sort of a ski lodge atmosphere. The bedroom had the look of having been recently straightened for company’s inspection. As was the case. There were crescent scratches about three feet up on the corner paneling next to the head of the bed, and Russ guessed that the pump shotgun did not usually hang from brackets on the bedroom wall as it did now.

The bathroom was out of Nero’s mountain retreat. Big enough to play tennis in, with synthetic fur rugs scattered on the slate-tiled floor, and with a dressing table and elaborate toilet fixtures that matched the tiles and included a bidet. A cross between a boudoir and the Roman baths. The sunken tub was a round affair and like an indoor pool. Russ wondered if the mirror on the ceiling fogged up when things got hot.

Swallowing the rest of his drink, he stepped into the guest room. Libby’s room. This would, of course, be the Blue Room in one of those sprawling mansions where pulp mysteries had a habit of placing their murders. Come to think of it, hadn’t he seen an old thirties movie called

something like *The Secret of the Blue Room*?

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he crunched an ice cube and studied the room about him. Very feminine—though the brightness of the patio outside kept it from becoming cloying. It had a comfortable feel about it, he decided—not the disused sensation that generally hangs over a guest room. There was just a hint of perfume still lingering—probably Gayle kept clothes in the closet here.

Russ resisted the temptation to lie down. Glancing outside, he reflected that, when drawn, the blue curtains would fill the room with blue light. Might be a point worth bringing up to Curtiss, in case the old fellow got too excited over ectoplasm and the like. Aside from that, Russ decided that the room was as thoroughly unhaunted as any bedroom he'd ever sat in.

Giving it up at length, he ambled back to the living room.

Stryker was just closing his notepad. Either he'd got another drink, or else he'd been too interested to do more than sip his gin and tonic. At Mandarin's entry, he excused himself and strode off for the bedroom.

Gayle's face was a trifle flushed, her manner somewhat nervous. Russ wondered whether it was the liquor, or if he'd broken in on something. She had that familiar edgy look of a patient after an hour of soul-baring on the analyst's couch. As he thought about it, Russ agreed that this interview must be a similar strain for her.

"You've eaten your ice cubes," she observed. "Shall I get you another?"

Russ swallowed a mouthful of salted nuts.

"Thank you—but I've got to drive."

She made a wry face. "You look big enough to hold another few. A light one, then?"

"Hell, why not. A light one, please." Probably she would feel more at ease if she supposed his psychiatric powers were disarmed by bourbon.

He paced about the living room while she saw to his glass. Coming to the fireplace, he studied the beautifully engraved shotgun that hung there. It was a Parker. Russ started to touch it.

"That's loaded."

He jerked back his hand like a scolded kid. "Sorry. Just wanted to get the feel of an engraved Parker double-barrel. That's some gun you have to decorate your fireplace with."

"Thank you. I know." She handed him his drink.

"Don't you worry about keeping a loaded shotgun in your living room?" The drink was at least equal to its predecessors.

"I'd worry more with an empty one. I'm alone here at night, and there aren't many neighbors. Besides, there aren't any kids around who might get in trouble with it."

"I'd think a woman would prefer something easier to handle than a shotgun."

"Come out on the skeet range with me sometime, and I'll show you something."

Mandarin must have looked properly chastened. With a quick grin Gayle drew down the weapon, opened the breech, and extracted two red shells. "Here." She handed the shotgun to him.

"Double ought," Russ observed, closing the breech.

"It's not for shooting starlings."

He sighted along the barrel a few times, gave it back. Briskly she replaced the shells and returned it to its mounting.

"Might I ask what you do, Mrs. Corrington?"

"Gayle. I assume you mean for a living. I own and manage a mixed bag of fashion stores—two here in Knoxville, plus a resort-wear shop in Gatlinburg, and a boutique on the Strip by the University. So you see, Doctor, not all working girls fall into the nurse or secretary system of things."

"Russ. No, of course not. Some of them make excellent psychiatrists."

She softened again. "Sorry for coming on strong for women's lib. Just that you find yourself a little defensive after being questioned for an hour."

"Sorry about that." Russ decided not to remind her that this was at her own invitation. "But this has been extremely interesting, and Curtiss is like a bloodhound on a fresh trail."

"But how do you feel about this, Gayle? Do you believe a poltergeist or some sort of spirit has attached itself to the house?"

She gave him a freckled frown and shrugged her shoulders. No, Russ concluded, she wasn't wearing some sort of backless bra beneath her gown—not that she needed one.

"Well, I can't really say. I mean, there's just been so many things happening that I can't explain. No, I don't believe in witches and vampires and ghosts all draped in bedsheets, if that's what you mean. But some of the books I've read explain poltergeists on an ESP basis—telekinesis

or something on that order."

"Do you believe in ESP?"

"Yes, to an extent."

"Do you consider yourself psychic?"

She did the thing with her shoulders again. "A little maybe. I've had a few experiences that are what the books put down as psychic phenomena. I guess most of us have.

"But now it's my turn. What do you think, Russ? Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Well, not the chain-rattling kind anyway."

"Then ESP?"

"Yes, I'll have to admit to a weakness toward ESP."

"Then here's to ESP."

They clinked glasses and drank.

"I'll second that," announced Stryker, rejoining them.

III.

"Jesus!" Stryker swore. "Slow down, Russ!" He braced himself with one hand against the dash, almost slung out of his bucket seat as the Jensen took a curve at seventy.

"Use the seat belt," advised Mandarin, slowing down somewhat. After all, he *was* a little high to be pushing the car this hard.

"Don't like them," Curtiss grunted. "The damned harnesses make me claustrophobic."

"They say they're someday going to pass a law making it compulsory to wear them."

"Like to see them try—we're not to 1984 yet! Why don't the prying bastards work to prevent

accidents instead of putting all their bright ideas into ways of letting the damn fools who cause them live through it. And speaking of prevention, how about slowing this sports car down to legal velocities. The cops would sure like to nail you on a drunk driving charge."

"Who's drunk?" Russ slowed to sixty-five, the legal limit for non-Interstate highways.

"Son, you had a few before you picked me up this noon—and Gayle Corrington wasn't running up her water bill on those drinks she poured for us."

Russ veered from the ragged shoulder of the old two-lane blacktop. "If she starts the day customarily with drinks like she was pouring for me, I think I know where her poltergeist comes from."

"You weren't impressed?" Stryker sounded amused. "But you'll admit natural explanations get a little forced and tenuous after a while."

A stop sign bobbed over the crest of a hill, and Russ hit the brakes hard. Four disc brakes brought the Jensen up almost in its length. Stryker uncovered his eyes.

"Yeah," Russ went on. "There were a number of things she said that sounded like telling points in favor of a poltergeist. But you have to bear in mind that all this is by her unsupported evidence. Hell, we can't be sure she isn't hallucinating this stuff, or even just making the whole thing up to string you along. Women do get bored at fortyish—to say nothing of what the thought of starting over the hill does to their libidos."

"She didn't look bored—and certainly not headed over the hill. Another few years, my

friend, and you'll stop thinking of womanhood withering at thirty. Hell, it's just starting to bloom. But do you think she's unreliable? Seemed to be just the opposite. A level-headed woman who was frankly baffled and a little embarrassed with the entire affair."

Russ grunted, unwilling to agree offhand—though these were his own impressions as well. "I'm just saying you need to keep everything in perspective. I've gotten fooled by too many patients with a smooth facade—even when I was expecting things to be different beneath the surface."

"But you'll hazard an opinion that Mrs. Corrington is playing straight with us so far as signs indicate?" Stryker persisted.

"Yeah," Mandarin conceded. "But that's one tough woman lurking beneath all that sweet Southern Belle charm she knows how to turn on. Watch out."

He turned onto the Interstate leading into Knoxville's downtown. In deference to Curtiss's uneasiness with high speed, he held the needle at eighty, safely just over the seventy-five limit of the time.

"What's your opinion of it all, then?" the author prodded.

"Well, I'll maintain scientific neutrality. While I consider poltergeists improbable, I'll accept the improbable when the probable explanations have all been eliminated."

"Nicely phrased, Holmes," Stryker chuckled. "And taking a position that will have you coming out sounding correct no matter what."

"The secret of medical training."

"I knew you'd come in handy for something."

"Well, then, what's your opinion?"

The author decided it was safe to release the dashboard and light his pipe. "Well, I guess I've used the supernatural too often in my fiction to accept it as willingly as I might otherwise. Seems every time I start gathering the facts on something like this, I find myself studying it as a fiction plot. You know—like those yarns I used to crank out for pulps like *Dime Mystery Stories*, where when you get to the end you learn that the Phantom of Ghastly Manor was really Cousin Rodney dressed up in a monster suit so he could murder Uncle Ethelred and claim the inheritance before the will was changed. Something like that. I start putting facts together like I was plotting a murder thriller, you know. Kind of spoils the effect for me. This thing, for instance . . ."

Russ cursed and braked viciously to avoid the traffic stopped ahead at Malfunction Junction. Knoxville's infamous rush-hour tangle had the Interstate blocked solid ahead of them. Swerving onto the shoulder, he darted for the upcoming exit and turned toward the University section. Curtiss seemed about to bite his pipe in two.

"Stop off at the Yardarm? I don't want to fight this traffic."

Stryker thought he could use a drink.

Safely seated in a back booth, stein of draft in hand, Curtiss regained his color. It was a favorite bar—just off the Strip section of the University area. When Stryker had first come to the area years back, it had been a traditional rathskeller

college bar. Styles had changed, and so had students. Long hair had replaced crewcuts, Zen and revolution had shoved fraternities and football from conversational standards, and there was a faint hint of marijuana discernible through the beer smell. Someone had once suggested changing the name of the Yardarm to the Electric Foreskin or some such, and had been tossed out for his own good.

Stryker didn't care. He'd been coming here for years—sometimes having a round with his creative writing students. Now—well, if they wanted to talk football, he'd played some; if they wanted to talk revolution, he'd fought in some. The beer was good, and the atmosphere not too frantic for conversation.

