
THE CREEPER IN THE DREAM
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THE BODY HUNTERS
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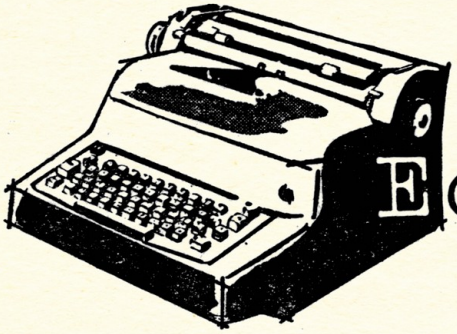

Editorial

IF WE WERE looking rather enviously at the automatic voting machines as we stood in line at the polling place last Election Day, it was because we were thinking how nice it would be to have one to tot up the flood of answers that deluged *Fantastic* after the editorial-preference questionnaire appeared in the October issue.

Really, it's very satisfying to know you have readers who care enough about a publication to spend their own valuable time giving an editor useful suggestions. It's even satisfying to realize that some of you will spend valuable time denouncing us!

In case you would like to know how your personal opinions stack up against the consensus, here is a survey of the results of our editorial-conference-by-mail.

First question we asked, you will recall, was whether you wanted more, less or the same amount of various types of fantasy. The top winner was weird-horror stories, which polled more than twice the total garnered by the other categories combined. Occult stories placed second, with straight science-fiction and light humor bringing up the rear.

Fact or all-fiction? All-fiction won hands down, on the theory, as some of you mentioned, that "fantasy" was just that, and please keep the "real" world out.

When it came to choosing between all-new fiction against an occasional classic reprint, you seemed undecided. The vote was close, with "all-new" holding a slight edge.

Most of you approved of the new classified ad section; and

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REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

NOVELETS

SHORT STORIES

FEATURES

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THE BODY HUNTERS

By PAUL W. FAIRMAN

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

Every night, in a daze of dream, he went to the studio to paint—to paint the snake that haunted him. One night he painted — and did something else besides.

IT BEGAN, technically, with Marta's suggestion at the breakfast table, but the actual beginning was probably the day Frank began worrying about the business to a point where he couldn't sleep.

This brought him to breakfast in a sharp, edgy mood until Marta began dreading the morning meal as an ordeal.

"It isn't as though you really had anything to worry about," she told him. "The business has made more money than you'll ever be able to spend."

"So I've been successful. Is that any reason to squat back on my haunches and let things go to pot?"

"Don't be vulgar at the table, Frank."

"This coffee would make a saint petition the devil."

"There's nothing wrong with the coffee. It's you, Frank Conroy. Maybe you ought to see a psychiatrist."

"Now wouldn't that be jolly? And let's see if I can guess the one you have in mind. His name is Forester and you met him at a lecture two weeks ago."

Marta sighed. You couldn't talk to Frank when he was in this sort of a mood. In fact, she suspected a touch of jealousy at the mention of Doctor Forester. The psychiatrist was in his early thirties—roughly Marta's own age—and handsome, while Frank was in his middle forties. But good heavens, if he was going to start that sort of thing!

Marta said, "All right, all right! I'm sorry I brought it up, but you've got to do some-

thing to take your mind off of business; find something to fill your off-hours."

"We could go dancing all night, than I could sleep all day and the hell with the business."

"I'm serious. Why don't you take up a hobby. Perhaps painting. There's talent in your family."

Frank almost choked on a piece of toast. Great Godfrey. Now she was throwing his forebears into his face! So Grandfather Conroy had been a darned good portrait painter. Also, he'd gone off his rocker during his later years and burned the house down. Good Lord! If Marta was going to start this sort of thing—

Frank paused, gained control of himself, swallowed the toast calmly, and said, "Sorry, pet. I will have to do something. I've got to stop coming down here every morning and biting your head off." He got up and went around to Marta's chair and kissed her. "Forgive me?"

"Darling, you're sweet and there's nothing to forgive. It's just that I'm worried. You've got to slow up."

"It's a promise, pet. See you tonight. Gotta run, now. If the boss comes late, the help goofs off . . ."

"Don't work too hard—please."

"That's a promise, too."

Frank left that morning thoroughly ashamed of himself. He'd been a heel. And there was no excuse for it. There might be some reason if the business was in trouble, but it wasn't. *Conroy & Co., Public Accountants* was doing very well. The firm was efficient, respected, and prosperous.

And Frank Conroy had done pretty well individually. He'd raised a son, educated him, set him up in business, and now Tommy was solidly entrenched over in Detroit.

Frank had been inordinately lucky, too. When Clara died, with Tommy already gone, he'd only a future of bleak loneliness stretching ahead of him.

Then Marta, sophisticated, blonde, lovely, had come up from Florida to visit the Spencers and they recommended Frank as an answer to her income tax problem.

That Marta had stayed single was a miracle, but that she consented to become Mrs. Frank Conroy was the miraculous compounded into quivering ecstasy.

And she'd been a darn good wife, too. As an added induce-

Hollow-eyed and exhausted, Frank was unaware of the force that drew him to the canvas.

ment to marriage, Frank promised to build her a new, modern house out in the Highview district where all the better people were going, but after the honeymoon, Marta fairly bowled him over by declaring that she liked the gloomy, eighteen-room mausoleum that Frank had picked up years before at a bargain because nobody else wanted it. Marta said it had a dignity and a beauty that came only from age and that Frank should be ashamed of himself for even mentioning a new house.

Marta. She should never have allowed him to slip into this stupid rut. When he snapped at her she should have bitten him right back instead of being so sweet and understanding. But she'd hit the nail right on the head, all right.

What he needed was a hobby. . . .

"Frank! What on earth?"

"Don't just stand there, baby. Grab the one hanging from my little finger."

"You look like an August Santa Claus. Wait! The big one's falling off your shoulder!"

They got the half-dozen-odd packages safely onto the table. Frank grinned like a middle-aged gargoyle and Marta demanded:

"What *is* all this truck?"

"My hobby."

"Your hobby! What are you going in for—bridge building?"

"Painting."

"Frank! You didn't take me seriously!"

He looked hurt. "Now wait a minute. What's so funny about that? Churchill paints. Eisenhower paints."

"So does Grandma Moses. But—"

"But what? You said yourself there's talent in my family."

Marta laughed and kissed her husband. "There certainly is, darling. Forgive me. It was just the surprise. Just that you've never shown any inclination in that direction."

"Well, that's all changed, now."

"Frank! I think it's wonderful. I'm so proud of you!"

He favored her with a return kiss. "That's better. And now, if there's time before dinner, I'll open this stuff and knock off an original Conroy. You don't happen to have an old landscape lying around anywhere, do you . . . ?"

The days immediately following—before the first wisps of dark clouds began forming—were delightful. Frank and

Marta spent whole weekends, off together in the country. They would load the car with Frank's equipment on Friday evening, "early enough to catch a sunset," as Frank put it, and start out in whatever direction fancy dictated. Any motel was good enough so long as it had a vacancy and in the morning they were off again.

Frank changed marvelously as a result of this new tonic and Marta fairly bloomed. Her husband had never seen her so vibrant and beautiful and he realized anew how lucky he was.

Once, looking at her across a fire they'd built after dusk, he spoke after a long thoughtful moment. "Darling, why did you marry me?"

Marta had been dozing. She opened her eyes quickly. "Why, what a question!"

"I mean what can you possibly see in me? A middle-aged, unromantic slob."

She smiled. "Feeling sorry for yourself?"

"I can't help wondering sometimes. You're very beautiful and the world is filled with young, attractive men. For instance, there's that psychiatrist fellow, Doctor Forester."

"Frank!" Marta wasn't smiling now. Her eyes threw sparks. "That isn't funny. I don't ever want to hear you talk that way again."

"I'm sorry, angel."

"You're forgiven. Now kiss me and then let's go find some food. I'm starved."

Days to remember. . . .

But then came the Friday just as they were starting out, when Frank turned from putting his easel into the trunk and said, "Honey, do you mind if we call it off?"

Marta set down the lunch basket she was holding. "Why, of course not, dear. Don't you feel well?"

"I'm okay. It's just that I'm so darned tired."

Marta's concern reflected in her voice. "Why? Darling—are you—?"

He waved an impatient hand. "I'm all right. Perfectly all right. It was just a rough day at the office." He smiled ruefully, "Guess I'm not the young sprout I try to make out. I think I'd better stay home this week-end."

"You go in and lie down. I'll unload the car and put it away."

Of course, Frank wouldn't allow that. He lugged the stuff back into the house and put the car into the garage and when he got back, Marta had a cup of hot tea waiting in the living room. Frank was

drowsy after he drank it and slept for an hour.

Then he awoke, he stretched luxuriously and said, "You must have put knockout drops in that brew."

"No, just a tranquilizer that Doctor Forester recommended."

Frank came erect on the lounge. He scowled, "Doctor Forester! Have you been seeing him?"

"Not *seeing* him, Frank. Not in that tone of voice. I consulted him — once. One visit."

"When?"

"About two weeks ago."

"And just what's wrong with you that you think you need the services of a headshrinker?"

Marta frowned angrily. "If you're implying that Doctor Forester is a quack, you're wrong. He's an able, sincere practitioner."

"Never mind that. Let's get back to you."

"I didn't visit him on my account."

"Then whose?"

"Yours."

"Well, if that doesn't beat the devil! And just what did you two do for me without my knowledge?"

Marta got up from where she was sitting. She went to the lounge and took Frank's hand. "Nothing. Nothing at all, darling. I was just worried about you."

"Worried about me! For God's sake, why?"

"It's—it's a little hard to explain, darling."

"Well, start at the beginning and try hard. Use big words if you have to. I'll keep up with you. I've got all my faculties and I'm considered fairly bright and intelligent."

"Frank, please don't make it so difficult. It was nothing except perhaps my own feeling of guilt."

"And what have you been guilty of?"

"Getting you involved in painting. I've been worried for fear you're throwing too much energy into it. That wasn't the purpose of the idea in the first place. It wasn't supposed to become a fixation."

"A fixation? Good heavens, what do you want of me? You suggest a hobby. I go along with you and now I'm criticized for taking an interest in it."

"It's more than just an interest, Frank."

"So, I suppose now you want me to drop it?"

"Of course not. But doesn't today prove you're throwing too much of yourself into it? Exhausting yourself?"

Frank's periods of upset never lasted very long. "I guess you've got a point there." And he was always contrite in ratio to the size of his outbursts. He took Marta's hand and kissed it. "Darling, I'm sorry! I'm so damned sorry. Can you forgive me again? I know that must sound monotonous, but please —just once more?"

Marta's manner indicated she thought herself to be at fault. "It hasn't been that way at all, darling. These last weeks have been wonderful. All I ask is that you take things a little easier; that you don't become so intense about anything, whether it's business *or* painting."

"Or you?"

"That's different."

"Okay, I'll slow down. But just one more question: How come you went to Forester about me? Old Doc Haynes has done pretty well by us for years and it seems to me overexertion is a little more in his line."

Frank saw instantly that he had hurt Marta and his contrition was so sincere that he again accused himself of being a heel and said, "I'm sorry, baby. There I go again. Look —get out those walking shoes and dress up fit to kill. I'll take you out to dinner and prove your husband's not such a bad slob after all."

They went to the swankiest hotel in town and had fun. Frank enjoyed himself, except for the interlude during which Doctor Forester, who happened to be dining there also, came over and asked for a dance with Marta. Frank watched them on the floor. They were disturbingly close to being a perfect couple. That didn't bother Frank, though. He was glad, he told himself firmly, that Marta was beautiful and desirable. In short, he was glad she was Marta.

Frank pondered the advisability of giving up painting after that. He enjoyed it and would certainly miss the pleasures it held for him. But the sudden fatigue—the low spot of that Friday afternoon —bothered him more than he cared to admit. Was he failing? Some men age rapidly after forty-five, and the vague specter of leaving Marta behind—young and vibrant—while he hobbled off into senility, shook him to the roots.

But if he gave up the brush and palette Marta might be hurt. She might feel she'd been responsible for driving him back into his old rut. And there was certainly room for compromise.

So the next evening while they were having coffee in the living room, Frank said, "You know, darling, in a way, I'm glad it happened the way it did. Actually, I was getting a little tired of gadding around to hell and back looking for good compositions. There are other forms of painting. Grandfather Conroy, you know, was a portrait man so maybe I've got some talent in that direction. Why don't I set up a studio in one of the rooms upstairs and try some still life just as a starter?"

"I think that's a wonderful idea."

"Fine. And before long maybe I'll do a portrait of my beautiful wife that will go down to posterity along with the Mona Lisa."

He laughed and Marta laughed back at him and got him another cup of coffee and they were happy for one more precious evening. . . .

Marta went to work on Frank's studio the very next day; a large room on the second floor of the house; in the back where the sun came in to best advantage. She ordered a day bed, an easy chair and a desk, insisting upon same-day delivery so the studio would be ready when Frank got home.

He was delighted, and that evening he painted a bunch of bananas while Marta sat by and watched.

"It's good, Frank. Very good. I don't know too much about art but I'm sure of it."

Frank studied his results in grim concentration. "Maybe, but not good enough. This still life technique is trickier than I thought."

"You know best. Why not sleep on it? Tomorrow evening you can start fresh."

"Uh-huh. Just a little while longer. You run on to bed. I'll be along."

Marta went to bed. Later, she woke to find Frank's bed empty. She put on a robe and went to the studio.

He was there, crouching over his easel, still trying to get the bananas right.

She had to speak twice before her voice yanked him out of his intense preoccupation.

"Frank! You've got to get some rest. Now put that brush down and come to bed."

"Eh?" He looked up, stared at Marta as though she were a stranger, then looked down at the brush in surprise. "What time is it?"

"Three o'clock."

"Good Lord! Where did the time go? Those bananas just aren't right, Marta."

It was one of the rare times she allowed herself the luxury

of exasperation. "Damn the bananas! Come to bed."

Frank went docilely enough, but the next morning he was dazed from weariness and went off to work with only a surly grunt of farewell.

And the situation did not improve. In fact, it worsened in that Marta found it increasingly difficult to talk to him. The old common ground upon which they had previously met in accusation, argument, reconciliation, and apology seemed to have vanished completely.

"I can't get to you anymore, darling. What's happened? We used to talk things out. You used to be reasonable. Now you look at me as though I were trying to rob you of your birthright. You grunt and crawl back into your shell."

Marta hadn't become so worked up about the situation until Frank had practically stopped sleeping in their bedroom; until, morning after morning, she'd gone to the studio to find him either working on his painting of the moment, or sleeping a sleep of exhaustion on the studio daybed.

He brushed her pleas aside as though both she and her arguments were unimportant. Only rarely did he show enough interest to become angry; to flare back positively.

"Marta! For heaven's sake, stop nagging. I'm perfectly all right! Painting does me good. For the first time in my life, I'm really interested in something. Stop playing the role of a nagging wife!"

If his callousness hurt Marta, she did not show it. In fact, with forebearance and tact she finally got through to him and one evening he kissed her, apologized for being a heel and as proof of his sincerity, retired to the bedroom at eight o'clock. Marta tiptoed in ten minutes later and found him in deep sleep.

After she tiptoed out, she went to the phone and spent half an hour talking to Doctor John Forester. When the conversation finally ended, Marta drank a cup of tea and went to bed herself. . . .

The following morning, Marta awoke as usual about seven. She opened her eyes, looked across, and saw an empty bed. She got up and went to Frank's studio.

He was there, but not quite as she expected him to be—in his bathrobe daubing doggedly at a canvas, red-eyed, stubbly, and close to exhaustion.

On the contrary, he was freshly shaven and dressed for

the office. But there the contrast stopped. His face was drawn and pale; his eyes anything but bright and alert.

As Marta entered, he threw her a look of suspicion. "Did you come in here last night and try your hand with my brushes?"

"Why, of course not. What on earth do you mean, Frank?"

"That."

He pointed to a new canvas he'd lately tacked to a frame and set on the easel. "I set that up yesterday—early—before dinner. Then I decided not to work and went to bed."

"I remember. It was there when I called you for dinner."

