SHOCK

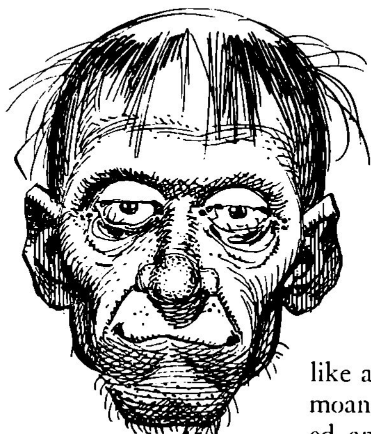
35¢ MAY

The Magazine of Terrifying Tales

BLOOD-CURDLING STORIES

By: RAY BRADBURY • THEODORE STURGEON

JOHN COLLIER • REGINALD ROSE • ANTHONY BOUCHER



Dear Reader:

We thought you might like to know something about The Editor. At the age of four, we leaped out from behind a door and screamed, "Boo!" at an elderly, ailing uncle. He dropped to the floor like a stone, then commenced the writhing and moaning of a coronary. We watched, fascinated and delighted. It was one of the more rewarding experiences of our childhood.

Our pet, Lulubel, also finds joy in other people's terror. That is one of the reasons we love Lulubel—that and her long, silky, black hair. Lulubel is a rather large tarantula. When we stroke her hair, she sways in ecstasy and keens a spidery hum. She is a great comfort to us. She is one of the few living creatures who really understands us.

There is a shelf about five feet from the floor at the entrance to our apartment. Lulubel usually perches there, waiting, when we are out, so that we can meet, face to face as it were, on our return. She greets other callers with cordiality, too, for Lulubel loves people. But I'm afraid we have few visitors these days. Even the laundryman just rings the bell and drops his package outside the door.

Since we are alone so much, we have taken to reading aloud to Lulubel. She loves to receive mail and is very wise. We always consult her before making decisions. She is also brilliant in other ways. I know you will enjoy her occasional comments throughout our magazine. She is—heh-heh—as much responsible as we are for the blood-chilling tales you are about to read.

We wish you many hours of terror and anguish.

Shudderingly yours,

and

SHOCK

Magazine

VOL. 1, NO. 1 MAY, 1960

FEAST DAY *by Matthew Lynge* 4

BIANCA'S HANDS *by Theodore Sturgeon* 14

THE BAND PLAYED ON *by Gene Dilmore* 23

GRAVEYARD RATS *by Henry Kuttner* 28

THE CROWD *by Ray Bradbury* 35

PARLOR GAME *by Reginald Rose* 44

THE MONKEY'S PAW *by W. W. Jacobs* 51

FOREVER AFTER *by Jim Thompson* 61

THE EMPTY MAN *by Anthony Boucher* 68

CRICKETS *by Richard Matheson* 83

SPECIALTY OF THE HOUSE *by Stanley Ellin* 89

GREEN THOUGHTS *by John Collier* 106

THE TENANT *by Avram Davidson* 122

SHOCK MAGAZINE, Vol. 1, No. 1, published bi-monthly by WINSTON PUBLICATIONS, INC., 157 West 57th St., N. Y. 19, N. Y. Subscriptions, 1 year (6 issues) $2.00. Single copy 35c. Application for second class entry pending at the post office at Holyoke, Mass., and New York, N. Y. Characters in this magazine are entirely fictitious. Copyright 1960 by Winston Publications, Inc. Printed in U. S. A. The Empty Man, copyright by Mr. Boucher, 1952; Specialty of the House, copyright by Mr. Ellin, 1948; Bianca's Hands, copyright 1947, 1951, 1953; Reprinted by permission of Harold Matson Co.: Graveyard Rats, copyright 1936 by Weird Tales, Inc.: Green Thoughts, copyright 1941 by Mr. Collier; The Crowd, copyright 1913 by Weird Tales, Inc.

Bugs are multiplying by the millions. Soon there may be too many bugs for us to handle. Then we won't have to worry about the population explosion and such trivialities. The only problem will be: are there enough people for the bugs to feed on?

FEAST DAY

by MATTHEW LYNGE

WHEN THE QUEEN LED HER SWARM *from the catacombed burrow in the earth, there was a purposiveness about her. She drew her thick, elongated body from the earth and without hesitating, took wing.*

Behind her, sexless workers followed in uncountable thousands, with a few eager drones among them. They soared into the sky, a black blur against fleecy white clouds, until they came to rest on a red clay field by a lonely house, a grey excrescence of a house, a shapeless mass of gables and dirty gingerbread.

The house was a festering sore on the flat plain. The red, clinging mud, unbroken by so much as a single tree, stretched across the landscape to the horizon like a great sea of congealing blood. Even the air had a murky heaviness about it, for it had been rain-

ing without let-up for seventy-two hours.

Coleman's footsteps, as he crossed the yard from the barn, made sucking sounds above the dull patter of the rain. He stumped up the steps of the great, grey pealing lump of a house and slammed open the kitchen door with his shoulder. There was a cant in the door frame that made it stick.

"Won't you even wipe your feet?"

Betty Rae's voice from the kitchen table was more tired than waspish. Her plaint had been voiced many times before and ignored, and so it was again. She watched her husband tracking red mud across the kitchen floor as he headed for the stove and poured himself a cup from the coffee pot.

"Honest to God, Coleman, honey, why do you always have to make twice as much work for me?" she said.

Coleman raised the scalding coffee and sucked up a mouthful as he passed through the door into the grey rooms beyond. When he was gone, Betty Rae commenced the ritual of cleaning up after him. She heard her husband thump up the stairs and slam the bedroom door.

Ten minutes later, Betty Rae's ear was pressed to that same bedroom door. She listened for what seemed a very long time to her husband's heavy, even breathing. Finally, assured that he slept, she descended once more, donned her raincoat, and crossed the red swamp to the barn, her footsteps hurried with eagerness. Coleman would nap, as he always did, until she awakened him for supper. Almost three delicious hours lay ahead for her.

But Coleman was not asleep. He stood behind the dusty curtain of the bedroom window, watching her progress. He saw the barn door open in front of her and eager hands grip her shoulders from the doorway and draw her within. The barn door closed behind her, but Coleman continued to stare at it for a long time, his smoky eyes unblinking, his thin lips drawn tight.

Night was falling when Betty Rae, her shoes carefully wiped, opened the bedroom door. Coleman lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. If he heard her enter the room, he gave no indication of it. She touched his forehead with her hand, then gripped his shoulder.

"Coleman, honey."

He continued to stare into the gathering dark.

"Coleman?"

She bent over and peered into his face. "Are you awake? Dinner's up." Still he did not move.

Betty Rae took his shoulder once more and shook it. Coleman did not respond. She stood there

for a moment, her hand still gripping her husband, her face blank with indecision. Then she turned and left the room, and went into the kitchen to start dinner.

Betty Rae's full mouth was pursed, her ordinarily smooth forehead wrinkled with concern as she worked at the stove. Coleman had been this way ever since the rains began three days before, responding to her scarcely at all, never speaking. He was not much of a talker, but it had never been this bad. Betty Rae liked things warm and friendly around her. She liked people and wanted them to like her, especially her smoky-eyed, taciturn husband, with his long, angular body and his huge, powerful hands that could turn her to water with a touch.

The meal prepared, Betty Rae rang the dinner bell for the last time. She rang it longer and louder than ever before, still hoping that Coleman would come down to eat. But the only response came from outside. The barn door creaked open and Fletcher, the hired man, lumbered across the muck to the house.

Betty Rae finally put the bell down. "Evening, Fletcher," she said as he folded his thick, muscular body into the kitchen chair.

"Where's Coleman?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Upstairs, staring at nothing."

"Having one of his spells again, I guess."

"I don't know. He frightens me sometimes. Oh, Fletcher, honey, I wish it was you stayed in the house and him in the barn." She stared anxiously at the door, then came up behind Fletcher and put her arms around him.

"Don't." He leaned away from her.

"I can't help it. Honey, we just have to do something."

"Ain't nothing to do," he said.

Her hands were inside his shirt, caressing the soft, black fur of his chest.

"We must," she said. "We must." Her eyes had grown liquid and her hands were warm and probing against his flesh.

"No! Don't!" There was almost panic in Fletcher's words. But her insistent hands were upon him, searing his ribs, his stomach. And suddenly he was out of his chair and his thick arms were around her and the length of her body was pressed against the length of his.

How long Coleman had been standing in the doorway watching them, neither would ever know.

The queen had commenced her mating dance.

The smaller males clustered around her, fighting among themselves with murderous savagery, tearing and slashing one another with powerful mandibles.

The workers alone ignored her primeval passion, proceeding with

their never-ending labor of digging.

And then there was an intruder, a stranger, in the circle of drones. He was larger, blacker. His six legs were thick and powerful and covered with sharp bristles. His jaws were two barbed tongs. And his wings glistened iridescent in the waning sun.

He slashed his way through the other males until he was head to head with the queen, swaying his powerful body as she swayed hers, his hairy legs undulating with a savage rhythm, his great jaws opening and closing convulsively. When the queen took flight, the black stranger alone pursued her.

Fletcher tore away from Betty Rae's clinging arms and leaped backwards as if he had been yanked by an invisible rope. He stood staring at Coleman, breathing heavily.

Betty Rae looked at her husband for a moment with a little half smile of startled wonder. Then she burst into tears. Coleman watched her, his gaunt, thin-lipped face a blank. It was he who finally broke the silence:

"Let's eat."

He walked past Betty Rae to the table and sat down. "C'mon now," he said. "Stop your sniveling. Fletcher and me have done a lot of work today. Bet you're hungry—and maybe some tired too, huh, Fletcher?"

His teeth showed in a quick smile that did not, however, reach past his cheeks to his eyes.

"Sit down, Fletcher. Sit down. I'm not going to bite you."

Fletcher didn't move. Always slow to think things out, this situation was beyond him. He could only fix his eyes at a spot on Coleman's chest, and wait.

Betty Rae's body was still wracked by an occasional deep sob, but she took the pots from the stove and brought them to the table, and sank into her seat.

"Coleman, honey," she said. "It's been whole days since you talked to me. I get so lonesome . . . Nothing really happened. Nothing serious I mean. You know that, Coleman, don't you? You know that I'd never . . ."

"Shut up and eat," Coleman said evenly.

She turned beseeching eyes toward Fletcher.

"Tell him nothing happened, Fletcher. Make him believe it."

Fletcher still hadn't moved. Only his eyes shifted from Coleman's chest for a moment, flickering across Betty Rae's face. His mouth pursed with uncertainty; his hands twitched. Then he bolted through the back door and was gone.

Coleman watched him slog through the red mire past the barn, past the pigpen fence and into the night.

"Well, Betty Rae," Coleman

said. "I guess that just leaves me."

"You're the only one," said Betty Rae, "or ever will be, Coleman, honey."

And despite what had happened, this was true. Betty Rae thought sometimes about going back and working at the tanning mill because she hated the farm, the loneliness of it, the red dust when it was dry, the clinging red mud when it wasn't.

But it was Coleman himself who kept her there. Coleman, with his powerful hands and lean muscled body. There was pain, sometimes, when he made love to her, but the other thing too that only Coleman could give her. He could beat her if he wanted to, twist and bruise her body until she thought she was going to die. He could reduce her to abject misery with his silence and cruel smile. But sometimes in the black of night, he could transport her to a paradise she had never known with anyone else. It was the thought of those moments that invariably ended any ideas of leaving for Betty Rae.

Piece by tiny piece, the workers carried red clay from the burrow in a never-ending line. Beneath the ground, a great honeycomb of passages began to form, a honeycomb alive, a seething mass of winged bodies.

Then one passage began, imperceptibly at first, to bend toward the porch of the house where the great wooden posts that supported it were buried deep in the clay.

The evening passed much as so many other evenings before had passed in the house. Coleman worked in the shop in the basement. Betty Rae sat by the radio.

Except for the single remark at supper, Coleman had not mentioned the scene in the kitchen and Betty Rae, absorbed in her favorite disc jockey, hummed along with the current song hits and singing commercials. A young tenor was crooning when Coleman came up from the cellar.

Betty Rae looked at him and smiled.

"What are you making, Coleman, honey?" she asked.

"A box," he said.

"What for?"

"For you." His teeth gleamed from between thin lips.

Betty Rae looked at him uncertainly.

"What do you mean, Coleman? What kind of a box?"

"You could put sewing in it," said Coleman, "if you wanted to. Or just about anything."

Betty Rae looked searchingly into his eyes. They were unbearably bright, looking back at her, unwavering.

"I'm frightened," she said.

He turned away and started up the stairs.

"You know nothing happened

with Fletcher," she called in a loud voice after him. "You know it's just the way I get sometimes when you don't talk to me for so long. It's so hard being by myself all the time."

Coleman had disappeared up the stairs. Betty Rae sat a while, her face buried in her hands. Then she switched off the radio and followed him.

Betty Rae pressed her face into the hollow of Coleman's neck.

"Coleman, honey, I can't stand it any more." She clung tightly, the length of her body heavy against him. "Please, Coleman." Tears began to course down her cheeks. "Please, honey."

His arm rested on her body, motionless, without pressure. He was looking past her head toward the window, an oblong of black against the grey night. Outside the rain continued to beat against it, driven by the wind.

Betty Rae shuddered in her misery. The sagging bed shook with it. The top of her head bumped Coleman's chin. He wedged his hands between her body and his, and thrust her away. Then he wiped his tear-drenched throat with his hand.

Betty Rae lay sobbing in the darkness. A foot away, Coleman, motionless, waited. First, there would be the tentative, searching hand, then her knee. He remembered from before, from all those other times. His fists clenched. His body tensed. He scarcely breathed. Waiting.

Her sobbing subsided. She stretched out her hand until it rested against Coleman's shoulders. She paused, then felt for his cheek, his throat, his chest. She inched closer to him, her hand probing, her body reaching.

Without sound or warning, Coleman was upon her, springing like a leopard. His hands were claws on her soft body, tearing at her flesh.

Betty Rae's moans of pleasure became cries of pain. "You're hurting me, Coleman, honey. Please . . . "

Coleman's fingers closed. He began to beat her, driving his fists into her. She screamed in terror and pain.

"No! Coleman, no . . . "

Then his hands were at her throat and her scream was a liquid, bubbling.

Once she managed to fill her lungs. She tore at his hands with her nails. Her eyes that were soft a few moments before bulged in their sockets. Her mouth opened and closed convulsively. Her legs thrashed from side to side. But Coleman held her beneath the weight of his body and his strong hands tightened. His face, inches above hers, was alive, wreathed in a beatific smile.

The box was indeed for Betty Rae.

In the morning, the rain had stopped at last. Coleman hummed a tuneless little song to himself as he prepared a great pot of coffee.

Afterwards, he carried Betty Rae downstairs, and set her in the box he had made. It was a snug fit, but by sitting on the cover while he nailed it shut, he was able to manage it. He lifted the box to his shoulders and carried it to the porch where he set it down again. The bottom of it pulled a little at his shirt where a bit of still soft resin stuck. "Green wood," Coleman said to himself.

Coleman brought a mattock and a shovel from the barn and began digging.

The rain-saturated earth clung to his tools. It was heavy at first in his shovel and hard to dislodge, but the hole was a deep one and the red clay became drier and more powdery as he went down.

All morning Coleman dug. He paused for a bit of lunch, and dug some more.

The porch of the grey house had already begun to cast a shadow over the hole when it suddenly came alive.

A bite of the shovel unearthed a swarm of insects deep in the ground. They came welling, boiling from it.

Coleman grunted and slammed the shovel repeatedly into the seething mass of life. But the boiling motion only increased, and from it came a faint humming sound. Individuals detached themselves from the swirling center. They crawled up the handle of the shovel, on Coleman's hands, his clothes, his face.

He leaped from the hole, swatting frantically at his head, his neck. Once the deep red mud seemed to grip his feet and he fell, headlong, into the ooze. He did not rise at once, but rolled over and over until the mud covered him. The insects left him then and he saw them fly back to the hole.

Coleman lay in the mud for a long time, staring at the box. Then, slowly, he crawled back toward it. He had to bury it, he knew. It had to be done before someone chanced by.

There was no trace of the moiling swarm. Even when he peered over the edge into the dull redness, he could not see them. There seemed to be a dark spot at the bottom, where they had been, but Coleman could not be certain even of that, for the hole was in deep shadow by then.

He rose to his feet and dumped the box into the hole. A corner of the cover sprang loose, but Coleman did not see it. He was already fleeing into the house.

All through the night, the workers labored to clear the passage. Grain by grain, they carried

the clay away until they reached the box.

They flitted back and forth over it aimlessly. The wood was green and not to their liking. Then they ventured within.

It was a larger creature than the others, larger and darker, with heavier legs and powerful, saw-edged mandibles that led the way. He hesitated for just an instant, then tore a tiny hole in flesh.

The others seemed to watch him, briefly, then they too hooked their narrower jaws into the yielding, pale matter. In a few moments, they had covered the head, the face. Down under clothing they swarmed, tearing, gnawing. An army at work they were, each digging his tiny burden and carrying it back into the labyrinthine recesses of the burrow. Food for the infant larvae; food for the sturdy, ravenous, half-grown young. Food for their huge queen as she moved from cell to cell laying her thousands of eggs.

Within the box, Betty Rae was a slightly moist skeleton by morning.

Coleman was up, filling in the hole, before the sun rose.

He worked furiously, pushing the clay with his shovel, with his hands and feet, tamping it down tight and solid. He raised a blister on his hand and it bled, the blood no redder than the moist clay. When he finished, he stood panting for a moment, then he brought the hose around to saturate the earth, to make of it mud like the mud around it.

Deep in their burrow, the termites devoured their new hoard of food, their new rich ambrosia. Quickly they digested it. It coursed through their bodies and made them strong. The hordes of half-grown beneath the earth ate of it and grew with startling rapidity. Their skins grew darker, their jaws wider, stronger, their bodies longer. Tiny black hairs sprouted on their legs.

And when the store was exhausted, the wood pulp the older workers brought them seemed pallid, unsatisfying.

And so they left the burrow, seeking they knew not what, driven by the overpowering atavistic urge to find meat.

Coleman was stretched out on the sagging bed, staring moodily at the ceiling, when he heard the screams. He sprang to his feet, wide awake and alert, his heart pumping furiously.

The screams continued, high and wailing, full of terror and pain. Coleman felt something akin to relief when he realized that they were coming from the pig-pen. By that time, he was already pounding down the stairs.

His shirt was off, his feet bare as he struck out across the red mire of the yard. By the time he

reached the pen it was too late. The screams were subsiding. His prize pigs were without hides, without eyes, oozing blood as if they had been flayed. And covering them, covering the ground around them, covering the red earth, was a seething, boiling mass of black insects.

Coleman stood watching the destruction of the pigs' carcasses. He was rooted with horror. It took the piercing, knife-like sensation in his foot to return him to reality. He had ventured too close. The edge of the black swarm had reached his feet and the cruel, razor-sharp mandibles were tearing.

Coleman bellowed in a hoarse, croaking roar and kicked out at the crawling black army that surrounded him. But twenty vise-like jaws were already embedded in his flesh and his blood was dripping into the clay.

Coleman tried to run. The searing, tearing pain had passed his feet and reached to his knees by then. He clawed at his legs wildly, then dropped to the ground and began to crawl. His shouts were deafening but they could not blot out the low hum that surrounded him.

The black army snaked after him over the red earth. More and more of the termites found their jawholds in his body.

Dragging himself along on his belly, Coleman reached a soft place in the earth, alongside the porch, an oblong of yielding mire. He lay there, thrashing aimlessly as piece after tiny piece was ripped from his body. With a last effort, Coleman turned over on his back in the mud for a final glimpse of the warming sun. But a grey cloud, heavy with rain, had obscured it.

A thousand pairs of hairy legs covered his face and eyes and tore at his cheeks. But Coleman could no longer feel them. He heard only a humming in his ears, calling to him.

"Coleman, honey," the swelling voices seemed to say. "Come, Coleman, honey."

When the rain ceased, the queen dragged her heavy body to the surface of the earth. She stood a moment, warming herself in the bright sun. Then she opened and closed her barbed jaws and stretched her wings, and took flight.

Like black smoke rising from the ground, the great gorged swarm followed her. Upward and upward they spiraled, like the funnel of a tornado. Then they leveled off and headed for their next nesting place.

Sometimes, in the black of the night, you'll dream about Bianca's hands. You'll feel their caressing softness silken against your eyes, your throat...

BIANCA'S HANDS

by THEODORE STURGEON

BIANCA'S MOTHER WAS LEADING her when Ran saw her first. Bianca was squat and small, with dank hair and rotten teeth. Her mouth was crooked and it drooled. Either she was blind or she just didn't care about bumping into things. It didn't really matter because Bianca was an imbecile. Her hands...

They were lovely hands, graceful hands, hands as soft and smooth and white as snowflakes, hands whose color was lightly tinged with pink like the glow of Mars on Snow. They lay on the counter side by side, looking at Ran. They lay there half closed and crouching, each pulsing with a movement like the panting of a

field creature, and they looked. Not watched. Later, they watched him. Now they looked. They did, because Ran felt their united gaze, and his heart beat strongly.

Bianca's mother d e m a n d e d cheese stridently. Ran brought it to her in his own time while she berated him. She was a bitter woman, as any woman has a right to be who is wife of no man and mother to a monster. Ran gave her the cheese and took her money and never noticed that it was not enough, because of Bianca's hands. When Bianca's mother tried to take one of the hands, it scuttled away from the unwanted touch. It did not lift from the counter, but ran on its fingertips to the edge and leaped into a fold of Bianca's dress. The mother took the unresisting elbow and led Bianca out.

Ran stayed there at the counter unmoving, thinking of Bianca's hands. Ran was strong and bronze and not very clever. He had never been taught about beauty and strangeness, but he did not need that teaching. His shoulders were wide and his arms were heavy and thick, but he had great soft eyes and thick lashes. They curtained his eyes now. He was seeing Bianca's hands again dreamily. He found it hard to breathe . . .

Harding came back. Harding owned the store. He was a large man whose features barely kept his cheeks apart. He said, "Sweep up, Ran. We're closing early today." Then he went behind the counter, squeezing past Ran.

Ran got the broom and swept slowly.

"A woman bought cheese," he said suddenly. "A poor woman, with very old clothes. She was leading a girl. I can't remember what the girl looked like, except—who was she?"

"I saw them go out," said Harding. "The woman is Bianca's mother, and the girl is Bianca. I don't know their other name. They don't talk to people much. I wish they wouldn't come in here. Hurry up, Ran."

Ran did what was necessary and put away his broom. Before he left he asked, "Where do they live, Bianca and her mother?"

"On the other side. A house on no road, away from people. Good night, Ran."

Ran went from the shop directly over to the other side, not waiting for his supper. He found the house easily, for it was indeed away from the road, and stood rudely by itself. The townspeople had cauterized the house by wrapping it in empty fields.

Harshly, "What do you want?" Bianca's mother asked as she opened the door.

"May I come in?"

"What do you want?"

"May I come in?" he asked again. She made as if to slam the

door, and then stood aside. "Come."

Ran went in and stood still. Bianca's mother crossed the room and sat under an old lamp, in the shadow. Ran sat opposite her, on a three-legged stool. Bianca was not in the room.

The woman tried to speak, but embarrassment clutched at her voice. She withdrew into her bitterness, saying nothing. She kept peeping at Ran, who sat quietly with his arms folded and the uncertain light in his eyes. He knew she would speak soon, and he could wait.

"Ah, well . . ." She was silent after that, for a time, but now she had forgiven him his intrusion. Then, "It's a great while since anyone came to see me; a great while . . . it was different before. I was a pretty girl—"

She bit her words off and her face popped out of the shadows, shrivelled and sagging as she leaned forward. Ran saw that she was beaten and cowed and did not want to be laughed at.

"Yes," he said gently. She sighed and leaned back so that her face disappeared again. She said nothing for a moment, sitting looking at Ran, liking him.

"We were happy, the two of us," she mused, "until Bianca came. He didn't like her, poor thing, he didn't, no more than I do now. He went away. I stayed by her because I was her mother. I'd go away myself, I would, but people know me, and I haven't a penny—not a penny . . . . They'd bring me back to her, they would, to care for her. It doesn't matter much now, though, because people don't want me any more than they want her, they don't . . ."

Ran shifted his feet uneasily, because the woman was crying. "Have you room for me here?" he asked.

Her head crept out into the light. Ran said swiftly, "I'll give you money each week, and I'll bring my own bed and things." He was afraid she would refuse.

She merged with the shadows again. "If you like," she said, trembling at her good fortune. "Though why you'd want to . . . still, I guess if I had a little something to cook up nice, and a good reason for it, I could make someone real cosy here. But — *why?*" She rose. Ran crossed the room and pushed her back into the chair. He stood over her, tall.

"I never want you to ask me that," he said, speaking very slowly. "Hear?"

She swallowed and nodded. "I'll come back tomorrow with the bed and things," he said.

He left her there under the lamp, blinking out of the dimness, folded round and about with her misery and her wonder.

People talked about it. People said, "Ran has moved to the house of Bianca's mother." "It must be

because—" "Ah," said some, "Ran was always a strange boy. It must be because—" "Oh, *no!*" cried others appalled. "Ran is such a good boy. He wouldn't—"

Harding was told. He frightened the busy little woman who told him. He said, "Ran is very quiet, but he is honest and he does his work. As long as he comes here in the morning and earns his wage, he can do what he wants, where he wants, and it is not my business to stop him." He said this so very sharply that the little woman dared not say anything more.

Ran was very happy, living there. Saying little, he began to learn about Bianca's hands.

He watched Bianca being fed. Her hands would not feed her, the lovely aristocrats. Beautiful parasites they were, taking their animal life from the heavy squat body that carried them, and giving nothing in return. They would lie one on each side of her plate, pulsing, while Bianca's mother put food into the disinterested drooling mouth. They were shy, those hands, of Ran's bewitched gaze. Caught out there naked in the light and open of the table-top, they would creep to the edge and drop out of sight—all but four rosy fingertips clutching the cloth.

They never lifted from a surface. When Bianca walked, her hands did not swing free, but twisted in the fabric of her dress. And when she approached a table or the mantelpiece and stood, her hands would run lightly up and leap, landing together, resting silently, watchfully, with that pulsing peculiar to them.

They cared for each other. They would not touch Bianca herself, but each hand groomed the other. It was the only labor to which they would bend themselves.

Three evenings after he came, Ran tried to take one of the hands in his. Bianca was alone in the room, and Ran went to her and sat beside her. She did not move, nor did her hands. They rested on a small table before her, preening themselves. This, then, was when they really began watching him. He felt it, right down to the depths of his enchanted heart. The hands kept stroking each other, and yet they knew he was there, they knew of his desire. They stretched themselves before him, archly, languorously, and his blood pounded hot. Before he could stay himself he reached and tried to grasp them. He was strong, and his move was sudden and clumsy. One of the hands seemed to disappear, so swiftly did it drop into Bianca's lap. But the other—

Ran's thick fingers closed on it and held it captive. It writhed, all but tore itself free. It took no power from the arm on which it lived, for Bianca's arms were flab-

by and weak. Its strength, like its beauty, was intrinsic, and it was only by shifting his grip to the puffy forearm that Ran succeeded in capturing it. So intent was he on touching it, holding it, that he did not see the other hand leap from the idiot girl's lap, land crouching at the table's edge. It reared back, fingers curling spider-like, and sprang at him, fastening on his wrist. It clamped down agonizingly, and Ran felt bones give and crackle. With a cry he released the girl's arm. Her hands fell together and ran over each other. feeling for any small scratch and tiny damage he might have done them in his passion. And as he sat there clutching his wrist, he saw the hands run to the far side of the little table, hook themselves over the edge and, contracting, draw her out of her place. She had no volition of her own—ah, but her hands had! Creeping over the walls, catching obscure and precarious holds in the wainscoting, they dragged the girl from the room.

And Ran sat there and sobbed, not so much from the pain in his swelling arm, but in shame for what he had done. They might have been won to him in another, gentler way . . .

His head was bowed, yet suddenly he felt the gaze of those hands. He looked up swiftly enough to see one of them whisk round the doorpost. It had come back, then, to see . . . Ran rose heavily and took himself and his shame away. Yet he was compelled to stop in the doorway, even as had Bianca's hands. He watched covertly and saw them come into the room dragging the unprotesting idiot girl. They brought her to the long bench where Ran had sat with her. They pushed her on to it, flung themselves to the table, and began rolling and flattening themselves most curiously about. Ran suddenly realized that there was something of his there, and he was comforted, a little. They were rejoicing, drinking thirstily, revelling in his tears.

Afterwards for nineteen [illegible] the hands made Ran do penance. He knew them as inviolate and unforgiving; they would not show themselves to him, remaining always hidden in Bianca's dress or under the supper table. For those nineteen days Ran's passion and desire grew. More—his love became true love, for only true love knows reverence—and the possession of the hands became his reason for living, his goal in the life which that reason had given him.

Ultimately they forgave him. They kissed him coyly when he was not looking, touched him on the wrist, caught and held him for one sweet moment. It was at table . . . a great power surged

through him, and he gazed down at the hands, now returned to Bianca's lap. A strong muscle in his jaw twitched and twitched, swelled and fell. Happiness like a golden light flooded him; passion spurred him, love imprisoned him, reverence was the gold of the golden light. The room wheeled and whirled about him and forces unimaginable flickered through him. Battling with himself, yet lax in the glory of it, Ran sat unmoving, beyond the world, enslaved and yet possessor of all. Bianca's hands flushed pink, and if ever hands smiled to each other, then they did.

He rose abruptly, flinging his chair from him, feeling the strength of his back and shoulders. Bianca's mother, by now beyond surprise, looked at him and away. There was that in his eyes, which she did not like, for to fathom it would disturb her, and she wanted no trouble. Ran strode from the room and outdoors, to be by himself that he might learn more of this new thing that had possessed him.