His office was a block or two away—an upstairs room in a ramshackle office building only slightly less disreputable in appearance than the dilapidated Edwardian mansion-turned-community-clinic where Russ worked. This was several blocks in the other direction, so the bar made a convenient meeting place for them. Afternoons often found the pair talking over a pitcher of beer (Knoxville bars could not serve liquor at the time), and the bartender—a huge red-bearded Viking named Blackie—knew them both by name.

"You were saying that your faith in the supernatural was fraught with skepticism," Mandarin reminded, wiping foam from his mustache.

"No. I said it was tempered with rationality," Stryker hedged. "That doesn't mean I don't believe in the supernatural. It means I examine facts with several of those famous grains of salt

before I offer them to my readers."

"I take it then you're going to use this business today in your new book."

Stryker nodded enthusiastically. "It's worth a chapter, I'm certain."

"Well, that's your judgment, of course," commented Mandarin, glancing at his watch. "Personally, I didn't read any irrefutable evidence of the supernatural into all this."

"Science scoffing under the shadow of truths inadmissible to its system of logic." Stryker snorted. "You're as blind in your beliefs as the old-guard priesthood holding the bastions of disease-by-wrath-of-God against the germ-theory heretics."

"I suppose," Russ admitted around a belch.

"But then, I forgot that you were back in Libby's room while I was finishing up the interview with Gayle Corrington," Stryker said suddenly. "Hell, you missed out on what I considered the most significant and intriguing part of her story. Let me read this off to you." He fumbled for his notepad.

Mandarin had had enough of hauntings for the day. "Let me have you fill me in later," he begged off. "I've got an evening clinic tonight, and I'd like to run back to the house beforehand and get packed."

"Going out of town?"

"I need to see my high-priced lawyers in New York tomorrow."

"That's right. How's that look?"

Russ frowned, said with more confidence than he felt: "I think we'll make our case. Police just can't burglarize a physician's confidential files in

order to get evidence for a drug bust."

"Well, I wish you luck," Stryker allowed. "There's a few angles I want to check out on this business first, anyway. I'll probably have the chapter roughed out by the time you're back in town. Why don't I give you a carbon then, and let you comment?"

"Fine." Russ stood up and downed his beer. "Can I give you a lift somewhere?"

"Thanks—but I've got my car parked just down the block. You take it easy driving back though."

Russ grinned. "Sure. Take it easy yourself."

Two nights later Mandarin's phone woke him up. Stryker hadn't taken it easy.

IV.

Disheveled and coatless in the misty rain, Mandarin stood glumly beside the broken guard-rail. It was past 3 A.M. His clothes looked slept in, which they were. He'd continued the cocktail hour that began on his evening flight from New York once he got home. Sometime toward the end of the network movie that he wasn't really watching he fell asleep on the couch. The set was blank and hissing when he stumbled awake to answer the phone.

"Hello, Russ," greeted Saunders, puffing up the steep bank from the black lakeshore. His face was grim. "Thought you ought to be called. You're about as close to him as anyone Stryker had here."

Mandarin swallowed and nodded thanks. With the back of his hand he wiped the beads of mist and sweat from his face. Below them the wrecker crew and police diver worked to secure cables to the big maroon Buick submerged there. Spotlights, red taillights burning through the mist. Yellow beacon on the wrecker, blue flashers on the two patrol cars. It washed the brush-grown lakeshore with a flickering nightmarish glow. Contorted shadows wavered around objects made grotesque, unreal. It was like a Daliesque landscape.

"What happened, Ed?" he managed to say.

The police lieutenant wiped mud from his hands. "Nobody saw it. No houses along this stretch, not a lot of traffic this hour of night."

An ambulance drove up slowly, siren off. Static outbursts of the two-way radios echoed like sick thunder in the silence.

"Couple of kids parked on a side road down by the lake. Thought they heard brakes squeal, then a sort of crashing noise. Not loud enough to make them stop what they were doing, and they'd been hearing cars drive by fast off and on all night. But they remembered it a little later when they drove past here and saw the gap in the guardrail."

He indicated the snapped-off stumps of the old-style wood-post-and-cable guardrail. "Saw where the brush was smashed down along the bank, and called it in. Investigating officer's flashlight picked out the rear end plain enough to make out the license number. I was on hand when owner's identification came in; had you called."

Russ muttered something. He'd met Saunders a few years before when the other was taking Stryker's evening class in creative writing. The detective had remained a casual friend despite Mandarin's recent confrontations with the department.

"Any chance Curtiss might have made it?"

Saunders shook his head. "Been better than a couple hours since it happened. If he'd gotten out, he'd've hiked it to a house down the road, flagged down a motorist. We'd have heard."

Someone called out from the shore below, and the wrecker's winch began to rattle. Russ shivered.

"Rained a little earlier tonight," Saunders went on. "Enough to make this old blacktop slick as greased glass. Curtiss to have been out this late, likely he'd been visiting some friends. Had maybe a few drinks more than he should have—you know how he liked gin in hot weather. Misjudged his speed on these slippery curves and piled on over into the lake."

"Hell, Curtiss could hold his liquor," Mandarin mumbled. "And he hardly ever pushed that big Buick over thirty-five."

"Sometimes that's fast enough."

The Buick's back end broke through the lake's black surface like a monster in a Japanese horror flick. With an obscene gurgle, the rest of the car followed. Lake water gushed from the car body and from the open door on the passenger side.

"OK! Hold it!" someone yelled.

The maroon sedan halted, drowned and streaming, on the brush-covered shore. Workers grouped around it. Two attendants unlimbered a

stretcher from the ambulance. Russ wanted to vomit.

"Not inside!" a patrolman called up to them.

The diver pushed back his face mask. "Didn't see him in there before we started hauling either."

"Take another look around where he went in," Saunders advised. "Someone call in and have the Rescue Squad ready to start dragging at daylight."

"He never would wear his seatbelt," Russ muttered.

Saunders's beefy frame shrugged heavily. "Don't guess it would have helped this time. Lake's deep here along the bluff. May have to wait till the body floats up somewhere." He set his jaw so tight his teeth grated. "Goddamn it to hell."

"We don't know he's dead for sure." Russ's voice held faint hope.

Sloshing and clanking, the Buick floundered up the lakeshore and onto the narrow blacktop. The door was sprung open, evidently by the impact. The front end was badly mauled—grill smashed and hood buckled—from collision with the guardrail and underbrush. Several branches were jammed into the mangled wreckage. A spiderweb spread in ominous pattern across the windshield on the driver's side.

Russ glowered at the sodden wreck, silently damning it for murdering its driver. Curtiss had always sworn by Buicks—had driven them all his life. Trusted the car. And the wallowing juggernaut had plunged into Fort Loudon Lake like a chrome-trimmed coffin.

Saunders tried the door on the driver's side. It was jammed. Deep gouges scored the sheet metal on that side.

"What's the white paint?" Mandarin pointed to the crumpled side panels.

"From the guardrail. He glanced along that post there as he tore through. Goddamn it! Why can't they put up modern guardrails along these back roads! This didn't have to happen!"

Death is like that, Russ thought. It never *had* to happen the way it did. You could always go back over the chain of circumstances leading up to an accident, find so many places where things could have turned out OK. Seemed like the odds were tremendous against everything falling in place for the worst.

"Maybe he got out," he whispered.

Saunders started to reply, looked at his face, kept silent.

V.

It missed the morning papers, but the afternoon *News-Sentinel* carried Stryker's book-jacket portrait and a few paragraphs on page one, a photograph of the wreck and a short continuation of the story on the back page of the first section. And there was a long notice on the obituary page.

Russ grinned crookedly and swallowed the rest of his drink. Mechanically he groped for the Jack Daniel's bottle and poured another over the remains of his ice cubes. God. Half a dozen errors in the obituary. A man gives his whole life

to writing, and the day of his death they can't even get their information straight on his major books.

The phone was ringing again. Expressionlessly Mandarin caught up the receiver. The first score or so times he'd still hoped he'd hear Curtiss's voice—probably growling something like: "The rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated." Eventually he'd quit hoping.

"Yes. Dr. Mandarin speaking."

(Curtiss had always ribbed him. "Hell, don't tell them who you are until they tell you who's calling.")

"No. They haven't found him yet."

("Hot as it is, he'll bob up before long," one of the workers had commented. Saunders had had to keep Russ off the bastard.)

"Yeah. It's a damn dirty shame. I know how you feel, Mrs. Hollister."

(You always called him a hack behind his back, you bloated bitch.)

"No. I can't say what funeral arrangements will be made."

(Got to have a body for a funeral, you stupid bitch.)

"I'm sure someone will decide something."

(Don't want to be left out of the social event of the season, do you?)

"Well, we all have to bear up somehow, I'm sure."

(Try cutting your wrists.)

"Uh-huh. Goodbye, Mrs. Hollister."

Jesus! Mandarin pushed the phone aside and downed his drink with a shudder. No more of this!

He groped his way out of his office. That morning he'd canceled all his appointments; his section of the makeshift clinic was deserted. Faces from the downstairs rooms glanced at him uneasily as he swept down the stairs. Yes, he must look pretty bad.

Summer twilight was cooling the grey pavement furnace of the University section. Russ tugged off his wrinkled necktie, stuffed it into his hip pocket. With the determined stride of someone in a hurry to get someplace, he plodded down the cracked sidewalk. Sweat quickly sheened his blue-black stubbled jaw, beaded his forehead and eyebrows. Damp hair clung to his neck and ears. Dimly he regretted that the crew-cut of his college days was no longer fashionable.

Despite his unswerving stride, he had no destination in mind. The ramshackle front of the Yardarm suddenly loomed before him, made him aware of his surroundings. Mandarin paused a moment by the doorway. Subconsciously he'd been thinking how good a cold beer would taste, and his feet had carried him over the familiar route. With a grimace, he turned away. Too many memories haunted the Yardarm.