"Then where did those smears across the bottom come from?"

Marta stepped around him for a closer look. The canvas had been definitely used. Various shades of pastels had been smeared across the bottom of it to a height of approximately three inches. "You must have started to work on a new painting and it slipped your mind."

"Such things don't slip my mind. What do you think I am—a doddering old man? Besides, who ever heard of doing a painting from the bottom up. It's ridiculous. Someone deliberately smeared my fresh canvas, and if it wasn't you, then who was it?"

"But Frank, it doesn't look like a smear. It's too—too orderly. Maybe no one ever started a painting at the bottom before but that looks like some kind of a beginning to me."

"I tell you you're being ridiculous."

Marta laid a hand on his arm, striving to soothe him. "All right, dear. It was just an idea but it isn't important. Come down and I'll make your coffee."

Frank said no more. The subject appeared to be closed. But during breakfast, he opened another one. Setting his cup down abruptly, he asked, "Who were you talking to on the phone last night?"

He threw the question so abruptly that Marta was caught completely off guard. "But I thought you were—"

"Asleep? No doubt. But it so happens I came down for a glass of milk."

"I was talking with Doctor Forester."

"It follows. I won't embarrass you by asking why." Frank got up from the table and stalked out of the house.

But he came home as usual and made no further mention of the Doctor Forester call, ac-

tually, he was afraid to. He was jealous and angry but from the back of his mind a voice of caution whispered. *Be careful. If you push too hard she may turn on you. She may leave you.*

This was unthinkable. He could not conceive facing the future without Marta, so he wrestled with his musing in silence.

Marta volunteered no information; gave no explanation and this bit even deeper. He went to his studio and tried to work but couldn't keep his mind on it; so, around nine o'clock, he put on his pajamas and dropped into bed. He was exhausted.

But why? He hadn't worked overly hard. He'd had a good night's sleep the night before. Then why this bone weariness? Why did he feel as though he'd spent the day lifting pumpkin-sized rocks out of a ditch?

"Drink this, dear. It will make you sleep better."

He opened his eyes to see Marta bending over him with a glass.

"What is it?"

"Warm milk."

He drank it, thinking bitterly, that tonight she wasn't taking any chances. She was going to see to it he'd have no reason for going to the kitchen while she talked to Doctor Forester.

Marta stood waiting for the glass and as she watched him she appeared to be reading his mind because as she took it from him she said, "Frank, if I was in love with John Forester and wanted to talk to him don't you think I would be smart enough to contact him during the day, when you are at work?"

She turned quickly and left the bedroom and Frank Conroy felt like the world's prize idiot. How could he have doubted— He opened his mouth to call after her; to bring her back and ask her to forgive him.

But before he could speak out, a thought struck him. Marta hadn't said *Doctor Forester*. She'd said *John Forester*. Mighty informal. A slip on her part?

While he was mulling this over, he went to sleep. . . .

The following morning was an almost exact repetition of the previous one except that this time the peremptory bellowing of her name brought Marta out of bed.

She hurried to the studio and found Frank staring at the canvas.

"You've been at it again," he accused. "Now tell me—for

heaven's sake, let me in on it. What's the point in a childish trick like this? What do you expect to gain. If you want to paint just say so and I'll give you a brush. But why sneak in here—"

"Frank! Stop it! Stop it!" Marta looked from her husband's dark, angry face to the canvas. A chill whipped up her body, leaving goose pimples in its wake.

The canvas had been tampered with. Something had been added; a continuation of the previous night's work—about six inches in all now, across the bottom.

"Frank. I had nothing to do with this. Believe me! Why you said it yourself. What would be the point of my coming while you were asleep and smearing your canvas?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

Marta came close to him. She put her hands on his shoulders. "Darling. I'm so scared!"

He frowned into her eyes. "Good Lord! What of? There's nothing frightening about a petty annoyance. And I've certainly got the right to inquire into it."

"But with no explanation, is it petty? Is it only an annoyance. Frank—why don't you give up the whole thing?"

"Are you out of your mind? Why must I give up the one thing left that gives me pleasure?"

"Darling, do you realize what you're saying?"

"I'm quite aware of what I said."

"That our life together is falling apart? That — that something's happened to your love?"

"I said no such thing."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to irritate you, but *has* it given you pleasure? Hasn't it on the contrary, become a source of —of distrust? A block between us?"

"I think you're deliberately evading the issue, Marta. We started out originally to discover who smeared my canvas."

Marta stared at it for a long moment. "Frank, it isn't a smear."

"Then what is it?"

"Look closely. It has been very carefully painted. It has form and meaning. It's the beginning of something regardless of what you said about no one ever starting a painting this way."

His frown deepened as he studied the canvas. "I'll admit it's a remarkably orderly smear—" he was silent as he leaned closer. "—but if it isn't

a daub in pastel colors, what is it?"

"I think I know."

"Then tell me."

"It's the beginning of a snake."

"A snake!"

"Yes. A snake or a serpent of some kind. Can't you see the tail? Only a very little bit of it, but whoever is doing it is painting a snake on that canvas."

Frank wasn't quite as belligerent now. This new suggestion—valid, as he was forced to admit—caught his whole attention.

He said, "—*Whoever is doing it* . . . You make it sound as though we have a houseful of frustrated painters. Remember. You and I are all alone here."

"All right, Frank, let's use common sense. If I *were* smearing your canvas I would do just that—smear it. I'm not a painter. I have no artistic ability whatsoever."

The truth of this reached him. His eyes widened as he turned them back on the pastel strip.

"I wouldn't be capable of doing what's on that canvas," Marta said.

Frank had no reply. His frown remained, but it was more abstract now; less personalized in Marta's direction.

He moved slowly toward the door, then stopped and waited for Marta to pass through first. As they moved down the stairs, he said, "Why don't you make some coffee, hon."

"Of course. I'll get breakfast right away."

"I'm not hungry. Make something for yourself. Just bring me coffee. . . .

When Marta brought the coffee into the living room where Frank sat silent on the lounge, she thought—from his appearance and expression—that another apology was in the making.

This was not the case, though. Frank's manner had changed completely and his thoughts hadn't veered from the riddle of the canvas.

He watched her set the percolator down on the coffee table, staring fixedly at its bright surface. "It would seem that I'm crowded into a corner, Marta."

"How do you mean, Frank?"

"Facing it squarely, plain logic indicates that I got up during the night on two occasions and did some painting in my sleep."

Marta filled the cups, relieved that his hostility had worn itself out. "Perhaps that is the answer, but it's no tragedy.

Such things have no doubt been done—"

He ignored her words and cut in. "Assuming this as true, three questions arise: One—What is the cause? Two—Why do I paint, under those conditions in a completely different manner than I go about it normally. And three—Why am I painting something alien to my waking mind—carrying through toward an idea that I'm sure never originated in my conscious thoughts?"

Marta had been sitting opposite him. She crossed over suddenly and dropped to her knees beside him. "Darling, will you please listen to me and not get angry?"

He passed a gentle hand along her cheek and smiled into her eyes. "Of course, sweetheart."

"I'm not saying any of this is serious. Perhaps it isn't, but I think we should talk to someone who's business it is to know about these things."

"A psychiatrist."

"Yes, darling, and not Doctor Forester necessarily. There are other psychiatrists as good and better. We'll go to the city and locate one."

His smile deepened and became even more tender. It was as though she were a beloved child. "Forester is the only one in town here?"

"I'm afraid so, but—"

"We'll consult Doctor Forester, then. I don't think it's anything serious, either. Just tension and over-exertion. But I'm curious about the symptoms. I'd like to know the answers and I'm sure Forester will be able to spell them out for us. . . .

Doctor John Forester was a good man in his line. He had been held in high regard by his instructors during his preparatory years and his post graduate work in New York City was rated as brilliant.

Why he turned away from potentially greater opportunity in a metropolitan area to set up practice in a relatively small city, was explainable only as a reflection of his missionary spirit and wholehearted belief in the future of psychiatry.

If John Forester had had the religious call, he would have gravitated, quite naturally to darkest Africa, or to the most difficult missionary post available. As it was, he was similarly located in relation to psychiatry. More than one fellow practitioner, upon hearing where John Forester had set up his office, shrugged expressively and muttered, "What a waste."

But Forester did not con-

sider it so. He was not exactly penniless and was thus in a position to wait it out; or rather, to build it up as he went along. He was personable and impressive in a David Nivenish sort of way, so when patients were reluctant to come beating on his door, he went forth and beat upon their's by addressing women's clubs, attending dinners, and getting in a plug for his profession wherever he was able to.

Forester's weakness as a practicing psychiatrist—if it could really be called a weakness—was probably co-existent with his pioneer spirit. It was an intense curiosity about the unplumbed depths of man's mind; a tendency, at times, to observe rather than cure; an inclination to experiment with more dramatic and uncertain techniques rather than to work carefully within the limits laid down by good men before him.

Yet he did not go forth seeking more complex minds to unravel. He liked small community life and the missionary angle of his location. It was both profitable and pleasant. One met such interesting people—and a surprising number of beautiful women.

Take that Marta Conroy, for instance. A gorgeous creature even if she did have the greatest father complex of the century. John Forester was far from a lecher but neither was he a prude and was quite frank—at least with himself—in admitting that Marta Conroy had just about everything a man could want in a woman.

And one rather unfortunate addition to the overall—a husband that kept her continually on edge; a misfit that blocked himself off in all directions. But still, with a mind—if what Forester had seen was any indication—that presented interesting possibilities. Too bad he had no use for head shrinkers.

So it was with surprise and pleasure that Forester answered his waiting-room buzzer that morning and found Mr. and Mrs. Frank Conroy waiting for an interview.

He said good morning and shook Marta's hand.

"This is my husband, Frank, Doctor. We took a chance and came down. Perhaps we should have phoned for an appointment."

Forester had a most engaging smile and a charmingly self-deprecating couchside manner.

"Not at all necessary. Everybody in this town is so

disgustingly normal, I'm thinking of giving my cleaning woman some free treatments to keep in practice."

Frank Conroy shook hands with Forester and was favorably impressed. There certainly wasn't any conceit or pompousness about the man.

Forester opened the door to his private office. "Come on in and let's see if I can figure out which one of you is the patient. When two people come in at once, I usually miss by a country mile."

Marta laughed. "Neither of us, really, Doctor, but Frank wants to talk to you about some nervous tensions he's been having. I've got some shopping to do."

Forester smiled easily. "Maybe the shopping sprees are what's causing the tensions. Will let you know. Come on in, Mr. Conroy."

They did not use the couch. They sat like two members of a club, drinking Doctor Forester's excellent Scotch and discussing casual things at first; until Frank found himself giving Forester the whole disturbing picture; or at least as much as he was aware of. Forester appeared, from his preoccupation and comparative sparsity of words to be circling the problem warily, sniffing at it from all sides.

Finally, he said, "I'd like to see that painting. Why don't you invite me to dinner tonight?"

And Frank thought it was a fine idea. . . .

John Forester did not appear to be in any great hurry, that evening, to get to the business of the moment. And he could hardly be blamed for his reluctance.

Marta was a charming hostess and while Frank couldn't be sure that she was extending herself beyond the usual in cordiality and graciousness, the suspicion was high in his mind.

He had resolved, however, to hold his negative emotions completely in check; to consciously react from the assumption that he had been an oversuspicious, misinterpreting idiot and that Marta's love and devotion was clearly obvious.

And he did a pretty good job of it but he was still relieved when Forester turned his attentions from Marta, rubbed his hands together briskly, and said "Perhaps we had better have a look at that mysterious masterpiece. Another brandy might dull my artistic appreciation."

Forester's tone was light and casual; nothing seemed

out of place—nothing Frank could put his finger on. Yet, when they were standing in the studio, their attention centered on the canvas in question, he couldn't get the idea out of his mind that something was very much amiss; definitely out of the ordinary; plain wrong.

But he was a little fuzzy from three brandies. Also he was doggedly determined not to be suspicious, so he was hostile to the feeling in the first place.

Then Forester was bending over the pastel strip, studying it closely, saying, "It certainly is a snake, a serpent, or at least the beginning of one," and Frank thought there was more eager interest in his face than concern for his patient justified.

Forester straightened and regarded Frank keenly. "And you have no recollection whatever of having painted this?"

"None."

"I see." Forester spoke cheerfully. "Well, we have a basis on which to proceed now. I'd like you to come to the office tomorrow afternoon and we'll have a talk. How about three o'clock?"

"I can make it."

Marta's eyes were on Doctor Forester's handsome face. Her expression was one of guarded apprehension. Fear. But fear of what?

Frank turned away and stubbornly told himself: *Fear for her husband. What else? Conroy, you're going to lick this stupid jealousy or die trying.*

He turned back. "Fine, Doc. And now, how about a nightcap before you go? A brandy to cap off the evening?"

Forester gallantly offered Marta his arm and the professional aspect of the evening was ended. They had two brandies instead of one and the Conroys finally got to bed at a quarter past one.

Frank went to sleep so quickly he had no recollection, later, of having laid down. But the brandy could have been responsible for that.

And responsible, too, perhaps, for his feeling of complete exhaustion the following morning. It was as though sleep had drained rather than replenished him. He finally got his eyes open and struggled out of bed. He peered over to find Marta sleeping peacefully, and groped for his robe with impatience.

This time he did not shower and shave first; this time he went straight to the studio, the canvas drawing him like an all-powerful magnet. It

was there. It hadn't gone anyplace.

And something had been added; another application of pastels across the bottom, bringing the frightening band of color to a total of about ten inches.

Frank looked closer. Flawless work. No doubt about it. And no doubt, now, that a thick-bodied serpent was in the making there on the easel.

Cold sweat chilled Frank. He straightened, reached a hand toward the palette that lay on the small table nearby and picked up a brush.

There was green paint on it. The paint was still wet. . . .

"Just lie there, Mr. Conroy. Take off your jacket and tie and make yourself comfortable."

"Thank you."

Forester laughed easily and gestured with a wave of his hand. "Don't let any of this weigh you down. It's set up mainly to impress frustrated females. And then, too, you'd be surprised how many tired businessmen appreciate an afternoon nap."

There was more of this easing, inconsequential chatter and Frank was looking up at Forester from a prone position and the hypodermic needle Forester had in his hand looked as big as an elephant's trunk.

"I'm going to quiet your nerves a little," Forester said. "That's about all it amounts to. The general idea of psychiatry is to get people to talk about things they normally keep locked up inside of them. These things are usually boxed in so deep the patient himself doesn't know they're there."

"What are you going to try and find out, Doctor?"

Forester frowned at the wall and then stared intently at the business end of the hypodermic. "Let me put it this way. We've got to assume, as a base for starting off, that you are getting up nights without knowing it. It seems pretty obvious that while in a deep sleep, you are able to go to your studio, find your brushes, mix your paints and do some remarkably good painting."

"I guess no other answer fits the facts. But is this so tremendously exceptional?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, sleep walking in itself is not taken too seriously by the medical profession. At least, I've never heard it referred to as being other than an isolated phenomenon. No doubt there have been cases of people doing things beside walking while they're roaming around unconscious. Perhaps

cooks, cook. Maybe pianists play the piano—"

"That's a perceptive generalization and you're quite right. But it would be a rare thing if a cook prepared a dish, while asleep, that was not habitual while awake. And a pianist who never got beyond "Home, Sweet Home," would not, as a rule, render Beethoven's Fifth."

"I don't quite get your point."

"It's really a modification of the basic tendency. You are a painter and you could naturally paint, but isn't it interesting that you adopt not only a completely alien technique but proceed in a manner incompatible with the first principles of the art?"

"I see what you mean. I always block out my work. And no painter in his right mind would work in strips upward from the bottom of a canvas."

"Right."

Frank lay back on the couch. His eyes hazy with thought. But not, oddly in relation to the points they'd just discussed. Something else bothered him—Forester's tone and manner when he'd said: *Isn't it interesting that you adopt not only . . . ?* The psychiatrist's attitude seemed so impersonal; almost gleeful, as though Frank were not a person but a freak of happy circumstance; a subject with a six-legged mind; so to speak, and aren't I the lucky practitioner to have him come my way.