It was evening. The crooked-bending skyline drank the buoyancy of the sun, dragged it down, sucking greedily. Ran stood on a knoll, his nostrils flaring, feeling the depth of his lungs. He sucked in the crisp air and it smelled new to him, as though the sunset shades were truly in it. He knotted the muscles of his thighs and stared at his smooth, solid fists. He raised his hands high over his head and, stretching, sent out such a great shout that the sun sank. He watched it, knowing how great and tall he was, how strong he was, knowing the meaning of longing and belonging. And then he lay down on the clean earth and he wept.

When the sky grew cold enough for the moon to follow the sun beyond the hills, and still an hour after that, Ran returned to the house. He struck a light in the room of Bianca's mother, where she slept on a pile of old clothes. Ran sat beside her and let the light wake her. She rolled over to him and moaned, opened her eyes and shrank from him. "Ran... what do you want?"

"Bianca. I want to marry Bianca."

Her breath hissed between her gums. "No!" It was not a refusal, but astonishment. Ran touched her arm impatiently. Then she laughed.

"To—marry—Bianca. It's late, boy. Go back to bed, and in the morning you'll have forgotten this thing, this dream." "Will you give me Bianca, or not?"

"I've not been to bed," he said patiently, but growing angry.

She sat up and rested her chin on her withered knees. "You're right to ask me, for I'm her mother. Still and all—Ran, you've

been good to us, Bianca and me. You're —you are a good boy but —forgive me, lad, but you're something of a fool. Bianca's a monster. I say it though I am what I am to her. Do what you like, and never a word will I say. You should have known. I'm sorry you asked me, for you have given me the memory of speaking so to you. I don't understand you; but do what you like, boy."

It was to have been a glance, but it became a stare as she saw his face. He put his hands carefully behind his back, and she knew he would have killed her else.

"I'll—marry her, then?" he whispered.

She nodded, terrified. "As you like, boy."

He blew out the light and left her.

Ran worked hard and saved his wages, and made one room beautiful for Bianca and himself. He built a soft chair, and a table that was like an altar for Bianca's sacred hands. There was a great bed, and heavy cloth to hide and soften the walls, and a rug.

They were married, though marrying took time. Ran had to go far afield before he could find one who would do what was necessary. The man came far and went again afterwards, so that none knew of it, and Ran and his wife were left alone. The mother spoke for Bianca, and Bianca's hand trembled frighteningly at the touch of the ring, writhed and struggled and then lay passive, blushing and beautiful. But it was done. Bianca's mother did not protest, for she didn't dare. Ran was happy, and Bianca—well, nobody cared about Bianca.

After they were married Bianca followed Ran and his two brides into the beautiful room. He washed Bianca and used rich lotions. He washed and combed her hair, and brushed it many times until it shone, to make her more fit to be with the hands he had married. He never touched the hands, though he gave them soaps and creams and tools with which they could groom themselves. They were pleased. Once one of them ran up his coat and touched his cheek and made him exultant.

He left them and returned to the shop with his heart full of music. He worked harder than ever, so that Harding was pleased and let him go home early. He wandered the hours away by the bank of a brook, watching the sun on the face of the chuckling water. A bird came to circle him, flew unafraid through the aura of gladness about him. The delicate tip of a wing brushed his wrist with the touch of the first secret kiss from the hands of Bianca. The singing that filled him was part of the nature of laughing, the running of water, the sound of the

wind in the reeds by the edge of the stream. He yearned for the hands, and he knew he could go now and clasp them and own them; instead he stretched out on the bank and lay smiling, all lost in the sweetness and poignance of waiting, denying desire. He laughed for pure joy in a world without hatred, held in the stainless palms of Bianca's hands.

As it grew dark he went home. All during that nuptial meal Bianca's hands twisted about one of his while he ate with the other, and Bianca's mother fed the girl. The fingers twined about each other and about his own, so that three hands seemed to be wrought of one flesh, to become a thing of lovely weight at his arm's end. When it was quite dark they went to the beautiful room and lay where he and the hands could watch, through the window, the clean, bright stars swim up out of the forest. The house and the room were dark and silent. Ran was so happy that he hardly dared to breathe.

A hand fluttered up over his hair, down his cheek, and crawled into the hollow of his throat. Its pulsing matched the beat of his heart. He opened his own hands wide and clenched his fingers, as though to catch and hold this moment.

Soon the other hand crept up and joined the first. For perhaps an hour they lay there passive with their coolness against Ran's warm neck. He felt them with his throat, each smooth convolution, each firm small expanse. He concentrated, with his mind and his heart on his throat, on each part of the hands that touched him, feeling with all his being first one touch and then another, though the contact was there unmoving. And he knew it would be soon now, soon.

As if at a command, he turned on his back and dug his head into the pillow. Staring up at the vague dark hangings on the wall, he began to realize what it was for which he had been working and dreaming so long. He put his head back yet farther and smiled, waiting. This would be possession, c o m p l e t i o n. He breathed deeply, twice, and the hands began to move.

The thumbs crossed over his throat and the fingertips settled one by one under his ears. For a long moment they lay there, gathering strength. Together, then, in perfect harmony, each co-operating with the other, they became rigid, rock-hard. Their touch was still light upon him, still light . . . no, now they were passing their rigidity to him, turning it to a contraction. They settled to it slowly, their pressure measured and equal. Ran lay silent. He could not breathe now, and did not want to. His great arms were crossed on his chest, his

knotted fists under his armpits, his mind knowing a great peace. Soon, now...

Wave after wave of engulfing, glorious pain spread and receded. He saw color impossible, without light. He arched his back, up, up...the hands bore down with all their hidden strength, and Ran's body bent like a bow, resting on feet and shoulders. Up, up...

Something burst within him—his lungs, his heart—no matter. It was complete.

There was blood on the hands of Bianca's mother when they found her in the morning in the beautiful room, trying to soothe Ran's neck. They took Bianca away, and they buried Ran, but they hanged Bianca's mother because she tried to make them believe Bianca had done it, Bianca whose hands were quite dead, drooping like brown leaves from her wrists. ■ ■

This is our absolutely favorite television show. We watch it every week. Wouldn't miss it for anything in this world—or the other . . .

THE BAND PLAYED ON

by GENE DILMORE

LITTLE MR. THOMPSON LAY ON HIS back; a clamp around each wrist held his arms to the floor, and a third clamp fastened down his right leg.

In Mr. Thompson's mouth had been thrust a large red plastic ball, which prevented the little grunting noises he occasionally made from becoming articulate words. Attached upright to his left foot was a thin willowy rod about three feet long. A cord from the tip of the rod supported a contrivance resembling an ice-cream scoop; with this contrivance Mr. Thompson was attempting to remove the ball from his mouth.

A slight twitch of his foot was exaggerated by the supple rod,

sending the scoop sailing wildly in a wide arc. Mr. Thompson squinted in the fierce light assailing him from above the cameras. Tiny beads of sweat regularly coalesced and trickled into the corners of his eyes. Blinking them away, he focused intently on the scoop, twitching his foot again and again in gradually more desperate efforts to engage the scoop and the plastic ball. At each attempt, waves of laughter undulated through the television studio, splashing now in cultivated snickers, again roaring out deep-throated, unrestrained.

Mr. Thompson was playing a game.

Standing behind the man on the floor, encouraging him, interspersing sly jokes with ingratiating references to his sponsor's product, was the master of ceremonies, affectionately known throughout the television world as Uncle Eddie. He had not strayed more than two or three feet from the spot, but with his dynamic gestures and great, exuberant shouts of hilarity, he was an explosive bundle of happy energy.

"Well, folks," he was saying now, "I believe we have only three minutes and forty seconds to see if our last contestant for the night can beat Uncle Eddie and the big grandfather's clock. If he wins—ho, look, he's banged his nose again; easy there, we just want to remove the plastic ball, sir, not our nose too"— Uncle Eddie paused for the laughter to die down— "if he wins, he gets the Lifetime Security and Happiness Certificate, of course, including a new house which we'll select for him in the finest section of his home city. But first, Mr. Thompson and his family will leave on a three months vacation to the place of their choice anywhere in the Free World. And thanks to our sponsor, a brand new automobile is outside waiting right now for our contestant to drive home—if he wins our little game, of course. And finally, for Mr. Thompson and each and every member of his family, one thousand dollars a month for the rest of their lives—all they need ever do is just snuggle back in warm, soft ol' easy chairs and BE HAPPY!"

Cheers and whistles echoed through the studio theatre and Uncle Eddie's white teeth gleamed in the kleig lights. When the clamor subsided, Uncle Eddie shouted, "And if he should lose—" He got no further. The applause rose again, thunderously, startling Mr. Thompson into a moment of inactivity.

Uncle Eddie held up his arms for quiet. His smile was broad and warm. "I see you remember last week's telecast," he chuckled. "But we must be fair to our contestant." He put his fingers to his lips.

For perhaps five seconds, the

studio was silent as all eyes concentrated on the gleaming scoop. Then Uncle Eddie called out the remaining time, and chuckled. In a softer voice he exclaimed over Mr. Thompson's difficulties, his boyish mouth widening in the famous warm grin.

But Mr. Thompson scarcely heard him. He was concentrating as he had never done before on the task at hand.

Under normal circumstances Mr. Thompson was, if not a man of unusual accomplishment, certainly a personage of solid respectability: a junior executive, perhaps a year or two over age in grade, but well fed, slightly jowly. He was considered extremely dignified by the typists at the office, a little stuffy, perhaps, by his peers, thoroughly loyal and reliable by his superiors, a man who could be depended on to do his job by the book. He had a mirror-framed photo of his well-fed wife and chubby children on his desk and had eaten the same chaste food at the same chaste restaurants five noons a week for eight years.

Like everyone else, Mr. Thompson treasured security. Along with motherhood, it was the one consistent value he was sure of in an insecure world. He had read many books on the subject. He was constantly alert for that one big break that would mean unassailable security. His days were spent thinking positively, living confidently; his evenings in winning friends; his nights in striving for peace of mind. Security drew Mr. Thompson the way the sweet smelling corn at the end of the maze draws the rat.

And now, as the result of a chance telephone call, Mr. Thompson found himself for the first time in sight of the big chance that he, and everyone he knew, dreamed of. When he had answered the phone, and been told the rewards and risks involved in accepting Uncle Eddie's proposition, he had talked it over with his wife, and called back to accept. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained," was a piece of advice Mr. Thompson had offered on many occasions.

Overhead, the click-clacking pendulum of the gigantic grandfather's clock swung inexorably to and fro. Mr. Thompson allowed his eyes to leave his scooping contrivance and turn briefly to the face of the big clock. He had barely a minute left. He made a deliberate effort to calm himself, and then began to work slowly and methodically, maneuvering the scoop in graceful little pirouettes. Mr. Thompson became his usual serene self; he had the situation in hand, and was competently, thoroughly applying all his know-how and confident persistence to the task. He was a man who knew

when he could and could not afford wasted motion. The game he was playing did not allow for anything less than one hundred per cent efficiency.

Suddenly, in the midst of his calm, efficient manipulation of the scoop, a phrase detached itself from Uncle Eddie's patter and fell jarringly on him like a physical blow: "fifteen seconds!" The corners of his mouth jerked spasmodically. He blinked rapidly to fight the trickles of sweat. He became reckless again in his maneuvering. Several times he gave the rod a petulant yank, bumping the scoop against his face and chest.

Each time, Uncle Eddie's smooth voice pointed out the mishaps. His jolly chortle and friendly avuncular shouts of commiseration were echoed a thousand-fold by the onlookers.

Then the pendulum of the great clock stopped click-clocking the seconds. Mr. Thompson clenched his eyes tight and shook his head. Like some hungry many-headed creature, the studio audience leaned forward with a thousand eager smiles; in millions of living rooms throughout the whole country the eager, remembering smiles were duplicated. "I'm afraid," said Uncle Eddie, clucking his tongue, "Your time is up."

Uncle Eddie stepped closer to Mr. Thompson who, though he had quit swinging the contrivance at the last click, now ignored the master of ceremonies and the audience, and lay gazing fixedly at the little metal scoop, as if it were a face he remembered but could not quite place.

The studio orchestra struck up a fast, brassy arrangement of the program's theme song, "Give Me Five Minutes More." Humming the tune under his breath, the inimitable Uncle Eddie waved his assistant forward, and gave the audience a conspiratorial wink. He knelt by Mr. Thompson's side, glanced up at the control-room clock, and smiled.

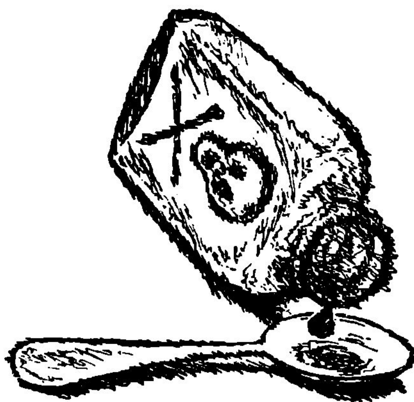
Other masters of ceremony, having lost the common touch, had their helpers handle this portion of their shows, and some of them even had it done by machines. But Uncle Eddie, who enjoyed every minute of his own program, liked this moment best of all, and he liked to do it the old-fashioned way. It always gave him a sense of being, so to speak, betwixt the cup and the lip; besides, he knew the reason for his high ratings in the popularity polls.

Since the contestant already had one of his legs and both of his arms fastened to the floor, the only help Uncle Eddie required was for his assistant, chosen from among volunteers from the audience, to hold the little man's left leg.

As his fingers arched and tight-

ened voluptuously around Mr. Thompson's throat, Uncle Eddie felt himself suffused in a warm, benign glow of approbation. Glancing over to the control booth, he caught a signal from one of the directors, and shifted a little to one side so the cameras could catch a close-up of Mr. Thompson's swelling, darkening face. Uncle Eddie sneaked a look at the monitor set, and saw the close-up coming through perfectly in full color, and just at that moment, with unintentional but perfect timing, the red plastic ball popped out on to the stage as Mr. Thompson's jaws were forced open. Uncle Eddie beamed at the guffaws that brought, and made a mental note to use the ball gimmick again next week.

Stimulated by the laughter and the thunderous applause, Uncle Eddie found himself hurrying, although, as a matter of fact, he had all the time in the world. The commercial was not due for another forty-five seconds, and Mr. Thompson would be dead long before then. ■ ■



We've always had a sneaking fondness for rats. In fact, we urge you to adapt one of the furry fellows for a pal. Rats are the only creatures who are faithful to the end—and even after...

GRAVEYARD RATS

by HENRY KUTTNER

OLD MASSON, THE CARETAKER OF one of Salem's oldest and most neglected cemeteries, had a feud with the rats. Generations ago they had come up from the wharves and settled in the graveyard, a colony of abnormally large rats, and when Masson had taken charge after the inexplicable disappearance of the former caretaker, he decided that they must go. At first he set traps for them and put poisoned food by their burrows, and later he tried to

shoot them, but it did no good. The rats stayed, multiplying and overrunning the graveyard with their ravenous hordes.

They were large, even for the *mus decumanus,* which sometimes measures fifteen inches in length, exclusive of the naked pink and gray tail. Masson had caught glimpses of some as large as good-sized cats, and when, once or twice, the grave-diggers had uncovered their burrows, the malodorous tunnels were large enough to enable a man to crawl into them on his hands and knees. The ships that had come generations ago from distant ports to the rotting Salem wharves had brought strange cargoes.

Masson wondered sometimes at the extraordinary size of these burrows. He recalled certain vaguely disturbing legends he had heard since coming to ancient, witch-haunted Salem—tales of a moribund, inhuman life that was said to exist in forgotten burrows in the earth. The old days, when Cotton Mather had hunted down the evil cults that worshipped Hecate and the dark Magna Mater in frightful orgies, had passed; but dark gabled houses still leaned perilously toward each other over narrow cobbled streets, and blasphemous secrets and mysteries were said to be hidden in subterranean cellars and caverns, where forgotten pagan rites were still celebrated in defiance of law and sanity. Wagging their gray heads wisely, the elders declared that there were worse things than rats and maggots crawling in the unhallowed earth of the ancient Salem cemeteries.

And then, too, there was this curious dread of the rats. Masson disliked and respected the ferocious little rodents, for he knew the danger that lurked in their flashing, needle-sharp fangs; but he could not understand the inexplicable horror which the oldsters held for deserted, rat-infested houses. He had heard vague rumors of ghoulish beings that dwelt far underground, and that had the power of commanding the rats, marshaling them like horrible armies. The rats, the old men whispered, were messengers between this world and the grim and ancient caverns far below Salem. Bodies had been stolen from graves for nocturnal subterranean feasts, they said. The myth of the Pied Piper is a fable that hides a blasphemous horror, and the black pits of Avernus have brought forth hell-spawned monstrosities that never venture into the light of day.

Masson paid little attention to these tales. He did not fraternize with his neighbors, and, in fact, did all he could to hide the existence of the rats from intruders. Investigation, he realized, would undoubtedly mean the opening of many graves. And while some of the gnawed, empty coffins could be attributed to the activities of the rats, Masson might find it difficult to explain the mutilated bodies that lay in some of the coffins.

The purest gold is used in filling teeth, and this gold is not removed when a man is buried. Clothing, of course, is another matter; for usually the undertaker provides a plain broadcloth suit that is cheap and easily recognizable. But gold is another matter; and sometimes, too, there were medical students and less reputable doctors who were in need of cadavers, and not over-scrupulous as to where these were obtained.

So far Masson had successfully managed to discourage investigation. He had fiercely denied the existence of the rats, even though they sometimes robbed him of his prey. Masson did not care what happened to the bodies after he had performed his gruesome thefts, but the rats inevitably dragged away the whole cadaver through the hole they gnawed in the coffin.

The size of these burrows occasionally worried Masson. Then, too, there was the curious circumstance of the coffins always being gnawed open at the end, never at the side or top. It was almost as though the rats were working under the direction of some impossibly intelligent leader.

Now he stood in an open grave and threw a last sprinkling of wet earth on the heap beside the pit. It was raining, a slow, cold drizzle that for weeks had been descending from soggy black clouds. The graveyard was a slough of yellow, sucking mud, from which the rain-washed tombstones stood up in irregular battalions. The rats had retreated to their furrows, and Masson had not seen one for days. But his gaunt, unshaved face was set in frowning lines; the coffin on which he was standing was a wooden one.

The body had been buried several days earlier, but Masson had not dared to disinter it before. A relative of the dead man had been coming to the grave at intervals, even in the drenching rain. But he would hardly come at this late hour, no matter how much grief he might be suffering, Masson thought, grinning wryly. He straightened and laid the shovel aside.

From the hill on which the ancient graveyard lay he could see the lights of Salem flickering dimly through the downpour. He drew a flashlight from his pocket. He would need light now. Taking

up the spade, he bent and examined the fastenings of the coffin.

Abruptly he stiffened. Beneath his feet he sensed an unquiet stirring and scratching, as though something was moving within the coffin. For a moment a pang of superstitious fear shot through Masson, and then rage replaced it as he realized the significance of the sound. The rats had forestalled him again!

In a paroxysm of anger Masson wrenched at the fastenings of the coffin. He got the sharp edge of the shovel under the lid and pried it up until he could finish the job with his hands. Then he sent the flashlight's cold beam darting down into the coffin.

Rain spattered against the white satin lining; the coffin was empty. Masson saw a flicker of movement at the head of the case, and darted the light in that direction.

The end of the sarcophagus had been gnawed through, and a gaping hole led into darkness. A black shoe, limp and dragging, was disappearing as Masson watched, and abruptly he realized that the rats had forestalled him by only a few minutes. He fell on his hands and knees and made a hasty clutch at the shoe, and the flashlight incontinently fell into the coffin and went out. The shoe was tugged from his grasp, he heard a sharp, excited squealing, and then he had the flashlight again and was darting its light into the burrow.

It was a large one. It had to be, or the corpse could not have been dragged along it. Masson wondered at the size of the rats that could carry away a man's body, but the thought of the loaded revolver in his pocket fortified him. Probably if the corpse had been an ordinary one Masson would have left the rats with their spoils rather than venture into the narrow burrow, but he remembered an especially fine set of cuff-links he had observed, as well as a stickpin that was undoubtedly a genuine pearl. With scarcely a pause he clipped the flashlight to his belt and crept into the burrow.

It was a tight fit, but he managed to squeeze himself along. Ahead of him in the flashlight's glow he could see the shoes dragging along the wet earth of the bottom of the tunnel. He crept along the burrow as rapidly as he could, occasionally barely able to squeeze his lean body through the narrow walls.

The air was overpowering with its musty stench of carrion. If he could not reach the corpse in a minute, Masson decided, he would turn back. Belated fears were beginning to crawl, maggot-like, within his mind, but greed urged him on. He crawled forward, several times passing the mouths of adjoining tunnels. The walls of the burrow were damp and slimy, and twice lumps of dirt dropped behind him. The second time he

paused and screwed his head around to look back. He could see nothing, of course, until he had unhooked the flashlight from his belt and reversed it.

Several clods lay on the ground behind him, and the danger of his position suddenly became real and terrifying. With thoughts of a cave-in making his pulse race, he decided to abandon the pursuit, even though he had now almost overtaken the corpse and the invisible things that pulled it. But he had overlooked one thing: the burrow was too narrow to allow him to turn.

Panic touched him briefly, but he remembered a side tunnel he had just passed, and backed awkwardly along the tunnel until he came to it. He thrust his legs into it, backing until he found himself able to turn. Then he hurriedly began to retrace his way, although his knees were bruised and painful.

Agonizing pain shot through his leg. He felt sharp teeth sink into his flesh, and kicked out frantically. There was a shrill squealing and the scurry of many feet. Flashing the light behind him, Masson caught his breath in a sob of fear as he saw a dozen great rats watching him intently, their slitted eyes glittering in the light. They were great misshapen things, as large as cats, and behind them he caught a glimpse of a dark shape that stirred and moved swiftly aside into the shadow; and he shuddered at the unbelievable size of the thing.

The light had held them for a moment, but they were edging closer, their teeth dull orange in the pale light. Masson tugged at his pistol, managed to extricate it from his pocket, and aimed carefully. It was an awkward position, and he tried to press his feet into the soggy sides of the burrow so that he should not inadvertently send a bullet into one of them.

The rolling thunder of the shot deafened him, for a time, and the clouds of smoke set him coughing. When he could hear again and the smoke had cleared, he saw that the rats were gone. He put the pistol back and began to creep swiftly along the tunnel, and then with a scurry and a rush they were upon him again.

They swarmed over his legs, biting and squealing insanely, and Masson shrieked horribly as he snatched for his gun. He fired without aiming, and only luck saved him from blowing a foot off. This time the rats did not retreat so far, but Masson was crawling as swiftly as he could along the burrow, ready to fire again at the first sound of another attack.

There was a patter of feet and he sent the light stabbing back of him. A great gray rat paused and watched him. Its long ragged whiskers twitched, and its scab-

rous, naked tail was moving slowly from side to side. Masson shouted and the rat retreated.

He crawled on, pausing briefly, the black gap of a side tunnel at his elbow, as he made out a shapeless huddle on the damp clay a few yards ahead. For a second he thought it was a mass of earth that had been dislodged from the roof, and then he recognized it as a human body.

It was a brown and shriveled mummy, and with a dreadful unbelieving shock Masson realized that it was moving.

It was crawling toward him, and in the pale glow of the flashlight the man saw a frightful gargoyle face thrust into his own. It was the passionless, death's-head skull of a long-dead corpse, instinct with hellish life; and the glazed eyes swollen and bulbous betrayed the thing's blindness. It made a faint groaning sound as it crawled toward Masson, stretching its ragged and granulated lips in a grin of dreadful hunger. And Masson was frozen with abysmal fear and loathing.

Just before the Horror touched him, Masson flung himself frantically into the burrow at his side. He heard a scrambling noise at his heels, and the thing groaned dully as it came after him. Masson, glancing over his shoulder, screamed and propelled himself desperately through the narrow burrow. He crawled along awkwardly, sharp stones cutting his hands and knees. Dirt showered into his eyes, but he dared not pause even for a moment. He scrambled on, gasping, cursing, and praying hysterically.

Squealing triumphantly, the rats came at him, horrible hunger in their eyes. Masson almost succumbed to their vicious teeth before he succeeeded in beating them off. The passage was narrowing, and in a frenzy of terror he kicked and screamed and fired until the hammer clicked on an empty shell. But he had driven them off.

He found himself crawling under a great stone, embedded in the roof, that dug cruelly into his back. It moved a little as his weight struck it, and an idea flashed into Masson's fright-crazed mind. If he could bring down the stone so that it blocked the tunnel!

The earth was wet and soggy from the rains, and he hunched himself half upright and dug away at the dirt around the stone. The rats were coming closer. He saw their eyes glowing in the reflection of the flashlight's beam. Still he clawed frantically at the earth. The stone was giving. He tugged at it and it rocked in its foundation.

A rat was approaching—the monster he had already glimpsed.

Gray and leprous and hideous it crept forward with its orange teeth bared, and in its wake came the blind dead thing, groaning as it crawled. Masson gave a last frantic tug at the stone. He felt it slide downward, and then he went scrambling along the tunnel.

Behind him the stone crashed down, and he heard a sudden frightful shriek of agony. Clods showered upon his legs. A heavy weight fell on his feet and he dragged them free with difficulty. The entire tunnel was collapsing!

Gasping with fear, Masson threw himself forward as the soggy earth collapsed at his heels. The tunnel narrowed until he could barely use his hands and legs to propel himself; he wriggled forward like an eel and suddenly felt satin tearing beneath his clawing fingers, and then his head crashed against some thing that barred his path. He moved his legs, discovering that they were not pinned under the collapsed earth. He was lying flat on his stomach, and when he tried to raised himself he found that the roof was only a few inches from his back. Panic shot through him.

When the blind horror had blocked his path, he had flung himself into a side tunnel, a tunnel that had no outlet. He was *in a coffin,* an empty coffin into which he had crept through the hole the rats had gnawed in its end!

He tried to turn on his back and found that he could not. The lid of the coffin pinned him down inexorably. Then he braced himself and strained at the coffin lid. It was immovable, and even if he could escape from the sarcophagus, how could he claw his way up through five feet of hard-packed earth?

He found himself gasping. It was dreadfully fetid, unbearably hot. In a paroxysm of terror he ripped and clawed at the satin until it was shredded. He made a futile attempt to dig with his feet at the earth from the collapsed burrow that blocked his retreat. If he were only able to reverse his position he might be able to claw his way through to air . . . air . . . .

White-hot agony lanced through his breast, throbbed in his eyeballs. His head seemed to be swelling, growing larger and larger; and suddenly he heard the exultant squealing of the rats. He began to scream insanely but could not drown them out. For a moment he thrashed about hysterically within his narrow prison, and then he was quiet, gasping for air. His eyelids closed, his blackened tongue protruded, and he sank down into the blackness of death with the mad squealing of the rats dinning in his ears. ■ ■

Something has got to be done about the High Cost of Killing. Anyone who's looked at the HCK index lately knows how ridiculously expensive even the simplest traffic accident has gotten to be. An old lady is knocked down by a car. In a few minutes, there are relatives, lawyers, insurance investigators—everyone with his hand out. Then there are jurors to be bribed, doctors, death certificates, funeral expenses, sometimes room and board in the lock-up, head-shrinkers to say you were thinking about making love to your grandmother at the time—and not one of them even appreciates the musical sound of chromium crunching against bone. No, instead of being fun, a traffic accident is getting to be a big, expensive bore. Who's to blame? The Crowd, of course.

THE CROWD

by RAY BRADBURY

MR. SPALLNER PUT HIS HANDS OVER his face.

There was the feeling of movement in space, the beautifully tortured scream, the impact and tumbling of the car with wall, through wall, over and down like a toy, and him hurled out of it. Then—silence.

The crowd came running. Faintly, where he lay, he heard them running. He could tell their ages and their sizes by the sound of their numerous feet over the summer grass and on the lined pavement, and over the asphalt street, and picking through the cluttered bricks to where his car hung half into the night sky, still spinning its wheels with a senseless centrifuge.

Where the crowd came from he didn't know. He struggled to re-

main aware and then the crowd faces hemmed in upon him, hung over him like the large glowing leaves of down-bent trees. They were a ring of shifting, compressing, changing faces over him, looking down, looking down, reading the time of his life or death by his face, making his face into a moon-dial, where the moon cast a shadow from his nose out upon his cheek to tell the time of breathing or not breathing any more ever.

How swiftly a crowd comes, he thought, like the iris of an eye compressing in out of nowhere.

A siren. A police voice. Movement. Blood trickled from his lips and he was being moved into an ambulance. Someone said, "Is he dead?" And someone else said, "No, he's not dead." And a third person said, "He won't die, he's not going to die." And he saw the faces of the crowd beyond him in the night, and he knew by their expressions that he wouldn't die. And that was strange. He saw a man's face, thin, bright, pale; the man swallowed and bit his lips, very sick. There was a small woman, too, with red hair and too much red on her cheeks and lips. And a little boy with a freckled face. Others' faces. An old man with a wrinkled upper lip, an old woman, with a mole upon her chin. They had all come from—where? Houses, cars, alleys, from the immediate and the accident-shocked world. Out of alleys and out of hotels and out of streetcars and seemingly out of nothing they came.

The crowd looked at him and he looked back at them and did not like them at all. There was a vast wrongness to them. He couldn't put his finger on it. They were far worse than this machine-made thing that happened to him now.

The ambulance doors slammed. Through the windows he saw the crowd looking in, looking in. That crowd that always came so fast, so strangely fast, to form a circle, to peer down, to probe, to gawk, to question, to point, to disturb, to spoil the privacy of a man's agony by their frank curiosity.

The ambulance drove off. He sank back and their faces still stared into his face, even with his eyes shut.