He walked on. He was on the strip now. Student bars, bookshops, drugstores, clothing shops, and other student-oriented businesses. Garish head shops and boutiques poured out echoes of incense and rock music. Gayle Corrington owned a boutique along here, he recalled—he dully wondered which one.

Summer students and others of the University crowd passed along the sidewalks, lounged in doorways. Occasionally someone recognized him

and called a greeting. Russ returned a dumb nod, not wavering in his mechanical stride. He didn't see their faces.

Then someone had hold of his arm.

"Russ! Russ, for God's sake! Hold up!"

Scowling, he spun around. The smooth-skinned hand anchored to his elbow belonged to Royce Blaine. Mandarin made his face polite as he recognized him. Dr. Blaine had been on the medicine house staff during Mandarin's psychiatric residency. Their acquaintance had not died out completely since those days.

"Hello, Royce."

The internist's solemn eyes searched his face. "Sorry to bother you at a time like now, Russ," he apologized. "Just wanted to tell you we were sad to hear about your friend Stryker. Know how good a friend of yours he was."

Mandarin mumbled something appropriate.

"Funeral arrangements made yet, or are they still looking?"

"Haven't found him yet."

His face must have slipped its polite mask. Blaine winced.

"Yeah? Well, just wanted to let you know we were all sorry. He was working on a new one, wasn't he?"

"Right. Another book on the occult."

"Always thought it was tragic when an author left his last book unfinished. Was it as good as his others?"

"I hadn't seen any of it. I believe all he had were notes and a few chapter roughs."

"Really a damn shame. Say, Russ—Tina says for me to ask you how about dropping out our

way for dinner some night. We don't see much of you these days—not since you and Alicia used to come out for fish fries.”

“I'll take you up on that some night,” Russ temporized.

“This week maybe?” Blaine persisted. “How about Friday?”

“Sure. That'd be fine.”

“Friday, then. Six-thirty say. Time for a happy hour.”

Mandarin nodded and smiled thinly. Blaine squeezed his shoulder, gave him a sympathetic face, and scurried off down the sidewalk. Mandarin resumed his walk.

The hot afternoon sun was in decline, throwing long shadows past the mismatched storefronts and deteriorating houses. Russ was dimly aware that his feet were carrying him along the familiar path to Stryker's office. Did he want to walk past there? Probably not—but he felt too apathetic to redirect his course.

The sun was behind the old drugstore whose second floor housed a number of small businesses, and the dirty windows of Stryker's office lay in shadow. Behind their uncurtained panes, a light was burning.

Mandarin frowned uncertainly. Curtiss never left his lights on. He had an obsession about wasting electricity.

Leaning heavily on the weathered railing, Russ climbed the outside stairway that gave access to the second floor. Above, a dusty hallway led down the center of the building. Several doorways opened off either side. A tailor, a leather-shop, several student-owned businesses—which

might or might not reopen with the fall term. Only Frank the Tailor was open for the summer, and he took Mondays off.

Dust and silence and the stale smell of disused rooms. Stryker's office was one of the two which fronted the street. It was silent as the rest of the hallway of locked doors, but light leaked through the not-quite-closed doorway.

Mandarin started to knock, then noticed the scars on the door jamb where the lock had been forced. His descending fist shoved the door open.

Curtiss's chair was empty. No one sat behind the scarred desk with its battered typewriter.

Russ glanced around the barren room with its cracked plaster and book-laden, mismatched furniture. Anger drove a curse to his lips.

Stryker's office had always been in total disorder; now it looked like it had been stirred with a stick. Whoever had ransacked the office had done a thorough job.

VI.

Through the Yardarm jukebox Johnny Cash was singing "Ring of Fire" for maybe the tenth time that evening. Some of those patrons who had hung around since nightfall were beginning to notice.

Ed Saunders hauled his hairy arms out of the sleeves of his ill-fitting suitcoat, slung the damp garment over the vacant chair beside him. He leaned over the beer-smeared table, truculently intent, like a linebacker in a defensive huddle.

"It still looks completely routine to me, Russ," he concluded.

Mandarin poked a finger through the pile of cold, greasy pizza crusts, singing an almost inaudible chorus of "down, down, down, in a burnin' ring of far . . ." A belch broke off his monotone, and he mechanically fumbled through the litter of green Rolling Rock bottles for one that had a swallow left. Blackie the bartender was off tonight, and his stand-in had no conception of how to heat a frozen pizza. Mandarin's throat still tasted sour, and he felt certain a bad case of heartburn was building up.

The bottles all seemed empty. He waved for two more, still not replying to Saunders's assertion. A wavy-haired girl, braless in a tank top, carried the beers over to them—glanced suspiciously at Saunders while she made change. Mandarin slid the coins across the rough boards and eyed the jukebox speculatively.

The city detective sighed. "Look, Russ—why don't you let Johnny Cash catch his breath, what do you say?"

Russ grinned crookedly and turned to his beer. "But it wasn't routine," he pronounced, tipping back the bottle. His eyes were suddenly clear.

Saunders made an exasperated gesture. "You know, Russ, we got God knows how many break-ins a week in this neighborhood. I talked to the investigating officer before I came down. He handled it OK."

"Handled it like a routine break-in—which it wasn't," Mandarin doggedly pointed out.

The lieutenant pursed his lips and reached for

the other beer—his second against Mandarin's tenth. Maybe, he mused, it was pointless to trot down here in response to Mandarin's insistent phone call. But he liked the psychiatrist, understood the hell of his mood. Both of them had known Curtiss Stryker as a friend.

He began again. "By our records, two of the other shops on that floor have been broken into since spring. It goes on all the time around here—I don't have to tell you about this neighborhood. You got a black slum just a few blocks away, winos and bums squatting in all these empty houses here that ought to be torn down. Then there's all these other old dumps, rented out full of hippies and junkies and God knows what. Hell, Russ—you know how bad it is. That clinic of yours—we have to just about keep a patrol car parked in front all night to keep the junkies from busting in—and then the men have to watch sharp or they'll lose their hubcaps just sitting there."

Mandarin reflected that the cessation of break-ins was more likely due to the all-night talking point now run by university volunteers at the community clinic—and that the patrol car seemed more interested in observing callers for potential dope busts than in discouraging prowlers. Instead, he said: "That's my point, Ed. Routine break-ins follow a routine pattern. Rip off a tv, stereo, small stuff that can easily be converted into cash. Maybe booze or drugs, if any's around. Petty theft.

"Doesn't hold for whoever hit Stryker's office. Hell, he never kept anything around there to attract a burglar."

"So the burglar made a mistake. After all, he couldn't know what was there until he looked."

Russ shook his head. "Then he would have taken the typewriter—beat-up as it is—or finished the half bottle of Gallo sherry Curtiss had on the shelf. Doubt if he would have recognized any of his books as worth stealing, but at least he would have taken something for his trouble."

"Probably knew the stuff wasn't worth the risk of carrying off," the detective pointed out. "Left it to try somewhere else. Looked like the door on the leathershop was jimmied, though we haven't contacted the guy who leases it. It's a standard pattern, Russ. Thief works down a hallway room by room until he gets enough or someone scares him off. Probably started at Stryker's office, gave it up and was working on another door when he got scared off."

"Ed, I know Curtiss's office as well as I know my own. Every book in that place had been picked up and set down again. Someone must have spent an hour at it. Everything had been gone through."

"Well, I've been up in his office before, too," Saunders recalled, "and I'd be surprised if anyone could remember what kind of order he kept his stuff in—if there *was* any order. I don't know—maybe the thief was up on his rare books. Say he was scanning title pages for first editions or something."

"Then he passed up a nice copy of Lovecraft's *The Outsider* that would have brought him a couple hundred bucks."

"Did he? I never heard of it. I meant stuff like Hemingway and all—things you'd likely know

were valuable. Or maybe he was just checking for money. Lot of people keep maybe ten or twenty dollars lying around the office for emergencies—stuck back in a drawer, behind a picture, inside a book or something.”

Mandarin snorted and finished his beer. He signaled for two more despite the other’s protest.

“Look, Russ,” Saunders argued gently. “Why are you making such a big thing out of this? So far as we can tell, nothing was taken. Just a simple case of break and enter—thief looks the place over a bit, then gives up and moves on. It’s routine.”

“No, it isn’t.” Mandarin’s thin face was stubborn. “And something *was* missing. The place was *too* neat, that’s the conclusion. Usually Curtiss had the place littered with notes, pieces of clippings, pages of manuscript, wadded-up rough drafts—you’ve seen how it is. Now his desk is clean, stuff’s been picked up off the floor and shelves. All of it gone—even his wastebasket!”

“Do you want to report a stolen wastebasket, Russ?” Saunders asked tiredly.

“Goddamn it all, can’t you put it together? Somebody broke into Curtiss’s office, spent a good deal of time gathering up all of his old notes and pages of manuscript—*all* of it, even the scrap paper—then piled it into the wastebasket and walked out. Who’d stop a man who was walking down the alley with a wastebasket full of paper?”

Saunders decided he’d have that third beer—if for no better reason than to keep the psychiatrist from downing it. “Russ, it seems to me you’re ignoring the obvious. Look, you’ve been gone for

a few days, right? Now isn't it pretty likely that Curtiss just decided to tidy the place up. So he goes through all his stuff, reorganizes things, dumps all his scrap paper and old notes into the wastebasket, sets the wastebasket out to be picked up, and takes the stuff he's working on for the moment on home with him."

"That place hasn't been straightened out in years—since the fire inspectors got on his ass."

"So he figured it was high time. Then later some punk breaks in, sees there's nothing there for him, moves on. Why not, Russ?"

Mandarin seemed to subside. "Just doesn't feel right to me, is all," he muttered.

"So why would somebody steal Curtiss's scrap paper, can you tell me?"

Mandarin scowled at his beer.