But it was vague, intangible, Frank told himself; an inaccurate distortion of his own tense perceptions.

He sighed, tried to loosen his muscles, and the bite of the hypo needle came as a relief in that the sharp pain was real and understandable. . . .

Doctor Forester rang the Conroy bell at eight that evening. Frank, too tired to work in the studio was drinking a cup of hot chocolate in the living room preparatory to retiring. When Marta brought the psychiatrist in Frank's eyes lingered for a moment on Marta's face. Was there more in her expression than a friendly smile of welcome? Was she happier to see Forester than she should have been? Frank couldn't be sure about it.

Forester had a small case of some sort with him. "I took the liberty of dropping over," he said, "because I wanted you to hear what went on today in my office."

"What went on?"

"Our question and answer session. I didn't mention it at the time, but I put it all on

tape. You're head should be pretty well cleared of the shot, now, and I thought you'd be interested."

"I certainly am."

"Fine. This is a portable unit—records and then plays it back." Forester took the unit out of its case.

"I'm familiar with them," Frank said. "We have two at the office."

"Fine. Why don't you take it somewhere—to your bedroom, perhaps—where you can concentrate undisturbed? And in the meantime," Forester's smile radiated his own personal brand of charm, "perhaps your good wife has a drink for a weary head shrinker."

"Why, of course," Marta assured him.

Frank put down his cup, picked up the machine, and left the room without a word.

He went to the studio instead of the bedroom, probably for no other reason than to assert an independence of Forester's directive, however minor. Once there, he pondered what he had come to mentally identify as the *snake picture* for a few moments, then plugged in the tape machine and sat down to listen. The recording was clear and distinct.

The beginning of the tape was of no great interest. He remembered both the question and his answers. They had discussed his deep weariness upon arising each morning, and there was reference to the Friday afternoon he hadn't felt up to the weekend painting schedule. The first question he had no recollection of hearing or answering was:

"Are you in love with your wife?"

"Love my wife — very much."

"Is the difference in your ages a matter of concern to you?"

"Think about it a lot."

"You worry about it?"

"I worry."

"When it is on your mind do you worry more about the future than the present?"

"I have plenty of money. No worry about—future."

"You must not evade my questions. I am referring to your virility. Are you aware that Marta is a young, passionate woman in the prime of life?"

Frank twisted in his chair as the cold words vibrated off the tape; at his dulled, foggy answers.

"Marta—fine woman."

"Are you able, now, to satisfy Marta?"

There was a brushing sound

as though he had been writhing there on the couch; trying to resist the questions.

"Marta happy — satisfied."

"Then perhaps it is the future that bothers you. Marta will no doubt be physically demanding upon you until well into her forties. Are you afraid you will lose her love if you are not able to fulfill the demands?"

"Marta loves me—always love me."

The tape was silent, indicating the new direction into which Forester now turned.

"Do you remember getting up after you went to bed recently?"

"Got up. Thirsty. Wanted milk."

"Later than that. Do you remember getting up because there was something you had to do?"

"Got up. Work. Work to be done."

"What sort of work? What did you have to do?"

"Paint. Paint body hunters."

"Body hunters? What are they?"

"Body hunters. Picture. Had to paint body hunters."

"Is that the name of the picture in your studio?"

"Yes. Body Hunters. Not much time. Must hurry. Paint Body Hunters."

"Why didn't you block out the painting the way you do your others?"

"No time. Not necessary."

"Why do you paint only a three-inch strip every night?"

"All I know. That much—every night. Have to wait for more."

"Who told you to paint—"

The brushing sound came again. And more, this time; indications of what might have been a mild struggle and his own, thickened voice:

"Must get up. Must paint. Body Hunters—"

"Not now. You don't know what to paint. You won't know until tonight."

"That's right. Don't know. Tired. Very tired."

Another pause and Frank could visualize Forester's bright, alert eyes, boring into him there in the office; waiting for him to drift back into the helpless, submissive sleep. Then—

"Who are the Body Hunters?"

"Who are—invaders I think. Monsters. Evil things out of swamps. Hot swamps. Older than time—"

"Who tells you to paint the Body Hunters?"

"Paint! Paint, then kill. Kill—kill!"

There was a pause, now,

followed by a choked garbled scream—as though evil itself had risen up out of his own throat to strangle him.

"Take it easy—take it easy. Everything's all right." Forester's voice trying to quiet him. Forester's hands holding him down.

It was evidently finished. Shaken deep in his being, Frank Conroy sat staring at the unfinished painting. It had a new name. The snake picture no longer, it was now The Body Hunters; an uncompleted horror with implications of unexplained horror; unexplained, but terrible in its weird frame of hidden thought laid bare on the tape.

Am I going mad? Frank asked. *Am I going out of my mind? Am I—*

"How did it work out?"

"I can't tell yet."

Voices. Frank raised his head, thinking Marta and Forester had entered the studio. But the door was still closed. He was alone.

"Do you think he suspects?"

"No. At least not yet."

The voices were coming from the tape. He had neglected to snap it off. Obviously, Forester had been guilty of the same oversight that morning in the office, and the truth sprang full-blown into Frank's shocked mind. Marta had entered the office. The voices were faint, but entirely clear. They had been standing nearby discussing him while he'd been lying on the couch!

"What will happen when he finds out?"

"Perhaps he won't have to. There are techniques I might use. Shock, for instance. I may be able to direct his mind where I want it while we—"

The words faded as Forester evidently moved farther away, perhaps out into the waiting room. Frank ran the tape out to its end just in case Forester had returned, but there was no more dialogue, and when the spool emptied, the machine stopped automatically.

Frank Conroy was unable to move. The blow, delivered in two installments, the second on the heels of the first, numbed him mentally and physically. He sat there for a long time—until his mind began functioning again and he was aware of the questions wracking through his mind. What were they planning? Murder? Maybe they hoped to force him into suicide. There were any number of devilish variations of the same theme and they had probably examined and discarded more than a man could count.

The second part of the tape put an entirely new complexion on the first. What Frank had considered to be honest, however shocking, now assumed all the aspects of an engineered device. Rigging the tape would not be difficult. Frank's answers could be repetitions of words Forester had actually put into his mouth. Cutting and splicing would do the rest.

Frank smiled without humor. A little technical skill could achieve the delusion but nothing could correct Forester's stupidity at not turning off the machine. Smaller points than that had upset better plans than theirs.

But what was their plan? And what would he do to protect himself? He considered the problem and made a quick decision. Nothing. Forearmed with the tape's revelations, he was in a position to watch and wait. Obviously, no violence was intended so there was no pressing reason for quick action on their part.

He would watch and wait.

Frank was surprised at the lack of hurt in his being. He'd felt that regardless of his suspicions he could not have lived through actual proof of Marta's infidelity. But the proof had been presented and the hurt was a cold, dull anger; an implacable desire for revenge; the vicious assertion of his own personality into the picture by whatever means he could devise.

The anger, fortunately, was one he could control; submerge under a pleasant mask. There were things he must find out; who was really painting the picture; to exactly what point did they expect the Body Hunter fiction and all the rest of it to lead?

Frank looked at his watch. He had been in the studio over an hour. Forester was certainly giving the "shock" enough time to take effect, he thought grimly.

But probably they weren't even thinking of that. The living room was a cozy place to plan their future and perhaps give each other some samples of the delights to come. Or had that part already been taken care of?

Regardless, Frank would have to be careful. It would be impolite for a betrayed husband to break in on a pair of young lovers and embarrass them. Strictly not cricket.

Frank made a point of bumping the recorder against the bannister twice on his way down the stairs. And when he entered the living room, Marta smiled almost gaily and

said, "Darling. Doctor Forester loves our house. He just told me there is a brooding somber atmosphere about it that fascinates him. If it were for sale, he says he'd like to buy it."

Buy it? Hardly. The doctor has plans of acquiring it much less expensively.

Frank hid this thought behind a smile. They had a drink. Forester left a little while later, and that night three more inches of pastel appeared on the lower half of the painting. . . .

Frank Conroy's whole attitude underwent a change, one so swift and complete that he marveled at it. Still, it was not too hard to rationalize. The core of the problem had been Marta's love. Having no reason to be certain he did not still possess it, he had reacted accordingly; fought for it so to speak; sought to maintain that possession.

But now, he knew the facts; that Marta and Forester had betrayed him; were in the midst of some devilish plot to deprive him, if not of his life, then, at least, of his freedom. All indications pointed in this direction. They wanted him out of the way.

So with this grim knowledge in the forefront he was able to turn from what had been only an illusion—Marta's love—and concentrate on the first law—survival.

And he was pleased with his skill at this new game; at his ability to hide his true thoughts and feelings behind a façade of seeming cooperation.

The various aspects of the plot became clear in the light of his new knowledge—all points except one. Who was doing the piecework on the canvas? Marta did not have the ability. Did that mean some unknown third party was involved in the conspiracy?

Frank was not required to ponder this for any great length of time, however. Forester inadvertently enlightened him during Frank's third visit to the psychiatrist's office.

Forester had set a pattern of casual friendliness that Frank decided could be only an attempt at camouflage. Logical, too, because they certainly didn't want him to suspect a thing until they were ready to lower their boom. When that time came, he was sure, the action would be sudden and decisive.

But until then, Forester was being casual and pleasant.

During the third visit, For-

ester brought out a small canvas. "What's your opinion of this?" he said.

It was an autumn landscape. "Very good," Frank said.

"Painting was a hobby of mine some years ago. Haven't touched a brush lately, though. Don't seem to get much time."

"Excellent detail."

"Thank you."

Forester put the painting away and Frank wondered at his stupidity in showing it. Didn't Forester realize he was furnishing the link Frank must have been looking for? Conceit, perhaps, rather than stupidity. Probably Forester hadn't the least idea of Frank's awareness. Conceit and stupidity. Actually they were the same thing.

At any rate, a major riddle was solved. Frank knew who was adding the mysterious strips to the canvas each night. An elaborate plot, to be sure, but its very complication pointed to a grim objective.

As Frank saw it the end could be one of three. They could be planning a pattern of such obvious insanity that they could have him put away without any trouble. They could be trying to actually drive him out of his mind so that the insanity claim would be legitimate. Or perhaps they were setting up a background against which they could kill him and prove legal justification; a claim that they had slain a madman.

Frank sat watching Forester put the painting away, wondering now, about only one thing. What drug was Marta giving him and just how was she accomplishing it without his detecting it?

It was probably administered in various ways. Any way she could manage it from night to night. He knew a few things about it. The stuff was tasteless or he would have detected it, his chances of awakening from its effects were nil, and it produced an exhausting sleep rather than a refreshing one.

"—Your morning exhaustions," Forester was saying. "They indicate, of course, that you are laboring under some tremendous frustration that's lodged in your subconscious."

"Can you be sure of that?"

"I'm very sure of it. That, coupled with the strange compulsion to paint—the thing we brought out on that tape you listened to pretty well outlines the problem we have to deal with."

That wasn't all we brought out on the tape, Frank told

himself. He said, "What do we do next, Doctor?"

Forester frowned professionally. "Keep digging," he replied.

"And tie me into bed every night?"

"I think not. At this point observation is most important. We must find out exactly what it is we have to deal with. From now on Mar—Mrs. Conroy will keep an eye on you if you sleep-walk to your studio at night. In fact, it may be necessary that I observe you myself."

Step by step, Frank was thinking. Moving in slowly but surely. That would certainly be very nice—an entree into the house—an excuse for being there while he himself was drugged into unconsciousness.

A sudden flare of hatred swept through him. For a moment he could hardly control his hands. He wanted to take Forester by the throat and tell him how stupid he was while choking him to death.

Instead, he lay meekly back on the couch and said, "You're the doctor. Anything you say. . . ."

Frank did his best to detect the drug that night but it was mixed somewhere into his dinner much too skillfully to be found. He complained about the taste of the coffee and the butterscotch pudding, but Marta hid any fear she might have had behind a mask of concern.

He got a certain pleasure out of staying up later than usual. Marta said nothing but he was entirely aware of her nervousness as the minutes ticked by. Finally, at ten-fifteen, he got up from his chair and stretched.

"Well, I guess I'll hit the pillow. Feel a little done in."

Marta looked up from her book with a good imitation of worry. "Perhaps everything will be all right tonight."

"I hope so. But if I take it into my head to do a little painting, Forester tells me you're going to follow along and keep tabs."

"Yes, he suggested that I watch for any sign of—"

Marta stopped, but Frank didn't press her for the rest of it. Whatever she said would no doubt have been a lie anyhow. "Okay. Let me know how things come out."

He wondered if he had overdone it a little bit—his air of unconcern — because Marta got up from her chair and came close to him.

"Darling, don't worry about anything. Everything is going to work out all right. I know

it. Doctor Forester is a very able psychiatrist."

Frank was sure of that; also, the handsome doctor was able in other directions, too. Able at breaking up a man's home; extremely able at plotting a man's death or the equivalent thereof.

And while he stood there with Marta close to him, Frank discovered something else. His love for her was gone. His feeling now was very close to plain hatred, if hatred was the emotion that made a smooth throat look attractive for strangling.

He smiled. "Sure, honey. Everything will turn out fine. Good night."

"I'll be up soon. . . ."

Sometime in the night; somewhere in the deep haze of his slumber, he heard them talking. He could not tell when it happened or where he was because he seemed to be in a dream but he knew he was not. There was the feeling that they stood in the bedroom looking down at him; yet that didn't seem to be quite right either.

Marta's voice seemed to be coming from far away in the rise and fall of a ghostly cadence.

"If the worst comes, what will happen?"

Forester's voice was unmistakable. "That depends on what you consider to be the worst. Death—or the other."

Frank could have sworn Marta began to cry, then. Was she losing her nerve? Forester must have suspected that last also, because he spoke soothingly.

"Now, now. It isn't as bad as all that. Anticipation in these things is always worse than the reality."

"Are you sure we're doing the right thing?"

"There is only one way to do it. I'm certain he would go completely to pieces if he knew the facts."

Even in his sleep Frank appreciated the irony of that. He wondered how Forester would take it if he knew his patient had all the facts and was doing quite nicely regardless.

Then he seemed to fall into a black abyss and the voices faded. . . .

He awoke next morning in the depths of a greater weariness than he had ever known. It was as though he had spent the night climbing a mountain hour after hour without rest. How could a man's bones ache so? How could his flesh seem such a burden?

Marta was not in her bed and Frank, after some mental

effort, got up and into his robe. He went out into the hall and stood for some minutes debating whether or not to check the canvas. It seemed useless. He knew Forester would certainly have done his nightly chore with the greens and the blues and the yellows.

He finally turned from the head of the stairs and shuffled wearily to the studio door and entered.

Yes, the stint had been accomplished. The work was going well. Frank stared at it. The picture was almost half-finished, now. The snake was developing into a mythical serpent of some kind. Certainly no such reptile existed in fact. Also the feet of a girl had now been painted in and the lower part of a white, diaphanous gown.

As Frank continued to stare at the canvas, there came to him a strange feeling of association; as though the idea behind it were a part of his mind; a segment of some fevered dream long forgotten.

He shivered. What were they doing to him? Was hypnotism involved somewhere in the plot? Was hypnotism of an unconscious man a possibility?

Frank dropped into a chair, infinitely tired, and into his chaotic mind came a vision of Marta in Forester's arms—there in his own house—flaunting him, insulting him, heaping contempt upon him.

And the rage that had flared but feebly through the crust of his confusion and bewilderment, blazed up, hot and all-consuming. He put his face into his hands and cursed them in thick whispers. Kill! Kill first or it would be too late. Kill before whatever deviltry they had in mind could evolve out of their drugs and heartless make-believe. A man had a right to protect his home.

Frank straightened up and smiled a smile that would have chilled Forester had the psychiatrist seen it. He got up and walked to the window, his weariness gone, a new-found strength rising out of the boiling well of his rage.

He stood looking out into the yard but not seeing, his whole attention turned inward, focused upon the necessity of capping his well of violence until he had use for it; costuming his rage in garments of quiet demeanor until his plans were made and he could turn its full force upon his tormentors.