The car wheels spun in his mind for days. One wheel, four wheels, spinning, spinning, and whirring, around and around.

He knew it was wrong. Something wrong with the wheels and the whole accident and the running of feet and the curiosity. The crowd faces mixed and spun into the wild rotation of the wheels.

He awoke.

Sunlight, a hospital room, a hand taking his pulse.

"How do you feel?" asked the doctor.

The wheels faded away. Mr. Spallner looked around.

"Fine—I guess."

He tried to find words. About the accident. "Doctor?"

"Yes?"

"That crowd—was it last night?"

"Two days ago. You've been here since Thursday. You're all right, though. You're doing fine. Don't try and get up."

"That crowd. Something about wheels, too. Do accidents make people, well, a—little off?"

"Temporarily, sometimes."

He lay staring up at the doctor. "Does it hurt your time sense?"

"Panic sometimes does."

"Makes a minute seem like an hour, or maybe an hour seem like a minute?"

"Yes."

"Let me tell you then." He felt the bed under him, the sunlight on his face. "You'll think I'm crazy. I was driving too fast, I know. I'm sorry now. I jumped the curb and hit that wall. I was hurt and numb, I know, but I still remember things. Mostly—the crowd." He waited a moment and then decided to go on, for he suddenly knew what it was that bothered him. "The crowd got there too quickly. Thirty seconds after the smash they were all standing over me and staring at me . . . it's not right they should run that fast, so late at night . . . ."

"You only think it was thirty seconds," said the doctor. "It was probably three or four minutes. Your senses—"

"Yeah, I know—my senses, the accident. But I was conscious! I remember one thing that puts it all together and makes it funny, God, so damned funny. The wheels were still spinning when the crowd got there!"

The doctor smiled.

The man in bed went on. "I'm positive! The wheels were spinning and spinning fast—the front wheels! Wheels don't spin very long, friction cuts them down. And these were really spinning!"

"You're confused," said the doctor.

"I'm not confused. That street was empty. Not a soul in sight. And then the accident and the wheels still spinning and all those faces over me, quick, in no time. And the way they looked down at me, I *knew* I wouldn't die . . . ."

"Simple shock," said the doctor, walking away into the sunlight.

They released him from the hospital two weeks later. He rode home in a taxi. People had come to visit him during his two weeks on his back, and to all of them he had told his story, the accident, the spinning wheels, the crowd. They had all laughed with him concerning it, and passed it off.

He leaned forward and tapped on the taxi window.

"What's wrong?"

The cabbie looked back. "Sorry, boss. This is one helluva town to drive in. Got an accident up ahead. Want me to detour?"

"Yes, No. No! Wait. Go ahead. Let's—let's take a look."

The cab moved forward, honking.

"Funny damn thing," said the cabbie. "Hey, *you*! Get that flea-trap out the way!" Quieter, "Funny thing—more damn people. Nosy people."

Mr. Spallner looked down and watched his fingers tremble on his knee. "You noticed that, too?"

"Sure," said the cabbie. "All the time. There's always a crowd. You'd think it was their own mother got killed."

"They come running awfully fast," said the man in the back of the cab.

"Same way with a fire or an explosion. Nobody around. Boom. Lotsa people around. I dunno."

"Ever seen an accident—at night?"

The cabbie nodded. "Sure. Don't make no difference. There's always a crowd."

The wreck came in view. A body lay on the pavement. You knew there was a body even if you couldn't see it. Because of the crowd. The crowd with its back toward him as he sat in the rear of the cab. With its back toward him. He opened the window and almost started to yell. But he didn't have the nerve. If he yelled they might turn around.

And he was afraid to see their faces.

"I seem to have a penchant for accidents," he said, in his office. It was late afternoon. His friend sat across the desk from him, listening. "I got out of the hospital this morning and first thing on the way home, we detoured around a wreck."

"Things run in cycles," said Morgan.

"Let me tell you about my accident."

"I've heard it. Heard it all."

"But it was funny, you must admit."

"I must admit. Now how about a drink?"

They talked on for half an hour or more. All the while they talked, at the back of Spallner's brain a small watch ticked, a watch that never needed winding. It was the memory of a few little things. Wheels and faces.

At about five-thirty there was a hard metal noise in the street. Morgan nodded and looked out and down. "What'd I tell you? Cycles. A truck and a cream-colored Cadillac. Yes, yes."

Spallner walked to the window. He was very cold and as he stood there, he looked at his watch, at the small minute hand. One two three four five seconds—people running—eight nine ten eleven

twelve—from all over, people came running—fifteen sixteen seventeen eighteen seconds—more people, more cars, more horns blowing. Curiously distant, Spallner looked upon the scene as an explosion in reverse, the fragments of the detonation sucked back to the point of impulsion. Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one seconds and the crowd was there. Spallner made a gesture down at them, wordless.

The crowd had gathered so fast.

He saw a woman's body a moment before the crowd swallowed it up.

Morgan said. "You look lousy. Here. Finish your drink."

"I'm all right, I'm all right. Let me alone. I'm all right. Can you see those people? Can you see any of them? I wish we could see them closer."

Morgan cried out, "Where in hell are you going?"

Spallner was out the door, Morgan after him, and down the stairs, as rapidly as possible. "Come along, and hurry."

"Take it easy, you're not a well man!"

They walked out on to the street. Spallner pushed his way forward. He thought he saw a red-haired woman with too much red color on her cheeks and lips.

"There!" He turned wildly to Morgan. "Did you see her?"

"See *who?"*

"Damn it; she's gone. The crowd closed in!"

The crowd was all around, breathing and looking and shuffling and mixing and mumbling and getting in the way when he tried to shove through. Evidently the red-haired woman had seen him coming and run off.

He saw another familiar face! A little freckled boy. But there are many freckled boys in the world. And, anyway, it was no use, before Spallner reached him, this little boy ran away and vanished among the people.

"Is she dead?" a voice asked. "Is she dead?"

"She's dying," someone else replied. "She'll be dead before the ambulance arrives. They shouldn't have moved her. They shouldn't have moved her."

All the crowd faces—familiar, yet unfamiliar, bending over, looking down, looking down.

"Hey, mister, stop pushing."

"Who you shovin', buddy?"

Spallner came back out, and Morgan caught hold of him before he fell. "You damned fool. You're still sick. Why in hell'd you have to come down here?" Morgan demanded.

"I don't know, I really don't. They moved her, Morgan, someone moved her. You should never move a traffic victim. It kills them. It kills them."

"Yeah. That's the way with people. The idiots."

Spallner arranged the newspaper clippings carefully.

Morgan looked at them. "What's the idea? Ever since your accident you think every traffic scramble is part of you. What are these?"

"Clippings of motor-car crack-ups, and photos. Look at them. Not at the cars," said Spallner, "but at the crowds around the cars." He pointed. "Here. Compare this photo of a wreck in the Wilshire District with one in Westwood. No resemblance. But now take this Westwood picture and align it with one taken in the Westwood District ten years ago." Again he motioned. "This woman is in both pictures."

"Coincidence. The woman happened to be there once in 1936, again in 1946."

"A coincidence once, maybe. But twelve times over a period of ten years, when the accidents occurred as much as three miles from one another, no. Here." He dealt out a dozen photographs. "She's in *all* of these!"

"Maybe she's perverted."

"She's more than that. How does she *happen* to be there so quickly after each accident? And why does she wear the same clothes in pictures taken over a period of a decade?"

"I'll be damned, so she does."

"And, last of all, why was she standing over *me* the night of my accident, two weeks ago!"

They had a drink. Morgan went over the files. "What'd you do, hire a clipping service while you were in the hospital to go back through the newspapers for you?" Spallner nodded. Morgan sipped his drink. It was getting late. The street lights were coming on in the streets below the office. "What does all this add up to?"

"I don't know," said Spallner, "except that there's a universal law about accidents. *Crowds gather*. They always gather. And like you and me, people have wondered year after year, why they gathered so quickly, and how? I know the answer. Here it is!"

He flung the clippings down. "It frightens me."

"These people—mightn't they be thrill-hunters, perverted sensationalists with a carnal lust for blood and morbidity?"

Spallner shrugged. "Does that explain their being at all the accidents? Notice, they stick to certain territories. A Brentwood accident will bring out one group. A Huntington Park another. But there's a norm for faces, a certain percentage appear at each wreck."

Morgan said, "They're not *all* the same faces, are they?"

"Naturally not. Accidents draw normal people, too, in the course of time. But these, I find, are always the *first* ones there."

"Who are they? What do they want? You keep hinting and never telling. Good Lord, you must

have some idea. You've scared yourself and now you've got me jumping."

"I've tried getting to them, but someone always trips me up, I'm always too late. They slip into the crowd and vanish. The crowd seems to offer protection to some of its members. They see me coming."

"Sounds like some sort of clique."

"They have one thing in common, they always show up together. At a fire or an explosion or on the sidelines of a war, at any public demonstration of this thing called death. Vultures, hyenas or saints, I don't know which they are, I just don't know. But I'm going to the police with it, this evening. It's gone on long enough. One of them shifted that woman's body today. They shouldn't have touched her. It killed her."

He placed the clippings in a briefcase. Morgan got up and slipped into his coat. Spallner clicked the briefcase shut. "Or, I just happened to think . . ."

"What?"

"Maybe they *wanted* her dead."

"Why?"

"Who knows. Come along?"

"Sorry. It's late. See you tomorrow. Luck." They went out together. "Give my regards to the cops. Think they'll believe you?"

"Oh, they'll believe me all right. Good night."

Spallner took it slow driving downtown.

"I want to get there," he told himself, "alive."

He was rather shocked, but not surprised, somehow, when the truck came rolling out of an alley straight at him. He was just congratulating himself on his keen sense of observation and talking out what he would say to the police in his mind, when the truck smashed into his car. It wasn't really his car, that was the disheartening thing about it. In a preoccupied mood he was tossed first this way and then that way, while he thought, what a shame, Morgan has gone and lent me his extra car for a few days until my other car is fixed, and now here I go again. The windshield hammered back into his face. He was forced back and forth in several lightning jerks. Then all motion stopped and all noise stopped and only pain filled him up.

He heard their feet running and running and running. He fumbled with the car door. It clicked. He fell out upon the pavement drunkenly and lay, ear to the asphalt, listening to them coming. It was like a great rainstorm, with many drops, heavy and light and medium, touching the earth. He waited a few seconds and listened to their coming and their arrival. Then, weakly, expectantly, he rolled his head up and looked.

The crowd was there.

He could smell their breaths, the

mingled odors of many people sucking and sucking on the air a man needs to live by. They crowded and jostled and sucked and sucked all the air up from around his gasping face until he tried to tell them to move back, they were making him live in a vacuum. His head was bleeding very badly. He tried to move and he realized something was wrong with his spine. He hadn't felt much at the impact, but his spine was hurt. He didn't dare move.

He couldn't speak. Opening his mouth, nothing came out but a gagging.

Someone said, "Give me a hand. We'll roll him over and lift him into a more comfortable position."

Spallner's brain burst apart.

No! Don't move me!

"We'll move him," said the voice, casually.

You idiots, you'll kill me, don't!

But he could not say any of this out loud. He could only think it.

Hands took hold of him. They started to lift him. He cried out and nausea choked him up. They straightened him out into a ramrod of agony. Two men did it. One of them was thin, bright, pale, alert, a young man. The other man was very old and had a wrinkled upper lip.

He had seen their faces before.

A familiar voice said, "Is—is he dead?"

Another voice, a memorable voice, responded, "No. Not yet. But he will be dead before the ambulance arrives."

It was all a very silly, mad plot. Like every accident. He squealed hysterically at the solid wall of faces. They were all around him, these judges and jurors with the faces he had seen before. Through his pain he counted their faces. The freckled boy. The old man with the wrinkled upper lip.

The red-haired, red-cheeked woman. An old woman with a mole on her chin.

I know what you're here for, he thought. You're here just as you're at all accidents. To make certain the right ones live and the right ones die. That's why you lifted me. You knew it would kill. You knew I'd live if you left me alone.

And that's the way it's been since time began, when crowds gather. You murder much easier, this way. Your alibi is very simple; you didn't know it was dangerous to move a hurt man. You didn't mean to hurt him.

He looked at them, above him, and he was curious as a man under deep water looking up at people on a bridge. Who are you? Where do you come from and how do you get here so soon? You're the crowd that's always in the way, using up good air that a dying man's lungs are in need of, using up space he should be using to lie in, alone. Tramping on people to make sure they die, that's

you. I know *all* of you.

It was like a polite monologue. They said nothing. Faces. The old man. The red-haired woman.

Someone picked up his brief-case. "Whose is this?" they asked.

It's mine! It's evidence against all of you!

Eyes, inverted over him. Shiny eyes under tousled hair or under hats.

Faces.

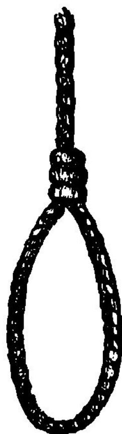
Somewhere—a siren. The ambulance was coming.

But, looking at the faces, the construction, the cast, the form of the faces, Spallner saw it was too late. He read it in their faces. They *knew*.

He tried to speak. A little bit got out:

"It—looks like I'll—be joining up with you. I—guess I'll be a member of your—group—now."

He closed his eyes then, and waited for the coroner. ■ ■



MEMO FROM THE EDITOR:

Grrr . . . At this moment, if Lulubel and I were financially independent, we'd cook up a pot of poisoned pea soup to tempt the palate of the idiot publisher we work for. That doughnut-headed square-brain pulled rank on us and insisted on writing the introduction to this story. Boss or no boss, we advise you to skip what he's written. It's nauseating. Not a drop of honest venom in it.

P. S. The story isn't bad, though.

Just seven years ago, the infant industry of TV began to find its own artists—men who knew how to create memorable works of fiction in the form of a TV scenario. There was Paddy Chayefsky, who wrote "Marty" and "The Bachelor Party" and went on to screen and stage triumphs. There was—and is—Rod Serling who, despite several successful movies to his credit, has remained loyal to TV and is currently producing and writing the eerie "Twilight Zone" series. And then there is the most controversial of all the TV titans—Reginald Rose. From the moment his stirring "Remarkable Incident at Carsons Corners" exploded onto millions of home screens, Reginald Rose was acclaimed as TV's freshest, most challenging writing talent. But he is better known for having authored the best motion picture written in America in the past five years. We refer, of course, to "Twelve Angry Men", the unforgettable motion picture about a jury, starring Henry Fonda and Lee J. Cobb. Many other fine movies and rousing TV dramas have come from Reginald Rose's facile pen. But the story on these pages is the first prose fiction he has ever written. SHOCK magazine is honored that he should have written it for us.

The Publisher

PARLOR GAME

by REGINALD ROSE

"YOU CAN START THE QUESTIONS with any one of us." The voice shivered with controlled excitement. "Well, come on. There's no point in waiting."

"He's allowed to take all the time he wants!"

That was the one who held the rifle pointed sometimes at his head, sometimes at his chest. Henry Munn thought it was a flintlock rifle, and it was odd that his mind was clear enough to grasp such an unusual detail. The rifle waved vaguely in front of him, hammer cocked. "It's unfair to hurry him."

"Well he must be able to think of one question. That's the whole fun of it, the questions."

"He'll ask when he's ready."

The first man grunted and pulled impatiently at a ragged mustache of gray shot with improbable yellow. He put the end of it in his mouth and sucked at it noisily.

Munn's wrists ached where the cords cut into them, and his ankles were growing numb. He had no idea how long he had been sitting, bound to the chair, facing the three old men. It was over an hour, he imagined.

They waited silently now, their faces joyous with anticipation. All three were gaunt, their features etched with lines, the planes of their cheekbones jutting out sharply over the hollows beneath. Their faces were yellow with age and peculiarly translucent, as though the skin was poured tallow. Munn was sure that each of them was over eighty, but which was the oldest?

That was the question they had put to him, and that was the question upon which his life depended.

He shook his head suddenly to clear it, expecting perhaps that a completely different scene might appear before him when he stopped. The rifle leaped for his head.

"Are you dizzy, young man? Would you like a window open in here?"

He heard himself saying that he was all right. It was far from true, but it seemed ridiculous to complain about the stuffiness.

"We like it warm," said the

man with the rifle. "Old people like to be in hot climates. It's the only way they can keep the chill of death out of their bones."

"Have him ask the questions," said the man with the mustaches. *"Now."*

The third old man merely watched, enormously interested, but mute. They had explained to Munn when he arrived that the third man was dumb. Munn was unable to estimate how long ago that had been. It may have been as much as two hours.

He had never taken this particular route before. Altoona was on the main highway, and it had always been Munn's habit to be there by six at the latest, but the thought of the hotel and its overstuffed lobby draped with scores of dreary salesmen waiting for the dinner hour had somehow repelled him this evening. He had taken a detour, driving the Chevrolet with its trunkload of fabric samples over a twisting country road, planning to find an inn where he might dine alone.

Then the car snapped an axle, driving over a boulder, and he pulled to a grinding halt miles from a service station and sat in it trembling for several minutes before he got out and began to look for help.

The house was a half-mile walk away, squatting alone on a little rise near the road. All Munn had wanted was a telephone.

Which of the three was the oldest?

There was absolutely no way of telling by examining the lean and wasted faces. Munn studied them and not a single question came into his mind. "We only answer yes or no," the man with the mustache had said. "Yes or no. Three questions each and then you have to guess who's the oldest. If you do then you win the game. If you don't then we'll shoot you and bury you down in the cellar with the others. It's the easiest game in the whole world." Said with absolute calm. Said as though dictated by impeccable logic. Munn had felt the desire to laugh, but had stifled it. It was too clear that they were serious.

He looked at the man with the rifle. His tongue felt swollen in his mouth as he asked the first question. "Are you over seventy-five years old?"

"Yes," said the man, nodding as though this were an intelligent question. "I told you he'd ask me first," he said to the man with the mustache. He smiled briefly at Munn. "Second question."

Munn had *already* gone through all of the begging, the pleading, the childish threats of retribution. So long ago when he had knocked on the rugged oak door and been admitted by the smiling mute everything had seemed normal. He had asked politely to use the telephone; it had

been pointed out to him by the mute, and he had turned directly into the muzzle of the flintlock. Between that moment and this he had asked for explanations of their behavior (he had wanted to call it macabre, but had refrained) and he had alternately been outraged and terrified. He had even cried. Yes, he had cried at the precise moment when it became clear to him that these waxen old men meant what they said. They had never explained, and he imagined now that they never would. So there was no longer any sense in asking explanation, or begging mercy. What was happening was happening, and Munn knew that he had best get on with the game and try somehow to win it.

But how did you find the proper questions? There must be a clear and precise logical path to the answer, but his mind was a hopeless jumble of half-ideas, and panic seemed to destroy each one as it formed.

The man with the rifle watched him with grave interest. He said, "Think hard."

Think hard. Think hard. Somehow he was thinking of the broken axle, and cursing the boulder. And before he knew his mouth was terrifyingly in motion he heard himself ask, and barely recognized the voice, "Are you over eighty?"

"Yes," said the man with the rifle.

Oh my God, he said to himself, any fool could have asked that. He closed his eyes to shut out the horribly distracting sight of the pleasant maple-paneled room. A log fire crackled cheerily behind him. He could feel the heat of it toasting the back of his neck. And now he was unable to think of any question at all. The only way to find the answer, he knew, was to pit one against the other, to trick them somehow.

Impossible. They would be wise enough to see through any feeble attempt he could muster. Suddenly the laugh burbled up within him again. He squeezed it off in his throat, and his eyes watered from the effort. It was hilarious in a way. How could he know that they would answer his questions honestly? And was there any way to be sure that even if he guessed which of them was the oldest they would admit it? It was a waste of strength to think. He pulled against the cords, and felt a thin trickle of blood slide down his index finger.

He let out a long, sighing breath. "Are you over eighty-five?"

"No," said the man with the rifle. "That's three."

"I'm next." The voice of the man with the mustache trembled with pleasure.

Three questions gone. And Munn knew only that the man with the rifle was between eighty-

one and eighty-five.

He studied the man with the mustache for fully five minutes. The fire roared at his back. Finally he spoke and his voice was a pitiful croak. "Are you over eighty?"

He had heard stories of men whose hearts, at moments of unspeakable pressure, had burst. He felt now that this would happen to him as he waited for the measured reply.

It came. "Yes."

He had to wait for over a minute before he could speak again, but he knew the question he wanted to ask. The man chewed on his gray-yellow mustache, and his eyes, sunken with age in their sockets and moist with rheum, held Munn's steadily. Munn spoke again. "Are you over eighty-five?"

The man with the mustache grinned happily. "No," he said. And he turned to the mute man who sat patiently there. "He's a smart one, this youngster!"

Now Munn could split the years between eighty-one and eighty-five in half. He asked the next question without hesitation. "Are you over eighty-three?"

"Yes," said the man with the mustache. "I love this game!" He laughed aloud to show a mouth startlingly filled with large white teeth. He nudged the mute man happily. "It's your turn."

Munn turned his head slowly to the mute man who watched him blandly. The man with the rifle changed his position, but Munn barely noticed, so intent was he upon the game. He saw at least a chance to win it now, and somehow was strangely exhilarated. The mute man waited.

"Are you over eighty?"

And the mute man slowly nodded his head. He was.

The man with the mustache slapped a bony leg. "I'll bet he gets it," he said.

Munn went right on, not stopping to think now. "Are you over eighty-five?"

The mute man shook his head slowly. He was not.

Now where to split it? Over eighty-three? Over eighty-four? Of course. Eighty-four. Eighty-three wouldn't help at all. "Last question," called the man with the mustache happily.

Munn took a deep breath. The room was in remarkably clear focus for him all at once. Every detail crisp, clear, perfect. "Are you over eighty-four?" he asked.

The mute man nodded as slowly. He was.

Now Henry Munn desperately reviewed what he had learned. The mute man had to be eighty-five years old. The man with the mustache was either eighty-four or eighty-five. The man who held the rifle pointed straight at his forehead now was between eighty-one and eighty-five. He had done

the best he could do under impossible circumstances. There was probably a much better way, but his questions were finished, his time was up. In spite of the overbearing heat in the room Munn was seized with a sudden chill. He had to make a decision. They waited, the one chewing his mustache, the other holding the rifle steady, the third blandly relaxed.

"Well, young man," said the man with the mustache, "Who is the oldest?"

"Shhh. Give him time," said the man with the flintlock.

What were the odds? Probably on the mute man. But there was no way of knowing. All of them could be eighty-five. The mute man could actually be the youngest. Munn cursed himself. He hadn't really found out anything at all. Not anything at all. He was merely going to be taking a random guess. Nine questions, and nothing. He had simply turned the odds slightly better in his favor than their original two to one against him.

They waited. The fire crackled behind him, yet the chill was stronger now. Involuntarily he shivered, his teeth clacking insanely together. He tensed his jaw as tightly as he could, feeling a spike of pain shoot up from a molar to the top of his head. His right eye filled with tears, and suddenly, ridiculously, he found himself thinking of the lobby of the hotel, of the little clusters of jovial miserable men, spinning their lewd and pointless yarns. He wished he were there.

"He's had enough time now, hasn't he?" asked the man with the mustache. "He's had as much as any of them."

And he had. Waiting was meaningless. Get it over with. He lowered his head and waited for the brain-splattering blast of the rifle, and he spoke. "The oldest," his voice seemed far away, "The oldest is the man who doesn't speak."

He waited, eyes closed. The skin of his scalp crawled and tightened. Time oozed by.

"By golly," said the man with the mustache, "He's right!"

Munn opened his eyes. It was impossible to describe the thrill he felt. Impossible! Life had returned to him. The blood shot through his body when a moment before he knew it had stopped. He looked at these shrunken old men almost with love in his heart.

"Congratulations," said the man with the rifle. "You did extremely well. He's one day older than I am. We're both eighty-five. This fellow here," and he laid a skinny hand on the shoulder of the man with the mustache, "is a mere eighty-four." He laughed. And Munn laughed too, laughed until the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"How old are you?" asked the man with the mustache.

Munn gasped for breath.

"Twenty-eight." And he went off again into another paroxysm of laughter. The cords cut even more deeply into his wrists.

"Think you'll live to be as old as we are?" asked the man with the flintlock rifle.

"God no," said Munn. "God no."

"Why not?" asked the man with the mustache.

"Because I couldn't bear to be very old," said Munn.

"Being old has some unusual advantages," said the man with the rifle. "Young people never see that, do they?"

"I don't know whether they do or not," said Munn. "Please cut me loose now," he added politely.

The man with the rifle looked at him openly. "There's something about age that is hateful to youth, isn't there?" he asked. "Age seems to give off an odor. It appears to be soiled. The creases of old skin are viewed by the young as though they hide deposits of decay. Isn't this so?"

Munn knew what he meant. But he lied. "I don't think so. Not for me anyway. I've never thought of it like that."

"We have," said the man with the rifle. "We've found that we are so ugly to young folk that they openly wish we would swiftly be taken by the death which even now lies waiting for us. Isn't that true?"

"No. I don't think so," said Munn softly. He was beginning to perspire a little.

"It *is* true," said the man with the rifle. "Don't you see death as you study us?"

"No," lied Munn.

"Then of course you are blind," said the man with the mustache. "Death grips us even now. We fight it without help from the young, and it is a terrifying thing, a hopeless thing. And that's why we seek revenge. We feel it is cruel of the young to wish us beneath ground as they do, and we try to show them, from time to time, what it is like to face death as we do. And of course, to make it absolutely real for them, there must be the very good chance that they lose. The very good chance." His tone changed now, became pleasant, solicitous. "We hope you understand why we behaved as strangely as we did."

"Of course," said Munn.

"Excellent," smiled the man with the rifle. "Now, please pay attention. My name is John. The name of the man who is mute is Edward. The next game we will play is quite simple. You have three guesses to tell us the name of the man with the mustache."

Munn stared into the suddenly immense muzzle of the flintlock rifle. He felt the heat of the fire scorching his back.

"I love this game," said the man with the mustache. ■ ■

A SHOCK CLASSIC

THE MONKEY'S PAW

by W. W. JACOBS

WITHOUT, THE NIGHT WAS COLD and wet, but in the small parlor of Lakesnam Villa the blinds were drawn and the fire burned brightly. Father and son were at chess, the former, who possessed ideas about the game involving radical changes, putting his king into such sharp and unnecessary perils that it even provoked comment from the white-haired old lady knitting placidly by the fire.

"Hear the wind," said Mr. White, who, having seen a fatal mistake after it was too late, was amiably desirous of preventing his son from seeing it.

"I'm listening," said the latter, grimly surveying the board as he stretched out his hand. "Check."

"I should hardly think that he'd come tonight," said his father, with his hand poised over the board.

"Mate," replied the son.

"That's the worst of living so far out," bawled Mr. White, with sudden and unlooked-for violence; "of all the beastly, slushy, out-of-the-way places to live in, this is the worst. Pathway's a bog, and the road's a torrent."

"Never mind, dear," said his wife soothingly; "perhaps you'll win the next one."

Mr. White looked up sharply, just in time to intercept a knowing glance between mother and son. The words died away on his lips, and he hid a guilty grin.

"There he is," said Herbert White, as the gate banged too loudly and heavy footsteps came toward the door.

The old man rose with hospitable haste, and opening the door, was heard condoling with the new arrival. The new arrival also condoled with himself, so that Mrs. White said, "Tut, tut!" and coughed gently as her husband entered the room, followed by a tall

burly man.

"Sergeant-Major Morris," he said, introducing him.

The sergeant-major shook hands, and taking the proffered seat by the fire, watched contentedly while his host got out whisky and tumblers.

At the third glass his eyes got brighter, and he began to talk, the little family circle regarding with eager interest this visitor from distant parts, as he squared his broad shoulders in the chair and spoke of strange scenes and doughty deeds, of wars and plagues and strange peoples.

"Twenty-one years of it," said Mr. White, nodding at his wife and son. "When he went away he was a slip of a youth in the warehouse. Now look at him."

"He don't look to have taken much harm," said Mrs. White politely.

"I'd like to go to India myself," said the old man, "just to look round a bit, you know."

"Better where you are," said the sergeant-major, shaking his head. He put down the empty glass and, sighing softly, shook it again.

"I should like to see those old temples and fakirs and jugglers," said the old man. "What was that you started telling me the other day about a monkey's paw or something, Morris?"

"Nothing," said the soldier hastily. "Leastways, nothing worth hearing."

"Monkey's paw?" said Mrs. White curiously.

"Well, it's just a bit of what you might call magic, perhaps," said the sergeant-major off-handedly.

His three listeners leaned forward eagerly. The visitor absent-mindedly put his empty glass to his lips and then set it down again. His host filled it for him.

"To look at," said the sergeant-major, fumbling in his pocket, "it's just an ordinary little paw, dried to a mummy."

He took something out of his pocket and proffered it. Mrs. White drew back with a grimace, but her son, taking it, examined it curiously.

"And what is there special about it?" inquired Mr. White, as he took it from his son and, having examined it, placed it upon the table.

"It had a spell put on it by an old fakir," said the sergeant-major, "a very holy man. He wanted to show that fate ruled people's lives, and that those who interfered with it did so to their sorrow. He put a spell on it so that three separate men could each have three wishes from it."

His manner was so impressive that his hearers were conscious that their light laughter jarred somewhat.

"Well, why don't you have three, sir?" said Herbert White

cleverly.

The soldier regarded him in the way that middle age is wont to regard presumptuous youth. "I have," he said quietly, and his blotchy face whitened.

"And did you really have the three wishes granted?" asked Mrs. White.

"I did," said the sergeant-major, and his glass tapped against his strong teeth.

"And has anybody else wished?" inquired the old lady.

"The first man had his three wishes, yes," was the reply. "I don't know what the first two were, but the third was for death. That's how I got the paw."

His tones were so grave that a hush fell upon the group.