"Morbid souvenir hunters? Spies trying to intercept secret information? Maybe it was ghosts trying to recover forbidden secrets? Hell, Russ—you've been reading too many of Stryker's old thrillers."

"Look, I don't know the motives or the logic involved," Russ admitted grandiosely. "That's why I say it *isn't* routine."

The detective rolled his eyes and gave it up. "All right, Russ. I can't go along with your half-assed logic, but I'll make sure the department checks into this to the best of our ability. Good enough?"

"Good enough."

Saunders grunted and glanced at his watch. "Look, Russ. I got to make a phone call before I forget. What do you say wait around and after I get through I'll run you on back to your place?"

"My car's just over at the clinic."

"Are you sure . . .?"

"Hell, I can drive. Few beers don't amount to anything."

"Well, wait here a minute for me," urged Saunders, deciding to argue it later. He lifted his sweaty bulk from the chair's sticky vinyl and made for the payphone in the rear of the bar.

Mandarin swore sourly and began to stuff the rinds of pizza crust into one of the empty bottles. Heartburn, for sure. He supposed he ought to get headed home.

"Well, well, well. Dr. Mandarin, I presume. This is a coincidence. Holding office hours here now, Doctor?"

Russ glowered upward. A grinning face leaned over the table. Russ continued to glower.

Natty in double-knit slacks and sportshirt, Brooke Hamilton dropped onto Saunders's vacated chair. "Rather thought I'd find you here, actually," he confided. "Believe you and the old man used to drop by here regularly, right?"

Hamilton was drinking beer in a frosted mug. It made an icy puddle on the cigarette-scarred tabletop. Mandarin had a private opinion of people who drank beer in frosted mugs.

"Really a shock hearing about old Stryker," Hamilton went on. "Really too bad—though I'm sure a man like Stryker never would have wanted to die in bed. A man of action, old Curtiss. A living legend now passed on to the realm of legends. Yes, we're all going to miss the old man. Not many of the old pulp greats left around. Well, *sic transit*." He made a toast.

Mandarin did not join him. He had met Ham-

ilton at various cocktail parties and writers' symposiums around the University. He was quite popular in some circles—taught creative writing, edited several "little magazines" and writers' projects, was prominent at gatherings of regional writers and camp followers. His own writing consisted of several startlingly bad novels published by various local presses—often after Hamilton had cornered their editors at some cocktail affair.

Stryker had loathed him—calling him at one such gathering an ingratiating, self-serving conceited phony. Hamilton had been within earshot, but chose not to hear. Their admiration was mutual. Since Hamilton was in the habit of referring to Stryker as an over-the-hill pulp hack, Mandarin was not moved by the man's show of grief.

"Where's the funeral, Dr. Mandarin—or do you know?"

Mandarin shook his head, measuring the distance to the other man's Kirk Douglas chin. "No body found yet," he said.

"Well, I suppose they'll have some sort of memorial service before long, whatever. Give the writers' community opportunity to pay our last respects to the old man. Professor Kettering has asked me to act as spokesman for the University. A little tribute for the school paper, and I suppose I'll say a few words at the memorial service. Old Stryker is going to be missed by those of us who carry on."

"I'm sure."

"Thought I might get you to fill me in on a few details of his career, if you don't mind. After all,

you saw a lot of the old man here in his last years." Hamilton glanced pointedly at the litter of beer bottles. "But I can catch you another time."

Mandarin grunted noncommittally.

"One thing I did want to ask though. Had old Stryker finished that last book he was working on?"

"No, he was still working on it last time I saw him."

"Oh, you don't think he did. Christ, isn't it tragic to think of all the unfinished work his pen will never take up again. And just when Stryker was as popular with readers as he ever was in the golden age of the pulps."

"Damn shame."

Hamilton nodded gravely. "Yes, it is a shame. You know, I was over at the Frostfire Press this morning, talking with Morris Sheldon about it. Christ, they're all so down about it over there. But we got to talking, and Morris suddenly came out and said: 'Brooke, how'd you like to edit a memorial volume for old Stryker?' You know, sort of an anthology of his best stuff, and I'd write the introduction—a short biography and criticism of his work. Well, I told him I'd be honored to do it for old Stryker, maybe even edit a few of his last, unfinished works for publication.

"Well, this started Morris thinking still further, and all of a sudden he came out and said: 'Brooke, there's no reason Stryker's public has to be deprived of these last few masterworks. He always made extensive notes, and you were always close to him as a writer and friend . . .'"

"You son of a bitch."

"How's that?"

"You ass-kissing, cocksucking son of a bitch."

Mandarin's voice was thick with rage.

Hamilton drew himself up. "Now hold it there, Mandarin." In his egotism it had not occurred to him that Mandarin might resent his assumption of role as Stryker's literary heir. But he was confident of his ability to destroy the other man in any verbal duel—his wit, termed variously "acid" or "rapier," had dazzled his fans at many a social function.

Heads were turning, as both men came to their feet in an angry crouch.

"You ass-licking fake! You couldn't write your name and phone number on a shithouse wall! And after all the snotty condescension you had for Stryker, you're stealing his name and his work before his grave's even been spaded!"

"I don't have to take that—even from a drunk!" Hamilton snarled. "Although I understand I'm not likely to ever find you sober."

The distance to his movie-star chin had already been noted. Mandarin reached across the table, put a fist there.

Hamilton sat down, hard. The rickety chair cracked under him. Arms flailing, he hit the floor in a tangle of splintered wood. The beer stein smashed against the dirty concrete.

Anger burned the dazed look from his eyes. Accustomed to urbane exchanges of insults at cocktail parties and catfights, Hamilton had not expected the manners of a barroom brawl. "You goddamn drunk!" he spat, struggling to rise.

Mandarin, who before medical school had

spent a lot of Saturday nights in Montana saloons, was not a gentleman. He waited until Hamilton had risen halfway from the wreckage of his chair, then put another straight right to his chin. Hamilton went down again.

The writer shook the stars from his head and came up frothing mad. He was only five years or so older than Mandarin and of approximate physical size. Regular workouts at the faculty health club had hardened his body into the finely tuned fighting machine of the heroes of his novels. Now he discarded his initial intent of dispatching his drunken opponent with a few precisely devastating karate blows.

The beer stein had shattered with a jagged chunk still attached to its handle. Hamilton rolled to his feet, gripping the handle in his fist like a pair of brass knucks.

Mandarin, unhappy that he had not had more on his punches, cleared the end of the table with no apparent intention of helping the other man to his feet. Hamilton's fist with its jagged knuckle-duster slashed at his face.

Rolling under the punch, Russ blocked Hamilton's arm aside and threw a shoulder into his chest. They smashed to the floor, Mandarin on top with a knee planted in the other man's belly.

Breath whooshed from the writer's lips as his head cracked against the floor. Mandarin took the broken stein away from him, grinned down at his pinned opponent. Hamilton gave a hoarse bleat of fear.

"Jesus H. Christ! Russ, stop it!"

Saunders shouldered through the crowd, caught Russ's arm in a shovel fist, hauled the two

men apart. His interference was booed.

Groggily, Hamilton came to his feet, his face astonishingly pale. He glared at Mandarin, struggling to break away from the burly detective, decided not to risk a punch against him.

"Call the police!" he said shakily. "This man attacked me!"

"I'm a policeman, buddy!" Saunders growled. "What I saw was this man disarming you after you tried to jam a busted bottle in his face! Want to take out a warrant?"

The writer composed himself, massaging his bruised chin. "A policeman? Yes, I believe I recognize you now. One of the late Curtiss Stryker's night school protégés, I recall. No doubt you learned more effective ways of writing parking tickets, officer—although it's always encouraging to see one of your sort trying to improve his mind."

"Ask him if he's stolen any good wastebaskets lately," Mandarin suggested, wriggling out of the detective's grasp.

"Very clever, aren't we," Hamilton sneered. "I wonder what the state medical association will say about an alcoholic psychiatrist who gets into barroom brawls?"

"I wonder what the English department will say about faggot faculty members who try to chop a man's face up with a busted beer stein?" Saunders wondered.

Hamilton brushed himself off, his smile supercilious. "Well, I can see there's no point taking out a warrant when the arresting officer is a personal friend of the guilty party."

He turned to the onlookers. "You see the kind

of police protection our community enjoys. I leave you to judge!"

"Hit him again, Doc!" someone yelled from across the bar. "We'll keep the pig from pulling you off before you're finished!"

Hamilton's face turned pale again.

"I think you'd better get going," Saunders warned. "Russ, get back here!"

"We shall, of course, take this up again when we aren't immersed in the rabble," Hamilton promised, moving for the door.

"Oh, to be sure!" Mandarin mimicked.

The writer swept out the door to a chorus of catcalls.

"OK, what started that!" Saunders demanded, picking up his coat.

The wavy-haired barmaid had brought Mandarin another beer. He was toasting her with a pleased expression on his stubbled face. Despite his annoyance, Saunders reflected that it was the first smile he'd seen from the psychiatrist since the accident.

"That son of a bitch Hamilton," Mandarin informed him, "that piece of shit—he's talked Stryker's publisher here into letting him edit Curtiss's last work—do a memorial volume and shit like that! Hell, you know how he and Curtiss felt about each other. Ed, get your fingerprint men up to Stryker's office. You'll find Hamilton's sticky little fingers were all over the place."

"Let's not get started on that one again," Saunders told him wearily.

"Bet you dollars to dogshit, and you can hold the stakes in your mouth."

"Come on, Russ. I'll drop you off."

Protesting, Mandarin let himself be led away.

VII.

"What's the matter?"

Mandarin had paused with his hand on the door of Saunders's Ford. He stared out across the parking lot. "Somebody's following us. Just saw his shadow duck behind that old VW van. If it's that son of a bitch Hamilton looking for more trouble . . ."

Saunders followed Mandarin's gaze, saw nothing. "Oh hell, get in, Russ! Jesus, you're starting to sound paranoid!"