He smiled again but more gently this time; a quiet cordial smile. He spoke, testing

his voice for the qualities they must find there, and said in quiet, sincere tones, "This house is remote. Screams will not be heard. They'll both regret the day they joined forces against Frank Conroy." He left the studio and went downstairs to find Marta and Doctor Forester having coffee together in the patio. Marta looked fresh and dewy in her morning gown, and Forester looked like a man who appreciated fresh, dewy women.

"Oh, Frank, darling. We were going to let you sleep as long as possible. You need your rest so badly."

Forester smiled cheerfully, "Right, old man. How do you feel?"

"I never felt better in my life," Frank said. "Is the coffee still hot, my dear?"

Forester sat back in his chair—like a man in complete possession, Frank thought—and said, "We now have an eye-witness account of your sleep-walking ativities, Mr. Conroy. Marta was just telling me."

Frank turned to her. "And how did I conduct myself, my dear?"

Marta glanced at Forester as though for guidance. Frank caught the look, Forester's almost imperceptible nod of assent, and had a quick struggle with the chained rage inside. Did they have that much contempt for him; did they think him so stupid that they could arrange his destruction while he sat by? He placated the rage, a living thing in his heart by promising a greater triumph later; something better than the mere unmasking of these two. Satisfied, the rage writhed back, like a sullen snake, into its pit of cold, contained fury.

"You got up at one-thirty by the bed clock, dear. Your eyes were open, though I'm sure you saw nothing. You walked straight to the studio and I'm sure you began working immediately."

"But you aren't certain?"

"It was pitch dark."

"We should have had a light on," Forester said. "We overlooked the point. I—"

Frank turned quickly to Forester. "What time did you arrive?"

Forester blinked and Marta interposed quickly. "I was just going to say—I called Jo—Doctor Forester and told him, as he'd asked me to."

Frank's eyes remained on the psychiatrist. "And was I still working when you arrived?"

"Oh, I was already here, old man. I was certain the routine

would be repeated, so I came over around midnight. Marta gave me a drink while we were waiting."

"Was that all?" Frank asked.

This startled both of them. "Was that all, *what,* old man?"

Frank struggled with a smile that almost broke through. It was fun playing with these fools, dancing around them like a shadow as they plodded stupidly on their unspeakable way.

"All that I did—just paint? Was there nothing else that would give you a clue?" The question struck him again—forcibly—why were they doing this? What was it about this outrageous masquerade that would further their ends? It had to be one of the three; a justification for putting him away; grounds to support a murder under the guise of suicide while of unsound mind; or a structure upon which to kill him and claim defense from a berserk madman.

"I'd hoped for something a little more definitive. That was why I came without telling you. I didn't want any variable in your mind that would change the pattern."

Well done, Frank thought. Our Don Juan is as nimble as a cat in a corn popper. Frank chuckled inwardly. He was enjoying himself.

"But actually we have enough to go on—clear evidence of an interesting hered — a compulsion springing from race consciousness to speak. Uprooting it will take a little time but the problem is not unique by any means."

Of course not. Men come into other men's homes every day and plot mischief with the wives while the husbands sit by and applaud. Not unique at all, Frank thought.

"I want you to go on with the painting and when you're through with it we'll show you something that will amaze you."

The inside of a padded cell, no doubt, Frank answered silently as he got to his feet and said, "Fine. But now I've got an office to run, so I'll leave you to amuse each other." He thought he saw a puzzled look on Marta's face as he left. Was she frightened? She certainly had cause to be. . . .

Frank had not planned to move so swiftly, but all during that morning at the office, he had before him the smug face of Doctor Forester; Marta's utter dependence upon him as indicated by his silent direction of her words, his comings and goings on his own terms.

This was food for the rage to batten on, gain strength from, a basis to rise up from its own authority and mock him.

It gave the rage an authority from which to sneer at him and accuse him of enjoying his role of awareness. But when he admitted this was true, the rage convinced him it was but a fragile rationalization of his own suffering; a shell that he must break out of in order to establish his authority as a man. They had sinned against him and they must pay and all else was excuse for weakness.

So he went home early in the afternoon and was fortunate in having the place to himself. Marta could have been off on any of a half a dozen afternoon occupations, but she was obviously somewhere with Forester. Good. He could use the time.

He began with a complete survey of the house. Even to the attic which served as a storehouse. Here, many things synonomous with the Conroy clan had come to rest, mainly because there was space to store them; residue from the lives of grandfathers, fathers, uncles, aunts; things of actual value and of no value other than the sentimental.

And it seemed to Frank that the attic had been disturbed. Someone had been digging around up here. He wondered why but it was a point of no great concern, his interest being in an overall survey of the house.

The attic was the fourth floor of the gloomy mansion. Frank found no possibilities there. Neither did the third nor the second levels give promise. It was not until he reached the basement that his search was rewarded.

He, of course, knew of the old unused refrigerator down there. It was a relic of those long gone years before automatic refrigeration; when blocks of ice were used to keep perishable food during the summer months. The refrigerator, called an ice box in the old days, was a room large enough to store a dozen halves of beef with space left to move around comfortably. Its floor was two feet below the basement level so that a dozen huge blocks of ice covered with sawdust formed a floor and resisted melting for months. The walls were over a foot thick and the door would have resisted dynamite.

Frank knew of the small drain pipe, built only to accommodate slow seepage from the melting ice, and the big water main that lay exposed against the back wall.

Frank found it after he got a flashlight to examine the vault's interior. The pipe was of tile. Chuckling happily to himself, he searched the basement until he found a sledgehammer.

Before smashing the pipe, he found the cutoff valve, a large wheel that taxed his strength in the turning. He shut off the water, smashed the pipe and turned the water back on for a test that was gratifying indeed. No man would possibly have been able to block the thunderous flow from the inside, coming as it did with the full force of the town main behind it. He turned off the valve and estimated that the comparative small amount of water he'd let in would drain away in about an hour. That would suit his purpose admirably. He took a last look at the vault. The rage inside him was bubbling like molten lava waiting to be released. He closed the vault door and went upstairs. . . .

"I wonder if you could drop over for a few minutes this evening, Doc. I've run onto something that should interest you."

"Of course. How about eight o'clock?"

"That will be fine."

As Frank hung up he wondered if perhaps Marta had been in Forester's office during the call. He thought it highly probable.

But Marta came home a few minutes later, her arms full of groceries. She appeared first, to be concerned, then happy to see him. He admired her ability as an actress.

"Darling," Marta said. "I thought perhaps something was wrong. Are you feeling all right?"

"Just a little tired. I think I'll take a nap, in fact, Doctor Forester is coming over about eight and I want to be rested up when he gets here."

"All right, darling. I'll call you for dinner."

"No. I'm not hungry. I'll eat a bite later."

Frank hurried to the studio. His reason for passing up dinner was a fear that he would not be able to sit across from Marta and not accuse her of her crimes. The rage was beating at the shell of its prison and now, with vengeance so close, he did not want to spoil it.

He managed to sleep for an hour or so and spent the rest of the time wondering what their plan was; what would have happened to him if he had decided to wait it out. But it was a waste of time. He would never know.

Shortly before eight he went to the bedroom, shaved and changed his shirt. A little like a pagan priest getting ready for a sacrifice to the gods, he thought grimly.

Forester was already on the scene when Frank got downstairs. He was just finishing the drink Marta had made for him and he looked quite satisfied with himself; handsome, debonair.

"How are you feeling, old man? And what's the thing of interest you have for me?"

Frank took a deep breath. There should be no trouble. The element of surprise would carry it off. But still, he would have to play it carefully. He would see now if he was as good at acting as they had been.

"I want to move my studio," he said.

"Where are you going to put it?"

"In the basement. I was down there looking things over today."

Forester considered gravely and Frank could see the wheels turning in his mind. What lay behind this; the psychiatrist was wondering.

"I'd like to show you the place I picked and then tell you why."

"Of course, old man. Let's take a look at the new layout."

Forester got up from his chair and Frank turned to Marta. "You, too, my dear. I want your opinion and, of course, I won't make any change unless you and the doctor agree with me."

Frank was watching Forester closely and this last seemed to quiet his doubts if he had any.

"The lights aren't on down there. We'll have to use the flashlight. I'll lead the way."

Marta did not identify the place until he swung the door open. "Why, Frank, this is the old ice room. What on earth—"

"Take a look before you make up your mind."

It was even easier than he had anticipated. He stood beside the door holding the light and as Marta took her first forward step, she lost her balance. Forester moved in to catch her. This carried them both down the four steps and Frank had only to close the door.

As he threw the heavy bar into place Marta cried out to him. "Frank! Darling! I can't see! The door closed on us. Frank! Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you through the ventilators. Do you have something to tell me?"

"Frank! Open the door!"

"Why should I open it? I just closed it."

Forester's frightened voice came through the ventilator. "Conroy! For heaven's sake. This is insane! Open that door."

Frank laughed. "Insane is it? Well, isn't that fine. It's what you started out to create, isn't it? An insane man."

"Frank, darling! What's gotten into you? Please let us out!"

"Not alive, sweetheart. Why do you think I went to all the trouble to get you in there?"

"Why? Darling—please—"

"Because I know! I've known for several days—all about you two. I don't know whether you planned to kill me or have me put away but it doesn't matter now."

"Conroy! You're all wrong—all wrong, man. Give us a chance to explain!"

"Go right ahead. I'm in no hurry."

"There's nothing between your wife and me. We've been keeping something from you—yes—but not what you think."

"All right. Let's see what you can dream up on the spur of the moment?"

"Let me tell him," Marta cried. "Frank! Frank! It was my fault. You were taking such a strange, compulsive interest in painting, I got worried. I remembered that we had some of your grandfather's things in the attic. Your father sent them to us before he died and we never opened them."

"Go on."

"I went to the attic and opened them. I read some letters your uncle wrote your father—the true facts about your grandfather. He was a homicidal maniac, Frank. They couldn't prove it, but the housekeeper and the caretaker who died in the fire were murdered by your grandfather."

"Then why wasn't I told?"

"They couldn't prove it, but they were positive. So, as long as your grandfather died in the fire himself, they hushed it up."

"That was fast thinking, my dear. But the whole thing is ridiculous. Tell me, why did you and your new lover cook up that sleep-walking gimmick?"

"That what?" Forester asked.

"Come, come. You both know I didn't get up at night and paint that picture."

"But you did, Conroy."

"Oh, well, if you want to stick to the camouflage."

Marta called out to him. "But there's more, Frank. Please listen!"

"I can still hear you."

"I found something else in the attic. The last picture your grandfather painted. And the one you're painting every night up in the studio is an exact duplicate of the one your grandfather painted. The name in your subconscious mind is the same, too. 'The Body Hunters'."

Frank laughed. "I never heard of a more fantastic cover-up for a cheap love affair in my life. Doctor Forester, to what do you attribute this similarity between my grandfather and me?"

"I don't know, Conroy. That is what I'm trying to find out. Maybe you heard the story and don't consciously remember it. There are several possibilities. I agreed with your wife—that you shouldn't know about it until we discover the reason."

"That's nonsense! You know I'm not insane."

"Of course, you aren't. Aberations — abnormalities — aren't necessarily insanity."

You've done very well—both of you. My wife thought up a quick lie and you thought of a way to support it. I've heard enough."

Their calls and cries died out as Frank moved toward the other end of the basement where the valve was located. It was his intention to flood the room immediately, but as he was about to turn the valve, he paused. Why not give them a little time to suffer; a payment for his own sufferings; a balancing of the books. The idea pleased him—pleased the rage that now flared unleashed.

He went back upstairs and made himself a drink. But it tasted bad, evidently a result of the brackish well water from the emergency pump he had turned on when he'd cut off the main water supply.

He threw the glass against the wall. His eyes burned and his head ached from the sudden emotional release. He lay down on the lounge and closed his eyes against the light.

When he awoke, daylight was streaming in the window. He tried to move but could not. His body ached from such exhaustion and fatigue as he had never known before. He opened his eyes. The light burned them and it was several seconds before he realized he was no longer in the living room. He was lying on the day bed in his studio. And painted on the wall was a monstrosity that brought him, staring, to his feet.

A full-length painting of a hideous serpent holding a girl

in its gleaming fangs. And smeared across the bottom, in crimson paint, was the title: *The Body Hunters.*

A painting no one on earth could have done but Frank Conroy.

Frank staggered to the wall and clawed at the still-wet paint and a realization swept through him. They had been telling the truth! He did not have to hunt for his grandfather's painting to know that every word they had told him was true!

Thank God, he had waited. Thank heavens, something had stayed his hand the night before. He sobbed as he made his way downstairs. They would understand. Marta would forgive him when he told her he knew, now, that he had gotten up in the night and painted The Body Hunters.

He rushed into the basement and stopped, frozen, at the bottom of the stairs, held by the sight of a foot of water on the floor. And the knowledge that he had done something else while he slept.

He had come to the basement and opened the valve.

He stood for one terrible moment sick from the horror of himself, his sanity, what was left of it, stripped away like burning flesh at the knowledge that the two who tried to help him, were now lifeless pieces of wet flesh in the execution chamber of his own making.

Then he went mad and knew the curse of his grandfather, whatever it was, had destroyed him.

Only one thing was left to do. One thing, and gibbering like an idiot, he went about it. Fire. Fire must be the end.

They found what they decided was Frank Conroy's body in the ruins; also the bodies in the basement, but were unable to make much out of it because Doctor Forester's tape, the only clue, was destroyed in the fire.

So it seemed that the Conroy insanity had run itself out in a final tragedy.

Except that one morning, a couple of months later, in the city of Detroit, Tommy Conroy's wife looked at him across the breakfast table and said,

"Darling, you're still terribly upset about that awful tragedy. I think you should do something to take your mind off it."

"What, for instance?"

"Well, there was talent in your family. Why don't you take up painting as a hobby?"

THE END

LIKE FATHER— LIKE SON

By HENRY SLESAR

It is not often that an editor cannot decide whether a story is sly and humorous, or sad. But this tale of a man who was there, and who wasn't, and who left a strange legacy, is one that raises such a question.

BILL ROSSI, not by plan, not by a desire to adhere to any by-laws of formal bachelordom, had his own rules of conduct and behavior regarding young women. In the case of Joyce Duram, the prohibitions that existed were constructed out of simple ethics: she was sixteen when they first met, and he was in his late twenties. He kept his fine Italian hands off, and if Joyce had entertained any thoughts of a relationship beyond big-brother kid-sister, Bill, with the engaging simplicity of words, a quick smile, a gentle touch on her young head, had kept the roles intact. Her visits, increasingly infrequent, to his two-room apartment in Washington Square, were occasions for comfort and advice as Joyce faced the problems of growing older. When the doorbell rang late that April evening, and he saw Joyce's little valentine of a face beneath the cocky blue beret she wore, he realized that a year had passed since that advice had last been needed.

He ushered her inside and gave her the best upholstered chair and made suggestions about tea and coffee, and then, remembering that Joyce had reached her majority, even a drink. When she nodded, white-faced, at the last offer, he knew that she was in trouble.

"What's wrong, Red?" he said softly. "You feel okay?"

"I'm not sick or anything," she said. "Nothing like that." She took off her beret and let her reddish-gold hair tumble

in loose waves to her shoulders. She had grown far more womanly in the interim, and the tears trembling in her gentian eyes were not the easy tears of a child.

"It's been a while," Bill said. "A year at least. What kind of year did you have, Red?"

For his answer, the girl cupped her hands to her face. He waited for the salty tide to ebb, knowing that her action was preamble to a story. He was right.

"It started about five months ago," she said. "I was trying to get some free-lance work from the art studios, before I got the job with the agency. I guess you didn't know about that; I'm working for an ad agency now. Well, I was coming home one night, carrying my samples. You know where I live, in the brownstone on First Avenue? I was just going up the steps when I met this man."

"Man?"

"I'd never seen him before. He was young, maybe twenty-five. Good-looking. Black hair, sort of curly. He looked—*nice*. You know what I mean.