"If you've had your three wishes, it's no good to you now, Morris," said the old man at last. "What do you keep it for?"

The soldier shook his head. "Fancy, I suppose," he said slowly. "I did have some idea of selling it, but I don't think I will. It has caused enough mischief already. Besides, people won't buy. They think it's a fairy tale, some of them, and those who do think anything of it want to try it first and pay me afterward."

"If you could have another three wishes," said the old man, eyeing him keenly, "would you have them?"

"I don't know," said the other. "I don't know."

He took the paw, and dangling it between his front finger and thumb, suddenly threw it upon the fire. White, with a slight cry, stooped down and snatched it off.

"Better let it burn," said the soldier solemnly.

"If you don't want it, Morris," said the old man, "give it to me."

"I won't," said his friend doggedly. "I threw it on the fire. If you keep it, don't blame me for what happens. Pitch it on the fire again, like a sensible man."

The other shook his head and examined his new possession closely. "How do you do it?" he inquired.

"Hold it up in your right hand and wish aloud," said the sergeant-major, "but I warn you of the consequences."

"Sounds like the *Arabian Nights,*" said Mrs. White, as she rose and began to set the supper. "Don't you think you might wish for four pairs of hands for me?"

Her husband drew the talisman from his pocket and then all three burst into laughter as the sergeant-major, with a look of alarm on his face, caught him by the arm. "If you must wish," he said gruffly, "wish for something sensible."

Mr. White dropped it back into his pocket, and placing chairs, motioned his friend to the table. In the business of supper the talisman was partly forgotten, and

afterward the three sat listening in an enthralled fashion to a second installment of the soldier's adventures in India.

"If the tale about the monkey paw is not more truthful than those he has been telling us," said Herbert, as the door closed behind their guest, just in time for him to catch the last train, "we shan't make much out of it."

"Did you give him anything for it, father?" inquired Mrs. White, regarding her husband closely.

"A trifle," said he, coloring slightly. "He didn't want it, but I made him take it. And he pressed me again to throw it away."

"Likely," said Herbert, with pretended horror. "Why, we're going to be rich, and famous, and happy. Wish to be an emperor, father, to begin with; then you can't be henpecked."

He darted round the table, pursued by the maligned Mrs. White armed with an antimacassar.

Mr. White took the paw from his pocket and eyed it dubiously. "I don't know what to wish for, and that's a fact," he said slowly. "It seems to me I've got all I want."

"If you only cleared the house, you'd be quite happy, wouldn't you?" said Herbert, with his hand on his shoulder. "Well, wish for two hundred pounds, then; that'll just do it."

His father, smiling shamefacedly at his own credulity, held up the talisman, as his son, with a solemn face somewhat marred by a wink at his mother, sat down at the piano and struck a few impressive chords.

"I wish for two hundred pounds," said the old man distinctly.

A fine crash from the piano greeted the words, interrupted by a shuddering cry from the old man. His wife and son ran toward him.

"It moved," he cried, with a glance of disgust at the object as it lay on the floor. "As I wished it twisted in my hands like a snake."

"Well, I don't see the money," said his son, as he picked it up and placed it on the table, "and I bet I never shall."

"It must have been your fancy, father," said his wife, regarding him anxiously.

He shook his head. "Never mind, though; there's no harm done, but it gave me a shock all the same."

They sat down by the fire again while the two men finished their pipes. Outside, the wind was higher than ever, and the old man started nervously at the sound of a door banging upstairs. A silence unusual and depressing settled upon all three, which lasted until the old couple rose to retire for

the night.

"I expect you'll find the cash tied up in a big bag in the middle of your bed," said Herbert, as he bade them good night, "and something horrible squatting up on top of the wardrobe watching you as you pocket your ill-gotten gains."

II

In the brightness of the wintry sun next morning as it streamed over the breakfast table Herbert laughed at his fears. There was an air of prosaic wholesomeness about the room which it had lacked on the previous night, and the dirty, shriveled little paw was pitched on the sideboard with a carelessness which betokened no great belief in its virtues.

"I suppose all old soldiers are the same," said Mrs. White. "The idea of our listening to such nonsense! How could wishes be granted in these days? And if they could, how could two hundred pounds hurt you, father?"

"Might drop on his head from the sky," said the frivolous Herbert.

"Morris said the things happened so naturally," said his father, "that you might if you so wished attribute it to coincidence."

"Well, don't break into the money before I come back," said Herbert, as he rose from the table. "I'm afraid it'll turn you into a mean, avaricious man, and we shall have to disown you."

His mother laughed, and followed him to the door, watched him down the road, and returning to the breakfast table, was very happy at the expense of her husband's credulity. All of which did not prevent her from scurrying to the door at the postman's knock, nor prevent her from referring somewhat shortly to retired sergeant-majors of bibulous habits when she found that the post brought a tailor's bill.

"Herbert will have some more of his funny remarks, I expect, when he comes home," she said, as they sat at dinner.

"I dare say," said Mr. White, pouring himself out some beer; "but for all that, the thing moved in my hand; that I'll swear to."

"You thought it did," said the old lady soothingly.

"I say it did," replied the other. "There was no thought about it. I had just— What's the matter?"

His wife made no reply. She was watching the mysterious movements of a man outside, who, peering in an undecided fashion at the house, appeared to be trying to make up his mind to enter. In mental connection with the two hundred pounds, she noticed that the stranger was well dressed and wore a silk hat of glossy newness. Three times he

paused at the gate, and then walked on again. The fourth time he stood with his hand upon it, and then with sudden resolution flung it open and walked up the path. Mrs. White at the same moment placed her hands behind her, and hurriedly unfastening the strings of her apron, put that useful article of apparel beneath the cushion of her chair.

She brought the stranger, who seemed ill at ease, into the room. He gazed furtively at Mrs. White, and listened in a preoccupied fashion as the old lady apologized for the appearance of the room, and her husband's coat, a garment which he usually reserved for the garden. She then waited as patiently as her sex would permit for him to broach his business, but he was at first strangely silent.

"I—was asked to call," he said at last, and stooped and picked a piece of cotton from his trousers. "I came from Maw and Meggins."

The old lady started. "Is anything the matter?" she asked breathlessly. "Has anything happened to Herbert? What is it? What is it?"

Her husband interposed. "There, there, mother," he said hastily. "Sit down, and don't jump to conclusions. You've not brought bad news, I'm sure, sir," and he eyed the other wistfully.

"I'm sorry—" began the visitor.

"Is he hurt?" demanded the mother.

The visitor bowed in assent. "Badly hurt," he said quietly, "but he is not in any pain."

"Oh, thank God!" said the old woman, clasping her hands. "Thank God for that! Thank—"

She broke off suddenly as the sinister meaning of the assurance dawned upon her and she saw the awful confirmation of her fears in the other's averted face. She caught her breath, and turning to her slower-witted husband, laid her trembling old hand upon his. There was a long silence.

"He was caught in the machinery," said the visitor at length, in a low voice.

"Caught in the machinery," repeated Mr. White, in a dazed fashion, "yes."

He sat staring blackly out at the window, and taking his wife's hand between his own, pressed it as he had been wont to do in their old courting days nearly forty years before.

"He was the only one left to us," he said, turning gently to the visitor. "It is hard."

The other coughed, and rising, walked slowly to the window. "The firm wished me to convey their sincere sympathy with you in your great loss," he said, without looking around. "I beg that you will understand I am only their servant and merely obeying orders."

There was no reply; the old woman's face was white, her eyes staring, and her breath inaudible; on the husband's face was a look such as his friend the sergeant might have carried into his first action.

"I was to say that Maw and Meggins disclaim all responsibility," continued the other. "They admit no liability at all, but in consideration of your son's services they wish to present you with a certain sum as compensation."

Mr. White dropped his wife's hand, and rising to his feet, gazed with a look of horror at his visitor. His dry lips shaped the words, "How much?"

"Two hundred pounds," was the answer.

Unconscious of his wife's shriek, the old man smiled faintly, put out his hands like a sightless man, and dropped, a senseless heap to the floor.

III

In the huge new cemetery, some two miles distant, the old people buried their dead, and came back to a house steeped in shadow and silence. It was all over so quickly that at first they could hardly realize it, and remained in a state of expectation as though of something else to happen—something else which was to lighten this load, too heavy for old hearts to bear. But the days passed, and expectation gave place to resignation—the hopeless resignation of the old, sometimes miscalled apathy. Sometimes they hardly exchanged a word, for now they had nothing to talk about, and their days were long to weariness.

It was about a week after that that the old man, waking suddenly in the night, stretched out his hand and found himself alone. The room was in darkness, and the sound of subdued weeping came from the window. He raised himself in bed and listened.

"Come back," he said tenderly. "You will be cold."

"It is colder for my son," said the old woman, and wept afresh.

The sound of her sobs died away on his ears. The bed was warm, and his eyes heavy with sleep. He dozed fitfully, and then slept until a sudden wild cry from his wife awoke him with a start.

"The monkey's paw!" she cried wildly. "The monkey's paw!"

He started up in alarm. "Where? Where is it? What's the matter?"

She came stumbling across the room toward him. "I want it," she said quietly. "You've not destroyed it?"

"It's in the parlor, on the bracket," he replied, marveling. "Why?"

She cried and laughed together, and bending over, kissed his

cheek.

"I only just thought of it," she said hysterically. "Why didn't I think of it before? Why didn't you think of it?"

"Think of what?" he questioned.

"The other two wishes," she replied rapidly. "We've only had one."

"Was not that enough?" he demanded fiercely.

"No," she cried triumphantly; "we'll have one more. Go down and get it quickly, and wish our boy alive again."

The man sat up in bed and flung the bedclothes from his quaking limbs. "Good God, you are mad!" he cried, aghast.

"Get it," she panted; "get it quickly, and wish— Oh, my boy, my boy!"

Her husband struck a match and lit the candle. "Get back to bed," he said unsteadily. "You don't know what you are saying."

"We had the first wish granted," said the old woman feverishly; "why not the second?"

"A coincidence," stammered the old man.

"Go and get it and wish," cried the old woman, and dragged him toward the door.

He went down in the darkness, and felt his way to the parlor, and then to the mantelpiece. The talisman was in its place, and a horrible fear that the unspoken wish might bring his mutilated son before him ere he could escape from the room seized upon him, and he caught his breath as he found that he had lost the direction of the door. His brow cold with sweat, he felt his way round the table, and groped along the wall until he found himself in the small passage with the unwholesome thing in his hand.

Even his wife's face seemed changed as he entered the room. It was white and expectant, and to his fears seemed to have an unnatural look upon it. He was afraid of her.

"Wish!" she cried, in a strong voice.

"It is foolish and wicked," he faltered.

"Wish!" repeated his wife.

He raised his hand. "I wish my son alive again."

The talisman fell to the floor, and he regarded it shudderingly. Then he sank trembling into a chair as the old woman, with burning eyes, walked to the window and raised the blind.

He sat until he was chilled with the cold, glancing occasionally at the figure of the old woman peering through the window. The candle end, which had burnt below the rim of the china candlestick, was throwing pulsating shadows on the ceiling and walls, until, with a flicker larger than the rest, it expired. The old man,

with an unspeakable sense of relief at the failure of the talisman, crept back to his bed, and a minute or two afterward the old woman came silently and apathetically beside him.

Neither spoke, but both lay silently listening to the ticking of the clock. A stair creaked, and a squeaky mouse scurried noisily through the wall. The darkness was oppressive, and after lying for some time screwing up his courage, the husband took the box of matches, and striking one, went down stairs for a candle.

At the foot of the stairs the match went out, and he paused to strike another, and at the same moment a knock, so quiet and stealthy as to be scarcely audible, sounded on the front door.

The matches fell from his hand. He stood motionless, his breath suspended until the knock was repeated. Then he turned and fled swiftly back to his room, and closed the door behind him. A third knock sounded through the house.

"*What's that?*" cried the old woman, starting up.

"A rat," said the old man, in shaking tones— "a rat. It passed me on the stairs."

His wife sat up in bed listening. A loud knock resounded through the house.

"It's Herbert!" she screamed. "It's Herbert!"

She ran to the door, but her husband was before her, and catching her by the arm, held her tightly.

"What are you going to do?" he whispered hoarsely.

"It's my boy; it's Herbert!" she cried, struggling mechanically. "I forgot it was two miles away. What are you holding me for? Let go. I must open the door."

"For God's sake don't let it in," cried the old man, trembling.

"You're afraid of your own son," she cried, struggling. "Let me go. I'm coming, Herbert; I'm coming."

There was another knock, and another. The old woman with a sudden wrench broke free and ran from the room. Her husband followed to the landing, and called after her appealingly as she hurried downstairs. He heard the chain rattle back and the bottom bolt drawn slowly and stiffly from the socket. Then the old woman's voice, strained and panting.

"The bolt," she cried loudly. "Come down. I can't reach it."

But her husband was on his hands and knees groping wildly on the floor in search of the paw. If he could only find it before the thing outside got in. A perfect fusillade of knocks reverberated through the house, and he heard the scraping of a chair as his wife put it down in the passage against the door. He heard the creaking

of the bolt as it came slowly back, and at the same moment he found the monkey's paw, and frantically breathed his third and last wish.

The knocking ceased suddenly, although the echoes of it were still in the house. He heard the chair drawn back and the door opened. A cold wind rushed up the staircase, and a long loud wail of disappointment and misery from his wife gave him courage to run down to her side, and then to the gate beyond. The street lamp flickering opposite shone on a quiet and deserted road. ■ ■

Life can be boring sometimes—but so can death . . .

FOREVER AFTER

by JIM THOMPSON

IT WAS A FEW MINUTES BEFORE FIVE o'clock when Ardis Clinton unlocked the rear door of her apartment, and admitted her lover. He was a cow-eyed young man with a wild mass of curly black hair. He worked as a dishwasher at Joe's Diner, which was directly across the alley.

They embraced passionately. Her body pressed against the meat cleaver, concealed inside his shirt, and Ardis shivered with delicious anticipation. Very soon now, it would all be over. That stupid ox, her husband, would be dead. He and his stupid cracks—all the dullness and boredom would be gone forever. And with the twenty thousand insurance money, ten thousand dollars double-indemnity . . .

"We're going to be so happy, Tony," she whispered. "You'll have your own place, a real swank little restaurant with what they call one of those intimate bars. And you'll just manage it, just kind of saunter around in a dress suit, and—"

"And we'll live happily ever after," Tony said. "Just me and you, baby, walking down life's highway together."

Ardis let out a gasp. She shoved him away from her, glaring up into his handsome empty face. "Don't!" she snapped. "Don't say things like that! I've told you and told you not to do it, and if I have to tell you again, I'll—!"

"But what'd I say?" he protested. "I didn't say nothin'."

"Well . . ." She got control of herself, forcing a smile. "Never mind, darling. You haven't had any opportunities and we've never really had a chance to know each other, so—so never mind. Things will be different after we're married." She patted his cheek, kissed him again. "You got away from the diner, all right? No one saw you leave?"

"Huh-uh. I already took the stuff up to the steam-table for Joe, and the waitress was up front too, y'know, filling the sugar bowls and the salt and pepper shakers like she always does just before dinner. And—"

"Good. Now, suppose someone comes back to the kitchen and finds out you're not there. What's your story going to be?"

"Well . . . I was out in the alley dumping some garbage. I mean" —he corrected himself hastily, "maybe I was. Or maybe I was down in the basement, getting some supplies. Or maybe I was in the john—the lavatory, I mean —or—"

"Fine," Ardis said approvingly. "You don't say where you were, so they can't prove you weren't there. You just don't remember where you were, understand, darling? You might have been any number of places."

Tony nodded. Looking over her shoulder into the bedroom, he frowned worriedly. "Why'd you do that now, honey? I know this has got to look like a robbery. But tearin' up the room now, before he gets here—"

"There won't be time afterwards. Don't worry, Tony. I'll keep the door closed."

"But he might open it and look in. And if he sees all them dresser drawers dumped around, and—"

"He won't. He won't look into the bedroom. I know exactly what he'll do, exactly what he'll say, the same things that he's always done and said ever since we've been married. All the stupid, maddening, dull, tiresome—!" She broke off abruptly, conscious that her voice was rising. "Well, forget it," she said, forcing another smile. "He won't give us any trouble."

"Whatever you say," Tony nodded docilely. "If you say so, that's the way it is, Ardis."

"But there'll be trouble—from the cops. I know I've already warned you about it, darling. But it'll be pretty bad, worse than anything you've ever gone through. They won't have any proof, but they're bound to be suspicious, and if you ever start talking, admitting anything—"

"I won't. They won't get anything out of me."

"You're sure? They'll try to trick you. They'll probably tell you that I've confessed. They may even slap you around. So if you're not absolutely sure . . . "

"They won't get anything out of me," he repeated stolidly. "I won't talk."

And studying him, Ardis knew that he wouldn't.

She led the way down the hall to the bathroom. He parted the shower curtains, and stepped into the tub. Drawing a pair of gloves from his pocket, he pulled them onto his hands. Awkwardly, he fumbled the meat cleaver from be-

neath his shirt.

"Ardis. Uh—look, honey."

"Yes?"

"Do I have to hit you? Couldn't I just maybe give you a little shove, or—"

"No, darling," she said gently. "You have to hit me. This is supposed to be a robbery. If you killed my husband without doing anything to me, well, you know how it would look."

"But I never hit no woman—any woman—before. I might hit you too hard, and—"

"Tony!"

"Well, all right," he said sullenly. "I don't like it, but all right."

Ardis murmured soothing endearments. Then, brushing his lips quickly with her own, she returned to the living room. It was a quarter after five, exactly five minutes—but *exactly*—until her husband, Bill, would come home. Closing the bedroom door, she lay down on the lounge. Her negligee fell open, and she left it that way, grinning meanly as she studied the curving length of her thighs.

Give the dope a treat for a change, she thought. Let him get one last good look before he gets his.

Her expression changed. Wearily, resentfully, she pulled the material of the negligee over her legs. Because, of course, Bill would never notice. She could wear a ring in her nose, paint a bulls' eye around her navel, and he'd never notice.

If he had ever noticed, just once paid her a pretty compliment...

If he had ever done anything different, ever said or done anything different at all—even the teensiest little bit...

But he hadn't. Maybe he couldn't. So what else could she do but what she was doing? She could get a divorce, sure, but that was all she'd get. No money; nothing with which to build a new life. Nothing to make up for those fifteen years of slowly being driven mad.

It's his own fault, she thought bitterly. I can't take any more. If I had to put up with him for just one more night, even one more hour . . . !

She heard heavy footsteps in the hallway. Then, a key turned in the doorlatch, and Bill came in. He was a master machinist, a solidly built man of about forty-five. The old-fashioned gold-rimmed glasses on his pudgy nose gave him a look of owlish solemnity.

"Well," he said, setting down his lunch bucket. "Another day, another dollar."

Ardis grimaced. He plodded across to the lounge, stooped, and gave her a half-hearted peck on the cheek.

"Long time no see," he said.

"What we havin' for supper?"

Ardis gritted her teeth. It shouldn't matter, now; in a few minutes it would all be over. Yet somehow it *did* matter. He was as maddening to her as he had ever been.

"Bill..." She managed a seductive smile, slowly drawing the negligee apart. "How do I look, Bill?"

"Okay," he yawned. "Got a little hole in your drawers, though. What'd you say we was havin' for supper?"

"Slop," she said. "Garbage. Trash salad with dirt dressing."

"Sounds good. We got any hot water?"

Ardis sucked in her breath. She let it out again in a kind of infuriated moan. "Of course, we've got hot water! Don't we always have? Well, don't we? Why do you have to ask every night?"

"So what's to get excited about?" he shrugged. "Well, guess I'll go splash the chassis."

He plodded off down the hall. Ardis heard the bathroom door open, and close. She got up, stood waiting by the telephone. The door banged open again, and Tony came racing up the hall.

He had washed off the cleaver. While he hastily tucked it back inside his shirt, Ardis dialed the operator. "Help," she cried weakly. "Help... police... murder!"

She let the receiver drop to the floor, spoke to Tony in a whisper. "He's dead? You're sure of it?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure I'm sure. What do you think?"

"All right. Now, there's just one more thing..."

"I can't, Ardis. I don't want to. I—"

"Hit me," she commanded, and thrust out her chin. "Tony, I said to hit me!"

He hit her. A thousand stars blazed through her brain, and disappeared. And she crumpled silently to the floor.

...When she regained consciousness, she was lying on the lounge. A heavy-set man, a detective obviously, was seated at her side, and a white-jacketed young man with a stethoscope draped around his neck hovered nearby.

She had never felt better in her life. Even the lower part of her face, where Tony had smashed her, was surprisingly free of pain. Still, because it was what she should do, she moaned softly; spoke in a weak, hazy voice.

"Where am I?" she said. "What happened?"

"Lieutenant Powers," the detective said. "Suppose you tell me what happened, Mrs. Clinton."

"I... I don't remember. I mean, well, my husband had just come home, and gone back to the bathroom. And there was a knock on the door, and I supposed it was the paper-boy or someone like that. So—"

"You opened the door and he rushed in and slugged you, right? Then what happened?"

"Well, then he rushed into the bedroom and started searching it. Yanking out the dresser drawers, and—"

"What was he searching for, Mrs. Clinton? You don't have any considerable amount of money around do you? Or any jewelry aside from what you're wearing? And it wasn't your husband's payday, was it?"

"Well, no. But—"

"Yes?"

"I don't know. Maybe he was crazy. All I know is what he did."

"I see. He must have made quite a racket, seems to me. How come your husband didn't hear it?"

"He couldn't have. He had the shower running, and—"

She caught herself, fear constricting her throat. Lieutenant Powers grinned grimly.

"Missed a bet, huh, Mrs. Clinton?"

"I—I don't know what you're—"

"Come off of it! The bathtub's dry as an oven. The shower was never turned on, and you know why it wasn't. Because there was a guy standing inside of it."

"B-but—but I don't know anything. I was unconscious, and—"

"Then, how do you know what happened? How do you know this guy went into the bedroom and started tearing it apart? And how did you make that telephone call?"

"Well, I . . . I wasn't completely unconscious. I sort of knew what was going on without really—"

"Now, you listen to me," he said harshly. "You made that fake call of yours—yes, I said *fake*—to the operator at twenty-three minutes after five. There happened to be a prowl car right here in the neighborhood, so two minutes later, at five-twenty-five, there were cops here in your apartment. You were unconscious then, more than an hour ago. You've been unconscious until just now."

Ardis' brain whirled. Then, it cleared suddenly, and a great calm came over her.

"I don't see quite what you're hinting at, lieutenant. If you're saying that I was confused, mixed up—that I must have dreamed or imagined some of the things I told you—I'll admit it."

"You know what I'm saying! I'm saying that no guy could have got in and out of this place, and done what this one did, in any two minutes!"

"Then the telephone operator must have been mistaken about the time," Ardis said brightly. "I don't know how else to explain it."

Powers grunted. He said he could give her a better explanation—and he gave it to her. The right one. Ardis listened to it placidly, murmuring polite objections.

"That's ridiculous, lieutenant. Regardless of any gossip you may have heard, I don't know this, uh, Tony person. And I most certainly did not plot with him or anyone else to kill my husband. Why—"

"He says you did. We got a signed confession from him."

"Have you?" But of course they didn't have. They might have found out about Tony, but he would never have talked. "That hardly proves anything, does it?"

"Now, you listen to me, Mrs. Clinton! Maybe you think that—"

"How is my husband, anyway? I do hope he wasn't seriously hurt."

"How *is* he?" the lieutenant snarled. "How would he be after gettin' worked over with—" He broke off, his eyes flickering. "As a matter of fact," he said heavily, "he's going to be all right. He was pretty badly injured, but he was able to give us a statement and—"

"I'm so glad. But why are you questioning me, then?" It was another trick. Bill had to be dead. "If he gave you a statement, then you must know that everything happened just like I said."

She waited, looked at him quizzically. Powers scowled, his stern face wrinkling with exasperation.

"All right," he said, at last. "All right, Mrs. Clinton. Your husband is dead. We don't have any statement from him, and we don't have any confession from Tony."

"Yes?"

"But we know that you're guilty, and you know that you are. And you'd better get it off your conscience while you still can."

"While I still can?"

"Doc" —Powers jerked his head at the doctor. At the man, that is, who appeared to be a doctor. "Lay it on the line, doc. Tell her that her boy friend hit her a little too hard."

The man came forward hesitantly. He said, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Clinton. You have a—uh—you've sustained a very serious injury."

"Have I?" Ardis smiled. "I feel fine."

"I don't think," the doctor said judiciously, "that that's quite true. What you mean is that you don't feel anything at all. You couldn't. You see, with an injury such as yours—"

"Get out," Ardis said. "Both of you get out."

"Please, Mrs. Clinton. Believe me, this isn't a trick. I haven't wanted to alarm you, but—"

"And you haven't," she said. "You haven't scared me even a little bit, mister. Now, clear out!"

She closed her eyes, kept them closed firmly. When, at last, she reopened them, Powers and the doctor—if he really had been a doctor— were gone. And the room was in darkness.

She lay smiling to herself, congratulating herself. In the corridor

outside, she heard heavy footsteps approaching; and she tensed for a moment. Then, remembering, she relaxed again.

Not Bill, of course. She was through with that jerk forever. He'd driven her half out of her mind, got her to the point where she couldn't have taken another minute of him if her life depended on it. But now . . .

The footsteps stopped in front of her door. A key turned in the lock, the door opened and closed.

There was a clatter of a lunch-pail being set down; then a familiar voice—maddeningly familiar words:

"Well. Another day another dollar."

Ardis' mouth tightened; it twisted slowly, in a malicious grin. So they hadn't given up yet! They were pulling this one last trick. Well, let them; she'd play along with the gag.

The man plodded across the room, stooped, and gave her a half-hearted peck on the cheek. "Long time no see," he said. "What we havin' for supper?"

"Bill . . . " Ardis said. "How do I look, Bill."

"Okay. Got your lipstick smeared, though. What'd you say we was having for supper?"

"Stewed owls! Now, look, mister. I don't know who you—"

"Sounds good. We got any hot water?"

"Of course, we've got hot water! Don't we always have? Why do you always have to ask if—if—"

She couldn't go through with it. Even as a gag—even someone who merely sounded and acted like he did—it was too much to bear.

"Y-you get out of here!" she quavered. "I don't have to stand for this! I *c-can't* stand it! I did it for fifteen years, and—"

"So what's to get excited about?" he said. "Well, guess I'll go splash the chassis."

"Stop it! *STOP IT!*" Her screams filled the room . . . silent screams ripping through silence. "He's—you're dead! I know you are! You're dead, and I don't have to put up with you for another minute. And—and—!"

"Wouldn't take no bets on that if I was you," he said mildly. "Not with a broken neck like yours."

He trudged off toward the bathroom, wherever the bathroom is in Eternity. ■ ■

This scan was produced and distributed free by the Pulpscans Group. If you paid for this digital document or a compilation of this and other digital pulps, you got ripped off. But you can still have this and more than a thousand more pulps for free by coming over and joining us at pulpscans@yahoogroups.com.

THE EMPTY MAN

by

ANTHONY BOUCHER

Some mysteries are better left alone, unless you can face up to the answers. But the answers may be just too horrible to face.

"THIS IS FOR YOU," INSPECTOR Abrahams announced wryly. "Another screwy one."

I was late and out of breath. I'd somehow got entangled with the Downtown Merchants' Association annual parade, and for a while it looked like I'd be spending the day surrounded by gigantic balloon-parodies of humanity. But it takes more than rubber Gullivers to hold me up when Inspector Abrahams announces that he's got a case of the kind he labels "for Lamb."

Abrahams didn't add any explanation. He just opened the door of the apartment. I went in ahead of him. It was a place I could have liked if it hadn't been for what was on the floor.

Two walls were mostly windows. One gave a good view of the Golden Gate. From the other, on a fine day, you could see the Farallones, and it was a fine day.

The other two walls were records and a record player. I'd heard of the Stambaugh collection of early operatic recordings. If I'd been there on any other errand, my mouth would have watered at the prospect of listening to lost great voices.

"If you can get a story out of this that makes sense," the Inspector grunted, "you're welcome to it—at the usual fee." Which was a dinner at Lupo's Pizzeria. "Everything's just the way we found it."

I looked at the unfinished highball, now almost colorless with all its ice melted and its soda flat. I looked at the cylindrical ash of the cigaret which had burned itself out. I looked at the vacuum cleaner—a shockingly utilitarian object in this set for gracious living. I looked at the record player, still switched on, still making its methodical seventy-eight revolutions per minute, though there was no record on the turntable.

Then I managed to look again at the thing on the floor.

It was worse than a body. It was like a tasteless, bloodless parody of the usual occupant of the spot marked X. Clothes scattered in disorder seem normal—even more normal, perhaps, in a bache-

lor apartment than clothes properly hung in closets. But this . . .

Above the neck of the dressing gown lay the spectacles. The sleeves of the shirt were inside the sleeves of the dressing gown. The shirt was buttoned, even to the collar, and the foulard tie was knotted tight up against the collar button. The tails of the shirt were tucked properly into the zipped-up, properly belted trousers. Below the trouser cuffs lay the shoes, at a lifelike angle, with the tops of the socks emerging from them.

"And there's an undershirt under the shirt," Inspector Abrahams muttered disconsolately, "and shorts inside the pants. Complete outfit: what the well-dressed man will wear. Only no man in them."

It was as though James Stambaugh had been attacked by some solvent which eats away only flesh and leaves all the inanimate articles. Or as though some hyperspatial suction had drawn the living man out of his wardrobe, leaving his sartorial shell behind him.

I said, "Can I dirty an ashtray in this scene?"

Abrahams nodded. "I was just keeping it for you to see. We've got our pictures." While I lit up, he crossed to the record player and switched it off. "Damned whirligig gets on my nerves."