"There's somebody there," Russ insisted. "Followed us from the Yardarm."

"Some damn hippy afraid of a bust," Saunders scoffed. "Will you just get in!"

His expression wounded, Mandarin complied.

Backing the Ford out of the parking place, Saunders turned down Forest Avenue. Mandarin took a last swig from the Rolling Rock he had carried with him from the bar, then stuck his arm out and fired the green bottle in the general direction of his imagined skulker. From the darkness came the rattle of breaking glass.

"Ka-pow!" echoed Russ.

Saunders winced and drove on in silence.

"Hey, you went past the clinic," Russ protested several blocks later.

"Look, I'll run you back down in the morning."

"I can drive OK."

"Will you let me do this as a favor?" Saunders

asked, not making it clear whose favor he meant it to be.

Mandarin sighed and shrugged. "Home, James."

Pressing his lips tightly, the detective turned onto Kingston Pike. After a while he said: "You know, Russ, there's several on the force who'd really like to put your ass in a sling. Drunken driving is a really tough charge."

When Mandarin started to argue, Saunders shouted him down. "Look, Russ. I know this is rough on you. It is on all of us who knew Curtiss. But damn it, this isn't going to make it any better for you. I thought you finally learned that for yourself after Alicia . . ."

"Goddamn it, Ed! Don't *you* start lecturing me now!"

"OK, Russ," his friend subsided, remembering the hell Mandarin had gone through three years before. "Just wanted to remind you that you'd tried this blind alley once before."

"Ed, I drink only socially these days." He waited for the other to say something, finally added: "Except for an occasional binge, maybe."

"Just trying to make a friendly suggestion."

"Well, I can do without friendly suggestions."

"OK, Russ."

They drove the rest of the way in silence. Saunders expected the psychiatrist to drop off, but the other sat rigidly upright all the way. Too much adrenalin, Saunders decided.

He pulled into the long driveway of Mandarin's Cherokee Hills estate. It was a rambling Tudor-style house of the 1920s, constructed when this had been the snob residential section

of Knoxville. Although most of the new money had now moved into the suburbs, Cherokee Hills had resisted urban decay with stately aloofness.

"I'll give you a ring in the morning," Saunders promised.

"It's all right; I'll call a cab," muttered Russ.

Saunders shrugged. "Good night, Russ."

He climbed out of the car. "Sure."

Saunders waited until he was in the front door before driving off.

The phone started to ring while Russ was dropping Alka-Seltzers into a highball glass. Holding the frothing glass carefully, he picked up the receiver.

"Hello." He wondered if he could finish the conversation before the tablets finished their dancing disintegration.

"Dr. Mandarin?"

"Speaking." He didn't recognize the voice.

"This is Morris Shelden from the Frostfire Press. Been trying to get in touch with you this evening."

"Yeah? Well, what can I do for you, Morris old buddy?"

"Well, I know you were close to poor Curtiss Stryker. I believe he mentioned to me that you were giving him some medical opinions relative to the research he was doing on this last book."

"I was," Russ acknowledged, taking time for a swallow of Alka-Seltzer.

"Do you know how far along he'd gotten . . . before the accident?"

"Well now, you probably know better than I. All I'd seen were several of the early chapters."

"I'd wondered if you perhaps had seen the rough draft of the chapter you were involved in."

"The poltergeist house? No, didn't know he'd had time to put that in rough draft yet."

"Yes, he had. At least he said so in our last conversation."

"Well, that's news to me. I was out of town the last couple days." Mandarin downed the last of the seltzer. "Why do you ask?"

Shelden paused. "Well, frankly I'd hoped Curtiss might have passed a carbon of it on to you. He didn't send me the typescript, and we're rather afraid it was with his papers when the accident occurred. If so, I'm afraid his last chapter has been lost forever."

"Probably so," Russ agreed, his voice carefully civil. "But why are you concerned?"

"Well, as a friend of Curtiss's you'll be glad to know that Frostfire Press has decided not to let his last book go unfinished. We've approached his close friend and colleague, Brooke Hamilton . . ."

"Oh," said Mandarin, revelation dawning in his voice. "Hey, you mean his confidant and bosom pal, Brooke Hamilton, hopes to use Stryker's notes and all for a posthumous collaboration?"

"That's right," Shelden agreed. "And naturally we want to locate as much of Stryker's material as we can."

"Well, then you're in luck, Morris old buddy. Stryker's dear friend, that critically acclaimed writer and all-around *bon vivant*, Brooke Hamilton, was so overcome with grief at his mentor's

death that he wasted no time in breaking into Stryker's office and stealing every shred of Stryker's unpublished writing. Just give him time to sort through the wastebasket, and dear old Brooke will keep you in posthumous collaborations for the next ten years."

"Now wait, Dr. Mandarin! You mean you're accusing Brooke Hamilton of . . ."

"Of following his natural talents. And may the pair of you be buggered in hell by ghouls! Good night, Morris old buddy."

He slammed the receiver over Sheldon's rejoinder, and swore for a while.

Returning to the sink, he carefully rinsed his glass, then added a few ice cubes. There was bourbon in the decanter.

Sipping his drink, he collapsed on the den couch and glared at the silent television screen. He didn't feel like watching the idiot tube tonight. He didn't even feel like having anything more to drink. Nor did he care to go to bed, despite extended lack of sleep. His belly felt sour, his head ached. He was too damn mad and disgusted to relax.

Ghouls. All of them. Gathering for the feast. *More Haunted Houses of the South*, by Curtiss Stryker and Brooke Hamilton. Probably they'd already approached Stryker's agent, set up a contract. Stryker would spin in his grave. If he ever reached his grave.

Mandarin wondered if he ought to phone Stryker's agent and protest—then remembered that he had no idea who his agent had been. No, make that *was*, not *had been*. As a literary

property, Curtiss Stryker was suddenly more alive than before.

Shelden would know who the agent was. Maybe he should phone and ask. Russ discarded the idea. Who was he to protest, anyway? Just another obnoxious "friend of the deceased."

His thoughts turned to Stryker's unfinished book, to the missing last chapter. Curtiss had promised to give him the carbon. Probably Hamilton had made off with that along with his other tomb spoils.

Maybe not.

Stryker kept a file of all his more recent manuscripts. A big filing cabinet in his study at home. Sometimes he worked there at night—when he was pushed by a deadline, or really caught up in something.

Russ hauled himself to his feet. A picture was taking shape. Stryker due at a friend's home for dinner, knowing he wouldn't be back until late. But too interested in his new chapter to leave the material in his office. Instead he brings his notes home and works on the manuscript until time to leave. Had anyone thought to check his study?

Someone would soon—if they hadn't already. Climbing the stairs to his bedroom, Russ fumbled through his dresser. There it was—in a box crammed mostly with cuff links, tie tacks and spare keys. The key to his house that Stryker had given him once when the author left for several months knocking about Mexico.

A look of angry resolve on his black-stubbed jaw, Mandarin snatched up the key and stalked to the garage. The battery was low in the old

GTO that he'd kept because it had been Alicia's favorite car, but the engine caught at the last moment. With an echo of throaty exhausts, he backed out of the garage.

His plans were only half formulated, as he carefully steered the rumbling Pontiac through the downtown streets. He meant to check Stryker's study immediately, however. If the chapter manuscript were there, he'd take it to read, and Brooke Hamilton could go to hell. And if he didn't find the manuscript—maybe that would be because someone had already broken into the house. A horrid grin twisted Mandarin's face. He'd like for that to be the case. Like to show the evidence to Saunders, place charges against Brooke Hamilton for stealing from a dead man.

It was past eleven, and traffic was thinning out—for which Russ was grateful. With far more caution than was his custom, he overcame his impatience and made the short drive out Lyons View Pike without mishap.

He turned into the empty drive and cut his lights. Stryker's house, an old brick farmhouse laid out in a T, hunched dark beneath huge white pines. The windows were black against the brick from the front; the remainder of the house was shadowed by the looming pines from what little moonlight the clouds hadn't kept.

Mandarin remembered a flashlight in the glove compartment and dug it out. The beam was yellow and weak, but enough to see by. Suspiciously he played the light across the front of the house. Seeing nothing untoward, he started around back.

The front of the house was two storeys and contained living quarters. Like the stem of a T, the rear section came out perpendicularly from the rest—a single-storey wing that housed kitchen and storage. A side porch came off from one side of the kitchen wing, where Stryker and Russ had spent many a summer evening, slouched in wooden rockers and with something cold to drink.

Having seen nothing out of the ordinary, Russ crossed the unscreened porch to the kitchen door, jabbed his key at the lock. As he fumbled for the knob, the door nudged open.

Mandarin brought up his flashlight. The old-fashioned latch had been forced.

He breathed a silent curse. Stealthily he pushed open the door, stepped inside.

Thunder spat flame from across the room. Russ pitched backward onto the porch, and the flame burst across his skull.

VIII.

She was the most beautiful, and at the same time the most frightening, woman Mandarin had ever seen. She danced in a whirl of blue, how could his heart forget? Blue were the skies, and blue were her eyes, just like the blue skirt she wore . . .

And she whispered to him as she waltzed, and the things she whispered to him were beautiful, and Mandarin wanted to hear more, even though her whispers terrified him.

And the more she danced and whispered and sang, the worse his vertigo became, and he was dizzy and falling, and he was clutching at her blue skirt to keep from falling, and she kept dancing away from him, and he cried out to her to come back . . .

He didn't understand . . .

But he *had* to understand . . .

"Come back!" he screamed. His voice was a tortured rasp.

The blue light became a lance of blue flame, searing his brain. And her hands of coldest ice pierced through him and seized upon his soul, and the blue lady was drawing him away, pulling him through the darkness . . .

Dimly, through the haze of throbbing pain, Mandarin became aware of the man bending over him.

Gritting his teeth, he forced his eyes to focus. It was hard. A bright beam of light bored into his face.