"Anyway, he offered to help me with the portfolio. It wasn't really very heavy, and I only had one flight to walk, but I let him help me. He was very polite. He said his first name was Don, and he was very interested in art. I mean, he must have known I was an artist from the portfolio. Well, I don't remember exactly how it happened, but I invited him in and he looked at my samples and said they were very good. I don't think he really meant it, he was just being nice. But it made me feel good, you know? After being out of work so long. It was nice to have somebody think I was talented."

"Sure," Bill said.

"Well, I don't remember the rest of the evening too well. We just talked, or maybe *I* just talked, and we had coffee and something and that was that. Except he asked if he could come back, Saturday night."

"And you said yes."

"I said sure, why not? He was a nice boy. He was very good-looking. I didn't think it was so wrong."

"No," Bill said.

"So he came that Saturday night, three days later. He arrived at nine o'clock. We—we didn't go any place. We just stayed there in my apartment."

"And talked?"

"Most of the time. But then—something happened. I don't

know how. It all seemed so natural. But we—" She turned her head aside. "Don't make me say it, Bill."

He patted her shoulder. "It's okay. Tell me the rest."

"Well, that was about all. Except for next Saturday night."

"Next Saturday?"

"He came back to the apartment at nine. He stayed until four, and then left. Just like the last time."

"And where did he go?"

"I don't know. I never thought to ask him."

"I should think you'd want to know. If he was—"

"My lover?" She squeezed a fist over her eyes. "I know; it was stupid of me. But somehow, it didn't seem important. Not that night or the next Saturday or the next . . ."

"He came back *every* Saturday?"

She nodded. "At nine, every Saturday. He never missed, not once. And I was always there, waiting for him. Until all of a sudden, he stopped showing up."

Bill frowned. "Maybe it's just as well."

"No. It's worse now, much worse."

She stared at the wallpaper, clutching her hands to her stomach.

"It's what you think, Bill. I'm pregnant. I found out this morning, for certain. I've suspected for weeks, but I was afraid to ask a doctor. This morning I asked."

Now that her story was told, Joyce Duram seemed to have no need for silent tears. She sobbed openly, and Bill let her cry, absorbed in the concern he felt. Then he said:

"All right, so we got a problem. We. I'll do everything I can, but first you have to help me. First you have to tell me everything you can about this man. If it's possible to find him, we'll find him."

"But I don't know anything. That's the worst part. I don't even know his last name—"

"Not even that?"

"That's what makes it so awful. What will people think?"

"The hell with people." He went to his knees and looked into her face. "The first thing we have to do is find this Don. The second is to arrange things."

She looked back fearfully. "Not an operation? I couldn't stand that—"

"No, of course not. I know a doctor, an old friend of the family, Dr. Leavitt. He has a hospital in New Jersey, a little family hospital, not a

big place. It's all nice and private, and when the time comes—"

"But the money?"

"This is a real old friend; a favor is a favor. You let me worry about the arrangements."

She touched his hand. "You're so good to me, Bill . . ."

"I like being good to you, Red. But this guy Don. That's another story."

At first, Bill Rossi blamed his own laziness for his failure to find Joyce Duram's mysterious lover. But as the days and weeks went by without success, he began to realize that the task was beyond his ability. He had walked the streets of Joyce's neighborhood, talking to shopkeepers and vendors and the tenants of the brownstone houses, without eliciting a clue about the curly-headed young man who had instigated the problem.

Then he took a drastic step, drastic mostly to the small accumulation of funds that were part of the assets of the local savings bank. He hired a private detective.

The detective was named Spear, and the curt, sharp name gave Bill confidence in his ability to produce rapid results. His fee was fifteen dollars a day and expenses, and he promised complete reports of his investigations. On that count, Mr. Spear was reliable. Each day, the mail brought a detailed summary of the detective's activities, which consisted of similar interviews with the neighborhood residents. Each summary brought a bill, and the expenses invariably matched the fee. At thirty dollars a day, Bill had reason to hope for a swift conclusion to the job.

But there wasn't any. After three weeks, Mr. Spear was still optimistic, but a letter he wrote upset Bill too much to continue the detective's employment. It read, in part:

"It's our opinion that the story related by Miss D. may not have been fully truthful, and may be intended to conceal the real identity of someone she wishes to protect."

Angrily, Bill had torn up the letter. He sat in a chair with the pieces in his lap, and sadly admitted that the job was beyond him. All he could do now was help Joyce as much as he could.

He renewed his friendship with Dr. Leavitt, and found the old physician more than willing to help. Leavitt assigned a young obstetrician to the case, and Bill himself

brought Joyce to New Jersey to see him. He was glad to learn that the girl was in excellent health, despite her despondency.

When the time came for her confinement, Bill found a quiet rooming house only four streets away from the small hospital where the baby would be born. The rent was low, and the landlady was matronly and sympathetic, and raised no eyebrow at the story of the young pregnant sister whose husband was in service overseas.

On an evening close to the predicted day of birth, Bill Rossi, feeling downcast and bitter about his own failure to find the child's father, roamed the darkening streets of Joyce's old neighborhood, as if in hopes of seeing the face she had described among the passersby. He walked past the stoops of the brownstone houses, past the dry cleaning store, the radio repair shop, the pharmacy, waving to the shopkeepers with whom he had become familiar in his search for the elusive Don. He walked around the block until the night air grew too cold. Then he started for home.

The sight of a parked police car made him pause as he rounded the corner, and for the first time, he realized that the local precinct house was located not far from Joyce's home. He hadn't thought of calling in the police; there might be criminal responsibility involved, but Joyce was over twenty-one, and unwilling to have her problem brought to the police blotter.

Still, Bill thought, it would not hurt; just to ask.

He walked slowly up the steps of the station house. Inside, the desk sergeant, a burly, large-featured man, asked his business.

"I'm trying to find someone," Bill said hesitantly. "Somebody who used to visit here in the neighborhood."

"What's the party's name?"

"Well, that's the trouble. All I have is the first name and a description. I don't suppose that'll help much."

The officer grinned. "You suppose right. Sorry, mister. This somebody connected with a crime, Missing Persons, anything like that?"

"Well, not exactly."

"Then I don't see how we can help you. But why don't you talk to Officer Jacoby here—" He nodded towards a blue-jowled, youngish man at a corner desk. "Maybe he can help you out."

"I guess not," Bill admit-

ted dejectedly. "I don't have many facts. It was somebody who used to visit at 340, the brownstone around the corner. Somebody named Don. That's all I really know."

The sergeant shrugged, but the officer looked up. "340, did you say? That the house next to the dry-cleaner?"

"That's the house, yes."

Jacoby scratched his chin. "I know the house okay. But the only guy I connect with that house is this Beeman guy. He wouldn't be the one, would he?"

"Beeman?" Bill knitted his brow. "I don't know the name."

"Beeman, sure, B-E-E-M-A-N. I remember him, all right, only I don't remember his first name." The officer chuckled. "He was quite a character. A real king with the dames, if you know what I mean."

"No."

"Well, he was a bachelor, only a practicin' bachelor, you know what I mean? One of these real playboy types, with the leopard-skin rug and the soft music and the etchings. He had a parade of dames goin' in and out of his apartment that'd knock your eyes out. Real lookers. Sure, I remember Beeman, all right."

"What happened to him?"

"Oh, this was maybe three, four years ago. I'll never forget the night that dame came bustin' in here." He was talking to the desk sergeant now, grinning in recollection. "She was a blonde, and what a shape. Wearin' something half on and half off, if you know what I mean. Screamin' bloody murder. Only it wasn't no murder. This guy Beeman had just popped off in his apartment. Heart attack; violent exertion, they said. You can imagine what he must have been doin'." He chuckled delightedly.

"This guy Beeman. You say he died?"

"Sure, that's what happened. Hey, just let me look up the records a minute. Can't think of his first name." He got up and went to a standing file.

"No," Bill said, "that's not the man I'm looking for."

"Well, just a minute, I got the file right here." He drew out a yellow folder, flipped it open, and said: "Yeah, that was his name. Don Beeman. He was only twenty-six when it happened, the poor slob."

"No," Bill said again. "That's not the guy I want. But thanks. Thanks a lot."

The telephone was ringing

when he walked into the apartment in Washington Square, ringing with an unfamiliar insistence. He picked up the receiver, and it took him a moment to realize that the voice spilling out the fuzzy, excited words belonged to Dr. Leavitt.

"What's the matter?" he said. "Is it Joyce?"

"I think you should come over," the doctor answered. "As soon as you can make it."

"Is Joyce all right?"

"She's okay, but I think you should come right out."

Bill hung up without another word. He put a warm woolen sweater beneath his topcoat and left the house. The trip to New Jersey was slow, involving a subway and two bus connections and a long uphill walk to the small private hospital. When he entered, he found the reception desk deserted. He walked down the corridor that led to a rectangle of warm light. There was a stout woman in the doorway, her nurse's cap askew on her gray head, her plump hands clutched together. He nodded at her and entered the bare room, and saw a young doctor sitting on a slatted bench, staring straight ahead. He looked for explanation at the face of old Dr. Leavitt, and what he saw there was worse, a commingling of shock and horror.

"What is it?" he said, looking around him. "What happened here?"

Leavitt turned, as if to lead Bill's eyes towards the window of the infant's nursery. Bill walked up to the glass, and heard the lusty cries of a newborn child. He wanted to smile, even chuckle with pleasure, until he came closer to the object pushed up against the window.

It was a crib, and it was empty. **THE END**

EDITORIAL

(Continued from page 3)

all of our regular departments—this editorial page, your letters, and cartoons—won overwhelming votes of confidence.

As you can see, like most editorial conferences this one solved nothing, except to provide a good deal of food for thought. We've been chewing on this food, and we hope that the improvements you'll be finding in this and future issues will be a reflection of your wishes and judgments.

Thanks for all your help. And if you have any more good ideas, don't wait for another questionnaire. Just write—NL

A haunting tale of death and re-birth, of terror in the night, of . . . . . .

THE CREEPER IN THE DREAM

By
ROG
PHILLIPS

CHECKMATE," I announced with satisfaction. It had been a tough game, but I had maneuvered one of my Rooks over from right field to pin Leonard's Queen in front of his King and accomplish the mate with my Knight.

Leonard Vincent smiled enigmatically, then shrugged his faint signal of defeat. "Another game?" he asked, without enthusiasm.

"Afraid not," I said, rising and stretching to get the kinks out from sitting too long. "I'd better go down to the garage and straighten out the cash before I go home."

"Well," Leonard Vincent said, frowning and getting up, "watch out for vampires this time of night."

"Vampires?" I said, being deliberately dense. This was the only side of Leonard I didn't like.

"And other things," he said. "Some of them much worse than vampires."

"What could be worse than losing all my blood?" I asked with a grin that concealed my annoyance, going to the door.

Leonard Vincent blinked owlishly at me as I paused and looked back at him. "Losing your body," he said.

It had to be a form of dead pan humor, I decided as I drove swiftly along the deserted street toward the arterial. I liked Leonard, but in the year I had known him I hadn't managed to know him very well.

The way we had gotten acquainted, he had brought his car into my garage for some repairs. It was the week Dave

Taylor had gone on his honeymoon. Dave's job is to sort of run the shop, assign work to the mechanics, listen to the customers gripes, and so on. Rather than put a man in his place for a week I did his work myself.

Somehow the word chess got mentioned, and the next thing I knew I had agreed to drop in on Leonard Vincent and play him a game. His place was out in the valley. He lived alone in a rambling brick house that was probably older than his forty odd years. You couldn't see the house from the street because of the densely spaced trees, and in the house you couldn't hear a whisper from the outside world. You were lost in a world of books, thousands of them, lining every room but the kitchen, it seemed. A restful world. And somewhat against my natural inclinations I had become a regular visitor.

Leonard didn't seem to have any other visitors except the housekeeper who came in twice a week. I'm sure he could have had. Almost six feet tall, broad shouldered and with almost no hips, black hair and lean dark features that framed smouldering black coals of eyes, there was a magnetic quality about him.

What he saw in me I don't know. My name is Sam Springer. I'm thirty, five-feet-ten, blond, and skinny. I don't care for books unless they are about automobiles. I probably never would have learned to play chess at all, but when I was seventeen I had a crush on a girl who insisted I learn. It didn't cost anything, so I got to put that much more money in 45 Jr., my hardtop.

She sat in the stands Saturday night chewing her fingernails to the elbow worrying about my getting killed, and Sundays I took lessons in chess from her. That lasted two years, and we were going to get married some day. Then I was in a real pile up at the Pacheco track, and out of hardtop racing for six months with broken ribs and right arm. When she saw I was going back in, she gave me the gate.

I didn't blame her, I guess. And somehow I never met anyone else to take her place. Oh, I met chess players. Especially after I opened my garage on San Pablo and worked up enough business to let the place run itself. Then I met Leonard Vincent. And got in the habit of dropping out to his place two or three

times a week to play chess, like I had done tonight.

It was almost midnight when I pulled to the curb in front of the garage. It's a nice place. I'm proud of it. On the edge of Albany, on San Pablo, it catches its fair share of East Bay cars, and in the five years I've been running it a lot of customers that moved away, to San Francisco across the Bay, and out into the valley, have kept coming back. My mechanics have stuck with me too.

One thing, it was an ideal place to start with. Plenty of floor space for every type of work on a car. Wheel work, tire work, overhaul, body work—the works. And an office and store front connected to it that was a donut shop for the first two years. Now it was the parts department and the office.

The light was on in the office. The frosted upper half of the door cast a milky radiance that reflected from the parts counter. Probably Dave had forgotten to shut off the light when he went home. I'd bawl him out about it in a kidding way in the morning.

Getting out of my car, I crossed the sidewalk and started to unlock the door. Then I hesitated. Maybe it was what Leonard Vincent had said about watching out for vampires—or worse!—that made me hesitate. Or maybe it was natural caution.

What if someone were in the office? Not Dave or someone who had a right to be there, such as one of the mechanics dropping in after an evening of partying to bring his work sheets up to date. An armed burglar, maybe.

There was one way of finding out.

Feeling like a fool, I went around the block to the alley. By the time I reached the alley I was ready to jump at anything. If a cat had run under my feet I would have made it to the roof in one easy jump. I was being the worst kind of a fool. If it was burglars, they would have broken in from the alley, and have a lookout ready to hit me over the head.

In fact, a car was parked close to the wall near the back entrance, and it shouldn't be there. As soon as I saw it I stood still. I was waiting for the tell tale flare of a cigarette behind the windshield to show someone was in the car. None came.

Finally I crept forward, making no sound, until I stood by the driver's window of the car. From its dark bulky form

I guessed it to be a late model Chevy. Its door was unlocked. I inched it open, already riding a hunch. Sure enough, it was Dave's Chevy. His name, David Taylor, was on the registration slip.

What the heck was Dave doing down at the office this time of the night? And why had he parked in the alley instead of in front? There could only be two things. Either he was working half the night on the books—doing my work as well as his, damn him —or he and Elena had had a quarrel and he was in the dog house, and sleeping on the beat-up couch in the office.

Dave was a brother and a son to me, all rolled into one. Seven years ago he had showed up in the pit at a track down the Coast from L.A., all goggle-eyed, when old 45 Jr. had won the thirty lap main event. He was the sixteen-year-old son of old man Taylor who owned the track.

We all like hero worship, I guess. Anyway, there was a two hundred Watt hero worship light in each of his big round eyes, so I talked too much and told him if he ever wanted to race just look me up. I was heading north the next morning anyway, so it was just talk.

Six months later he showed up. I was at one of the Portland tracks, and the kid had hitch hiked all the way up there to take me up on my promise. He had run away from home!

Sure I shipped him back home. A year later his dad died. I heard about it. Then the next thing I knew Dave showed up again. He was broke. His dad's track had been mortgaged to the hilt, and his mother had had to find a job the week after the funeral.

This time I kept Dave. He handed me tools I could have reached without him. He fetched me coffee. We got along, and he was company. Maybe it was because of him I started the garage. I felt responsible for his future. Maybe some day he'd meet a girl, and I didn't want that girl to decide that the worry of being in love with a stock car racer wasn't worth it, like my girl did.

One day five years after I opened the garage he came in with the prettiest girl I'd ever seen. He introduced her to me. Her name was Elena Price.