"Whole damned setup gets on mine," I said. "It's like a striptease version of the *Mary Celeste*. Only the strip wasn't a gradual tease; just abruptly, *whoosh!*, a man's gone. One minute he's comfortably dressed in his apartment, smoking, drinking, playing records. The next he's stark naked —and where and doing what?"

Abrahams pulled at his nose, which didn't need lengthening. "We had the Japanese valet check the wardrobe. Every article of clothing James Stambaugh owned is still here in the apartment."

"Who found him?" I asked.

"Kaguchi. The valet. He had last night off. He let himself in this morning, to prepare coffee and prairie oysters as usual. He found this."

"Blood?" I ventured.

Abrahams shook his head.

"Visitors?"

"Ten apartments in this building. Three of them had parties last night. You can figure how much help the elevator man was?"

"The drink?"

"We took a sample to the lab. Nothing but the best scotch."

I frowned at the vacuum cleaner. "What's that doing out here? It ought to live in a closet."

"Puzzled Kaguchi too. He even says it was still a little warm when he found it, like it had been used. But we looked in the bag. I assure you Stambaugh didn't get sucked in there."

"Motive?"

"Gay dog, our Mr. Stambaugh.

Maybe you read Herb Caen's gossip column too? And Kaguchi gave us a little fill-in. Brothers, fathers, husbands... Too many motives."

"But why this way?" I brooded. "Get rid of him, sure. But why leave this hollow husk . . . ?"

"Not just why, Lamb. How."

"How? That should be easy enough to—"

"Try it. Try fitting sleeves into sleeves, pants into pants, so they're as smooth and even as if they were still on the body. I've tried, with the rest of the wardrobe. It doesn't work."

I had an idea. "You don't fit 'em in," I said smugly. "You take 'em off. Look." I unbuttoned my coat and shirt, undid my tie, and pulled everything off at once. "See," I said, "sleeves in sleeves." I unzipped and stepped out of trousers and shorts. "See, pants in pants."

Inspector Abrahams was whistling the refrain of *Strip Polka.* "You missed your career, Lamb," he said. "Only now you've got to put your shirt tails between the outer pants and the inner ones and still keep everything smooth. And look in here." He lifted up one shoe and took out a pocket flash and shot a beam inside. "The sock's caught on a little snag in one of the metal eyelets. That's kept it from collapsing, and you can still see the faint impress of toes in there. Try slipping your foot out of a laced-up shoe and see if you can get that result."

I was getting dressed again and feeling like a damned fool.

"Got any other inspirations?" Abrahams grinned.

"The only inspiration I've got is as to where to go now."

"Some day," the Inspector grunted, "I'll learn where you go for your extra-bright ideas."

"As the old lady said to the elephant keeper," I muttered, "you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Things were relatively quiet today in Dr. Verner's studio. Slavko Catenich was still hammering away at his block of marble, apparently on the theory that the natural form inherent in the stone would emerge if you hit it often enough. Irma Borigian was running over vocal exercises and occasionally checking herself by striking a note on the piano, which seemed to bring her more reassurance than it did me. Those two, plus a couple of lads industriously fencing whom I'd never seen before, were the only members of Verner's Varieties on hand today.

Irma ah-ah-ahed and pinked, the fencers c l i c k e d, Slavko crashed, and in the midst of the decibels the Old Man stood at his five-foot lectern-desk, resolutely proceeding in quill-pen longhand with the resounding periods of *The Anatomy of Nonscience,* that

never concluded compendium of curiosities which was half Robert Burton and half Charles Fort.

He gave me the medium look. Not the hasty "Just this sentence" or the forbidding "Dear boy, this page *must* be finished"; but the in-between "One more deathless paragraph" look. I grabbed a chair and tried to watch Irma's singing and listen to Slavko's sculpting.

There's no describing Dr. Verner. You can say his age is somewhere between seventy and a hundred. You can say he has a mane of hair like an albino lion and a little goatee like a Kentucky Colonel who never heard of cigars. ("When a man's hair is white," I've heard him say, "tobacco and a beard are mutually exclusive vices.") You can mention the towering figure and the un-English mobility of the white old hands and the disconcerting twinkle of those impossibly blue eyes. And you'd still have about as satisfactory a description as when you say the Taj Mahal is a domed, square, white marble building.

The twinkle was in the eyes and the mobility was in the hands when he finally came to tower over me. They were both gone by the time I'd finished the story of the Stambaugh apartment and the empty man. He stood for a moment frowning, the eyes lusterless, the hands limp at his sides. Then, still standing like that, he relaxed the frown and opened his mouth in a resonant bellow.

"You sticks!" he roared. (Irma stopped and looked hurt.) "You stones!" (The fencers stopped and looked expectant.) "You worse than worst of those that lawless and uncertain thoughts" (Slavko stopped and looked resigned.) "imagine howling," Dr. Verner concluded in a columbine coo, having shifted in mid-quotation from one Shakespearean play to another so deftly that I was still looking for the joint.

Verner's Varieties waited for the next number on the bill. In majestic silence Dr. Verner stalked to his record player. Stambaugh's had been a fancy enough custom-made job, but nothing like this.

If you think things are confusing now, with records revolving at 78, 45, and 33 1/3 rpm, you should see the records of the early part of the century. There were cylinders, of course (Verner had a separate machine for them). Disc records, instead of our present standard sizes, ranged anywhere from 7 to 14 inches in diameter, with curious fractional stops in between. Even the center holes came in assorted sizes. Many discs were lateral-cut, like modern ones; but quite a few were hill-and-dale, with the needle riding up and down instead of sideways—which actually gave better reproduction but somehow never became overwhelmingly popular. The grooving varied too, so that even if two

companies both used hill-and-dale cutting you couldn't play the records of one on a machine for the other. And just to make things trickier, some records started from the inside instead of the outer edge. It was Free Enterprise gone hogwild.

Dr. Verner had explained all this while demonstrating to me how his player could cope with any disc record ever manufactured. And I had heard him play everything on it from smuggled dubbings of Crosby blow-ups to a recording by the original *Floradora Sextet*—which was, he was always careful to point out, a double sextet or, as he preferred, a duo-decimet.

"You are," he announced ponderously, "about to hear the greatest dramatic soprano of this century. Rosa Ponselle and Elisabeth Rethberg were passable. There was something to be said for Lillian Nordica and Lena Geyer. But listen!" And he slid the needle into the first groove.

"Dr. Verner—" I started to ask for footnotes; I should have known better.

"Dear boy . . . !" he murmured protestingly, over the preliminary surface noise of the aged pressing, and gave me one of those twinkles of bluest blue which implied that surely only a moron could fail to follow the logic of the procedure.

I sat back and listened. Irma listened too, but the eyes of the others were soon longingly intent on foils and chisel. I listened casually at first, then began to sit forward.

I have heard, in person or on records, all of the venerable names which Dr. Verner mentioned—to say nothing of Tebaldi, Russ, Ritter-Ciampi, Souez and both Lehmanns. And reluctantly I began to admit that he was right; this was *the* dramatic soprano. The music was strange to me—a setting of the Latin text of the *Our Father,* surely eighteenth century and at a guess by Pergolesi; it had his irrelevant but reverent tunefulness in approaching a sacred text. Its grave sustained lilt was admirable for showing off a voice; and the voice, unwavering in its prolonged tones, incredible in its breath control, deserved all the showing off it could get. During one long phrase of runs, as taxing as anything in Mozart or Handel, I noticed Irma. She was holding her breath in sympathy with the singer, and the singer won. Irma had let out an admiring gasp before the soprano had, still on one breath, achieved the phrase.

And then, for reasons more operatic than liturgical, the music quickened. The sustained legato phrases gave way to cascades of light bright coloratura. Notes sparkled and dazzled and brightness fell from the air. It was impeccable, inapproachable—infinite-

ly discouraging to a singer and almost shocking to the ordinary listener.

The record ended. Dr. Verner beamed around the room as if he'd done all that himself. Irma crossed to the piano, struck one key to verify the incredible note in alt upon which the singer had ended, picked up her music, and wordlessly left the room.

Slavko had seized his chisel and the fencers were picking up their foils as I approached our host. "But Dr. Verner," I led with my chin. "The Stambaugh case . . ."

"Dear boy," he sighed as he readied the old one-two, "you mean you don't realize that you have just heard the solution?"

"You will have a drop of Drambuie, of course?" Dr. Verner queried formally as we settled down in his more nearly quiet inner room.

"Of course," I said. Then as his mouth opened, " 'For without Drambuie,' " I quoted, " 'the world might never have known the simple solution to the problem of the mislaid labyrinth.' "

He spilled a drop. "I was about to mention that very fact. How . . .? Or perhaps I have alluded to it before in this connection?"

"You have," I said.

"Forgive me." He twinkled disarmingly. "I grow old, dear boy."

Ritualistically we took our first sip of Drambuie. Then:

"I well remember," Dr. Verner began, "that it was in the autumn of the year 1901 . . .

. . . that the horror began. I was by then well established in my Kensington practice, which seemed to flourish as it never had under the ministrations of its previous possessor, and in a more than comfortable financial position. I was able at last to look about me, to contemplate and to investigate the manifold pleasures which a metropolis at once so cosmopolitan and so insular as London proffers to the unattached young man. The humours of the Music Halls, the delights of a hot bird and a cold bottle shared with a dancer from Daly's, the simpler and less expensive delights of punting on the Thames (shared, I may add, with a simpler and less expensive companion)—these claimed what portion of my time I could salvage from my practise.

But above all I was devoted to music; and to be devoted to music meant, in the London of 1901, to be devoted to—but I have always carefully refrained from the employment of veritable and verifiable names in these narratives. Let me once more be discreet, and call her simply by that affectionate agnomen by which my cousin, to his sorrow, knew her: *Carina.*

I need not describe Carina as a musician; you have just heard her

sing Pergolesi, you know how she combined nobility and grandeur with a technical agility which these degenerate days associate only with a certain type of light soprano. But I must seek to describe her as a woman, if woman she may be called.

When first I heard the tittle-tattle of London, I paid it small heed. To the man in the street (or even in the stalls) *actress* is still a euphemism for a harsher and shorter term, though my experience of actresses, extending as it has over three continents and more than my allotted three score and ten of years, tends to lead me, if anywhere, to an opposite conclusion.

The individual who stands out from the herd is the natural target of calumny. I shall never forget the disgraceful episode of the purloined litter, in which the veterinarian Dr. Stookes accused me of —but let us reserve that anomaly for another occasion. To return to Carina: I heard the gossip; I attributed it to as simple a source as I have indicated. But then the evidence began to attain proportions which the most latitudinarian could hardly disregard.

First young Ronny Furbish-Darnley blew out his brains. He had gambling debts, to be sure, and his family chose to lay the stress upon them; but his relations with Carina had been common knowledge. Then Major MacIvers hanged himself with his own cravat (the MacIvers tartan, of course). I need hardly add that a MacIvers had no gambling debts. Even that episode might have been hushed up had not a peer of so exalted a name that I dare not even paraphrase it perished in the flames of his ancestral castle. Even in the charred state in which they were recovered, the bodies of his wife and seven children clearly evinced the clumsy haste with which he had slit their throats.

It was as though ... how shall I put it? ... as though Carina were in some way a "carrier" of what we had then not yet learned to call The Death Wish. Men who knew her too well hungered no longer for life.

The press began to concern itself, as best it might with due regard for the laws of libel, with this situation. Leading articles hinted at possible governmental intervention to preserve the flower of England from this insidious foreigner. Little else was discussed in Hyde Park save the elimination of Carina.

Even the memorable mass suicides at Oxford had provided no sensation comparable to this. Carina's very existence seemed as much in danger as though Jack the Ripper had been found and turned over to the English people. We are firm believers in our English justice; but when that justice is powerless to act, the

Englishman aroused is a phenomenon to fear.

If I may be pardoned a Hibernian lapse, the only thing that saved Carina's life was . . . her death.

It was a natural death—perhaps the first natural action of her life. She collapsed on the stage of Covent Garden during a performance of Mozart's *Cosi fan tutte,* just after having delivered the greatest performance of that fantastic aria, *Come scoglio,* that a living ear has heard.

There were investigations of the death. Even my cousin, with an understandable personal interest, took a hand. (He was the only one of Carina's close admirers to survive her infection; I have often wondered whether this fact resulted from an incredible strength or an equally incredible inadequacy within him.) But there was no possible doubt that the death was a natural one.

It was after the death that the Carina legend began to grow. It was then that young men about town who had seen the great Carina but once began to mention the unmentionable reasons which had caused them to refrain from seeing her again. It was then that her dresser, a crone whose rationality was as uncertain as her still persistent terror was unquestionable, began to speak of unspeakable practises, to hint at black magic as among milady's avocations, to suggest that her utterance (which you have heard) of flights of notes, incredibly rapid yet distinct, owed its facility to her control and even suspension of the mortal limitations of time.

And then began . . . the horror. Perhaps you thought that by *the horror* I meant the sequence of Carina-carried suicides? No; even that lay still, if near the frontier, within the uttermost bounds of human comprehension.

The horror passed those bounds; I need not ask you to envision it. You have beheld it. You have seen clothing sucked dry of its fleshly tenant, you have seen the haberdashers' habitation sink flabbily in upon itself, no longer sustained by tissue of bone and blood and nerves.

All London saw it that year. And London could not believe.

First it was that eminent musicologist, Sir Frederick Paynter, F R C M. Then there were two young aristocrats, then, oddly, a poor Jewish peddler in the East End.

I shall spare you the full and terrible details, alluding only in passing to the Bishop of Cloisterham. I had read the press accounts. I had filed the cuttings for their very impossibility (for even then I had had adumbrations of the concept which you now know as *The Anatomy of Nonscience*).

But the horror did not impinge

upon me closely until it struck one of my own patients, a retired naval officer by the name of Clutsam. His family had sent for me at once, at the same time that they had dispatched a messenger to fetch my cousin.

As you know, my cousin enjoyed a certain fame as a private detective. He had been consulted in more than one previous instance of the horror; but I had read little of him in the press save a reiteration of his hope that the solution lay in his familiar dictum: "Discard the impossible; and whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be true."

I had already formulated my now celebrated counter-dictum: "Discard the impossible; then if *nothing* remains, some part of the 'impossible' must be possible." It was thus that our dicta and ourselves faced each other across the worn and outdated naval uniform on the floor, complete from the gold braid on its shoulders to the wooden peg below the empty left trouser leg, cut off at the knee.

"I imagine, Horace," my cousin remarked, puffing at his blackened clay, "that you conceive this to be your sort of affair."

"It is obviously not yours," I stated. "There is something in these evanishings beyond—"

"—beyond the humdrum imagination of a professional detective? Horace, you are a man of singular accomplishments."

I smiled. My cousin, as my great-uncle Etienne used to remark of General Massena, was famous for the accuracy of his information.

"I will confess," he added, "since my Boswell is not within earshot, that you have occasionally hit upon what satisfies you, at least as the truth in some few cases in which I have failed. Do *you* see any element linking Captain Clutsam, Sir Frederick Paynter, Moishe Lipkowitz and the Bishop of Cloisterham?"

"I do not." It was always discreet to give my cousin the answer which he expected.

"And *I do!* And yet I am no nearer a solution than . . . " His pipe clenched in his teeth, he flung himself about the room, as though pure physical action would somehow ameliorate the lamentable state of his nerves. Finally he paused before me, looked sharply into my eyes and said, "Very well. I shall tell you. What is nonsense in the patterns shaped by the reasoning mind may well serve you as foundation for some new structure of unreason.

"I have traced every fact in the lives of these men. I know what they habitually ate for breakfast, how they spent their Sundays, and which of them preferred snuff to tobacco. There is *one* factor which they all possess in common: Each of them recently purchased a record of the Pergolesi *Pater*

Noster sung by... *Carina.* And those records have vanished as thoroughly as the naked men themselves."

I bestowed upon him an amicable smile. Family affection must temper the ungentlemanly emotion of triumph. Still smiling, I left him with the uniform and the leg while I betook myself to the nearest gramophone merchant.

The solution was by then obvious to me. I had observed that Captain Clutsam's gramophone was of the sapphire-needled type designed to play those recordings known as hill-and-dale, the vertical recordings produced by Pathe and other companies as distinguished from the lateral recordings of Columbia and Gramophone-and-Typewriter. And I had recalled that many hill-and-dale recordings were at that time designed (as I believe some wireless transcriptions are now) for an inside start, that is, so that the needle began near the label and traveled outward to the rim of the disc. An unthinking listener might easily begin to play an inside-start record in the more normal manner. The result, in almost all instances, would be gibberish; but in this particular case...

I purchased the Carina record with no difficulty. I hastened to my Kensington home, where the room over the dispensary contained a gramophone convertible to either lateral or vertical recordings. I placed the record on the turntable. It was, to be sure, labeled INSIDE START; but how easily one might overlook such a notice! I overlooked it deliberately. I started the turntable and lowered the needle....

The cadenzas of coloratura are strange things in reverse. As I heard it, the record naturally began with the startling final note which so disheartened Miss Borigian, then went on to those dazzling *fioriture* which so strengthen the dresser's charge of time-magic. But in reverse, these seemed like the music of some undiscovered planet, coherent to themselves, following a logic unknown to us and shaping a beauty which only our ignorance prevents us from worshiping.

And there were words to these flourishes; for almost unique among sopranos, Carina possessed a diction of diabolical clarity. And the words were at first simply *Nema... nema... nema...*

It was while the voice was brilliantly repeating this reversed Amen that I became *literally* beside myself.

I was standing, naked and chill in the London evening, beside a meticulously composed agglomeration of clothing which parodied the body of Dr. Horace Verner.

This fragment of clarity lasted only an instant. Then the voice reached the significant words:

olam a son arebil des men . . .

This was the Lord's Prayer which she was singing. It is common knowledge that there is in all necromancy no charm more potent than that prayer (and most especially in Latin) *said backwards*. As the last act of her magical malefactions, Carina had left behind her this record, knowing that one of its purchasers would occasionally, by inadvertence, play it backwards, and that then the spell would take effect. It had taken effect now.

I was in space . . . a space of infinite darkness and moist warmth. The music had departed elsewhere. I was alone in this space and the space itself was alive and by its very moist warm dark life this space was draining from me all that which was my own life. And then there was with me a voice in that space, a voice that cried ever *Eem vull! Eem vull!* and for all the moaning gasping urgency in that voice I knew it for the voice of Carina.

I was a young man then. The Bishop's end must have been swift and merciful. But even I, young and strong, knew that this space desired the final sapping of my life, that my life should be drawn from my body even as my body had been drawn from its shell. So I prayed.

I was not a man given to prayer in those days. But I knew words which the Church has taught us are pleasing to God, and I prayed with all the fervor of my being for deliverance from this Nightmare Life-in-Death.

And I stood again naked beside my clothes. I looked at the turntable of the gramophone. The disc was not there. Still naked, I walked to the dispensary and mixed myself a sedative before I dared trust my fingers to button my garments. Then I dressed and went out again to the shop of the gramophone merchant. There I bought every copy in his stock of that devil's *Pater Noster* and smashed them all before his eyes.

Ill though I could afford it, even in my relative affluence, I spent the next few weeks in combing London for copies of that recording. One copy, and one only, I preserved; you heard it just now. I had hoped that no more existed . . .

. . . but obviously," Dr. Verner concluded, "your Mr. Stambaugh managed to acquire one, God rest his soul . . . and body."

I drained my second Drambuie and said, "I'm a great admirer of your cousin." Dr. Verner looked at me with polite blue inquiry. "You find what satisfies *you* as the truth."

"Occam's Razor, dear boy," Dr. Verner murmured, associatively stroking his smooth cheeks. "The solution accounts economically for every integral fact in the prob-

lem."

"But look," I said suddenly. "It doesn't! For once I've got you cold. There's one 'integral fact' completely omitted."

"Which is . . . ?" Dr. Verner cooed.

"You can't have been the first man that thought of praying in that . . . that space. Certainly the Bishop must have."

For a moment Dr. Horace Verner was silent. Then he fixed me with the Dear-boy-how-idiotic! twinkle. "But only I," he announced tranquilly, "had realized that in that . . . space all sound, like the Our Father itself, was reversed. The voice cried ever *Eem vull!* and what is that phonetically but *Love me!* backwards? Only *my* prayer was effective, because only I had the forsight to pray *in reverse phonetics.*"

I phoned Abrahams to say I had an idea and could I do some checking in the Stambaugh apartment?

"Good," he said. "I have an idea too. Meet you there in a half hour."

There was no Abrahams in the corridor when I got there; but the police seal was broken and the door was ajar. I went on in and stopped dead.

For the first moment I thought it was still Stambaugh's clothes spread out there. But there was no mistaking Inspector Abraham's neat gray plainclothes—with no Abrahams in them.

I think I said something about *the horror.* I draw pretty much of a blank between seeing that empty suit and looking up to the far doorway and seeing Inspector Abrahams.

He was wearing a dressing gown of Stambaugh's, which was far too short for him. I stared at his grotesque figure and at the android parody which dangled from his hand.

"Sorry, Lamb," he grinned. "Couldn't resist the theatrical effect. Go on. Take a good look at the empty man on the floor."

I looked. The clothes were put together with the exactly real, body-fitting, sucked-out effect which we had already decided was impossible.

"You see," Abrahams said, "I remembered the vacuum cleaner. And the Downtown Merchants' parade."

I was back at the studio early the next morning. There was nobody from Verner's Varieties there but Slavko, and it was so relatively quiet that Dr. Verner was just staring at the manuscript of *The Anatomy* without adding a word.

"Look," I said. "In the first place, Stambaugh's record-player isn't equipped for hill-and-dale records."

"They *can* be played even on an ordinary machine," Dr. Verner

observed tranquilly. "The effect is curious—faint and with an odd echoing overlap, which might even enhance the power of the cantrip."

"And I looked in his card catalog," I went on, "and he didn't have a recording of the Pergolesi *Pater Noster* by anybody."

Dr. Verner widened his over-blue eyes. "But of course the card would vanish with the record," he protested. "Magic makes allowances for modern developments."

"And besides," I insisted, "Abrahams has demonstrated how it was really done. The vacuum cleaner tipped him off. Stambaugh had bought a man-sized, man-shaped balloon, a little brother of those monster figures they use in parades. He inflated it and dressed it in his clothes. Then he deflated it, leaving the clothes in perfect arrangement with nothing in them but a shrunken chunk of rubber, which he could withdraw by unbuttoning the shirt. Abrahams found the only firm in San Francisco that manufactures such balloons. A clerk identified Stambaugh as a purchaser. So Abrahams bought a duplicate and pulled the same gag on me."

Dr. Verner frowned. "And the vacuum cleaner?"

"You use a vacuum cleaner in reverse for pumping up large balloons. And you use it normally for deflating them; if you just let the air out *whoosh!* they're apt to break."

"The clerk" (it came out *clark*, of course) "identified Stambaugh positively?"

I shifted under the piercing blueness. "Well, you know identifications from photographs . . ."

"Indeed I do." He took a deliberately timed pause. "And the record-player? Why was its turntable still revolving?"

"Accident, I guess. Stambaugh must've bumped against the switch."

"Which projected from the cabinet so that one might well engage it by accident?"

I pictured the machine. I visualized the switch and the depth to which one would have to reach in. "Well, no," I granted. "Not exactly . . ."

Dr. Verner smiled down at me tolerantly. "And the motive for these elaborate maneuvers by Mr. Stambaugh?"

"Too many threatening male relatives on his tail. He deliberately staged this to look oh-so-mysterious so nobody'd spot the simple fact that he was just getting the hell out from under. Abrahams has an all-points alarm out; he'll be picked up any time within the next few days."

Dr. Verner sighed. His hands flickered through the air in a gesture of infinitely resigned patience. He moved to his record cabinet, took out a disc, placed it on the turntable, and adjusted cer-

tain switches.

"Come, Slavko!" he announced loudly. "Since Mr. Lamb prefers rubber balloons to truth, we are conferring a signal privilege upon him. We are retiring to the other room, leaving him here alone with the Carina record. His cocksure materialism will surely wish to verify the effect of playing it in reverse."

Slavko stopped pounding and said, "Huh?"

"Come, Slavko. But first say a polite goodbye to Mr. Lamb. You may not be seeing him again." Dr. Verner paused in the doorway and surveyed me with what seemed like genuine concern. "Dear boy," he murmured, "you won't forget that point about the reverse phonetics . . . ?"

He was gone and so (without more polite goodbye than a grunt) was Slavko. I was alone with Carina, with the opportunity to disprove Dr. Verner's fabulous narrative once and for all.

His story had made no pretense of explaining the presence of the vacuum cleaner.

And Inspector Abrahams' theory had not even attempted to account for the still-revolving turntable.

I switched on the turntable of the Verner machine. Carefully I lowered the tone-arm, let the oddly rounded needle settle into the first groove from the outer rim.

I heard that stunning final note in alt. So flawless was the Carina diction that I could hear, even in that range, the syllable to which it was sung: *nem,* the beginning of the reverse-Latin *Amen.*

Then I heard a distorted groan as the turntable abruptly slowed down from 78 to zero revolutions per minute. I looked at the switch; it was still on. I turned and saw Dr. Verner towering behind me, with a disconnected electric plug dangling from his hand.

"No," he said softly—and there was a dignity and power in that softness that I had never heard in his most impressive bellows. "No, Mr. Lamb. You have a wife and two sons. I have no right to trifle with their lives merely to gratify an old man's resentment of scepticism."

Quietly he lifted the tone-arm, removed the record, restored it to its envelope, and refiled it. His deft, un-English hands were not at their steadiest.

"When Inspector Abrahams succeeds in tracing down Mr. Stambaugh," he said firmly, "you shall hear this record in reverse. And not before then."

And it just so happens they haven't turned up Stambaugh yet.

MEMO FROM LULUBEL:

Now, here's the kind of story I really like. It proves that everything turns out for the worst in this worst of all possible worlds.

CRICKETS

by RICHARD MATHESON

AFTER SUPPER, THEY WALKED DOWN to the lake and looked at its moon-reflecting surface.

"Pretty, isn't it?" she said.

"Mmm-hmm."

"It's been a nice vacation."

"Yes, it has," he said.

Behind them, the screen door on the hotel porch opened and shut. Someone started down the gravel path toward the lake. Jean glanced over her shoulder.

"Who is it?" asked Hal without turning.

"That man we saw in the dining room," she said.

In a few moments, the man stood nearby on the shoreline. He didn't speak or look at them. He stared across the lake at the distant woods.

"Should we talk to him?" whispered Jean.

"I don't know," he whispered back.

They looked at the lake again and Hal's arm slipped around her waist.

Suddenly the man asked.

"Do you hear them?"

"Sir?" said Hal.

The small man turned and

looked at them. His eyes appeared to glitter in the moonlight.

"I asked if you heard them," he said.

There was a brief pause before Hal asked, "Who?"

"The crickets."

The two of them stood quietly. Then Jean cleared her throat. "Yes, they're nice," she said.

"Nice?" The man turned away. After a moment, he turned back and came walking over to them.

"My name is John Morgan," he said.

"Hal and Jean Galloway," Hal told him and then there was an awkward silence.

"It's a lovely night," Jean offered.

"It would be if it weren't for them," said Mr. Morgan. "The crickets."

"Why don't you like them?" asked Jean.

Mr. Morgan seemed to listen for a moment, his face rigid. His gaunt throat moved. Then he forced a smile.

"Allow me the pleasure of buying you a glass of wine," he said.

"Well—" Hal began.

"Please." There was a sudden urgency in Mr. Morgan's voice.

* * * * *

The dining hall was like a vast shadowy cavern. The only light came from the small lamp on their table which cast up formless shadows of them on the walls.

"Your health," said Mr. Morgan, raising his glass.

The wine was dry and tart. It trickled in chilly drops down Jean's throat, making her shiver.

"So what about the crickets?" asked Hal.

Mr. Morgan put his glass down.

"I don't know whether I should tell you," he said. He looked at them carefully. Jean felt restive under his surveillance and reached out to take a sip from her glass.

Suddenly, with a movement so brusque that it made her hand twitch and spill some wine, Mr. Morgan drew a small, black notebook from his coat pocket. He put it on the table carefully.

"There," he said.

"What is it?" asked Hal.

"A code book," said Mr. Morgan.

They watched him pour more wine into his glass, then set down the bottle and the bottle's shadow on the table cloth. He picked up the glass and rolled its stem between his fingers.

"It's the code of the crickets," he said.

Jean shuddered. She didn't know why. There was nothing terrible about the words. It was the way Mr. Morgan had spoken them.

Mr. Morgan leaned forward, his eyes glowing in the lamplight.

"Listen," he said. "They aren't

just making indiscriminate noises when they rub their wings together." He paused. *"They're sending messages,"* he said.

Jean felt as if she were a block of wood. The room seemed to shift balance around her, everything leaning toward her.

"Why are you telling us?" asked Hal.

"Because now I'm sure," said Mr. Morgan. He leaned in close. "Have you ever really listened to the crickets?" he asked, "I mean really? If you had you'd have heard a rhythm to their noises. A pace—a definite beat.

"I've listened," he said. "For seven years I've listened. And the more I listened the more I became convinced that their noise was a code; that they were sending messages in the night.

"Then—about a week ago—I suddenly heard the pattern. It's like a Morse code only, of course, the sounds are different."

Mr. Morgan stopped talking and looked at his black notebook.

"And there it is," he said. "After seven years of work, here it is. I've deciphered it."

His throat worked convulsively as he picked up his glass and emptied it with a swallow.

"Well . . . what are they saying?" Hal asked, awkwardly.

Mr. Morgan looked at him.

"Names," he said. "Look, I'll show you."

He reached into one of his pockets and drew out a stubby pencil. Tearing a blank page from his notebook, he started to write on it, muttering to himself.

"Pulse, pulse—silence—p u l s e, pulsepulse—silence—p u l s e—silence . . . "

Hal and Jean looked at each other. Hal tried to smile but couldn't. Then they were looking back at the small man bent over the table, listening to the crickets and writing.