"Christ! He's coming around, Sid!"

The light swept away.

Mandarin struggled to rise—groaned and fell back. Bright flashes of pain rippled from the numbing ache of his skull.

"Just stay put, buddy. Jesus! We thought you were . . ."

Russ's vision was clearing. Blotchy green after-images swam across his eyes. But he saw the patrolman's uniform, and the rising wave of panic subsided.

"Neighbor says she knows who he is, Hardin."

The other voice drifted from farther away. "He's a friend of the guy who owned this place. Drops by every week or so."

Russ dully recognized the floor of Stryker's side porch spread out around him. It was damp and sticky. He could hear a woman's voice speaking from the kitchen, though he couldn't follow her words.

"I think the bullet must've just grazed the top of his forehead," the first man called out. "There's blood all over the back of his head, but it looks like he just busted his scalp open falling back against the post here. You're one lucky hardheaded bastard, buddy."

His partner was examining Russ's billfold. "Name's Dr. Russell Mandarin. He's that shrink friend of Lieutenant Saunders, I think. Hope that's the ambulance I hear coming. He's been out a damn long time."

"I'm all right," protested Mandarin without conviction. He tried again to rise, made it to his knees. The porch seemed to whirl and pitch. He shut his eyes hard and waited.

An arm steadied his shoulder. "Maybe you better stay down, buddy. You got blood leaking all across the back of your head."

Doggedly Mandarin got his feet under him, lurched onto a porch rocker. The chair almost tipped, then steadied. With careful fingers he touched his forehead, found pain there. His hair was clotted with blood. Squinting across the narrow porch, Russ saw the support post opposite the back door. He remembered a gunshot, and falling backward. He must have bashed his head against the oak pillar.

"Dr. Mandarin? Are you all right?"

Russ recognized Mrs. Lieberman, Stryker's closest neighbor. Russ had often kidded Stryker that the widow had designs on him, and Stryker would always reply that only a cad tells.

"I heard that loud old car of yours turn into Mr. Stryker's driveway," she was saying. "And then I heard a shot. I thought it must be a gang of burglars, and so I called the police."

"And it's good you did, ma'am. They might have finished the job on your friend here otherwise."

The one called Hardin looked down the driveway. "Here's the ambulance—and our backup, now that we don't need it."

"I think I heard them miss the turnoff twice," his partner replied.

"What's happening?" Mandarin asked, recovering enough to become aware of his situation.

"You been shot, Doc, but you're going to be all right now."

"Shot?"

"Reckon you busted in on whoever it was that'd broke into the house. Can't see that anything's taken, but the place is sure a mess."

IX.

Saunders was waiting for him when Mandarin got out of X-ray. Russ had insisted on viewing the films himself, after making enough of a scene that the radiologist seemed a little disappointed to find no evidence of fracture or subdural. Russ let them wheel him back down to the ER, where

a nervous resident began to patch him up.

"I am goddamn glad to see you here," was Saunders's first comment.

"Same to you, sideways," Russ said. "Did you know that those two clowns of yours had radioed me in as DOA? Damn lucky I didn't bleed out waiting."

"Damn lucky you got a thick skull and a hippy haircut. Somebody bounced a bullet off your head, and if they'd aimed an inch or so lower, it'd've gone between your eyes instead of parting your hair. I hear you busted loose a porch rail banging it with your head afterward."

"Nothing much hurt but my good looks," Russ allowed. "They want to keep me overnight for observation, but I'm heading home from here. I can damn well observe myself—no point in being a doctor if you can't change your own oil. And don't tell me the one about '. . . has a fool for a physician.'"

Saunders was serious now. Too serious.

"Russ, I'm going to tell you that the only reason you're not headed from here to the station is because you were lying there DOA on Stryker's porch at the same time Brooke Hamilton was being murdered."

Mandarin decided he was still suffering the effects of his concussion. "What's that about Hamilton?"

Saunders was looking for a cigarette, then remembered he couldn't smoke here. "Just came from his place. A boyfriend let himself in around midnight, found Hamilton tied to a chair, throat had just been cut. And he'd been cut up pretty

good elsewhere before he got his second smile. After that business this afternoon, I was afraid it was you I'd be bringing in. I was at your house when word came in that you were dead at the time of the murder. Reckon we'll hold his boyfriend now instead."

"Jesus!" Russ muttered. It was all coming too fast for him.

"These queers do some weird shit when they have their love spats," Saunders informed him. "Likely high on pot and LSD."

"I didn't know Hamilton was gay."

"No? Well, he *looked* queer. I can spot them. Anyway, if you hadn't been busy getting shot in the head at Curtiss's house at the time Hamilton was last seen alive, you'd be in worse trouble now."

"I think I want to go home."

"I'll see that you get there," Saunders said. "Only this time you stay put."

"Scout's honor." Russ held up three fingers.

Saunders watched him without amusement. "And when you get there, you can help fill out a report. Tell us if anything's missing."

"Missing?"

"Somebody'd broke into your house right before we got there."

X.

Mandarin had a bottle of Percodan tablets for pain—contraindicated, of course, in the presence of recent head injury—and he prescribed

himself a couple and washed them down with a medicinal glass of Jack Daniel's. He supposed he should sue himself for malpractice. After all, he'd only been permitted to leave the hospital after signing an "against medical advice" form. A fool for a physician.

Was it possible for a head to ache any worse than his did? He had a gash above his forehead where the bullet had grazed his scalp, a lump across the back of his skull from his fall, and a terminal hangover. Russ almost wished his assailant had aimed lower. Saunders's people hadn't turned up any brass, and Saunders was of the opinion that Russ's attacker had got off a lucky shot with a junk .22 revolver—probably one of his hippy dopefiend patients. Typical of the times, Saunders judged, and with our boys dying in Vietnam while scum like this dodged the draft.

Three break-ins in one night—not to mention the burglary of Stryker's office the day before—hardly seemed random, Mandarin had argued. Saunders had pointed out that these were only a few of the dozens of break-ins that took place each night, and that it was all due to drugs, and that if certain psychiatrists would stick to shrinking heads and let the police go about their business, a lot of this sort of thing would be stopped.

Russ promised to go to bed.

But neither the Percodan nor the bourbon could ease the pain in his skull. And the thoughts kept running through his brain. And every time he closed his eyes, she was there.

*I dream of that night with you,
Darling, when first we met . . .*

Mandarin realized that his eyes weren't closed. She was there. In his room. And she whispered to him . . .

Mandarin screamed and sat up. His drink, balanced on the back of the couch, fell over and spilled melted ice cubes onto his lap.

The dancing image faded.

Never, thought Mandarin, *never* mix Percodan and alcohol. He was shaking badly, and his feet seemed to float above the floor as he stumbled into the kitchen for another drink. Maybe he ought to take a couple Valiums. Christ, he was in worse shape now than when Alicia died.

Could a poltergeist direct a bullet?

Russ noticed that he was pouring bourbon over the top of his glass. He gulped down a mouthful, not tasting it. His hands were steadier.

Could a poltergeist direct a bullet?

Either he was succumbing to paranoid fantasies and alcoholic hallucinations, or maybe he should have stayed in the hospital for observation. Was he going over the edge? What the hell—he hadn't been worth shooting since Alicia died.

Someone thought he was worth shooting.

Could a poltergeist direct a bullet?

Was *he* haunted?

It wasn't random; Saunders was wrong. There *was* a pattern, and it had all started that afternoon when Gayle Corrington told them about her poltergeist. A ghostly lesbian who dabbled in

the occult and who liked blue. The stuff of one of Stryker's pulp thrillers, but now there were two people dead, and someone—or something—had broken into the homes of everyone involved and scattered things about like a vengeful whirlwind.

Mandarin decided that a walk in the early dawn would do him good. He just might be sober by the time he reached the clinic and his car.

Could a poltergeist *deflect* a bullet?

XI.

This one ends on a bright summer morning, and a fresh dew on the roses that perfume the dawn.

Russ Mandarin eased his Jensen Interceptor into the driveway and killed the engine. All at once it seemed absurdly dramatic to him. He really should have phoned Gayle Corrington before driving over to her house at this hour.

Or maybe he shouldn't have.

He closed the door quietly and walked up to the carport. The white Corvette was parked there as before, only before there hadn't been a scraping of maroon paint along its scored right front fender. Fiberglass is a bitch to touch up.

Russ tried the doorbell long enough to decide that Gayle Corrington wasn't going to answer. Either not at home (her car was still there) or a sound sleeper. Russ pounded loudly against the door. After a time his knuckles began to hurt. He stopped and thought about it.

Nothing made sense. Mandarin wished he had

a drink—that was always a good answer to any crisis.

He ought to call Saunders, tell him about the maroon paint on Gayle Corrington's white Corvette. Maybe just a fender-bender, but it might match up with the crease on the left side of Stryker's Buick. And so what if it did? Curtiss was a terrible driver—he might well have paid Gayle a second visit, scraped up against her car in parking.

Nothing made sense.

Just this: Gayle Corrington had told Stryker *something* in the course of the interview—while Mandarin had been out of the room. Stryker had been excited about it, had written it into his account of the haunting. And someone had gone to a lot of trouble to make certain that whatever Stryker had discovered would never be published.

Only Gayle Corrington had freely asked Stryker to investigate her haunted house.

Nothing made sense.

Mandarin thought he heard a television set going. Maybe Gayle was around back, catching some early morning sun, and couldn't hear his knock. Worth trying.

Russ headed toward the rear of the house. As he reached the patio, he saw Prissy lying beside a holly bush. At first he thought the little border collie was asleep.

Not random. A pattern.

The sliding glass door from the patio was curtained and at first glance appeared to be closed. Russ saw that the catch had been forced,

and he cautiously slid the glass panel open, stepped inside.

Gayle Corrington was wearing dark slacks and a black sweatshirt. She was hog-tied with her wrists bound back to her ankles, her body arched like a bow upon the couch. Her lips were taped with adhesive, but the cord knotted tightly into her neck would assure that she would never cry out.