A month later she changed it to Elena Taylor, and as a wedding present I bought

them the furniture for the cute duplex they rented. Why not? Dave's mother had died two years before, and I was all the family he had.

If something was troubling him now—

I forgot about Leonard's vampires and things, and carefully unlocked the back door and went into the shop. I wasn't looking for burglars now, neither was I going to bust in on Dave unexpected. I was going to peek like a father or brother and see what cooked.

To do it, all I had to do was stand on the workbench against the back of the office wall and look through the ventilation fan opening.

I picked my way around cars and equipment in the darkness, conscious of the odor of oil and gasoline and other garage smells that are sweeter to me than the most expensive perfume, and lifted myself onto the bench, without making a sound.

Sure enough, Dave was in the office. He was at my desk. In front of him were the work sheets on the completed jobs with the plainly stamped *paid* that was visible even at this distance. Also on the desk was a stack of money and checks, the day's receipts.

The damned fool! Working half the night when he should be home with Elena! The damned fool! I almost shouted at him through the ventilation fan, I was so indignant.

I thought better of it, though, and I was about to turn away when I saw him do something I couldn't understand. He tore a work sheet in two, and counted some money over into a pile across the desk from him.

The obvious reason hit me like the fourth double shot of tequila. I felt like throwing up. I had to be mistaken.

But fifteen minutes later I knew I couldn't be mistaken. Dave, the guy that could have the shirt off my back for the asking, was stealing from me. It was obvious. The system was obvious. With business so good, I'd been paying the men a straight four-fifty an hour whether they were busy or not. Charges to customers are on a standard job rate. One type of job brings eight-fifty, say; and one time it takes two hours to do, while another time it takes maybe fifteen minutes, and on still another job it takes four hours, so I lose money that time. But it averages up.

What Dave was doing was studying the time record on each job, and where it took a

short time and the mechanic could just as well have been having a coffee break, so far as I would ever know, he was tearing up the work sheet and setting aside the money for himself.

While I stood there on the bench in almost total darkness watching him, I began to think back, and I could almost pin down when he had started doing this from the time gravy jobs, as we call them, had suddenly become rare. Two months.

I couldn't be sure, of course. It's like gambling. One month I'd make six hundred more than I would another month, and about one month out of six I'd lose money, after the overhead.

But Dave knew all this as well as I did, and he could have gone on forever stealing from me without my catching on, if I hadn't been standing there in the darkness seeing him do it with my own eyes.

Why? Why?

I paid him six hundred a month.

Shaking like a leaf, I got down off the bench and sneaked out the way I had come in. Through the alley. In my car once again, I drove on home to my swanky little apartment on Dwight in Berkeley, to my book cases filled with—not books—but trophies I had won at tracks from Tijuana to Seattle, from Pacheco to Chicago.

For the first time since I had moved into my apartment it seemed empty and lonely. I waded across my thick nylon rug that almost needed mowing, opened my fancy bar, and poured myself a half a glass of Jack Daniels, gulped about half of it, then went over and slumped down on my expensive davenport.

And for the first time in my life I felt old.

How much liquor did it take at one sitting to kill a man? A gallon of eighty proof stuff?

Why not, I thought with self pity. My will was already made out, leaving everything to Dave and Elena. I had two ten thousand dollar life insurance policies with Dave as my beneficiary. Why not get it over with so he wouldn't have to steal from me any more?

I downed the rest of my drink and got up and poured myself another. While I did it I sang, "I'm gonna get right up and pour myself an oth-er, and make believe I'm pouring it for you . . ."

On the third drink I had to break the seal on another Jack Daniels. When I got it out

from underneath the bar I leered at the five virginal bottles still there, lined up so precisely between the Ron Rico and the Vodka.

Sure I could kill myself from an overdose of alcohol, if I remained conscious long enough to accomplish it.

Halfway through the second bottle of Jack Daniels I thought of Leonard Vincent. I could go out and unburden my troubles on him. If the door would stand still long enough for me to get up and head for it.

Or I could call him.

That was the ticket, I decided cheerfully. Call him.

I got up and started for the phone.

I never made it.

About two the next afternoon when I woke up things looked different. For one thing, I said to myself through the din of my pounding headache, Dave wasn't a thief, he merely thought he was. It was his money—or would be when I was dead.

I was glad I hadn't gotten in touch with Leonard last night. This was a family matter. Dave was the only family I had. And he wasn't stealing from me, he had a problem.

A problem. Yes, that was it.

I poured myself a Hair of the Dog, and when the world around me settled down a bit I went into the kitchen and started the coffee pot. Funny thing. I had never gotten drunk before in my life.

Except once. When my girl had told me she couldn't go on dying a thousand deaths every time I raced. But that time had been sissy pants compared to last night. I was even a little proud of last night. I had, at least, lived through it. And I hadn't really expected to.

The coffee made me feel civilized. On the second cup I called the garage. Dave answered the phone. He said everything was under control, and I said I was feeling a little under the weather and wouldn't be in. And that was that.

I spiked my third cup of coffee a little.

The reason I did it was because I knew that I was going to drop by the cute little duplex and have a talk with Elena. I didn't know what I was going to say to her yet, but I would play it cagey and maybe find out what was making Dave steal from me.

And yet, I didn't want to. This was something new in my life. But when a married man starts stealing, a home conflict is generally at the

bottom of things. I wanted to find out. If there was any way to stop Dave from stealing without him knowing I knew about it, I had to find it. And my reason was purely selfish. Once I confronted him with it, from that moment on a part of me was gone. From then on I'd be a little bit lonelier.

When I drove up in front of the duplex I shut off the motor and sat there for a minute. It was a white stucco place on Ordway in Berkeley, just a couple of miles from the garage. Postage stamp lawn, concrete drive, with Elena's Ford in it, a big picture window with venetian blinds, and a row of tall red flowers in front of the picture window standing like red capped soldiers.

They'd been lucky to find a rental this nice. I remembered when Elena had come rushing into the shop all excited, the *Tribune* clutched in her hand, and dragged Dave and me off to see it. That was a couple of days before the wedding day.

Elena had rattled along excitedly about it being owned by an old lady who owned a lot of nice houses scattered over the East Bay from Oakland to Richmond, and she had turned down literally dozens of couples before Elena showed up, because she "always liked to rent to just the right couple."

All that kind of talk made me more curious about the old lady than I was about the house. She was there waiting for us. Her name was Alice Crestley. She had a couple of pounds of diamonds on her fingers, a mink stole, and had at one time been very beautiful. The signs of it were still in her wrinkled face. Her skin was tanned.

On her forehead an inch above her right eye was a star shaped scar that stood out white against the surrounding tan. It had startled me, because for a moment it had looked like some dead-white insect resting there.

Alice Crestley and I had been left alone while Elena took Dave's hand and dragged him from room to room, showing him the place.

"They'll do," Alice Crestley confided in me. "You're David's boss?" She was sizing me up as though looking for something and being disappointed. Then she said something that made me take a dislike to her. She leaned toward my ear and whispered, "Too bad she didn't see you first. You would have made a better husband for her."

And she had sensed my anger over her remark, and been silently amused at it.

But why should I think of the old lady who owned this house? Suddenly I remembered another impression I had had, and it came back to me. It had been caused, I felt sure, by the scar on her forehead that had vaguely resembled a fat white spider.

After Dave had paid out the first month's rent so it was all settled he and Elena would move into the place, we had gone back out to the car and sat in this very spot admiring the house. And for just a second I had seen it, not as a house, but as part of the web of a spider. A bloated white spider whose web stretched over the entire East Bay. The people who rented the houses were the flies caught in her web.

I felt that now, as I sat there looking at the place. Elena was inside, caught in the web. And I couldn't save her. The fat white spider had her.

I tried to shake off the morbid feeling. I thought, if that's what really getting drunk does to me I'd better lay off of the stuff completely. Next thing, the bloated white spider would come crawling down her web after me!

And I definitely had the shakes. When I took out a cigarette my hands were shaking so much I had trouble lighting it. I let the smoke bite into my lungs, then got out of the car and went up the walk to the porch and rang the bell.

"Sam!" Elena said when she came to the door. "This is a pleasant surprise. Dave called up and said you were a little under the weather." She had taken my hand and pulled me through the door. "You do look sick," she said, touching the palm of her hand to my forehead. "Can I get you anything? Lie down on the davenport. I'll fix you some hot broth."

"No," I said. "No. I'm okay."

"Well you certainly aren't!" Elena said. "I've never seen you so under the weather."

"Have you and Dave had any trouble?" I blurted out, trying to keep things from getting bogged down on the subject of how I felt.

"Why no!" Elena said. She lifted her hand and touched something over her right eye. Then I noticed the bandage. It was skin colored and smooth.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Nothing," Elena said. "I

fell and hit my forehead a week ago. It's nearly healed now." She blinked doubtfully. "Maybe it was two weeks ago. Yes, I think it was two weeks ago."

"And you and Dave haven't been in any trouble?" I persisted.

"No," Elena said. "What gave you the idea we had?"

"What was Dave doing down at the shop so late last night?" I said.

"He wasn't," Elena said. "He was home a little before six. We watched TV, and went to bed about ten."

"You went to bed about ten?" I said. "Oh, I get it. You went to sleep and he got up later and went down to the shop."

"I'm sure he didn't," Elena said.

"I saw him," I said.

"You couldn't have!" Elena said. "Look here, Sam, what are you driving at?"

"Nothing," I said miserably. "I must have been mistaken."

"Well I'm going to find out right now!" Elena said. Her nostrils were flaring from anger. Her face was white. She went to the phone and dialed the garage with fingers that jerked.

I watched her in amazement. Something was bothering her all out of proportion to what I had said.

"Dave?" Elena said into the phone. "Come home for a few minutes. Whatever you're doing can wait."

That wasn't so alarming. She often called up and Dave hopped in his car, and came back to the garage in twenty minutes. But now I felt absolutely miserable. I had seen Dave, he had been stealing from me, and now he would know that I knew it as surely as if I had walked in on him last night while he was tearing up those job sheets that would have shown money was missing.

Dave's car bounced into the driveway just behind Elena's. Sometime he would get a ticket for speeding. Through the picture window I saw him look at my car as he went past the window. I took a deep breath and held it.

When he came in he looked at me and said, "Good God, Sam, you look bad. We've got to get him to bed, Elena. He's sick."

"And out of his head," Elena said. "He says he saw you at the garage last night, late."

"What time?" Dave said, then shook his head. "No. I left at five-thirty, stopped at

the Pick-N-Pack to get some groceries, and came right on home."

I grinned disarmingly. "I tried to tell Elena I was probably mistaken," I said. "I don't know why she's upset. All I tried to say was that I happened to drive by the garage about midnight and saw a light in the office and *thought* I saw your car. I just happened to ask her because I had a guilty conscience about not doing my share of the book work."

"Well, why should you?" Dave said. "When you didn't come down this morning I did it for you, and it only took a few minutes. But you must have been mistaken because I didn't leave the house last night. Elena and I went to bed about ten and didn't get up until six-thirty this morning, like we always do. And *you'd* better get to bed, Sam. You don't look a bit well. I'll tell you what, Elena, put some fresh sheets on our bed and I'll stay until Sam gets to bed. You can put on a pair of my pajamas, Sam, and—"

"No," I said flatly. "All that's wrong with me is that I was with some guys last night—a little card party out in Richmond—and I had too much to drink."

Dave looked at me more closely. His eyes widened, then he laughed. "So that's it!" he said. "You ought to know better, Sam! Just a minute and I'll fix you up. Where's the tomato juice and Worchestershire Sauce, honey?"

My personal nightmare had begun, though I didn't realize it yet. All I knew, as Dave proudly brought in his concoction and he and Elena forced me to drink it, and after drinking it I immediately felt better, was that Dave definitely didn't act like he was guilty.

Elena fixed some blankets on the davenport and Dave made me lie down and promise I would stay there until he got home about six. He was going to bring some steaks and the makings for a salad that would be out of this world.

If he was guilty of anything, I would have staked my life that he was innocent—yet I had seen what he was doing with my own eyes.

Elena, on the other hand, was obviously troubled by something. Her eyes were too round, she smiled too quickly, her voice was too bright and cheerful.

After I lay down I must have fallen asleep, because I

didn't remember Dave leaving, yet when I opened my eyes Dave was shaking me and telling me the steaks were just coming out of the broiler and I'd better get up and wash.

Nothing was as I had expected it might be. I had expected, when Elena called Dave and told him to come home, that I would hear a confession of bad financial troubles, a confession of theft, and that I would forgive Dave, write out a check to cover the trouble, and there would be a touching scene of reunion among us. Instead, Dave was either innocent and I was nuts and had imagined I had seen him, or he had somehow become a callous criminal, able to bluff it through as convincingly as the best Hollywood actor. So it didn't make sense to me.

I *was* hungry, and there's something about a T bone steak from an exclusive butcher shop, broiled just right, and a fresh vegetable salad made just right.

It was eight-thirty when I finally got away. The sun had set, but it was still almost bright as noon because of the slight haze in the sky.

I noticed the blue and cream '54 Buick parked down the block with a man sitting behind the wheel, but assumed he was waiting for someone in the house he was parked in front of. I didn't even look back as I drove away.

I cut up Gilman to Sacramento, the shortest way home to my apartment. Half a block before I reached University the light changed to red. I took my foot off the gas and started to brake.

At that moment I felt the jolt of a car contacting my rear bumper, and suddenly my car was hurtling forward into the intersection under the driving force of the car behind.

Traffic on University was speeding through the intersection. A crash would be unavoidable.

An ordinary person would have been helpless in that fix. I had spent too many years as hard top racing to be an ordinary person. The ordinary person would have slammed on his brakes. I pushed my gas pedal to the floorboard.

For a split second I was going faster than the highballer behind me. In that split second I pulled sharply to the right, out of his way. And then slammed on my brakes.

The next instant he had shot past me into the intersection. There was the loud

rending of metal. The blue and cream Buick—it was the blue and cream Buick—and a '58 Ford station wagon, were overturned.

I got out of my car and ran over to the Buick. I climbed up on it and lifted the door on the driver's side like it was a trap door to a cellar.

I could see that the man was badly hurt, but I was mad. "Why did you try to kill me?"

"Huh?" he said, wincing. "What happened? How did I get here? Am I crazy? A second ago I was eating supper . . ."

Fear flowed over his features, etching them with its acid. And then he was dead. And it was a miracle he had lived at all, because the steering wheel had caved in his chest clear to his backbone.

I leaned inside his car and read his name and address from the registration slip on the steering wheel. He was George Mason, of 1427 Adeline, Oakland.

Then I dropped off the Buick to the pavement and returned to my car. The sirens of police cars and ambulances were growing into a banshee wail as I crept past the accident scene and drove slowly away.

I didn't go home. Instead, I went down University to the East Shore Freeway and headed north, toward Leonard Vincent's.

I had had just about enough of things I couldn't understand . . .

I drove faster than I had ever driven on a public highway, and slower. Each car that approached me from behind was a threat, and each car that slowed down inexplicably was a lurking menace. I had never realized before how inscrutible a pair of headlights, or tail lights, can be.

Eventually I reached the haven of Leonard Vincent's driveway and shut off the motor. I forced myself not to run in panic to the front door and pound on it for admittance. That would be childish, I told myself as I ignored the darkness lurking around me.

When he answered my insistent ringing and let me in, I felt a letdown. Why had I come here at all? He was just a man, superficially concerned about my being upset; but underneath he was probably annoyed at my disturbing his evening without warning, I thought guiltily.

He retreated, it seemed, into the role of a host, insisting that I be comfortable,

that I have a drink at my elbow, that he be allowed to light his pipe and puff on it until the atmosphere between us was comfortable to him, and relaxed. Then he let me talk. When I finished, he had laid his pipe aside and his hands were in his habitual pose for deep thought, the fingers fanned out and touching, tip to tip, before his chest.

When he did that at some stage of a chess game, I very seldom won the game.

"I'm most interested in this stealing," Leonard said. "I think you did correctly in not accusing this young man David Taylor, because it seems certain to me that he knows nothing about it."