Mr. Morgan put down the pencil. "It will give you some idea," he said, holding out the sheet to them. They looked at it.

MARIE CADMAN, it read. JOHN JOSEPH ALSTER. SAMUEL—

"You see," said Mr. Morgan, "Names."

"Whose?" Jean had to ask it even though she didn't want to.

Mr. Morgan held the book in a clenching hand.

"The names of the dead," he answered.

* * * * *

Later that night, Jean climbed into bed with Hal and pressed close to him. "I'm cold," she murmured.

"You're scared."

"Aren't you?"

"Well," he said, "if I am, it isn't in the way you think."

"How's that?"

"I don't believe what he said.

But he might be a dangerous man. That's what I'm afraid of."

"Where'd he get those names?"

"Maybe they're friends of his," he said. "Maybe he got them from tombstones. He might have just made them up." He grunted softly. "But I don't think the crickets told him," he said.

Jean snuggled against him.

"I'm glad you told him we were tired," she said. "I don't think I could have taken much more."

"Honey," he said, "Here that nice little man was giving us the lowdown on crickets and you disparage him."

"Hal," she said, "I'll never be able to enjoy crickets for the rest of my life."

They lay close to each other and slept. And, outside in the still darkness, crickets rubbed their wings together until morning came.

* * * * *

Mr. Morgan came rapidly across the dining room and sat down at their table.

"I've been looking for you all day," he said. "You've got to help me."

Hal's mouth tightened. "Help you how?" he asked, putting down his fork.

"They know I'm on to them," said Mr. Morgan. "They're after me."

"Who, the crickets?" Hal asked, jadedly.

"I don't know," said Mr. Morgan, "Either them or—"

Jean held her knife and fork with rigid fingers. For some reason, she felt a chill creeping up her legs.

"Mr. Morgan." Hal was trying to sound patient.

"Understand me," Mr. Morgan pleaded. "The crickets are under the command of the dead. The dead send out these messages."

"Why?"

"They're compiling a list of all their names," said Mr. Morgan. "They keep sending the names through the crickets to let the others know."

"Why?" repeated Hal.

Mr. Morgan's hands trembled. "I don't know, I don't know," he said. "Maybe when there are enough names, when enough of them are ready, they'll—" His throat moved convulsively. *"They'll come back,"* he said.

After a moment, Hal asked, "What makes you think you're in any danger?"

"Because while I was writing down more names last night," said Mr. Morgan, *"they spelled out my name."*

Hal broke the heavy silence.

"What can we do?" he asked in a voice that bordered on uneasiness.

"Stay with me," said Mr. Morgan, "so they can't get me."

Jean looked nervously at Hal.

"I won't bother you," said Mr. Morgan, "I won't even sit here, I'll sit across the room. Just so I can see you."

He stood up quickly and took out his notebook.

"Will you watch this?" he asked.

Before they could say another word, he left their table and walked across the dining room, weaving in and out among the white-clothed tables. About fifty feet from them, he sat down, facing them. They saw him reach forward and turn on the table lamp.

"What do we do now?" asked Jean.

"We'll stay here a little while," said Hal, "Nurse the bottle along. When it's empty, we'll go to bed."

"Do we have to stay?"

"Honey, who knows what's going on in that mind of his? I don't want to take any chances."

Jean closed her eyes and exhaled wearily. "What a way to polish off a vacation," she said.

Hal reached over and picked up the notebook. As he did, he became conscious of the crickets rasping outside. He flipped through the pages. They were arranged in alphabetical order, on each page three letters with their pulse equivalents.

"He's watching us," said Jean.

"Forget him."

Jean leaned over and looked at the notebook with him. Her eyes moved over the arrangements of dots and dashes.

"You think there's anything to this?" she asked.

"Let's hope not," said Hal.

He tried to listen to the crickets' noise and find some point of comparison with the notes. He couldn't. After several minutes, he shut the book.

When the wine bottle was empty, Hal stood. "Beddy-bye," he said.

Before Jean was on her feet, Mr. Morgan was halfway to their table. "You're leaving?" he asked.

"Mr. Morgan, it's almost eleven," Hal said. "We're tired. I'm sorry but we have to go to bed."

The small man stood wordless, looking from one to the other with pleading, hopeless eyes. He seemed about to speak, then his narrow shoulders slumped and his gaze dropped to the floor. They heard him swallowing.

"You'll take care of the book?" he asked.

"Don't you want it?"

"No." Mr. Morgan turned away. After a few paces, he stopped and glanced back across his shoulder. "Could you leave your door open so I can—call?"

"All right, Mr. Morgan," he said.

A faint smile twitched Mr. Morgan's lips.

"Thank you," he said and walked away.

* * * * *

It was after four when the screaming woke them. Hal felt Jean's fingers clutching at his arm as they both jolted to a sitting position, staring into the darkness.

"What is it?" gasped Jean.

"I don't know." Hal threw off the covers and dropped his feet to the floor.

"Don't leave me!" said Jean.

"Come on then!"

The hall had a dim bulb burning overhead. Hal sprinted over the floorboards toward Mr. Morgan's room. The door to it was closed although it had been left open before. Hal banged his fist on it. "Mr. Morgan!" he called.

Inside the room, there was a sudden, rustling, crackling sound—like that of a million, wildly shaken tambourines. The noise made Hal's hand jerk back convulsively from the door knob.

"What's *that?"* Jean asked in a terrified whisper.

He didn't answer. They stood immobile, not knowing what to do. Then, inside, the noise stopped. Hal took a deep breath and pushed open the door.

The scream gagged in Jean's throat.

Lying in a pool of blood-splotched moonlight was Mr. Morgan, his skin raked open as if by a thousand tiny razor blades. There was a gaping hole in the window screen.

Jean stood paralyzed, a fist pressed against her mouth while Hal moved to Mr. Morgan's side. He knelt down beside the motionless man and felt at Mr. Morgan's chest where the pajama top had been sliced to ribbons. The faintest of heartbeats pulsed beneath his trembling fingers.

Mr. Morgan opened his eyes. Wide, staring eyes that recognized nothing, that looked right through Hal.

"P-H-I-L-I-P M-A-X-W-E-L-L." Mr. Morgan spelled out the name in a bubbling voice.

"M-A-R-Y G-A-B-R-I-E-L," spelled Mr. Morgan, eyes stark and glazed.

His chest lurched once. His eyes widened.

"J-O-H-N M-O-R-G-A-N," he spelled.

Then his eyes began focusing on Hal. There was a terrible rattling in his throat. As though the sounds were wrenched from him one by one by a power beyond his own, he spoke again.

"H-A-R-O-L-D G-A-L-L-O-W-A-Y," he spelled, "J-E-A-N-G-A-L-L-O-W-A-Y."

Then they were alone with a dead man. And outside in the night, a million crickets rustled their wings together. And waited.

A charmingly grisly masterpiece by one of our favorite authors.

SPECIALTY OF THE HOUSE

by STANLEY ELLIN

"AND THIS," SAID LAFFLER, "IS Sbirro's." Costain saw a square brownstone facade identical with the others that extended from either side into the clammy darkness of the deserted street. From the barred windows of the basement at his feet, a glimmer of light showed behind heavy curtains.

"Lord," he observed, "it's a dismal hole, isn't it?"

"I beg you to understand," said Laffler stiffly, "that Sbirro's is the restaurant without pretensions. Besieged by these ghastly, neurotic times, it has refused to compromise. It is perhaps the last important establishment in this city lit by gas jets. Here you will find the same honest furnishings, the same magnificent Sheffield service, and possibly, in a far corner, the very same spider webs that were remarked by the patrons of a half century ago!"

"A doubtful recommendation," said Costain, "and hardly sanitary."

"When you enter," Laffler continued, "you leave the insanity of this year, this day, and this hour, and you find yourself for a brief span restored in spirit, not by opulence, but by dignity, which is the lost quality of our time."

Costain laughed uncomfortably. "You make it sound more like a cathedral than a restaurant," he said.

In the pale reflection of the street lamp overhead, Laffler peered at his companion's face. "I wonder," he said abruptly, "whether I have not made a mistake in extending this invitation to you."

Costain was hurt. Despite an impressive title and large salary, he was no more than clerk to this pompous little man, but he was impelled to make some display of his feelings. "If you wish," he said coldly, "I can make other plans for the evening with no trouble."

With his large, cowlike eyes turned up to Costain, the mist drifting into the ruddy, full moon of his face, Laffler seemed strangely ill at ease. Then "No, no," he said at last, "absolutely not. It's important that you dine at Sbirro's with me." He grasped Costain's arm firmly and led the way to the wrought-iron gate of the basement. "You see, you're the sole person in my office who seems to know anything at all about good food. And on my part, knowing about Sbirro's but not having some appreciative friend to share it is like having a unique piece of art locked in a room where no one else can enjoy it."

Costain was considerably mollified by this. "I understand there are a great many people who relish that situation."

"I'm not one of that kind!" Laffler said sharply. "And having the secret of Sbirro's locked in myself for years has finally become unendurable." He fumbled at the side of the gate and from within could be heard the small, discordant jangle of an ancient pull-bell. An interior door opened with a groan, and Costain found himself peering into a dark face whose only discernible feature was a row of gleaming teeth.

"Sair?" said the face.

"Mr. Laffler and a guest."

"Sair," the face said again, this time in what was clearly an invitation. It moved aside and Costain stumbled down a single step behind his host. The door and gate creaked behind him, and he stood blinking in a small foyer. It took him a moment to realize that the figure he now stared at was his own reflection in a gigantic pier glass that extended from floor to ceiling. "Atmosphere," he said under his breath and chuckled as he followed his guide to a seat.

He faced Laffler across a small table for two and peered curiously around the dining room. It was no size at all, but the half-dozen guttering gas jets which provided the only illumination threw such a deceptive light that the walls flickered and faded into uncertain distance.

There were no more than eight or ten tables about, arranged to

insure the maximum privacy. All were occupied, and the few waiters serving them moved with quiet efficiency. In the air were a soft clash and scrape of cutlery and a soothing murmur of talk. Costain nodded appreciatively.

Laffler breathed an audible sigh of gratification. "I knew you would share my enthusiasm," he said. "Have you noticed, by the way, that there are no women present?"

Costain raised inquiring eyebrows.

"Sbirro," said Laffler, "does not encourage members of the fair sex to enter the premises. And, I can tell you, his method is decidedly effective. I had the experience of seeing a woman get a taste of it not long ago. She sat at a table for not less than an hour waiting for service which was never forthcoming."

"Didn't she make a scene?"

"She did." Laffler smiled at the recollection. "She succeeded in annoying the customers, embarrassing her partner, and nothing more."

"And what about Mr. Sbirro?"

"He did not make an appearance. Whether he directed affairs from behind the scenes, or was not even present during the episode, I don't know. Whichever it was, he won a complete victory. The woman never reappeared nor, for that matter, did the witless gentleman who by bringing her was really the cause of the entire contretemps."

"A fair warning to all present," laughed Costain.

A waiter now appeared at the table. The chocolate-dark skin, the thin, beautifully molded nose and lips, the large liquid eyes, heavily lashed, and the silver white hair so heavy and silken that it lay on the skull like a cap, all marked him definitely as an East Indian of some sort, Costain decided. The man arranged the stiff table linen, filled two tumblers from a huge, cutglass pitcher, and set them in their proper places.

"Tell me," Laffler said eagerly, "is the special being served this evening?"

The waiter smiled regretfully and showed teeth spectacular as those of the majordomo. "I am so sorry, sair. There is no special this evening."

Laffler's face fell into lines of heavy disappointment. "After waiting so long. It's been a month already, and I hoped to show my friend here . . ."

"You understand the difficulties, sair."

"Of course, of course." Laffler looked at Costain sadly and shrugged. "You see, I had in mind to introduce you to the greatest treat that Sbirro's offers, but unfortunately it isn't on the menu this evening."

The waiter said, "Do you wish

to be served now, sair?" and Laffler nodded. To Costain's surprise the waiter made his way off without waiting for any instructions.

"Have you ordered in advance?" he asked.

"Ah," said Laffler, "I really should have explained. Sbirro's offers no choice whatsoever. You will eat the same meal as everyone else in this room. Tomorrow evening you would eat an entirely different meal, but again without designating a single preference."

"Very unusual," said Costain, "and certainly unsatisfactory at times. What if one doesn't have a taste for the particular dish set before him?"

"On that score," said Laffler solemnly, "you need have no fears. I give you my word that no matter how exacting your tastes, you will relish every mouthful you eat in Sbirro's."

Costain looked doubtful, and Laffler smiled. "And consider the subtle advantages of the system," he said. "When you pick up the menu of a popular restaurant, you find yourself confronted with innumerable choices. You are forced to weigh, to evaluate, to make uneasy decisions which you may instantly regret. The effect of all this is a tension which, however slight, must make for discomfort.

"And consider the mechanics of the process. Instead of a hurly-burly of sweating cooks rushing about a kitchen in a frenzy to prepare a hundred varying items, we have a chef who stands serenely alone, bringing all his talents to bear on one task, with all assurance of a complete triumph!"

"Then you have seen the kitchen?"

"Unfortunately, no," said Laffler sadly. "The picture I offer is hypothetical, made of conversational fragments I have pieced together over the years. I must admit, though, that my desire to see the functioning of the kitchen here comes very close to being my sole obsession nowadays."

"But have you mentioned this to Sbirro?"

"A dozen times. He shrugs the suggestion away."

"Isn't that a rather curious foible on his part?"

"No, no," Laffler said hastily, "a master artist is never under the compulsion of petty courtesies. Still," he sighed, "I have never given up hope."

The waiter now reappeared bearing two soup bowls which he set in place with mathematical exactitude, and a small tureen from which he slowly ladled a measure of clear, thin broth. Costain dipped his spoon into the broth and tasted it with some curiosity. It was delicately flavored, bland to the verge of tastelessness. Costain frowned, tentatively reached for the salt and pepper cellars, and discovered there were none on the

table. He looked up, saw Laffler's eyes on him, and although unwilling to compromise with his own tastes, he hesitated to act as a damper on Laffler's enthusiasm. Therefore he smiled and indicated the broth.

"Excellent," he said.

Laffler returned his smile. "You do not find it excellent at all," he said coolly. "You find it flat and badly in need of condiments. I know this," he continued as Costain's eyebrows shot upward, "because it was my own reaction many years ago, and because like yourself I found myself reaching for salt and pepper after the first mouthful. I also learned with surprise that condiments are not available in Sbirro's."

Costain was shocked. "Not even salt!" he exclaimed.

"Not even salt. The very fact that you require it for your soup stands as evidence that your taste is unduly jaded. I am confident that you will now make the same discovery that I did: by the time you have nearly finished your soup, your desire for salt will be nonexistent."

Laffler was right; before Costain had reached the bottom of his plate, he was relishing the nuances of the broth with steadily increasing delight. Laffler thrust aside his own empty bowl and rested his elbows on the table. "Do you agree with me now?"

"To my surprise," said Costain, "I do."

As the waiter busied himself clearing the table, Laffler lowered his voice significantly. "You will find," he said, "that the absence of condiments is but one of several noteworthy characteristics which mark Sbirro's. I may as well prepare you for these. For example, no alcoholic beverages of any sort are served here, not for that matter any beverage except clear, cold water, the first and only drink necessary for a human being."

"Outside of mother's milk," suggested Costain dryly.

"I can answer that in like vein by pointing out that the average patron of Sbirro's has passed that primal stage of his development."

Costain laughed. "Granted," he said.

"Very well. There is also a ban on the use of tobacco in any form."

"But good heavens," said Costain, "doesn't that make Sbirro's more a teetotaler's retreat than a gourmet's sanctuary?"

"I fear," said Laffler solemnly, "that you confuse the words, *gourmet* and *gourmand*. The gourmand, through glutting himself, requires a wider and wider latitude of experience to stir his surfeited senses, but the very nature of the gourmet is simplicity. The ancient Greek in his coarse chiton savoring the ripe olive; the Japanese in his bare room comtemplat-

ing the curve of a single flower stem—these are the true gourmets."

"But an occasional drop of brandy or pipeful of tobacco," said Costain dubiously, "are hardly overindulgences."

"By alternating stimulant and narcotic," said Laffler, "you seesaw the delicate balance of your taste so violently that it loses its most precious quality: the appreciation of fine food. During my years as a patron of Sbirro's, I have proved this to my satisfaction."

"May I ask," said Costain, "why you regard the ban on these things as having such deep esthetic motives? What about such mundane reasons as the high cost of a liquor license, or the possibility that patrons would object to the smell of tobacco in such confined quarters?"

Laffler shook his head violently. "If and when you meet Sbirro," he said, "you will understand at once that he is not the man to make decisions on a mundane basis. As a matter of fact, it was Sbirro himself who first made me cognizant of what you call 'esthetic' motives."

"An amazing man," said Costain as the waiter prepared to serve the entree.

Laffler's next words were not spoken until he had savored and swallowed a large portion of meat. "I hesitate to use superlatives," he said, "but to my way of thinking, Sbirro represents man at the apex of his civilization!"

Costain cocked an eyebrow and applied himself to his roast which rested in a pool of stiff gravy ungarnished by green or vegetable. The thin steam rising from it carried to his nostrils a subtle, tantalizing odor which made his mouth water. He chewed a piece as slowly and thoughtfully as if he were analyzing the intricacies of a Mozart symphony. The range of taste he discovered was really extraordinary, from the pungent nip of the crisp outer edge to the peculiarly flat yet soul-satisfying ooze of blood which the pressure of his jaws forced from the half-raw interior.

Upon swallowing he found himself ferociously hungry for another piece, and then another, and it was only with an effort that he prevented himself from wolfing down all his share of the meat and gravy without waiting to get the full voluptuous satisfaction from each mouthful. When he had scraped his platter clean, he realized that both he and Laffler had completed the entire course without exchanging a single word. He commented on this, and Laffler said: "Can you see any need for words in the presence of such food?"

Costain looked around at the shabby, dimly lit room, the quiet diners, with a new perception.

"No," he said humbly, "I cannot. For any doubts I had I apologize unreservedly. In all your praise of Sbirro's there was not a single word of exaggeration."

"Ah," said Laffler delightedly. "And that is only part of the story. You heard me mention the special which unfortunately was not on the menu tonight. What you have just eaten is as nothing when compared to the absolute delights of that special!"

"Good Lord!" cried Costain. "What is it? Nightingale's tongues? Filet of unicorn?"

"Neither," said Laffler. "It is lamb."

"Lamb?"

Laffler remained lost in thought for a minute. "If," he said at last, "I were to give you in my own unstinted words my opinion of this dish, you would judge me completely insane. That is how deeply the mere thought of it affects me. It is neither the fatty chop, nor the too solid leg; it is, instead, a select portion of the rarest sheep in existence and is named after the species—lamb Amirstan."

Costain knit his brows. "Amirstan?"

"A fragment of desolation almost lost on the border which separates Afghanistan and Russia. From chance remarks dropped by Sbirro, I gather it is no more than a plateau which grazes the pitiful remnants of a flock of superb sheep. Sbirro, through some means or other, obtained rights to the traffic in this flock and is, therefore, the sole restauranteur ever to have lamb Amirstan on his bill of fare. I can tell you that the appearance of this dish is a rare occurrence indeed, and luck is the only guide in determining for the clientele the exact date when it will be served."

"But surely," said Costain, "Sbirro could provide some advance knowledge of this event."

"The objection to that is simply stated," said Laffler. "There exists in this city a huge number of professional gluttons. Should advance information slip out, it is quite likely that they will, out of curiosity, become familiar with the dish and thenceforth supplant the regular patrons at these tables."

"But you don't mean to say," objected Costain, "that these few people present are the only ones in the entire city, or for that matter, in the whole wide world, who know of the existence of Sbirro's!"

"Very nearly. There may be one or two regular patrons who, for some reason, are not present at the moment."

"That's incredible."

"It is done," said Laffler, the slightest shade of menace in his voice, "by every patron making it his solemn obligation to keep the secret. By accepting my invitation this evening you automatically as-

sume that obligation. I hope you can be trusted with it."

Costain flushed. "My position in your employ should vouch for me. I only question the wisdom of a policy which keeps such magnificent food away from so many who would enjoy it."

"Do you know the inevitable result of the policy *you* favor?" asked Laffler bitterly. "An influx of idiots who would nightly complain that they are never served roast duck with chocolate sauce. Is that picture tolerable to you?"

"No," admitted Costain, "I am forced to agree with you."

Laffler leaned back in his chair wearily and passed his hand over his eyes in an uncertain gesture. "I am a solitary man," he said quietly, "and not by choice alone. It may sound strange to you, it may border on eccentricity, but I feel to my depths that this restaurant, this warm haven in a coldly insane world, is both family and friend to me."

And Costain, who to this moment had never viewed his companion as other than tyrannical employer or officious host, now felt an overwhelming pity twist inside his comfortably expanded stomach.

By the end of two weeks the invitations to join Laffler at Sbirro's had become something of a ritual. Every day, at a few minutes after five, Costain would step out into the office corridor and lock his cubicle behind him; he would drape his overcoat neatly over his left arm, and peer into the glass of the door to make sure his Homburg was set at the proper angle. At one time he would have followed this by lighting a cigarette, but under Laffler's prodding he had decided to give abstinence a fair trial. Then he would start down the corridor, and Laffler would fall in step at his elbow, clearing his throat. "Ah, Costain. No plans for this evening, I hope."

"No," Costain would say, "I'm footloose and fancyfree," or "At your service," or something equally inane. He wondered at times whether it would not be more tactful to vary the ritual with an occasional refusal, but the glow with which Laffler received his answer, and the rough friendliness of Laffler's grip on his arm, forestalled him.

Among the treacherous crags of the business world, reflected Costain, what better way to secure your footing than friendship with one's employer. Already, a secretary close to the workings of the inner office had commented publicly on Laffler's highly favorable opinion of Costain. That was all to the good.

And the food! The incomparable food at Sbirro's! For the first time in his life, Costain, ordinarily a lean and bony man, noted with gratification that he was certainly

gaining weight; within two weeks his bones had disappeared under a layer of sleek, firm flesh, and here and there were even signs of incipient plumpness. It struck Costain one night, while surveying himself in his bath, that the rotund Laffler, himself, might have been a spare and bony man before discovering Sbirro's.

So there was obviously everything to be gained and nothing to be lost by accepting Laffler's invitations. Perhaps after testing the heralded wonders of lamb Amirstan and meeting Sbirro, who thus far had not made an appearance, a refusal or two might be in order. But certainly not until then.

That evening, two weeks to a day after his first visit to Sbirro's, Costain had both desires fulfilled: he dined on lamb Amirstan, and he met Sbirro. Both exceeded all his expectations.

When the waiter leaned over their table immediately after seating them and gravely announced: "Tonight is special, sair," Costain was shocked to find his heart pounding with expectation. On the table before him he saw Laffler's hands trembling violently. But it isn't natural, he thought suddenly. Two full grown men, presumably intelligent and in the full possession of their senses, as jumpy as a pair of cats waiting to have their meat flung to them!

"This is it!" Laffler's voice startled him so that he almost leaped from his seat. "The culinary triumph of all times! And faced by it you are embarrassed by the very emotions it distills."

"How did you know that?" Costain asked faintly.

"How? Because a decade ago I underwent your embarrassment. Add to that your air of revulsion and it's easy to see how affronted you are by the knowledge that man has not yet forgotten how to slaver over his meat."

"And these others," whispered Costain, "do they all feel the same thing?"

"Judge for yourself."

Costain looked furtively around at the nearby tables. "You are right," he finally said. "At any rate, there's comfort in numbers."

Laffler inclined his head slightly to the side. "One of the numbers," he remarked, "appears to be in for a disappointment."

Costain followed the gesture. At the table indicated a gray-haired man sat conspicuously alone, and Costain frowned at the empty chair opposite him.

"Why, yes," he recalled, "that very stout, bald man, isn't it? I believe it's the first dinner he's missed here in two weeks."

"The entire decade more likely," said Laffler sympathetically. "Rain or shine, crisis or calamity, I don't think he's missed an evening at Sbirro's since the first time I dined here. Imagine his expression when he's told that, on his very first de-

fection, lamb Amirstan was the *plat du jour.*"

Costain looked at the empty chair again with a dim discomfort. "His very first?" he murmured.

"Mr. Laffler! And friend! I am so pleased. So very, very pleased. No, do not stand; I will have a place made." Miraculously a seat appeared under the figure standing there at the table. "The lamb Amirstan will be an unqualified success, hurr? I myself have been stewing in the miserable kitchen all the day, prodding the foolish chef to do everything just so. The just so is the important part, hurr? But I see your friend does not know me. An introduction, perhaps?"

The words ran in a smooth, fluid eddy. They rippled, they purred, they hypnotized Costain so that he could do no more than stare. The mouth that uncoiled this sinuous monologue was alarmingly wide, with thin mobile lips that curled and twisted with every syllable. There was a flat nose with a straggling line of hair under it; wide-set eyes, almost oriental in appearance, that glittered in the unsteady flare of gaslight; and long, sleek hair that swept back from high on the unwrinkled forehead—hair so pale that it might have been bleached of all color. An amazing face surely, and the sight of it tortured Costain with the conviction that it was somehow familiar. His brain twitched and prodded but could not stir up any solid recollection.

Laffler's voice jerked Costain out of his study. "Mr. Sbirro. Mr. Costain, a good friend and associate." Costain rose and shook the proffered hand. It was warm and dry, flint-hard against his palm.

"I am so very pleased, Mr. Costain. So very, very pleased," purred the voice. "You like my little establishment, hurr? You have a great treat in store, I assure you."

Laffler chuckled. "Oh, Costain's been dining here regularly for two weeks," he said. "He's by way of becoming a great admirer of yours, Sbirro."

The eyes were turned on Costain. "A very great compliment. You compliment me with your presence and I return same with my food, hurr? But the lamb Amirstan is far superior to anything of your past experience, I assure you. All the trouble of obtaining it, all the difficulty of preparation, is truly merited."

Costain strove to put aside the exasperating problem of that face. "I have wondered," he said, "why with all these difficulties you mention, you even bother to present lamb Amirstan to the public. Surely your other dishes are excellent enough to uphold your reputation."

Sbirro smiled so broadly that his face became perfectly round.

"Perhaps it is a matter of the psychology, hurr? Someone discovers a wonder and must share it with others. He must fill his cup to the brim, perhaps, by observing the so evident pleasure of those who explore it with him. Or," he shrugged, "perhaps it is just a matter of good business."

"Then in the light of all this," Costain persisted, "and considering all the conventions you have imposed on your customers, why do you open the restaurant to the public instead of operating it as a private club?"

The eyes abruptly glinted into Costain's, then turned away. "So perspicacious, hurr? Then I will tell you. Because there is more privacy in a public eating place than in the most exclusive club in existence! Here no one inquires of your affairs; no one desires to know the intimacies of your life. Here the business is eating. We are not curious about names and addresses or the reasons for the coming and going of our guests. We welcome you when you are here; we have no regrets when you are here no longer. That is the answer, hurr?"

Costain was startled by this vehemence. "I had no intention of prying," he stammered.

Sbirro ran the tip of his tongue over his thin lips. "No, no," he reassured, "you are not prying. Do not let me give you that impression. On the contrary, I invite your questions."

"Oh, come, Costain," said Laffler. "Don't let Sbirro intimidate you. I've known him for years and I guarantee that his bark is worse than his bite. Before you know it, he'll be showing you all the privileges of the house—outside of inviting you to visit his precious kitchen, of course."

"Ah," smiled Sbirro, "for that, Mr. Costain may have to wait a little while. For everything else I am at his beck and call."

Laffler slapped his hand jovially on the table "What did I tell you!" he said. "Now let's have the truth, Sbirro. Has anyone, outside of your staff, ever stepped into the sanctum sanctorum?"

Sbirro looked up. "You see on the wall above you," he said earnestly, "the portrait of one to whom I did the honor. A very dear friend and a patron of most long standing, he is evidence that my kitchen is not inviolate."

Costain studied the picture and started with recognition. "Why," he said excitedly, "that's the famous writer—you know the one, Laffler—he used to do such wonderful short stories and cynical bits and then suddenly took himself off and disappeared in Mexico!"

"Of course!" cried Laffler, "and to think I've been sitting under his portrait for years without even realizing it!" He turned to Sbirro. "A dear friend, you say? His disappearance must have been a

blow to you."

Sbirro's face lengthened. "It was, it was, I assure you. But think of it this way, gentlemen: he was probably greater in his death than in his life, hurr? A most tragic man, he often told me that his only happy hours were spent here at this very table. Pathetic, is it not? And to think the only favor I could ever show him was to let him witness the mysteries of my kitchen, which is, when all is said and done, no more than a plain, ordinary kitchen."

"You seem very certain of his death," commented Costain. "After all, no evidence has ever turned up to substantiate it."

Sbirro contemplated the picture. "None at all," he said softly. "Remarkable, hurr?"

With the arrival of the entree Sbirro leaped to his feet and set about serving them himself. With his eyes alight he lifted the casserole from the tray and sniffed at the fragrance from within with sensual relish. Then, taking great care not to lose a single drop of gravy, he filled two platters with chunks of dripping meat. As if exhausted by this task, he sat back in his chair, breathing heavily. "Gentlemen," he said, "to your good appetite."

Costain chewed his first mouthful with great deliberation and swallowed it. Then he looked at the empty tines of his fork with glazed eyes.

"Good God!" he breathed.

"It is good, hurr? Better than you imagined?"

Costain shook his head dazedly. "It is as impossible," he said slowly, "for the uninitiated to conceive the delights of lamb Amirstan as for mortal man to look into his own soul."

"Perhaps—" Sbirro thrust his head so close that Costain could feel the warm, fetid breath tickle his nostrils— "perhaps you have just had a glimpse into your soul, hurr?"