Russ stared at her dumbly. He knew there was no point in searching for a pulse.

"Hello, Russ," said Stryker. "Come on in."

Russ did as he was told.

Curtiss Stryker was straightening out from where he worked over the brick hearth. The hearth had been lifted away, revealing an opening beneath the floor.

"Used brick hearth on a mountain stone fireplace. Should have tipped me off from the first—an obvious lapse in taste." Stryker was holding a Colt Woodsman. It was pointed at Mandarin's heart.

"Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated," said Stryker.

"You son of a bitch," said Mandarin.

"Probably. But you just stand still where you are."

Russ nodded toward Gayle's body. "Your work?"

"Yes. While you were ringing. Just not quite in the nick of time, Doctor. But don't waste any tears on our Mrs. Corrington. She tried to kill both of us, after all—and I gather she was certain that you, at least, were most decidedly dead. This

is her gun, and she would be disappointed to learn that her aim was not as infallible as she imagined."

"I don't get it," Russ said. "What are you doing?"

Stryker glanced toward the opened hearth. "Just getting a little social security. Maybe you can understand."

"I don't understand a goddamned thing! I came here to ask Gayle what it was that she told you while I was out of the room that day. Seems that a lot of people are interested."

"You might as well know," Stryker decided. "She wanted me to perform an exorcism."

"An exorcism?"

"Or something to that effect. She'd read my books on the occult, decided I was a better ghost-chaser than a priest would be. Maybe she'd already tried a priest."

"I don't follow."

"Then I'll make it short and snappy."

"Is this the point in your story where the villain always explains everything to the hero before he shoots him?"

"It is. I'm afraid this story won't have a happy ending, though. After all, an author has his privileges."

"I wept for you."

"I know. I'll weep for you."

Stryker kept the Colt Woodsman steady in the direction of Mandarin's chest. Russ recalled that Curtiss had always bragged about his marksmanship.

"Our Mrs. Corrington changed a few details,

and she changed a few names. She played the part of Cass in the highly revised account she gave us of this house. She and her Libby were medical secretaries. They had access to patients' records, and they knew various prominent citizens who had certain sexual quirks. Knowing their particular weaknesses, it was simple enough to lure them out here for an odd orgy or two—black magic, S & M, any sort of kink their secret selves desired. Then there were the hidden mikes and camera, the two-way mirrors. Made for some lovely footage. Here's a respected publisher who likes to dress up in women's clothing and be whipped, here's a noted doctor who prefers to give enemas to submissive girls. Maybe just a Baptist preacher who can't get a blowjob from his wife. They knew about them, and they preyed on them.

"But they needed another girl—another feminine one for their fantasies-delivered orgies. So they brought in a third girl—and that was a crowd. Cass—Gayle—liked her better than Libby, and Libby got jealous. She was going to blow the whistle on the entire operation, unless the other girl was sent away. But that was too dangerous, and Gayle was growing tired of Libby. They had a special black sabbath orgy that night, and when it was over they gave Libby an injection of insulin. Your friend, Dr. Royce Blaine, didn't give any trouble over signing the death certificate; after all, he was in the photos. Later, when Gayle grew tired of Tina, she married Dr. Blaine—probably saved her life, his too, maybe."

"But why did Mrs. Corrington call you in on this?" Russ wondered if he could jump the older man.

"Because she really did think she was being haunted. Nothing more than a nuisance, but it preyed on her nerves. So she made up this plausible story, and she reckoned I'd perform some magical miracle, just like the heroes in my stories. But she didn't reckon on how good a researcher I was. I got suspicious—you know: 'Doctor, I have this friend . . .' and it didn't take long to dig out the facts. It happened while you were off in New York."

"So then?"

"Well, I wrote down my findings, made a carbon for you, then set out for another talk with Gayle Corrington. Of course, then I didn't know about the blackmail angle—I just wanted to confront Gayle with the fact that I knew her part in the story was more than just an innocent bystander.

"She followed me after I left her house, ran me off the road into the lake. By then I knew about the blackmail—she was too upset with me to lie convincingly that night—so I thought I'd just lie doggo for a few days and see what happened. I destroyed my notes, but that little bastard Brooke Hamilton beat me to my office and stole your carbon of the chapter rough. I caught up with him last night, made him tell me where he'd hidden everything, then destroyed it all—and that little shit. In the meantime, Gayle knew of my carbons, so she was checking out my house and afterward yours. You walked in on her at my

house, and she thought she'd killed you. That's two mistakes. You should have seen her expression when she walked in here afterward. Thought she'd seen a real ghost this time."

"Just Uncle Dudley in a monster suit."

"Just like one of my old thrillers. No ghosts. Just greed. And a guilty conscience that made ghosts out of chance phenomena."

"Now what?"

"I take over the racket, that's all. After a little persuasion, Gayle told me what I already knew—that the films and tapes were all hidden in a little safe here beneath the raised hearth. I've got enough on some of our city's finest and wealthiest to retire in style. I'll just make an appearance later on today, say I was knocked for a loop by my accident, took a day or two wandering around the lakeside to remember who I was."

"What about me?"

"Now that does bother me, Russ. I hadn't counted on your dropping in like this. I think you'll be the drugged-out killer in the story—the one who conveniently takes his life when he realizes what he's done."

"Saunders won't buy that."

"Sure he will. You've been walking around town with a screw loose ever since your wife died—before that maybe. You were the one who blew her diagnosis when she complained of chronic headaches."

"I was your friend, Curtiss."

"Writers don't have friends. Only deadlines. And cheating publishers. And meddling editors. And carping reviewers. And checks that never

come when they're supposed to come, and are always short when they do come. I've scraped along for a living at this damn trade for over forty years, and I'm still living hand to mouth, and I'm just an old hack to my fellow writers. This is my chance to make someone else pay—pay big."

Stryker steadied the pistol. "Sorry, Russ. I'll miss you. Hope you can understand."

The Victrola behind them made a rattle and whirl. There was an audible *clunk* as the heavy tonearm descended.

Stryker looked toward it for an instant. Russ started to go for him. Stryker nailed him through the upper left shoulder with his first shot. Russ collapsed.

I dream of that night with you . . .

"Going to be a tough job of suicide now," Mandarin whispered.

"I'll figure something," Stryker assured him.

Blue were the skies,

And blue were your eyes . . .

Stryker leveled his pistol again. "Very interesting."

Come back, blue lady, come back . . .

"There are too many dead!" Russ managed. "She's grown too strong."

"I never really believed in ghosts," said Stryker, lining up on Russ's heart.

Don't be blue anymore.

There was a sudden scraping at the fireplace behind them.

From its brackets, the Parker shotgun swung away from the stone wall. It seemed to hesitate

an instant, then slowly fell to the hearth, stock downward.

Stryker turned to stare at it, open-mouthed in wonder. He was still gaping into its double barrels, looking down into the blackness within, when both shells fired at once.

SILTED IN

The pain in his chest was back again. Perhaps it was worse this time, but he couldn't remember.

He leaned against the sink, trying to belch. The kitchen counter was stacked high with dishes: to his right dirty ones; to his left clean ones, waiting to dry themselves. He rinsed the suds from his hands, staring at them as the suds peeled away. Were the wrinkles from the dishwater, or had he grown that much older?

He sat down heavily at the kitchen table, remembered his cup of coffee. It had grown cold, but he sipped it without tasting. That was enough of the dishes for today; tomorrow he'd make a fresh start.

He hated the dishes. Each one was a memory. This was *her* coffee cup. This was her favorite glass. They drank together from these wine glasses. They'd picked out this china pattern together. This casserole dish was a wedding present. This skillet was the one she used to make her special omelets. This was the ashtray she always kept beside her favorite chair.

Her chair. He shuffled into the living room, collapsed across the swaybacked couch. Her

chair waited there for her, just as she had left it. He wouldn't sit in it. A guest might, but he never had guests now.

A broken spring pressed into his consciousness, and he shifted his weight. Not much weight now. Once he had enjoyed cooking for her. Now every meal he fixed reminded him of her. He left his food untasted. When he cleaned out the freezer, her dog had grown plump on roasts and steaks and chops, stews and soups and etouffées, fried chicken and roast goose and curried duck. After her dog died, he simply scraped the untouched food into the dog's old bowl, left it on the back porch for whatever might be hungry. When his stomach gave him too much pain, he made a sandwich of something, sometimes ate it.

The mail truck was honking beside his mailbox, and he remembered that he hadn't checked his mail all week. Once he had waited impatiently each day for the mail to come. Now it was only bills, duns, letters from angry publishers, some misdirected letters for her, a few magazines whose subscriptions still ran.

He was out of breath when he climbed back up the steps from the street. He stared at his reflection in the hallway mirror without recognition, then dumped the armload of unopened mail onto the pile that sprawled across the coffee table.

The phone started to ring, but his answering machine silently took charge. He never played back the messages, used the phone only now and again to order a pizza. No one comes up into the hills at night.

"Why don't you answer it?" Bogey asked him.

He was working his way through a bottle, waiting for Ingrid to show up.

"Might be my agent. He's been stalling my publishers as long as he can. Now I owe him money, too."

"Maybe it's her."

He ignored the poster and found the bathroom. He took a long piss, a decidedly realistic touch which was the trendiest verism in horror fiction this season. So inspired, he groped his way into his study, dropped into the leather swivel chair she had bought him for his last birthday. He supposed it was a gift.

He brought up the IBM word processor and hit the command for global search and replace, instructed it to replace the phrase "make love" with "piss on" throughout the novel. Yes, go ahead and replace without asking.

While the computer sorted that out, he fumbled with the bank of stereo equipment, tried to focus his eyes on the spines of a thousand record albums. He reached out to touch several favorites, pulled his hand away reluctantly each time. Every album was a memory. The Blues Project album he'd played while they made love for the first time. The Jefferson Airplane album she loved to dance to: Don't you need somebody to love? And not the Grateful Dead—too many stoned nights of sitting on the floor under the black lights, passing the pipe around. Hendrix? No, too many acid-trip memories.