"What!" I said. "I saw him!"

"How much do you know of the background of David's wife Elena?" Leonard Vincent asked.

"Why, her maiden name was Price," I said. "She was born back east somewhere, I think."

"I don't mean that sort of thing," Leonard said. "It doesn't matter where she was born, where she went. At least not directly. What do you know of her beliefs? Is she religious? Superstitious? Interested in psychology? Spiritualism? Magic?"

"I doubt it," I said. "Of course, I don't believe much in that stuff myself, so if she is interested in it and tried to talk about it I would probably change the subject."

"I know," Leonard said sadly, glancing at his shelves of books. "Friendship must have a bond of common interest. With us it isn't automobile racing but chess, because I have no interest in the thrills of racing."

"Nicely put," I said. "I'll admit I'm not interested in ghosts and the occult, and when you've tried to get me interested in it I couldn't make much sense out of it. The books you've loaned me—"

"I know," Leonard said. "When you returned them you said you read them, but you didn't."

"I tried," I said.

"There are many things, even in this modern world," Leonard Vincent said, "that find no ordinary explanation. Psychology is the science of reducing all mental phenomena to ordinary explanations, so psychology blinds itself to many things. For example, how often do you think murders are committed by people who blanked out before the

deed and have not the slightest memory of it after it's over? The psychologists believe that the person, unable to consciously accept the fact of being a murderer, represses the memory, burying it deep in the subconscious."

"Well, isn't that so?" I asked.

"It may be in some cases," Leonard said. "But consider this: murder is always noticed, because there is a body. The police gather the evidence. The suspect swears he was home in bed. The police produce witnesses that saw the suspect at or near the scene of the crime. It's very similar to David Taylor going to bed at ten and believing he stayed there—yet you saw him in the garage office a couple of hours later.

"David is telling the truth. *He* didn't go to the garage. It was someone else, using his body. And before you close your mind to the subject, consider what the man, George Mason, said, the moment before he died. That too has a pat explanation in psychology. Amnesia. One moment he was eating dinner, the next instant, so it seemed to him, he was dying as the result of an automobile accident.

"What is important is what happened while he *wasn't there.* Remember, his last memory was of eating dinner. We can presume that he was relaxed, and we can theorize that some entity took over, moving him aside. That entity, using his mind and body, went out to his car, drove it over and parked where it could see you come out of David's house, followed you, and attempted to involve you in an automobile accident that would be fatal to you. Instead, due to your skill as a rough and tumble racing driver, you turned the tables. If you hadn't, if you had been plunged into the cross traffic, and at the last instant he had been able to slam on his brakes and avoid being in an accident himself, the entity in control would have driven the car back to where he lived, parked it where it was parked before, gone into the house, perhaps placed his body in a state of natural sleep, and when George Mason woke up he would have no memory of what he did. Only a blank spot in his memory. A blank he would never admit to anyone!"

"But why would anyone want to kill me?" I asked.

"To stop you from upsetting someone's plans, prob-

ably," Leonard Vincent said. "No other attempt has been made on your life in the past few days has it?"

"Never before in my whole life!" I said.

"Then consider the events of this afternoon. You asked Elena what David was doing at the shop last night around midnight. It upset her very much. She called David home and every effort was made to convince you he couldn't have been there. You were practically forced to stay on until after dinner, and when you went outside to your car someone was waiting for you, to kill you."

"Are you trying to tell me it was Elena?" I asked incredulously.

"Of course not," Leonard said evasively, shrugging. "Not Elena *herself*, at least."

"Why?" I went on. "So Dave can inherit my garage?"

"Does he know he's your heir?" Leonard asked. "Does Elena?" I shook my head. "I think it was intended for you to catch him stealing and confront him in the act and fire him," Leonard said. "Instead, you took a line that might upset someone's plans—plans having nothing to do with you. I think one of the most heinous of all crimes is on the verge of being committed. Your life's still in danger, but the less you know the safer you should be."

"The more of a sitting duck I'll be!" I said angrily. "What kind of a crime?"

Leonard Vincent picked up his pipe and carefully got it going before he spoke again. He could have been pondering a move in a chess game, and its future consequences . . .

"It's better for you not to know at present," he said.

"Why?" I said.

"You're going to have to trust me. I'm going to try to prevent that crime, and I'm going to need you as my eyes and ears." Leonard Vincent reached into his pocket and brought out a coin. He stood up and came over to me and handed it to me.

I took it and examined it. It was a gold piece, slightly larger than a silver dollar. On one side was a triangle, and on the other side was a five-pointed star design. On both sides were tiny figures that reminded me of Egyptian hieroglyphics.

"I want you to have this with you at all times," Leonard Vincent said. "Every minute, day and night. When you go to bed put it in the pocket of your pajamas. When you dress be sure and trans-

fer it to a pocket in the clothes you wear. Will you promise to do that—and ask no more questions for the present?" When I hesitated he added, "Your life may depend on it, but even so I want you to be very careful. Your life will be in danger from unusual quarters. Perfect strangers. Also friends."

Leonard's eyes were glowing with what seemed to me a feverish inner fire. In the year I had known him he had never been like this. Was he insane?

I didn't know. And rather than prolong this sight of him so off balance, as I thought, I wanted only to get away from him.

"Okay, I promise," I said, getting up.

He went with me out to my car. After I started the motor he said, "One more thing. Don't show this talisman I've given you to anyone. Understand?" His voice was stern, commanding.

I nodded.

He stepped back from the car and I backed out into the street. I drove more warily than I had on even the most cut throat of tracks in my racing days. But nothing happened out of the ordinary. I reached my apartment at nine-thirty. I searched it and found no lurking prowler, no ticking bomb, nothing.

I locked the doors. Suddenly I was very tired and let down. It had been the roughest day of my life, I decided.

I got undressed, took a quick hot shower, and went to bed. In ten seconds I was asleep.

The next second, it seemed, I was awakened by the ringing of the phone. I struggled up out of sleep and groped for the phone.

"Hello?" I groaned.

"Sam," Leonard Vincent's voice sounded sternly, "you forgot to take the talisman to bed with you."

"So I did!" I said, startled into full wakefulness. "But how did you know?"

"How could I *not* know," Leonard snarled. "Get it!" And there was the loud bang as he slammed the phone.

The gold coin was heavy and hot in the pocket of my pajamas. And my eyes were heavy and hot too. But my mind was running away with me. How had Leonard Vincent known I had left it in my trousers pocket?

Or had he? Wasn't it just a psychological trick? The chances were better than even that I would forget to transfer the talisman to my pajama

pocket, so by calling me up he would stand a better than even chance of making me think he could tell over a distance whether I had it on me or not.

What would he gain by that?

A million things were flowing through my mind. A year ago Elena had come into Dave's life. Shortly after—while they were on their honeymoon—Leonard Vincent had come into mine. Was there a connection? They had never met, so far as I knew. It had never occurred to me to bring them together. I went out to Leonard Vincent's to play chess, I saw Elena only when she and Dave insisted I come over for dinner. Sometimes I had dinner with Dave and Elena and went directly from there to Leonard's to play chess. There was no connection.

And when it came right down to it, I knew less about Leonard than I did about Elena . . .

Terror engulfed me. It was all the worse because it was full blown, as though it had been there and I had just entered into consciousness of it. A heavy weight was pressing against my chest. I couldn't breathe. I opened my mouth to gulp air and a stinging blow numbed the side of my face. I went reeling into a black abyss of nothingness.

I opened my eyes. Leonard Vincent was crouched over me like an evil spider, his eyes bright coals of malevolence.

"So it's you!" I gasped. "It's been you all along!"

He blinked at me. "Nonsense!" he said, moving back a ways. "I see you're yourself now. Get up off the floor."

I looked around me. I was back in his living room. But how had I gotten there? The last I could remember, I was in my own bed. And I was dressed now, too!

"You attempted to shoot me with this gun," he said, holding a .38 Colt automatic out to me. "No. Don't take it. I can't trust you right now. Do you know where you got it?"

I nodded. "It's kept in the drawer of my desk at the garage," I said. "But that means—"

He nodded. "It means that after you went to sleep something *took over,* causing you to get dressed and drive to the garage and get this gun, then drive out here with the intention of killing me. Fortunately that *something* neglected to transfer the talisman back to your street clothes, and the moment it left the aura of

your body I was aware of it, and ready."

The horror of my nightmare that had begun with seeing Dave in the office stealing from me had now reached—I thought—it's ultimate peak. I couldn't take my eyes away from my clothes. They were my clothes, and they were on me, and *I* had not put them on me. They symbolized the rest, driving, getting the gun . . .

"But this means," I said, "that I don't dare drive. Whoever or whatever is doing this could make me kill myself by taking over and twisting the steering wheel so I'd ram into an oncoming car."

"No," Leonard said. "Here, let me fix you a drink. You need one. Then I'll tell you more about this thing that's happening."

"No drink," I said. "Right now my stomach's working in reverse. Maybe some coffee."

"Coffee it is," Leonard said. "Come out in the kitchen with me, Sam."

We sat in the breakfast nook with the coffee pot snoring, while Leonard Vincent talked.

"Have you ever seen a trance medium taken over by a spirit?" he asked.

"Once," I said. "But that kind of thing is a fake—" I stopped. What had just happened to me hit me in the face. It was impossible by every standard of my beliefs, but it had happened to me.

"Much of the time it is a fake," Leonard said. "But sometimes it isn't. Consider it this way. The first motor Henry Ford made by hand for his first horseless carriage would not be suitable for today's hydramatic car that cruises at eighty-five on the open highway, would it? Yet the same *principle* is used in today's powerful high-speed motor. The difference is that that first motor just barely functioned, and would break down easily. It was a clumsy machine. In the same way a trance medium who is genuine is a clumsy machine, and the spirit that takes control is a clumsy operator. But the principle which makes the phenomenon possible exists in all of us. A car on the highway consists of machine and driver. Each of us is a body and a driver, and the driver can slide over so that someone else takes the wheel.

"When we sleep, we in effect have slid out from behind the wheel. Under hypnosis we deliberately move from behind the wheel. An entity with long practice and

plenty of skill can take over at such times and drive the car—use the body—without our being aware of it. But she couldn't make the body commit suicide."

"She?" I said.

"A figure of speech," Leonard said.

"Or a slip of the tongue," I said. "You think it's Elena, don't you?"

"Believe me, Sam," Leonard said, "you're safer not knowing." The coffee pot had stopped perking. He poured the coffee, and suddenly his hand shook. "In fact, probably no more attempts will be made on your life, because now she knows about me. In protecting you from her I revealed myself."

"I wish I was more of a reader," I said. "Maybe if I read some of those books on your shelf I'd know more of what it's about."

"You won't find it in the books, Sam," Leonard said. "You'll find vampires, werewolfs, spirits of the dead, reincarnation, and plenty of other things. But you won't find out about this."

He took out his pipe, and frowned in silent thought while he filled it and lit it.

"One thing that puzzles me," he said finally. "The attempt on my life through you —it has all the earmarks of desperation and panic. She must be getting quite close to the culmination of her plan for her to panic so quickly. Sam, you must still act as my eyes and ears. To some extent I can tell what's going on around you by means of the talisman, but she may be able to screen that off just as she has screened herself off so that I can't pinpoint her."

"Okay," I said, "but can't you give me some idea what this is all about and what I can expect?"

He hesitated, then shook his head. "No, Sam," he said. "For your own safety. But I'll tell you this much. I've been hunting for her for a long time. When I first went to your garage, I knew that she was aware of me. When we were having our drink together, for just a brief moment she was looking at me through your eyes. You weren't aware of it, of course. I hoped she didn't recognize me. Perhaps she didn't. So I decided to wait. If I could only learn what physical body she inhabits now my search would be over. So far I haven't, and you are my only hope of finding her.

"I want you to tell me everything that happens every

day, from now on. Every little thing. Something that you tell me may be what I need. If you knew that, she would sense it and risk everything to kill you." He stood up. "Go home now, Sam," he said. "Get some sleep.

The phone woke me at eight-thirty. It was Dave. Two of the mechanics had called in sick. I told him I'd be right down. I dressed quickly, remembered the talisman and took it out of my pajamas, turning it over in my hand curiously.

It was definitely solid gold and probably very old. I knew enough about stampings to know it wasn't a stamped coin. It had probably been formed from molten gold in a gypsum mold on a centrifuge. I explored around its rim, and sure enough, I found the little filed dot where the extra metal had been broken off.

That still didn't mean it was old. It could have been made yesterday. But it opened up the possibility it was hundreds or thousands of years old. And the small figures on it were hieroglyphics. It was Egyptian, all right.

Suddenly it seemed to get very warm in my hand. Then I got the strong impression that the phone was going to ring, and it would be Leonard Vincent calling me. So strong was the feeling that I poured myself a second cup of coffee in a hurry and picked it up and went into the bedroom.

Just as I reached the phone it rang. And sure enough, it was Leonard. His chuckle sounded as I put the phone to my ear, interrupting its first ring.

"I see you have a cup of coffee with you so you can talk," he said.

"What is this?" I kidded. "TV?"

"Almost," he said. "What was your phone call about this morning at eight-thirty?"

"Now I know it's TV," I said. "A couple of my men phoned in sick and I have to get down and fill in."

"I guessed it was that," Leonard said. "Watch it very closely. Watch out especially for new customers."

"I will," I said. "By the way, how does this gold coin work? It is the gold coin that made me know you were going to call, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Leonard said. "It works by another old principle you'll find in the books, but you won't find anything about this particular application of the principle in the books. It's impregnated with my psychic wavelength, aura,

or whatever you want to think it is, so that it's actually an extension of my spirit. The same principle is involved in using hair and fingernail parings from a person in a devil doll, in black magic, and in using a handkerchief for mail order faith healings."

I laughed. "You make it sound as common as automobiles," I said.

"Perhaps it is," Leonard said, and he didn't sound like he was kidding. "The talisman itself is very old. It's worth probably twice as much as your garage, so don't lose it."

I whistled my amazement.

"That man who tried to kill you last night," Leonard said. "His name was George Mason, and he lived at 1427 Adeline Street in Oakland?"

"That's right," I said. "If he was the owner of that car."

"Good," Leonard said. "And you'll be at the garage all day?"

"Yes," I said. "If I leave I'll call you."

"Do that, Sam," Leonard said, and hung up.

Dave greeted me when I went in the garage. He seemed nervous, but I put it down to the pressure of piled up work. I was quite sure after my experience of last night that he knew nothing of having stolen from me.

"Handle the customers," I told him. "I'll pick up on the odd jobs and keep things rolling."

I looked over the work piled up, and chose the wheel alignment jobs. There were six of them to do. I could get them out in a couple of hours, and if no more came in I could take the three or four tune-ups to do before I knocked off for lunch.

"Sam," Dave said as I slipped into white coveralls.

"Yeah?" I said, glancing up at him.

"Nothing," he said.

"Is that any way to act with me, Davey boy?" I said. "What's eating you?"

"It's Elena," he said. "I—I guess we had a fight this morning."

"You guess?" I said. "Don't you know?"

"You know how it is," Dave said uncomfortably. "*I* didn't want a fight. But she said things."

"Don't let it bother you," I said. "Women say things they don't mean. You know that."

"Yeah, I guess so," Dave said.

"You know so," I said cheerfully. "When you go home for lunch she'll say she's

sorry and you'll say you're sorry and things will be okay."

"If she's there," Dave said darkly, and went to take care of a customer.

I went to work on the front end alignment jobs. Ordinarily I enjoy diving in and working now and then, but this morning I was on edge. Always before, a pair of feet meant a waiting customer. Now they might be a threat. If they were in view for five minutes without moving away, I had to get out of the pit with a heavy bending bar in my hand for a weapon to meet the threat—and it always turned out to be some harmless guy patiently waiting for his car. And that irritated me too.

At noon I was still on the third alignment job and not doing so well. I washed up so I could handle the customers while Dave went to lunch.

Dave had been gone only fifteen minutes when he came back, white as a sheet.

"She's left me!" he said.

"Nonsense!" I said. "She probably went shopping."