Costain tried to draw back slightly without giving offense. "Perhaps." He laughed. "And a gratifying picture it made: all fang and claw. But without intending any disrespect, I should hardly like to build my church on *lamb en casserole.*"

Sbirro rose and laid a hand gently on his shoulder. "So perspicacious," he said. "Sometimes when you have nothing to do, nothing, perhaps, but sit for a very little while in a dark room and think of this world—what it is and what it is going to be—then you must turn your thoughts a little to the significance of the Lamb in religion. It will be so interesting. And now—" he bowed deeply to both men— "I have held you long enough from your dinner. I was most happy," he said, nodding to Costain, "and I am sure we will meet again." The teeth gleamed, the eyes glittered,

and Sbirro was gone down the aisle of tables.

Costain twisted around to stare after the retreating figure. "Have I offended him in some way?" he asked.

Laffler looked up from his plate. "Offended him? He loves that kind of talk. Lamb Amirstan is a ritual with him; get him started and he'll be back at you a dozen times worse than a priest making a conversion."

Costain turned to his meal with the face still hovering before him. "Interesting man," he reflected. "Very."

It took him a month to discover the tantalizing familiarity of that face, and when he did, he laughed aloud in his bed. Why, of course! Sbirro might have sat as the model for the Cheshire cat in *Alice!*

He passed this thought on to Laffler the very next evening as they pushed their way down the street to the restaurant against a chill, blustering wind. Laffler only looked blank.

"You may be right," he said, "but I'm not a fit judge. It's a far cry back to the days when I read the book. A far cry, indeed."

As if taking up his words, a piercing howl came ringing down the street and stopped both men short in their tracks. "Someone's in trouble there," said Laffler. "Look!"

Not far from the entrance to Sbirro's two figures could be seen struggling in the near darkness. They swayed back and forth and suddenly tumbled into a writhing heap on the sidewalk. The piteous howl went up again, and Laffler, despite his girth, ran toward it at a fair speed with Costain tagging cautiously behind.

Stretched out full-length on the pavement was a slender figure with the dusky complexion and white hair of one of Sbirro's servitors. His fingers were futilely plucking at the huge hands which encircled his throat, and his knees pushed weakly up at the gigantic bulk of a man who brutally bore down with his full weight.

Laffler came up panting. "Stop this!" he shouted. "What's going on here?"

The pleading eyes almost bulging from their sockets turned toward Laffler. "Help, sair. This man—drunk—"

"Drunk am I, ya dirty—" Costain saw now that the man was a sailor in a badly soiled uniform. The air around him reeked with the stench of liquor. "Pick me pocket and then call me drunk, will ya!" He dug his fingers in harder, and his victim groaned.

Laffler seized the sailor's shoulder. "Let go of him, do you hear! Let go of him at once!" he cried, and the next instant was sent careening into Costain, who staggered back under the force of the

blow.

The attack on his own person sent Laffler into immediate and berserk action. Without a sound he leaped at the sailor, striking and kicking furiously at the unprotected face and flanks. Stunned at first, the man came to his feet with a rush and turned on Laffler. For a moment they stood locked together, and then as Costain joined the attack, all three went sprawling to the ground. Slowly Laffler and Costain got to their feet and looked down at the body before them.

"He's either out cold from liquor," said Costain, "or he struck his head going down. In any case, it's a job for the police."

"No, no, sair!" The waiter crawled weakly to his feet, and stood swaying. "No police, sair. Mr. Sbirro do not want such. You understand, sair." He caught hold of Costain with a pleading hand, and Costain looked at Laffler.

"Of course not," said Laffler. "We won't have to bother with the police. They'll pick him up soon enough, the murderous sot. But what in the world started all this?"

"That man, sair. He make most erratic way while walking, and with no meaning I push against him. Then he attack me, accusing me to rob him."

"As I thought." Laffler pushed the waiter gently along. "Now go in and get yourself attended to."

The man seemed ready to burst into tears. "To you, sair, I owe my life. If there is anything I can do—"

Laffler turned into the areaway that led to Sbirro's door. "No, no, it was nothing. You go along, and if Sbirro has any questions send him to me. I'll straighten it out."

"My life, sair," were the last words they heard as the inner door closed behind them.

"There you are, Costain," said Laffler, as a few minutes later he drew his chair under the table, "civilized man in all his glory. Reeking with alcohol, strangling to death some miserable innocent who came too close."

Costain made an effort to gloss over the nerve shattering memory of the episode. "It's the neurotic cat that takes to alcohol," he said. "Surely there's a reason for that sailor's condition."

"Reason? Of course there is. Plain atavistic savagery!" Laffler swept his arm in an all-embracing gesture. "Why do we all sit here at our meat? Not only to appease physical demands, but because our atavistic selves cry for release. Think back, Costain. Do you remember that I once described Sbirro as the epitome of civilization? Can you now see why? A brilliant man, he fully understands the nature of human beings. But unlike lesser men he bends all his efforts to the satisfaction of our innate natures

without resultant harm to some innocent bystander."

"When I think back on the wonder of lamb Amirstan," said Costain, "I quite understand what you're driving at. And, by the way, isn't it nearly due to appear on the bill of fare? It must have been over a month ago that it was last served."

The waiter, filling the tumblers, hesitated. "I am so sorry, sair. No special this evening."

"There's your answer," Laffler grunted, "and probably just my luck to miss out on it altogether the next time."

Costain stared at him "Oh, come, that's impossible."

"No, blast it." Laffler drank off half his water at a gulp and the waiter immediately refilled the glass. "I'm off to South America for a surprise tour of inspection. One month, two months, Lord knows how long."

"Are things that bad down there?"

"They could be better." Laffler suddenly grinned. "Mustn't forget it takes very mundane dollars and cents to pay the tariff at Sbirro's."

"I haven't heard a word of this around the office."

"Wouldn't be a surprise tour if you had. Nobody knows about this except myself—and now you. I want to walk in on them completely unsuspected. Find out what flimflammery they're up to down there. As far as the office is concerned, I'm off on a jaunt somewhere. Maybe recuperating in some sanatorium from my hard work. Anyhow, the business will be in good hands. Yours, among them."

"Mine?" said Costain, surprised.

"When you go in tomorrow you'll find yourself in receipt of a promotion, even if I'm not there to hand it to you personally. Mind you, it has nothing to do with our friendship either; you've done fine work, and I'm immensely grateful for it."

Costain reddened under the praise. "You don't expect to be in tomorrow. Then you're leaving tonight?"

Laffler nodded. "I've been trying to wangle some reservations. If they come through, well, this will be in the nature of a farewell celebration."

"You know," said Costain slowly, "I devoutly hope that your reservations don't come through. I believe our dinners here have come to mean more to me than I ever dared imagine."

The waiter's voice broke in. "Do you wish to be served now, sair?" and they both started.

"Of course, of course," said Laffler sharply, "I didn't realize you were waiting."

"What bothers me," he told Costain as the waiter turned away, "is the thought of the lamb Amirstan I'm bound to miss. To tell you

the truth, I've already put off my departure a week, hoping to hit a lucky night, and now I simply can't delay any more. I do hope that when you're sitting over your share of lamb Amirstan, you'll think of me with suitable regrets."

Costain laughed. "I will indeed," he said as he turned to his dinner.

Hardly had he cleared the plate when a waiter silently reached for it. It was not their usual waiter, he observed; it was none other than the victim of the assault.

"Well," Costain said, "how do you feel now? Still under the weather?"

The waiter paid no attention to him. Instead, with the air of a man under great strain, he turned to Laffler. "Sair," he whispered. "My life. I owe it to you. I can repay you!"

Laffler looked up in amazement, then shook his head firmly. "No," he said, "I want nothing from you, understand? You have repaid me sufficiently with your thanks. Now get on with your work and let's hear no more about it."

The waiter did not stir an inch, but his voice rose slightly. "By the body and blood of your God, sair, I will help you even if you do not want! *Do not go into the kitchen, sair.* I trade you my life for yours, sair, when I speak this. Tonight or any night of your life, do not go into the kitchen at Sbirro's!"

Laffler sat back, completely dumfounded. "Not go into the kitchen? Why shouldn't I go into the kitchen if Mr. Sbirro ever took it into his head to invite me there? What's all this about?"

A hard hand was laid on Costain's back, and another gripped the waiter's arm. The waiter remained frozen to the spot, his lips compressed, his eyes downcast.

"What is all *what* about, gentlemen?" purred the voice. "So opportune an arrival. In time as ever, I see, to answer all the questions, hurr?"

Laffler breathed a sigh of relief. "Ah, Sbirro, thank heaven you're here. This man is saying something about my not going into your kitchen. Do you know what he means?"

The teeth showed in a broad grin. "But of course. This good man was giving you advice in all amiability. It so happens that my too emotional chef heard some rumor that I might have a guest into his precious kitchen, and he flew into a fearful rage. Such a rage, gentlemen! He even threatened to give notice on the spot, and you can understand what that would mean to Sbirro's, hurr? Fortunately, I succeeded in showing him what a signal honor it is to have an esteemed patron and true connoisseur observe him at his work firsthand, and now he is quite amenable. Quite, hurr?"

He released the waiter's arm. "You are at the wrong table," he said softly. "See that it does not happen again."

The waiter slipped off without daring to raise his eyes and Sbirro drew a chair to the table. He seated himself and brushed his hand lightly over his hair. "Now I am afraid that the cat is out of the bag, hurr? This invitation to you, Mr. Laffler, was to be a surprise; but the surprise is gone, and all that is left is the invitation."

Laffler mopped beads of perspiration from his forehead. "Are you serious?" he said huskily. "Do you mean that we are really to witness the preparation of your food tonight?"

Sbirro drew a sharp fingernail along the tablecloth, leaving a thin, straight line printed in the linen. "Ah," he said, "I am faced with a dilemma of great proportions." He studied the line soberly. "You, Mr. Laffler, have been my guest for ten long years. But our friend here—"

Costain raised his hand in protest. "I understand perfectly. This invitation is solely to Mr. Laffler, and naturally my presence is embarrassing. As it happens, I have an early engagement for this evening and must be on my way anyhow. So you see there's no dilemma at all, really."

"No," said Laffler, "absolutely not. That wouldn't be fair at all. We've been sharing this until now, Costain, and I won't enjoy this experience half as much if you're not along. Surely Sbirro can make his conditions flexible, this one occasion."

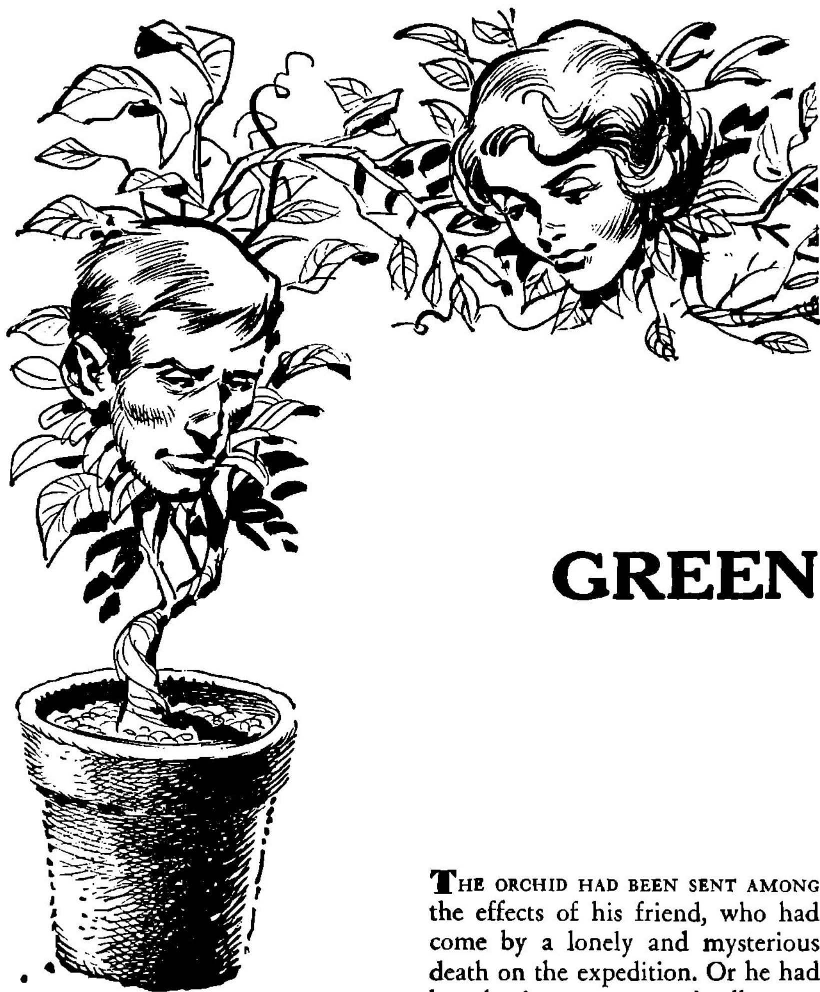
They both looked at Sbirro who shrugged his shoulders regretfully.

Costain rose abruptly. "I'm not going to sit here, Laffler, and spoil your great adventure. And then too," he bantered, "think of that ferocious chef waiting to get his cleaver on you. I prefer not to be at the scene. I'll just say goodbye," he went on, to cover Laffler's guilty silence, "and leave you to Sbirro. I'm sure he'll take pains to give you a good show." He held out his hand and Laffler squeezed it painfully hard.

"You're being very decent, Costain," he said. "I hope you'll continue to dine here until we meet again. It shouldn't be too long."

Sbirro made way for Costain to pass. "I will expect you," he said. *"Au 'voir."*

Costain stopped briefly in the dim foyer to adjust his scarf and fix his Homburg at the proper angle. When he turned away from the mirror, satisfied at last, he saw with a final glance that Laffler and Sbirro were already at the kitchen door, Sbirro holding the door invitingly wide with one hand, while the other rested, almost tenderly, on Laffler's meaty shoulders. ■ ■



GREEN

THE ORCHID HAD BEEN SENT AMONG the effects of his friend, who had come by a lonely and mysterious death on the expedition. Or he had bought it among a miscellaneous lot, "unclassified," at the close of the auction. I forget which it was, but it was certainly one or the other of these. Moreover, even in its dry, brown, dormant root state, this orchid had a certain sinister quality. It looked, with its bunched

THOUGHTS

by JOHN COLLIER

and ragged projections, like a rigid yet a gripping hand, hideously gnarled, or a grotesquely whiskered, threatening face. Would you not have known what sort of an orchid it was?

Mr. Mannering did not know. He read nothing but catalogues and books on fertilizers. He unpacked the new acquisition with a solicitude absurd enough in any case toward any orchid, or primrose either, in the twentieth century, but idiotic, foolhardy, doom-eager, when extended to an orchid thus come by, in appearance thus. And in his traditional obtuseness he at once planted it in what he called the "Observation Ward," a hothouse built against the south wall of his dumpy red dwelling. Here he set always the most interesting additions to his collection, and especially weak and sick-

ly plants, for there was a glass door in his study wall through which he could see into this hothouse, so that the weak and sickly plants could encounter no crisis without his immediate knowledge and his tender care.

This plant, however, proved hardy enough. At the ends of thick and stringy stalks it opened out bunches of darkly shining leaves, and soon it spread in every direction, usurping so much space that first one, then another, then all its neighbours had to be removed to a hothouse at the end of the garden. It was, Cousin Jane said, a regular hopvine. At the ends of the stalks, just before the leaves began, were set groups of tendrils, which hung idly, serving no apparent purpose. Mr. Mannering thought that very probably these were vestigial organs, a heritage from some period when the plant had been a climber. But when were the vestigial tendrils of an ex-climber half or quarter so thick and strong?

After a long time sets of tiny buds appeared here and there among the extravagant foliage. Soon they opened into small flowers, miserable little things; they looked like flies' heads. One naturally expects a large, garish, sinister bloom, like a sea anemone, or a Chinese lantern, or a hippopotamus yawning, on any important orchid; and should it be an unclassified one as well, I think one has every right to insist on a sickly and overpowering scent into the bargain.

Mr. Mannering did not mind at all. Indeed, apart from his joy and happiness in being the discoverer and godfather of a new sort of orchid, he felt only a mild and scientific interest in the fact that the paltry blossoms were so very much like flies' heads. Could it be to attract other flies for food or as fertilizers? But then, why like their heads?

It was a few days later that Cousin Jane's cat disappeared. This was a great blow to Cousin Jane, but Mr. Mannering was not, in his heart of hearts, greatly sorry. He was not fond of the cat, for he could not open the smallest chink in a glass roof for ventilation but the creature would squeeze through somehow to enjoy the warmth, and in this way it had broken many a tender shoot. But before poor Cousin Jane had lamented two days something happened which so engrossed Mr. Mannering that he had no mind left at all with which to sympathize with her affliction, or to make at breakfast kind and hypocritical inquiries after the lost cat. A strange new bud appeared on the orchid. It was clearly evident that there would be two quite different sorts of bloom on this one plant, as sometimes happens in such fantastic corners of the vege-

table world, and that the new flower would be very different in size and structure from the earlier ones. It grew bigger and bigger, till it was as big as one's fist.

And just then—it could never have been more inopportune—an affair of the most unpleasant, the most distressing nature summoned Mr. Mannering to town. It was his wretched nephew, in trouble again, and this time so deeply and so very disgracefully that it took all Mr. Mannering's generosity, and all his influence, too, to extricate the worthless young man. Indeed, as soon as he saw the state of affairs, he told the prodigal that this was the very last time he might expect assistance, that his vices and his ingratitude had long ago cancelled all affection between them, and that for this last helping hand he was indebted only to his mother's memory, and to no faith on the part of his uncle either in his repentance or his reformation. He wrote, moreover, to Cousin Jane, to relieve his feelings, telling her of the whole business, and adding that the only thing left to do was to cut the young man off entirely.

When he got back to Torquay, Cousin Jane was nowhere to be found. The situation was extremely annoying. Their only servant was a cook who was very old and very stupid and very deaf. She suffered besides from an obsession, owing to the fact that for many years Mr. Mannering had had no conversation with her in which he had not included an impressive reminder that she must always, no matter what might happen, keep the big kitchen stove up to a certain pitch of activity. For this stove, besides supplying the house with hot water, heated the pipes in the "Observation Ward," to which the daily gardener who had charge of the other hothouses had no access. By this time she had come to regard her duties as stoker as her chief *raison d'etre,* and it was difficult to penetrate her deafness with any question which her stupidity and her obsession did not somehow transmute into an inquiry after the stove, and this, of course, was especially the case when Mr. Mannering spoke to her. All he could disentangle was what she had volunteered on first seeing him, that his cousin had not been seen for three days, that she had left without saying a word. Mr. Mannering was perplexed and annoyed, but, being a man of method, he thought it best to postpone further inquiries until he had refreshed himself a little after his long and tiring journey. A full supply of energy was necessary to extract any information from the old cook; besides, there was probably a note somewhere. It was only natural that before he went to his room Mr. Mannering should peep into the hothouse, just to make sure that the wonderful

orchid had come to no harm during the inconsiderate absence of Cousin Jane. As soon as he opened the door his eyes fell upon the bud; it had now changed in shape very considerably, and had increased in size to the bigness of a human head. It is no exaggeration to state that Mr. Mannering remained rooted to the spot, with his eyes fixed upon this wonderful bud, for fully five minutes.

But, you will ask, why did he not see her clothes on the floor? Well, as a matter of fact (it is a delicate point), there were no clothes on the floor. Cousin Jane, though of course she was entirely estimable in every respect, though she was well over forty, too, was given to the practice of the very latest ideas on the dual culture of the soul and body—Swedish, German, neo-Greek and all that. And the orchid house was the warmest place available. I must proceed with the order of events.

Mr. Mannering at length withdrew his eyes from this stupendous bud, and decided that he must devote his attention to the grey exigencies of everyday life. But although his body dutifully ascended the stairs, heart, mind, and soul all remained in adoration of the plant. Although he was philosophical to the point of insensibility over the miserable smallness of the earlier flowers, yet he was now as much gratified by the magnitude of the great new bud as you or I might be. Hence it was not unnatural that Mr. Mannering while in his bath should be full of the most exalted visions of the blossoming of his heart's darling, his vegetable godchild. It would be by far the largest known, complex as a dream, or dazzlingly simple. It would open like a dancer, or like the sun rising. Why, it might be opening at this very moment! Mr. Mannering could restrain himself no longer; he rose from the steamy water, and, wrapping his bathrobe about him, hurried down to the hothouse, scarcely staying to dry himself, though he was subject to colds.

The bud had not yet opened; it still reared its unbroken head among the glossy, fleshy foliage, and he now saw, what he had had no eyes for previously, how very exuberant that foliage had grown. Suddenly he realized with astonishment that this huge bud was not the one which had appeared before he went away. That one had been lower down on the plant. Where was it now, then? Why, this new thrust and spread of foliage concealed it from him. He walked across, and discovered it. It had opened into a bloom. And as he looked at this bloom his astonishment grew to stupefaction, one might say to petrification, for it is a fact that Mr. Mannering remained rooted to the spot, with his eyes fixed on the flower, for

fully fifteen minutes. The flower was an exact replica of the head of Cousin Jane's lost cat. The similitude was so exact, so life-like, that Mr. Mannering's first movement, after the fifteen minutes, was to seize his bathrobe and draw it about him, for he was a modest man, and the cat, though bought for a Tom, had proved to be quite the reverse. I relate this to show how much character, spirit, *presence*—call it what you will—there was upon this floral cat's face. But although he made to seize his bathrobe, it was too late. He could not move. The new lusty foliage had closed in unperceived; the too lightly dismissed tendrils were everywhere upon him; he gave a few weak cries and sank to the ground, and there, as the Mr. Mannering of ordinary life, he passes out this story.

Mr. Mannering sank into a coma, into an insensibility so deep that a black eternity passed before the first faint elements of his consciousness reassembled themselves in his brain. For of his brain was the centre of a new bud being made. Indeed, it was two or three days before this at first almost shapeless and quite primitive lump of organic matter had become sufficiently mature to be called Mr. Mannering at all. These days, which passed quickly enough, in a certain mild, not unpleasant excitement, in the outer world, seemed to the dimly working mind within the bud to resume the whole history of the development of our species, in a great many epochal parts.

A process analogous to the mutations of the embryo was being enacted here. At last the entity which was thus being rushed down an absurdly foreshortened vista of the ages slowed up and came almost to a stop in the present. It became recognizable. The Seven Ages of Mr. Mannering were presented, as it were, in a series of close-ups, as in an educational film; his consciousness settled and cleared. The bud was mature, ready to open. At this point, I believe, Mr. Mannering's state of mind was exactly that of a patient who, wakening from under an anaesthetic, struggling up from vague dreams, asks plaintively, "Where am I?" Then the bud opened, and he knew.

There was the hothouse, but seen from an unfamiliar angle. There, through the glass door, was his study. There below him was the cat's head, and there—there beside him was Cousin Jane. He could not say a word, but then, neither could she. Perhaps it was as well. At the very least, he would have been forced to own that she had been in the right in an argument of long standing; she had always maintained that in the end no good would come of his preoccupation with "those unnatural flowers."

It must be admitted that Mr. Mannering was not at first greatly upset by this extraordinary upheaval in his daily life. This, I think, was because he was interested, not only in private and personal matters, but in the wider and more general, one might say the biological, aspects of his metamorphosis. For the rest, simply because he *was* now a vegetable, he responded with a vegetable reaction. The impossibility of locomotion, for example, did not trouble him in the least, or even the absence of body and limbs, any more than the cessation of that stream of rashers and tea, biscuits and glasses of milk, luncheon cutlets, and so forth, that had flowed in at his mouth for over fifty years, but which had now been reversed to a gentle, continuous, scarcely noticeable feeding from below. All the powerful influence of the physical upon the mental, therefore, inclined him to tranquillity. But the physical is not all. Although no longer a man, he was still Mr. Mannering. And from this anomaly, as soon as his scientific interest had subsided, issued a host of woes, mainly subjective in origin.

He was fretted, for instance, by the thought that he would now have no opportunity to name his orchid, or to write a paper upon it, and, still worse, there grew up in his mind the abominable conviction that, as soon as his plight was discovered, it was he who would be named and classified, and that he himself would be the subject of a paper, possibly even of comment and criticism in the lay press. Like all orchid collectors, he was excessively shy and sensitive, and in his present situation these qualities were very naturally exaggerated, so that the bare idea of such attentions brought him to the verge of wilting. Worse yet was the fear of being transplanted, thrust into some unfamiliar, draughty, probably public place. Being dug up! Ugh! A violent shudder pulsated through all the heavy foliage that sprang from Mr. Mannering's division of the plant. He became conscious of ghostly and remote sensations in the stem below, and in certain tufts of leaves that sprouted from it; they were somehow reminiscent of spine and heart and limbs. He felt quite a dryad.

In spite of all, however, the sunshine was very pleasant. The rich odour of hot, spicy earth filled the hothouse. From a special fixture on the hot-water pipes a little warm steam oozed into the air. Mr. Mannering began to abandon himself to a feeling of *laissez-aller*. Just then, up in a corner of the glass roof, at the ventilator, he heard a persistent buzzing. Soon the note changed from one of irritation to a more complacent sound; a bee had managed, after some difficulty, to find his way through one of the tiny chinks in

the metal work. The visitor came drifting down and down through the still, green air, as if into some subaqueous world, and he came to rest on one of those petals which were Mr. Mannering's eyebrows. Thence he commenced to explore one feature after another, and at last he settled heavily on the lower lip, which drooped under his weight and allowed him to crawl right into Mr. Mannering's mouth. This was quite a considerable shock, of course, but on the whole the sensation was neither as alarming nor as unpleasant as might have been expected. "Indeed," thought the vegetable gentleman, "it seems quit agreeable."

But Mr. Mannering soon ceased the drowsy analysis of his sensation when he saw the departed bee, after one or two lazy circlings, settle directly upon the maiden lip of Cousin Jane. Ominous as lightning, a simple botanical principle flashed across the mind of her wretched relative. Cousin Jane was aware of it also, although, being the product of an earlier age, she might have remained still blessedly ignorant had not her cousin—vain, garrulous, proselytizing fool!—attempted for years past to interest her in the rudiments of botany. How the miserable man upbraided himself now! He saw two bunches of leaves just below the flower tremble and flutter, and rear themselves painfully upwards into the very likeness of two shocked and protesting hands. He saw the soft and orderly petals of his cousin's face ruffle and incarnadine with rage and embarrassment, then turn sickly as a gardenia with horror and dismay. But what was he to do? All the rectitude implanted by his careful training, all the chivalry proper to an orchid-collector, boiled and surged beneath a paralytically calm exterior. He positively travailed in the effort to activate the muscles of his face, to assume an expression of grief, manly contrition, helplessness in the face of fate, willingness to make honourable amends, all suffused with the light of a vague but solacing optimism; but it was in vain. When he had strained till his nerves seemed likely to tear under the tension, the only movement he could achieve was a trivial flutter of the left eyelid—worse than nothing.

This incident completely aroused Mr. Mannering from his vegetable lethargy. He rebelled against the limitations of the form into which he had thus been cast while subjectively he remained all too human. Was he not still at heart a man, with a man's hopes, ideals, aspirations—and capacity for suffering?

When dusk came and the opulent and sinister shapes of the great plant dimmed to a suggestiveness more powerfully impressive than had been its bright noonday lux-

uriance, and the atmosphere of a tropical forest filled the orchid-house like an exile's dream or the nostalgia of the saxophone; when the cat's whiskers drooped, and even Cousin Jane's eyes slowly closed, the unhappy man remained wide awake, staring into the gathering darkness. Suddenly the light in the study was switched on. Two men entered the room. One of them was his lawyer, the other was his nephew.

"This is his study, as you know, of course," said the wicked nephew. "There's nothing here. I looked when I came over on Wednesday."

"I've sat in this room many an evening," said the lawyer with an expression of distaste. "I'd sit on this side of the fireplace and he on that. 'Mannering,' I'd think to myself, 'I wonder how you'll end up. Drugs? Sexual perversion? Or murder?' Well, maybe we'll soon know the answer. Until we do, I suppose you, as next of kin, had better take charge here."

Saying this, the lawyer turned, about to go, and Mr. Mannering saw a malicious smile overspread the young man's face. The uneasiness which had overcome him at first sight of his nephew was intensified to fear and trembling at the sight of this smile.

When he had shown the lawyer out, the nephew returned to the study and looked round him with lively and sinister satisfaction. Then he cut a caper on the hearth-rug. Mr. Mannering thought he had never seen anything so diabolical as this solitary expression of the glee of a venomous nature at the prospect of unchecked sway, here whence he had been outcast. How vulgar petty triumph appeared, beheld thus; how disgusting petty spite, how appalling revengefulness and hardness of heart! He remembered suddenly that his nephew had been notable, in his repulsive childhood, for his cruelty to flies, tearing their wings off, and for his barbarity toward cats. A sort of dew might have been noticed upon the good man's forehead. It seemed to him that his nephew had only to glance that way, and all would be discovered, although he might have remembered that it was impossible to see from the lighted room into the darkness of the hothouse.

On the mantelpiece stood a large unframed photograph of Mr. Mannering. His nephew soon caught sight of this, and strode across to confront it with a triumphant and insolent sneer. "What? You old Pharisee," said he, "taken her off for a trip to Brighton, have you? My God! How I hope you'll never come back! How I hope you've fallen over the cliffs, or got swept off by the tide or something! Anyway—I'll make hay while the sun shines. Ugh! You old skinflint, you!"

And he reached forward his hand, and bestowed a contemptuous fillip upon the nose in the photograph. Then the usurping rascal left the room, leaving all the lights on, presumably preferring the dining-room with its cellarette to the scholarly austerities of the study.