"You're burning out, man," Jimi told him.

"Better to burn out than to fade away," he answered. "You should know."

Jimi shrugged and went back to tuning his Fender Stratocaster.

He left the stereo on, still without making a selection. Sometimes a beer helped him get started.

The dishes were still waiting in the sink, and Jim Morrison was looking in the refrigerator. He reached an arm in past Jimbo and snagged the last beer. He'd have to remember to go to the store soon.

"Fucking self-indulgent," Jim said.

"What was? Oh, here." He offered Jimbo the beer can.

Jim shook his head. "No. I meant changing 'fuck' to 'piss on' in the novel."

"It's the same thing. And anyway, it's so New Wave."

"How would you know? You're past forty."

"I was New Wave back in the sixties."

"And you're still stuck in the sixties."

"And so are you."

"Maybe so. But I *know* that I'm dead."

"You and all my heroes."

Back in his study he sipped his beer and considered his old Royal portable. Maybe that was the trouble. He'd never really made the shift to high-tech creativity. Stick with the manual typewriter. Maybe go back to the roots: a quill pen, or even clay tablets.

He rolled in a sheet of paper, typed *I* at the top of the page. He sipped the rest of his beer and stared at the blank page. After a while he noticed that the beer can was empty.

The battery in his car was dead, but there was a 7-11 just down the hill. His chest was aching

again by the time he got back. He chugged a fresh brew while he put away the rest of the six-pack, a Redi-Maid cheese sandwich, a jar of instant coffee and a pack of cigarettes. The long belch made him feel better.

James Dean was browsing along his bookshelves when he returned to the living room. He was looking at a copy of *Electric Visions*. "I always wondered why you dedicated this book to me," he said.

"It was my first book. You were my first hero—even before Elvis. I grew up in the fifties wanting to be like you."

James read from the copyright page: "1966." He nodded toward the rest of the top shelf. "You write these others, too?"

"Fourteen hardcovers in ten years. I lived up to your image. Check out some of the reviews I stuck inside the books: The New Wave's brightest New Star. Sci-fi's rebellious new talent. The angriest and most original writer in decades. Great jacket blurbs."

James Dean helped himself to a cigarette. "I don't notice any reviews more recent than 1978."

"Saving reviews is the mark of a beginner." There hadn't been many since 1978, and those had been less than kind. The last had pronounced sentence: Tired rehash of traditional themes by one of the genre's Old Hands. He hadn't finished a book since then.

James French-inhaled. "Don't see many books since 1978 here either."

"Whole next shelf."

"Looks like reprints mostly."

"My books are considered classics. They're kept in print."

"What a load of bull."

"Why don't you go take a spin in your Porsche?"

The remark was in poor taste, and he decided to play his tape of *Rebel Without a Cause* by way of apology. And then he remembered how she had cried when the cops gunned down Sal Mineo. Maybe he should get some work done instead.

The stereo and the word processor were both still on when he returned to his study, and there was a sheet of paper in his typewriter with *I* typed across the top. He studied all of this in some confusion. He cut power switches, cranked out the blank sheet of paper, carefully placed it in a clean manila folder and dated the tab.

He sat down. Maybe he should listen to a tape. Something that wouldn't remind him of her. He turned his stereo back on. The tapes were buried under a heap of unanswered correspondence, unread magazines, unfinished manuscripts on the spare bed. He sat back down.

It might be best to make a fresh start by tackling an unfinished manuscript. There were a few, several, maybe a dozen, or more. They were all somewhere on the spare bed, hidden beneath one overturned stack or another. He'd paid fifteen bucks for the brass bed when he'd moved in, twenty years ago. Spent two days stripping the multilayered paint, polishing with Brass-O. Five bucks to Goodwill for the stained mattress and box springs. They'd slept together on it their first year together, until he pulled down a big enough

advance to convert his former housemate's room into their bedroom, pay for a proper double bed. He'd always meant to sell the single brass bed, put in proper shelves instead.

He never slept in their bedroom now. It held her clothes, her pictures, her scent, her memories.

It would be an all-day chore to sort through all the mess to find just the right manuscript whose moment had come. Best to tackle that tomorrow.

He pulled out an abused legal pad, wrote *I* across the first yellow page.

His stomach was hurting now. That made it hard to choose which pen to write with. He thought there might still be some milk left.

He drank a glass of milk and then a cup of coffee and smoked three Winstons, while he waited for his muse to awaken. The living room walls were hung with the same black-light posters they had put there when they'd first moved in together, back in the late sixties. He supposed that the black lights still worked, although it had been years since he had switched them on. About all that had changed over the years were occasional new bookshelves, growing against the walls like awkward shelf-fungus. They were triple-stacked with books he really meant to read, although he hadn't been able to finish reading a book in years.

I can't see you because of your books, she had warned him on occasion, from her chair across the room from his. And then he would stick together another shelf, try to clear away the confusion of books and magazines piled in the middle of the living room, try to explain the

necessity of keeping copies of *Locus* from 1969. In another year the pile would grow back.

My books are my life, he would tell her. Now that she was gone, he had grown to hate them almost as much as he had grown to hate himself. They were memories, and he clung to them while hating them, for memories were all he had left of his life.

It was getting dark. He glanced toward the front door, thinking it was about time for the cat to show up to be fed. He remembered that he hadn't seen the cat in weeks.

Time to get back to work. He would write all night.

The cigarettes started him coughing again. She had nagged him to see a doctor about that cough. He treasured the cough for that memory of her concern.

He drank a glass of water from the tap, then remembered that her plants needed watering. She had left him with her plants, and he tried to keep them watered. He was crying again by the time he completed his rounds with the watering can. That made the cough worse. His chest ached.

"What you need is to stop feeling sorry for yourself," Elvis advised him. "Stop moping around this dump. Go out and get yourself a new woman."

"Too old for chasing tail at the singles bars," he protested, reaching around Elvis to select some pills from the medicine cabinet. Shitty street-speed they sold now only made him long for the good old days of dex and Ritalin and black beauties.

"Never too old to make a comeback," The King said.

"Who says I need to make a comeback?"

"Shit. Look at yourself."

"You look at yourself, dammit! You've got an extra chin and sleeping bags under your eyes. Try to squeeze that stomach into one of those black leather jackets you slouched in back when I was trying to grow sideburns like yours."

"But I'm not getting any older now."

"And I won't grow up either."

"It's not the same thing."

Street-speed always made him hungry. He ate half of the cheese sandwich, felt vaguely nauseated, and had a swallow of Maalox for dessert. His head was starting to ache, so he chased the Maalox with several aspirin.

He really ought to take a break before getting back to work. There was nothing on television that interested him at all, and he wondered again why he paid for all the cable channels that were offered. Still, best to have access; there might be something that would inspire him—or at least fill the empty hours of pain.

He could watch a tape. The trouble was that the tapes were unsorted and unlabeled, stuffed away into boxes and piled together with all the other debris of his life. He could dig through it all, but then he would run the risk of pulling out a cassette of a film that was special to her. He would never watch *To Have And Have Not* again. Best just to turn on Cable News and let it run.

He put the rest of the cheese sandwich out for the cat, in case he came back during the night. His stomach was hurting too much to finish

eating. Despite the Maalox, he felt like vomiting. Somehow he knew that once he started vomiting, he would never stop—not until all that he spewed out was bright blood, and then not until he had no more blood to offer. A toilet bowl for a sacrificial altar.

There was inspiration at last. Vomiting was back in vogue now—proof that great concepts never die.

While the fire was in him, he brought up the IBM, instructed global search to replace “kiss” with “vomit on.”

That was more than enough creativity for one day. He felt drained. It was time to relax with a cold beer. Maybe he could play a record. He wondered if she had left him a little pot, maybe hidden away in a plastic film canister.

But film canisters reminded him of all the photographs they had taken together, frozen memories of the two of them in love, enjoying their life together. He was too depressed to listen to a record now. Best just to sit in the darkness and sip his beer.

Janis Joplin was trying to plug in one of the black lights, but she needed an extension cord. Giving it up, she plopped down onto the couch and grinned at him. She was wearing lots of beads and a shapeless paisley blouse over patched and faded bell-bottoms. From somewhere she produced a pint of Southern Comfort, took a pull, offered the bottle to him.

“Good for that cough,” she urged in her semi-hoarse voice.

“Thanks,” he said. “I got a beer.”

Janis shook back her loose waves of hair,

looked around the room. "Place hasn't changed."

"It never does."

"You're stuck in the past, man."

"Maybe. It sure beats living in the future."

"Oh wow." Janis was searching for something in her beaded handbag. "You're buried alive, man."

"Beats just being buried."

"Shit, man. You're lost among your artifacts, man. I mean, like you've stored up memories like quicksand and jumped right in."

"Maybe I'm an artifact myself. Just like you."

Janis laughed her gravelly cackle. "Shit, man. You're all left alone with the pieces of your life, and all the time life is passing you by. Buried alive in the blues, man."

"Since she left me, all I have left to look forward to is my past."

"Hey, man. You got to let it go. You got to let her go. You know how that old song goes."

Janis began to sing in her voice that reminded him of cream sherry stirred into cracked ice:

*Look up and down that long lonesome road,
Where all of our friends have gone, my love,
And you and I must go.
They say all good friends must part someday,
So why not you and I, my love,
Why not you and I?*

"Guess I'm just not ready to let it all go," he said finally. But now he was alone in the darkness, his chest hurt, and his beer was empty.

She shouldn't have left him.

He tossed the beer can into the trash, turned off the kitchen light. One thing to do before sprawling out across the couch to try to sleep.

He opened the upright freezer. It had only been a matter of removing the shelves.

"Goodnight, my love," he whispered to her.

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