All night long the glare of electric light from the study fell upon Mr. Mannering and his Cousin Jane, like the glare of a cheap and artificial sun. You who have seen at midnight in the park a few insomniac asters standing stiff and startled under an arc light, all their weak colour bleached out of them by the drenching chemical radiance, neither asleep nor awake, but held fast in a tense, a neurasthenic trance, you can form an idea of how the night passed with this unhappy pair.

And toward morning an incident occurred, trivial in itself, no doubt, but sufficient then and there to add the last drop to poor Cousin Jane's discomfiture and to her relative's embarrassment and remorse. Along the edge of the great earthbox in which the orchid was planted, ran a small black mouse. It had wicked red eyes, a naked, evil snout, and huge repellent ears, queer as a bat's. This creature ran straight over the lower leaves of Cousin Jane's part of the plant. It was simply appalling. The stringy main stem writhed like a hair on a coal-fire, the leaves contracted in an agonized spasm, like seared mimosa; the terrified lady nearly uprooted herself in her convulsive horror. I think she would actually have done so, had not the mouse hurried on past her.

But it had not gone more than a foot or so when it looked up and saw, bending over it, and seeming positively to bristle with life, that flower which had once been called Tib. There was a breathless pause. The mouse was obviously paralyzed with terror, the cat could only look and long. Suddenly the more human watchers saw a sly frond of foliage curve softly outward and close in behind the hypnotized creature. Cousin Jane, who had been thinking exultantly, "Well, now it'll go away and never, never, never come back," suddenly became aware of hideous possibilities. Summoning all her energy, she achieved a spasmodic flutter, enough to break the trance that held the mouse, so that, like a clock-work toy, it swung round and fled. But already the fell arm of the orchid had cut off its retreat. The mouse leaped straight at it. Like a flash five tendrils at the end caught the fugitive and held it fast, and soon its body dwindled and was gone. Now the heart of Cousin Jane was troubled with horrid fears, and slowly and painfully she turned her weary face first to one side, then to the other, in a fever of anxiety as to where the new bud would appear.

A sort of sucker, green and sappy, which twisted lightly about her main stem, and reared a blunt head, much like a tip of asparagus, close to her own, suddenly began to swell in the most suspicious manner. She squinted at it, fascinated and appalled. Could it be her imagination? It was not.

Next evening the door opened again, and again the nephew entered the study. This time he was alone, and it was evident that he had come straight from table. He carried in his hand a decanter of whiskey capped by an inverted glass. Under his arm was a siphon. His face was distinctly flushed, and such a smile as is often seen in saloon bars played about his lips. He put down his burdens and, turning to Mr. Mannering's cigar cabinet, produced a bunch of keys, which he proceeded to try upon the lock, muttering vindictively at each abortive attempt, until it opened, when he helped himself from the best of its contents. Annoying as it was to witness this insolent appropriation of his property, and mortifying to see the contempt with which the cigar was smoked, the good gentleman found deeper cause for uneasiness in the thought that, with the possession of the keys, his abominable nephew had access to every private corner that was his.

At present, however, the usurper seemed indisposed to carry on investigations; he splashed a great deal of whiskey into the tumbler and relaxed into an attitude of extravagant comfort. But after a while the young man began to tire of his own company. He had not yet had time to gather any of his pothouse companions into his uncle's home, and repeated recourse to the whiskey bottle only increased his longing for something to relieve the monotony. His eye fell upon the door of the orchid-house. Sooner or later it was bound to have happened. Does this thought greatly console the condemned man when the fatal knock sounds upon the door of his cell? No. Nor were the hearts of the trembling pair in the hothouse at all comforted by the reflection.

As the nephew fumbled with the handle of the glass door, Cousin Jane slowly raised two fronds of leaves that grew on each side, high upon her stem, and sank her troubled head behind them. Mr. Mannering observed, in a sudden rapture of hope, that by this device she was fairly well concealed from any casual glance. Hastily he strove to follow her example. Unfortunately, he had not yet gained sufficient control of his —his *limbs?*—and all his tortured efforts could not raise them beyond an agonized horizontal. The door had opened, the nephew was feeling for the electric light switch just inside. It was a moment for

one of the superlative achievements of panic. Mr. Mannering was well equipped for the occasion. Suddenly, at the cost of indescribable effort, he succeeded in raising the right frond, not straight upwards, it is true, but in a series of painful jerks along a curve outward and backward, and ascending by slow degrees till it attained the position of an arm held over the possessor's head from behind. Then, as the light flashed on, a spray of leaves at the very end of this frond spread out into a fan, rather like a very fleshy horse-chestnut leaf in structure, and covered the anxious face below. What a relief! And now the nephew advanced into the orchid-house, and now the hidden pair simultaneously remembered the fatal presence of the cat. Simultaneously also, their very sap stood still in their veins. The nephew was walking along by the plant. The cat, a sagacious beast, "knew" with the infallible intuition of its kind that this was an idler, a parasite, a sensualist, gross and brutal, disrespectful to age, insolent to weakness, barbarous to cats. Therefore it remained very still, trusting to its low and somewhat retired position on the plant, and to protective mimicry and such things, and to the half-drunken condition of the nephew, to avoid his notice. But all in vain.

"What?" said the nephew. "What, a cat?" And he raised his hand to offer a blow at the harmless creature. Something in the dignified and unflinching demeanour of his victim must have penetrated into his besotted mind, for the blow never fell, and the bully, a coward at heart, as bullies invariably are, shifted his gaze from side to side to escape the steady, contemptuous stare of the courageous cat. Alas! His eye fell on something glimmering whitely behind the dark foliage. He brushed aside the intervening leaves that he might see what it was. It was Cousin Jane.

"Oh! Ah!" said the young man, in great confusion. "*You're* back. But what are you hiding there for?"

His sheepish stare became fixed, his mouth opened in bewilderment; then the true condition of things dawned upon his mind. Most of us would have at once instituted some attempt at communication, or at assistance of some kind, or at least have knelt down to thank our Creator that we had, by His grace, been spared such a fate, or perhaps have made haste from the orchid-house to ensure against accidents. But alcohol had so inflamed the young man's hardened nature that he felt neither fear, nor awe, nor gratitude. As he grasped the situation a devilish smile overspread his face.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" said he. "But where's the old man?"

He peered about the plant, look-

ing eagerly for his uncle. In a moment he had located him and, raising the inadequate visor of leaves, discovered beneath it the face of our hero, troubled with a hundred bitter emotions.

"Hullo, Narcissus!" said the nephew.

A long silence ensued. The spiteful wretch was so pleased that he could not say a word. He rubbed his hands together, and licked his lips, and stared and stared as a child might at a new toy.

"Well, you're properly up a tree," he said. "Yes, the tables are turned now all right, aren't they? Do you remember the last time we met?"

A flicker of emotion passed over the face of the suffering blossom, betraying consciousness.

"Yes, you can hear what I say," added the tormentor. "Feel, too, I expect. What about that?"

As he spoke, he stretched out his hand and, seizing a delicate frill of fine, silvery filaments that grew as whiskers grow around the lower half of the flower, he administered a sharp tug. Without pausing to note, even in the interests of science, the subtler shades of his uncle's reaction, content with the general effect of that devastating wince, the wretch chuckled with satisfaction and, taking a long pull from the reeking butt of the stolen cigar, puffed the vile fumes straight into his victim's centre. The brute!

"How do you like that, John the Baptist?" he asked with a leer. "Good for the blight, you know. Just what you want!"

Something rustled upon his coat sleeve. Looking down, he saw a long stalk, well adorned with the fatal tendrils, groping its way over the arid and unsatisfactory surface. In a moment it had reached his wrist, he felt it fasten, but knocked it off as one would a leech, before it had time to establish its hold.

"Ugh!" said he. "So that's how it happens, is it? I think I'll keep outside till I get the hang of things a bit. I don't want to be made an Aunt Sally of. Though I shouldn't think they could get you with your clothes on." Struck by a sudden thought, he looked from his uncle to Cousin Jane, and from Cousin Jane back to his uncle again. He scanned the floor, and saw a single crumpled bathrobe lying in the shadow.

"Why!" he said. *"Well!*—Haw! Haw! Haw!" And with an odious backward leer, he made his way out of the orchid-house.

Mr. Mannering felt that his suffering was capable of no increase. Yet he dreaded the morrow. His fevered imagination patterned the long night with waking nightmares, utterly fantastic visions of humiliation and torture. Torture! It was absurd, of course, for him to fear cold-blooded atrocities on the part of his nephew, but how

he dreaded some outrageous whim that might tickle the youth's sense of humour, and lead him to *any* wanton freak, especially if he were drunk at the time He thought of slugs and snails, espaliers and topiary. If only the monster would rest content with insulting jests, with wasting his substance, ravaging his cherished possessions before his eyes, with occasional pulling at the whiskers, even! Then it might be possible to turn gradually from all that still remained in him of man, to subdue the passions, no longer to admire or desire, to go native as it were, relapsing into the Nirvana of a vegetable dream. But in the morning he found this was not so easy.

In came the nephew and, pausing only to utter the most perfunctory of jeers at his relatives in the glass house, he sat at the desk and unlocked the top drawer. He was evidently in search of money, his eagerness betrayed that; no doubt he had run through all he had filched from his uncle's pockets, and had not yet worked out a scheme for getting direct control of his bank account. However, the drawer held enough to cause the scoundrel to rub his hands with satisfaction and, summoning the housekeeper, to bellow into her ear a reckless order upon the wine and spirit merchant.

"Get along with you!" he shouted, when he had at last made her understand. "I shall have to get someone a bit more on the spot to wait on me; I can tell you that. Yes," he added to himself as the poor old woman hobbled away, deeply hurt by his bullying manner, "yes, a nice little parlourmaid."

He hunted in the telephone book for the number of the local registry office. That afternoon he interviewed a succession of maidservants in his uncle's study. Those that happened to be plain, or too obviously respectable, he treated curtly and coldly; they soon made way for others. It was only when a girl was attractive (according to the young man's depraved tastes, that is) and also bore herself in a fast or brazen manner, that the interview was at all prolonged. In these cases the nephew would conclude in a fashion that left no doubt in the minds of any of his auditors as to his real intentions. Once, for example, leaning forward, he took the girl by the chin, saying with an odious smirk, "There's no one else but me, and so you'd be treated just like one of the family, d'you see, my dear?" To another he would say, slipping his arm round her waist, "Do you think we shall get on well together?"

After this conduct had sent two or three in confusion from the room, there entered a young person of the most regrettable description; one whose character, betrayed as it was in her meretricious

finery, her crude cosmetics, and her tinted hair, showed yet more clearly in florid gesture and too facile smile. The nephew lost no time in coming to an arrangement with this creature. Indeed, her true nature was so obvious that the depraved young man only went through the farce of an ordinary interview as a sauce to his anticipations, enjoying the contrast between conventional dialogue and unbridled glances. She was to come next day. Mr. Mannering feared more for his unhappy cousin than for himself. "What scenes may she not have to witness," he thought, "that yellow cheek of hers to incarnadine?" If only he could have said a few words!

But that evening, when the nephew came to take his ease in the study, it was obvious that he was far more under the influence of liquor than he had been before. His face, flushed patchily by the action of the spirits, wore a sullen sneer; an ominous light burned in that bleared eye; he muttered savagely under his breath. Clearly this fiend in human shape was what is known as "fighting drunk"; clearly some trifle had set his vile temper in a blaze.

It is interesting to note, even at this stage, a sudden change in Mr. Mannering's reactions. They now seemed entirely egotistical, and were to be elicited only by stimuli directly associated with physical matters. The nephew kicked a hole in a screen in his drunken fury, he flung a burning cigar-end down on the carpet, he scratched matches on the polished table. His uncle witnessed this with the calm of one whose sense of property and of dignity has become numbed and paralyzed; he felt neither fury nor mortification. Had he, by one of those sudden strides by which all such development takes place, approached much nearer to his goal, complete vegetation? His concern for the threatened modesty of cousin Jane, which had moved him so strongly only a few hours earlier, must have been the last dying flicker of exhausted altruism; that most human characteristic had faded from him. The change, however, in its present stage, was not an unmixed blessing. Narrowing in from the wider and more expressly human regions of his being, his consciousness now left outside its focus not only pride and altruism, which had been responsible for much of his woe, but fortitude and detachment also, which, with quotations from the Greek, had been his support before the whole battery of his distresses. Moreover, within its constricted circle, his ego was not reduced but concentrated; his serene, flower-like indifference toward the ill-usage of his furniture was balanced by the absorbed, flower-like single-mindedness of his terror at the thought

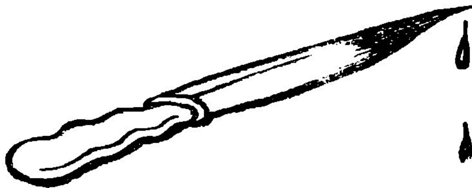
of similar ill-usage directed toward himself.

Inside the study the nephew still fumed and swore. On the mantelpiece stood an envelope, addressed in Mr. Mannering's handwriting to Cousin Jane. In it was the letter he had written from town, describing his nephew's disgraceful conduct. The young man's eye fell upon this and, unscrupulous, impelled by idle curiosity, he took it up and drew out the letter. As he read, his face grew a hundred times blacker than before.

"What," he muttered, " 'a mere race-course cad . . . a worthless vulgarian . . . a scoundrel of the sneaking sort' . . . and what's this? ' . . . cut him off absolutely . . .' What?" said he, with a horrifying oath. "*Would* you cut me off absolutely? Two can play at that game, you old devil!"

And he snatched up a large pair of scissors that lay on the desk, and burst into the hothouse—

Among fish, the dory, they say, screams when it is seized upon by man; among insects, the caterpillar of the death's-head moth is capable of a still, small shriek of terror; in the vegetable world, only the mandrake could voice its agony—till now. ■ ■



The first time Lulubel met Avram Davidson, she was struck by the fullness of his thick, black beard. We're not sure that Lulubel wasn't a little jealous of its texture. At any rate Avram's beard certainly drew her. She was like a straight pin in front of a magnet. First, there she was looking at Avram from the shelf at the door. Then she was on his shoulder, her two front legs reaching. Avram smiled at her indulgently. But an instant later, we heard him utter a little yelp of pain and surprise.

There was Lulubel clambering down his jacket to the floor, dragging a long black strand behind her. She tells us she is going to use it as a hair ribbon but from the way she keeps asking when Avram is going to visit again, I think she plans to accumulate enough of his fine beard to weave herself a fine black web.

THE TENANT

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

EDGEL WAS SORT OF LARGE, AND sort of lopsided, and for this he drew a disability pension on which he drank more than was good for him. But on this night he told himself that he was not—was *not*—drunk. Only a little wine. The air would clear his head. But the air, instead of affecting his head, affected his kidneys. The tap-tap of a woman's heels on the cracked sidewalk made him draw deeper into the darkness. At the same time the sound put an idea into his fuddled mind. A hot, urgent, ugly idea. What sort of a woman, what kind of a woman, would be out

on the prowl on these streets at night . . . ?

Then she stopped just at the lip of an alley, in the thin shaft of lamp-light. She turned her face to and fro as if she sensed someone's presence. A feathered hat was on her head, and her dress, low-cut; was of a rich fabric. Her mouth shone red. She smiled, her brows arched. He took a silent half-step forward. Then his bleared vision cleared, and he saw that it was Mrs. Waldeck . . . .

Edgel had seen her before through the red phlegm that coated his eyes. "A hustler. Just another hustler," a gray-stubbled bum at his elbow leered. "When she's out she take anybody. Just anybody."

He prodded the meat over Edgel's ribs. "Go ahead." He said. "Try her. Why not?"

Then she was gone, but she'd left an image in Edgel's mind. The way she walked as if her feet, shuffling through the filth of the streets, were not really a part of her. A queen. That's what she was, a queen. Mrs. Waldeck, the bum said her name was. Mrs. Waldeck. The word image was graven on Edgel's whiskey-fogged brain. Mrs. Waldeck, Queen.

Balto, the landlord, a little grey suit of a man with a long, hairy nose, hired Edgel. Persuasively, he'd tell Edgel that this was no life, that there was no future in this dirty business, that he ought to be looking around for something better. But still, every now and then, Balto hired Edgel. And so Edgel would go to work for Balto as rent-collector/agent in one or other of the heaps of vertical rat-holes from which Balto drew great sums of money: And Edgel pictured himself growing steady and respectable. When a tenant had promised to cut Balto open and draw his tripes if he dared present his face again, then Balto hired Edgel. And as soon as the menace ceased, Balto dismissed Edgel with a sigh. Or it might be that the housing and health people were anxious to close in on Balto, in which case they were baffled by seeing only Edgel, who was not summonsable. And when the heat was off, Balto, with a sigh, always hired Edgel to deal with the angry ones.

One day Balto and Edgel were talking together.

"Do you think I like this rotten business?" Balto asked. "I would much rather own clean property. All I've ever asked was a decent chance. And now I have it. And I want to share it with you."

Edgel, teetering on a dirty curbstone, tried to concentrate. He tried not to wonder if he should venture over to a new bar reputed to give an ounce and a quarter of whiskey for the price of an ounce. He tried not to think about Mrs. Waldeck, or about a certain taxi-driver who had made an agreement with a new woman.

He looked down again at the little grey man with the hairy nose.

"I will not deceive you, Edgel," Balto said, "I have a job to be done and there is no one I trust to do it except you." For this was a fact: Edgel was honest. His accounts often didn't balance and were short, but he made up the difference himself. Scrupulously. "Furthermore," said Balto, with great earnestness, "I'll tell you immediately that the job isn't permanent. In fact, the better you do your work, the sooner the job is over. But there is money in it." And he named impressive sums.

No less than six of Balto's rat-eaten tenements were included in a section which was to be torn down and new housing put up. The authorities had condemned the properties and now the builders were offering the contractor a bonus for speedy completion of the wrecking, the contractor was passing on part of the bonus to owners of the condemned roach-traps (including Balto) for speedy vacating, and Balto: Great-Heart: was dividing part of it between Edgel and the tenants.

"And," he wound up, "as a matter of fact—I tell you in confidence, Edgel—I am very familiar with the other owners. We have formed a new syndicate. We will need a staff of dependable people, experienced, and honest. A word to the wise. I really mustn't say any more." The long, hairy nose looked up at Edgel, significantly.

The next day, Edgel met by appointment a man named Hallam, who had a wen, and who worked for a real estate firm that was engaged in relocating tenants who didn't relocate themselves. "They don't appreciate it," he told Edgel. "You might think they'd be glad to leave these rat-holes, but they aren't. Of course," he pointed out, walking rapidly down the littered street, "the places we're moving them into are also rat-holes, but what the Hell, it's a change of scenery."

They passed a tiny store that sold textile remnants, ready-made rejects in factory clothes, and all sorts of things. A dark little man who had been crouching in the doorway like an upright bat uncurled himself and fluttered at them. "Remember, you find me a good new place, now? Remember."

"Yes, yes," Hallam assured him. "We certainly will. You start getting packed." To Edgel, he said, "He'll take what we give him, or find his own self a place."

By noon they were in the last house on Edgel's list. "With this building," said Hallam, "we've got both good luck and bad. Good luck—the middle floor tenants took the bonus and moved right into the place I offered them. Bad luck—this lady on the top floor. She's the main problem. Some of

the people, now, they say they won't move and then you got to evict them and that could lead to all kinds of trouble. This one, she doesn't exactly say she *won't* move, but she don't make no *move* to move, if you folla me. I feel sorry for them when they get that sick look on their face."

The downstairs hall, where they paused, was dark and damp and fetid. "It can make you feel like a criminal, some of these people that are afraid to move because they've forgotten they ever lived anywhere else. Because, really, she's a nice, quiet person." *Some* of the tenants were neither nice nor quiet and it had become easier for Edgel to understand why Balto was parting with money for a surrogate. Hallam said, now, "Don't pay no attention if that old bum downstairs says anything. He's just a dirty old bum. Not sorry for *him,* you can betcher life."

The old bum downstairs looked, sounded, and smelled like an old bum. He began to curse as soon as they knocked, he cursed in English, a tongue singularly poor in obscene invention, and he repeated his scant store over and over. Then he stopped. He leered at them, tiny filmed eyes squinting and winking from his ruined face. "Going upstairs, boys?" he asked. Softly, slyly. "She'll let you —if she's in the mood. If she's in the mood, she'll let anybody. And when Old Larry says, 'Anybody,' that's just what he means. *Anybody.*"

The stairs creaked and shifted. There was more light on the top floor because of a dirty hall window. An odd noise came from somewhere. Hallam knocked. The woman who answered did not come out to the hall, but stood behind the half-closed door and peered out. Edgel couldn't see her clearly, but in the murk she was just an ordinary-looking woman.

"Mrs. Waldeck, this is Mr. Edgel, the landlord's agent."

Edgel's stolid, beefy face showed nothing. But he squinted, trying to penetrate the gloom. *Mrs. Waldeck.* A single, naked, dusty bulb shone through the crack in the door behind her. Edgel could see only the woman's silhouette. He became conscious of a pounding in his chest which had begun at Hallam's mention of the name.

"Have you been getting ready to move?" Hallam asked. "If you move before the end of next month, we find you another place—"

"I don't want another place," she said in a quick, fearful voice.

"—and we give you a bonus. How much of a bonus, Edgel?"

Edgel was staring hard, his thick body bent forward a little.

"How much, Edgel?" Hallam nudged him. "How much did Balto say?"

Edgel straightened up. Balto.

He was on a job. Balto had said this was very important.

"Maybe even a hundred dollars," he said.

"I don't want a bonus. I can't move. I lived here twenty-two years. I'm a sick woman. You can't make me move out." She shifted her body restlessly. The door opened a little wider and Edgel saw that her dress was spotted and gappy.

The flesh that had seemed rounded and ivory through the window of the bar was sagging and raddled with hollows, in which the skin was yellow wrinkles or knotted folds of fat. The eyes were painted, the lips revealed a thin, loose line beneath smears of greasy rouge inexpertly applied to paint a floppy paraphrase of a mouth.

Edgel straightened. "That's nonsense, Mrs. Waldeck," he said brusquely. "We can come here with a cop and a marshal tomorrow and throw you out on the sidewalk. But we don't want to do that," he said, wheedlingly. "We'll get you a place on the ground floor, you won't have to climb all these stairs, and we'll give you a bonus. They're going to tear this house down, you know."

The woman had begun to shake her head while he was talking. Then she said, "Maybe they won't tear this one down. I could pay more rent. Two dollars more?—three? You tell them I'll pay more rent, because I'm a sick woman and I lived here twenty two years and I can't move, and they won't tear this house down. Because I can't *move!*" Her voice rose to a shriek and she slammed the door. After a minute, they started down the steps.

"What we could do, maybe," Hallam suggested, "is: we could get a guy with a badge and a paper, like they both look real, and she wouldn't know the difference. A dumb broad who thinks they'll leave the house stay up for her extra three dollars! And we move her and her things into one of the places you got. That way, we can still collect the bonus."

Edgel said, Yeah, maybe they could do that, if they were real careful about it. "You hear that funny noise?" he asked.

"Sounded like a parrot?"

"Sounded more to me like a frog."

"Maybe she keeps frogs to feed the parrot?" And they both laughed and they went down to the corner to get a bite to eat and a glass of beer.

Hallam went on his way, but the beer tasted good to Edgel and he had another and another, and the sun went down behind the sooty roofs of the factories. The gray daylight became gray darkness. Edgel belched, got up from his seat and went to watch the people from the doorway.

Then he saw her.

She was mincing along with little steps, her face framed in an old ruin of a hat. And her eyes rolled and winked and the painted lips made mouthings that hintded of hardlost memories of smiles.

He saw that it was Mrs. Waldeck, and shrank into his clothes. She saw someone. Her hands smoothed her dress. Her face simpered. She walked off with a roll of her hips and the tip-tap of her heels. Suddenly, the street went quiet. When he emerged from the tavern there was no one in sight. There was nothing in sight. He scuttled away, and he thought of Old Larry's words. *When she's in the mood she'll let anybody ... Any-body ...*

One by one, the tenants moved on. Edgel paused to speak to the bat-like little man in the shop, whose plaint that they find him a good new place had begun to assume a querulous tone. "Listen," Edgel asked him, "Who is this Mrs. Waldeck? What kind of a—"

He stopped. The little man was making gestures, his face gone yellow the while. He made a V of two fingers and peered through it, then he pushed the thumb up and closed the same fingers around it, and he spat three times with desperate vigor. And from within his greasy shirt he pulled out a cord from which hung a cross, a medallion, a tiny coral hand with open palm, and a black-obsidian long-horn— These he kissed with fervor and with noises of heavy breathing. Then he looked up at Edgel, thin waxy lids drawn back from shining, frightened eyes.

"I don't talk to her," he said. "I don't talk about her. She bring me those quilt she make—I sell them to Gypsy peoples—that's all. I don't know no more. *Please.* Nomore!" And he scurried into his pack-rat's nest of a store.

And so Edgel set his vigil. Into an empty room on the other side of the street he moved a big chair and some food and a few bottles. She'd have to go out for food herself, sooner or later. And finally, at the start of the blue dusk the afternoon of the second day of his vigil, she did go out. She stood at the steps for a long while. She moved away slowly. But she moved away!

She had several quilts and a shopping bag with her, so she would be gone for some time. How long? Long enough. Edgel crossed the street, entered her house, and sped up the stairs on his toes. Silent, though no one was left in the house to hear him. Mrs. Waldeck was the last tenant.

Edgel told himself, as he fumbled with the keys, that he had a right to do what he was doing—he was the landlord's agent (and damn Balto for making him do

his dirty work!), she, tenant, ex-tenant, really—was living there by sufferance and not by right, her rent refused. And the day of reckoning near. But his heart beat in sickly beats and it told him that what he was doing was vile and cheap. The key rasped in the old lock and then it opened.

The room he entered was dim, and crowded with old furniture. He saw something to one side, flashed his pocket light. The quilting frame, and a bag of dirty-looking cotton padding. It was very warm, and there was a bad smell. Something moved, something sounded. It was in the opposite corner—a mound, like a vast tea-cozy, and on top of it a pair of heavy leather gloves.

Edgel stood there another minute. Then he pulled off the cover, and again he heard movement, sounds, but the light was dim and he could see nothing, so he turned on the electric light and turned to face what seemed to be a huge bird-cage.

At first glance he thought he saw a child inside of it—a child like one of those in the hideous photographs of famines: all bloated huge belly and stick-like arms and legs—but in just an instant he saw it was no ordinary child. Nor was it starving, not the way it moved so quickly again and again, throwing itself against the heavy wires, beating with its tiny fists and gibbering and yammering in that hateful voice: half shrill scream and half thick croak—and both sounds together.

The fists uncurled and made wrinkled palms and twiggy fingers with yellow, twisted talons—cracked-skin fingers with bitten-looking warts and dirty flaps of skin between them, which at once stretched out to become webs up to the first joint. (How many joints there might be, he could not afterwards remember, but more than on his own fingers; and he had been put in mind, by those fingers, of the bandy, loathsome legs of some huge bird-eating spider.) On the lips and chin and paps were scatterings of long hairs, and there were clotted tufts in the armpits. Its coloring was dead and litch-like and the skin glistened with a dewy sheen.

And the head thrust against the wire of the cage, worried at it with tiny sharp teeth, and licked at it with a blue-black tongue.

Yet it was unmistakably a child. A monstrous child. *Her* child.

Edgel flung himself around. Mrs. Waldeck was there. She came at him. There was a flat-iron in her hand. Her face was white and blank. He seized her wrist, struggled, and she spat at him. Then he twisted, and the iron fell. Her eyes looked into his and her lips moved.

"Sometimes he is very sweet," she said. "Sometimes he'll take food from my fingers."

"What—?" Edgel babbled. "What—?" And he thrust her away from between him and the door, and he fled.

After the second double-shot he felt able to unclench his fists and it was safe to relax a bit without fear of the quick, spasmodic grunting noises he had heard himself making as he fled down the rotting stairs. Swallowing, swallowing the quick flow of spittle which the drinks produced, taking the chaser at a gulp to wash away the taste of his own bile, he stared at a mass of color before his eyes. It came into focus just as the dull roaring in his ears did. A calendar of a naked woman with great gourds of breasts, and the pounding brass of a juke-box and on his right the hoarse and knowing voice of some bar-room brave who hadn't even seen Edgel come in. His words drew Edgel back once more to the creature in the cage.

"Whuddiya mean, 'd he make out? Whuddiya mean? He never did 'n he never will, not unless he pays f'r it: *an'* no wonder. *You* seen whuttee looks like? Christ! *that,* only a mother could love!"

■ ■

Announcing

The Best New Mystery Magazine in 20 Years!

KEYHOLE MYSTERY
Magazine

Bringing you these topnotch writers—

ANTHONY BOUCHER
CORNELL WOOLRICH
NORMAN KATKOV
MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD
HAYDEN HOWARD
and others

KEYHOLE MYSTERY *Magazine* 35c

Get your copy now!
On sale at your newstand

CALLING ALL SPACE FANS!

Whether you're engineer, doctor, lawyer or Indian Chief, you can't afford to miss a single issue of SPACE WORLD

It's the big, full-sized magazine that tells you what you want to know about man's newest, most exciting frontier. The world's greatest scientists take you inside their laboratories and blockhouses, tell you what projects they're working on now, what they're going to do in the future.

Wernher von Braun tells SPACE WORLD's readers how he got started; Willie Ley recounts the fascinating story of orbits in the sky; John R. Pierce, Chief of the Bell Telephone Laboratories, writes amusingly about the difference between science and science fiction; M. Vassiliev, a famous Russian astro-scientist, blueprints the coming Russian assault on the moon.

See for yourself how much more you will know and understand about the greatest era in mankind's history — the Age of Space, when you read

SPACE WORLD only 50¢

ON SALE AT YOUR NEWSSTAND NOW!

Or send $3.00 for 6 big issues to — SPACE WORLD, 157 West 57th Street, New York 19, N.Y.

EXCITER