"No. She left a note saying she wouldn't be back," Dave said.

"She'll be back," I said. "She wouldn't break off with you over a quarrel at breakfast."

"It isn't just that," Dave said. "It's been building up for almost a month."

"Come in the office and tell me about it," I said.

We went into the office. Dave sat where he had been sitting two nights before, stealing from me.

"I don't know what it is," Dave began, despair in his voice. "About six weeks ago when I came home from work Elena had a bandage on her forehead. At first she wouldn't tell me what had happened, then she admitted she had fallen and cut herself. I asked her why she hadn't called me and let me take her to a doctor and she said she didn't want to bother me with it.

"Maybe that was the beginning. Always before, if she so much as scratched herself she'd call me and I would rush home. Sometimes I almost wished she wasn't quite so much of a baby." Dave grinned wistfully.

"But about a month ago she started in on me about never amounting to anything. All I would ever be was a garage mechanic, while other men made enough in a year to buy a garage like yours, Sam."

"Why didn't you tell me, Dave?" I said. "I've been

meaning to give you another raise."

"You're already paying me almost twice what the job is worth," Dave said. "Besides, it wasn't the money. I'm sure of that. She was different, somehow. Not always. It would come over her. Like she was two people. One was the old Elena, the other was always needling me. I never knew quite what to expect. She'd keep after me for an hour about how worthless I was. Then all of a sudden she'd give me the funniest look, like she was afraid of something, right in the midst of my saying something, and she would start crying and run from the room. I just couldn't figure it out."

"Do you know where she went?" I asked.

"If I did, Sam, I'd go after her," Dave said.

"Maybe she'll be back by tonight," I said. "Damn it, I wish we weren't so shorthanded around here. Jim's on vacation, Art and Hank are sick, and everybody and his brother are bringing in cars that have to be fixed right now!"

"Why don't you get another mechanic from the Union?" Dave said, his eyes haunted by misery. "I may have to quit and try my hand at real estate or something to get Elena back."

"Nonsense, Dave!" I said. "But you're right about getting another man. I should have hired one temporary for the vacations. The trouble is, it's damned hard to find a man of the kind we like. Go get yourself something to eat at the Donut Shop. I'll see what I can do."

"If Elena calls . . ." Dave said miserably.

"Sure," I said. "If she calls I'll come get you."

Fat chance of her coming back, I said to myself after Dave had gone across the street. How much money she had made Dave steal from me I didn't know, but I had been doing a little mental arithmetic, and I knew it was several thousand dollars.

I'd been coasting along without paying much attention to the shop. But I knew that business was better than last year and we had taken in less money by several hundred dollars a month for at least the last five months. Maybe more than several hundred dollars, if today was any criterion!

I had it all pretty much figured out now. Leonard had as good as said that Elena was in back of everything. Even

if he hadn't, it stood to reason.

And last night, through me, she had tried to kill Leonard. If she had succeeded, she would have returned me to my apartment before I woke up. I would have gotten up this morning with no memory of having done anything but sleep all night.

It would have been another one of those things. Witnesses seeing me at the scene of the murder, my fingerprints all over the place, and me protesting my innocence. I'd go to the gas chamber swearing I was innocent, but it would have been my finger that pulled the trigger!

When I told Leonard about her flying the coop he would probably say it was to be expected. She had failed to get rid of him, and of me. There was nothing left for her to do but get lost.

I couldn't tell Dave that though. In the first place he would hate me, in the second place there was absolutely no proof. What kind of proof would it be to say that Elena had taken over control of my body while I was asleep, and had taken over control of Dave's when he was asleep?

If I tried to say something like that in court they'd turn me over to a psychiatrist. A psychiatrist who had to believe such things were impossible or he would have to see a psychiatrist himself!

I felt pretty good about Elena skipping out. In time, Dave would get over her. Meanwhile there was work to do.

I called the Union. The business agent promised to send over three good men. I hated the thought but there was nothing else to do. Dave was going to be no good to me until Elena came back or he got her out of his system. I'd have to handle the floor myself until then, and keep a close watch on the new men.

Dave came back from lunch and took over. I went over to the Donut Shop and had a hamburger steak with a double order of french fries. When I went back to the shop the three men from the Union were there. So were a flood of customers with car troubles. Business had never been so good.

At three o'clock I told Dave to scram. He took off like an Atlas headed for outer space.

And at six, when I had finished counting the take, there were six jackpot jobs for a total of sixty-two-fifty that could have been skimmed off without my missing them—

provided the work sheets were destroyed.

I was pretty bitter about Dave, and it was hard to remember that *he* was completely innocent.

Just the same, I put the day's receipts in my pocket instead of putting them in the safe. And as I drove home I watched the traffic like it was invading Russians. I made it home safe, too.

When I got there I took a thick T-bone out of the freezer compartment and had myself a treat. Afterwards I called Leonard Vincent and gave him a brief rundown on the day's events, including the news that Elena had departed for parts unknown.

Leonard seemed interested in that, but I cut him short. I'd had a rough day.

I tried to watch TV, but fell asleep a couple of times, so finally I went to bed—not forgetting to transfer the gold coin to my pajama pocket.

And—surprise!— I had a good night's sleep. Or at least I did so far as I knew . . .

The headlines in the morning paper were about the murder of the woman recluse, Mrs. Crestley. Widow of a former San Francisco financier, owner of extensive real estate holdings, she had lived in one of the hold-out mansions on Lake Park Avenue, just off of Lake Merrit in Oakland.

A prowler had broken into her place and, surprised in the act of burglarizing the house, had killed Mrs. Crestley by a "blow on the head with a blunt instrument" according to the police.

The housekeeper, a Miss Cravendish, had called the police, and had been taken to the hospital suffering from shock.

There was more, but I had to get to the garage, so I laid the paper aside.

When I got to the garage the phone was ringing. It was Dave. He was despondent enough to kill himself. Elena hadn't been home all night. He hadn't heard from her. He didn't have any idea where she might be.

I told him to get hold of himself—to take a few days off. When I hung up the phone rang again. Art calling in sick. Then it was Hank's wife on the phone saying he was too sick to come in that day.

Eight o'clock came and we were open for business. Sure I was lonesome without Dave. I worked to keep my thoughts off of my lonesomeness.

I was kept busier than ever before in my life.

And while I saw the front ends were aligned, and carburetors were adjusted properly, and main bearing oil seals were replaced satisfactorily, a crime beyond imagination, too horrible to conceive, was being committed.

And I could have prevented it—if I had not been too busy to even think!

It was three in the afternoon when the phone rang for the hundredth time that day. This time it was a smooth feminine voice.

"May I speak to Mr. Springer?" she said.

"Talking," I said.

"Could you tell me where I could reach Mrs. Taylor, Mr. Springer? Mrs. David Taylor?" she said. "No one answers at the Taylor residence."

"If she isn't home I don't know where she would be," I said. "Who is this? How did you happen to call me?"

"You're listed as Mr. Taylor's employer," she said. "That's why I called you. This is the Kaiser Foundation Hospital. Mr. Taylor was involved in an automobile accident and we like to inform relatives as soon as possible when—"

"Is Dave hurt?" I shouted into the phone. I was cursing myself for a fool. It hadn't occurred to me that Elena would try to get Dave killed! "Is he going to live?"

"I can't tell you that," she said with maddening calm. "If you could locate Mrs. Taylor—"

"To hell with Mrs. Taylor," I snarled at her. "How badly is Dave hurt? Do you want me to crawl through this phone and knock your teeth in—whoever you are?"

Her voice relented. "I can't tell you how he is because I don't know, Mr. Springer," she said. "He was just this moment brought in. I'm in charge of the emergency ward desk. His valuables were turned over to me and it's my job to try to locate his wife."

"Oh," I said. "I'll be right down. And listen—I want the best doctors for him, a private room, private nurses. I don't care what it costs. I'll have a check for you when I get there. I can make it in less than ten minutes."

"Yes, sir," she said. "But if you could locate Mrs. Taylor. Elena. He keeps calling for her."

I slammed the phone.

"Howy!" I called to one of the mechanics. "Take over the floor for the rest of the

day. And open up tomorrow if I'm not here."

Then I was in my car and barreling through traffic in second gear, and using my horn as I went through red lights to paralyze startled drivers.

After a few red lights a Berkeley Police car tried to signal me down. I kept going, and when he pulled alongside of me I shouted, "Kaiser Hospital!" to him. He went ahead of me with his siren blasting, and I was able to shift into high.

At the emergency entrance to the hospital he followed me inside.

The girl at the desk was a redhead with big brown eyes and a firm mouth. The nameplate in front of her said, *Mary Parks.*

"Where have they got Dave?" I barked at her.

"Oh, you must be Mr. Springer," she said. "They have him in X-ray. I'll find out if you can see him."

"Never mind that," I said. "Just point where I'm to go and I'll go to him."

She looked up at me, opened her mouth, then closed it and merely pointed down the hall.

I grinned at her. "Thanks," I said. And I meant it. I had never before met a woman who could size up a situation and realize she should keep her mouth shut and just point.

I barged into the X-ray room, the Berkeley cop right behind me. I was grateful for that, because the men inside looked at me like they intended to throw me out, until they looked past me and saw the uniform.

"Dave!" I said, trying to get to him while two white coats pushed me back.

Dave didn't turn his head. He was strapped onto a low table and two men were looking at the image of his skeleton on a ground glass plate that moved over him on metal arms. It was a fluoroscope.

Dave opened his lips and said, "Elena!"

I could see why they thought he was calling for her, but to me it didn't sound like he was calling for her. It sounded more like he had found her. There was horror and accusation in the way he said her name.

"How bad is he?" I asked the whole room.

One of the men bent over the fluoroscope said in a low, distinct voice, "We are trying to find out. We've given him blood and cut him open to block off and bypass a per-

forated artery. He has some broken bones. But it's the extent of damage to his liver that we are concerned about. If that isn't too great he'll live."

"When will he be conscious?" I asked.

The man shook his head, still without looking up from his study of the moving image of bones on the glass screen. "We'll have him in the operating room two hours or more. Four or five hours after that will bring it to about midnight."

"I'll be back," I said. "My name's Sam Springer. I'm footing the bills. Give him the best. You understand?"

I called Leonard Vincent, told him what happened and arranged to meet him at Dave's house. The cop said it would be safer if he drove.

We got to the house before Leonard. The cop left me at the curb, then pulled away. I used the key and went into the house. I knew I wouldn't find anything, but I looked in every room for a note that Elena might have left.

I was searching the waste paper in the fireplace when Leonard arrived. I was glad to see him. The place bothered me with its emptiness. I had never been there before when either Elena or Dave wasn't with me.

"You've been searching for a note from Elena?" he said.

"Yeah," I answered. "No luck." I tossed the last of the scrap paper back into the fireplace.

Leonard Vincent stalked from room to room, scowling at the walls with his lean, handsome face, his dark eyes missing nothing. I followed, mystified by the places where he looked. Under the bed, under scatter rugs, behind pictures. I had to admit he was looking places I would never have thought of looking.

In the bedroom there was a picture hanging above the head of the bed. When Leonard slid this aside he grunted triumphantly and took the picture down.

"It's just as I suspected!" he exclaimed.

I looked at the wall. There was a faint design, painted over but still visible. It was of a five pointed star, as though it stood on two of its legs and was tipped over at a forty-five degree slant. Around it was drawn an oval. And as I studied it I began to see the familiar drawings of hieroglyphics like those on the golden talisman Leonard had given me. Maybe not the same, but like them.

"Who owns this house?" Leonard said.

"I don't know," I said, shrugging. "I was here when Dave and Elena rented the place. All I know is she was an old lady."

"Can you remember her name?" Leonard asked.

I thought about it. Finally I shook my head. "I know it," I said. "It's on the tip of my tongue . . ."

"It doesn't matter," he said. "We can check at the Hall of Records." He glanced at his watch and groaned. "Too late. They'll be closed by the time we get there."

I looked at my watch. It was lacking a couple of minutes of five.

"Maybe you could call them from here and find out," I suggested.

Leonard cursed under his breath as he searched for the phone book. Finally he found it, located the number, and dialed. I could hear the phone ringing, and to me it sounded like it was ringing in an empty office. Finally he hung up.

"What's the landlady got to do with it?" I asked.

I had never seen Leonard Vincent angry before. His eyes flared like those of an eagle or a hawk. Suddenly he seemed much like a humanized hawk, the way his shoulders were hunched and his chin thrust forward.

"All along it's smacked of a landlady," he said. "Who else would have a string of dwellings in which to place pentagrams and gain control of dozens of human beings after months of patient practice. How else would *she* hope to find the successor of her body?"

"Maybe Elena put that design there herself," I said.

"Nonsense," Leonard snapped. "Can't you see it's been painted over?" He touched it with his finger. "Besides, it's more than just the pentagram. It's familiarity with this place and many others. Familiarity such as only the owner could obtain.

"Dozens of houses. A spider web to trap the unwary flies. And I am at a standstill until the Hall of Records opens in the morning!"

He turned to me with an expression so menacing that I backed up a step.

"You saw her, you say?" he snapped. "What did she look like?"

"An old woman in her seventies, I would say," I said. "About five-feet-two, wrinkled face, beautiful once. Oh, yes, she had a scar on her fore-

head. How could I forget that? It was shaped a little like a spider, and very white against the background of her California tan."

"I know her," Leonard said. "Each of them have their own distinctive means of binding themselves securely to a body. Now, if you can remember her name?"

"But if you know her, don't you know her name?" I said.

He laughed. "Her name has changed a hundred times since I last saw her," he said.

He took my shoulders and shook them.

"You've got to remember!" he said. "She has Elena. *Elena is her successor.*"

He let go of me and stepped back. He ran his hand over his eyes.

"Let me explain to you," he said. "She's one of the Cult of Osiris. The Cult that discovered the secret of living forever by transfering to a young body before the old one died. She has picked Elena's body to live in, and at this very moment she may have made the transfer and be ready to destroy her old body, *with Elena's soul in it.*" His eyes bored into mine. "When that happens it will be too late!"

"Then it wasn't Elena herself?" I said.

"No! Of course not!" Leonard said. His face clouded over. "There's just one thing," he said. "In order to make a permanent transfer that would survive death, she would have to obtain a similar scar on Elena's forehead. Each of the Cult of Osiris has his or her own peculiar marking of continuity."

I was nodding dismally. "Elena had been wearing a bandage over her forehead just above the right eye for several weeks," I said. "Dave said that that was the beginning of things going sour between him and Elena."

"Then maybe we're too late," Leonard said. "If the landlady has died already, we may find Elena too late. There's one chance, a remote one, of saving Elena even then. If we can find her before the old body has been dead three days, Elena's soul will still be trapped and we can rescue her."

He paced like a wild animal.

"I could kill her with my own two hands," he said, glaring at me. "She's merciless. She has the cunning of a serpent. For two thousand years she has evaded—us." He tore at his hair. "And we have to waste precious hours waiting

for the Hall of Records to open at nine in the morning! If we didn't have to wait . . ."

"Maybe we don't," I said. "The doctor said that Dave may be able to speak at midnight. We can go to the hospital and wait."

When we arrived, it was 5:30. Mary Parks was still there and eager to help. She told us that the operation was successful and they were just taking Dave out of surgery.

"How long before he can talk?" Leonard asked.

"I think he had pentathol," Mary Parks said. "It's funny stuff. Let's go eat, and then I'll see if we can go see him. Sometimes they'll talk even when they aren't conscious."

"Yes," Mary said when we had settled ourselves in a booth in a nearby restaurant. "Just the other day there was a pentathol patient, double hernia case. He came out of surgery at ten-thirty. His wife came to see him at noon. He talked to her just like he was awake. But he didn't really wake up until almost three in the afternoon. And he couldn't remember his wife coming to visit him at noon. That's the way pentathol acts."

"Then maybe," Leonard said hopefully, "Mr. Taylor will answer a question or two even if he isn't awake, when we go back?"

"He might," Mary Parks said. She turned to me. "Did you locate his wife yet?"

"No," I said. "That's what we want to ask him about. We think she's at the house of the woman who owns the house they live in, but we don't know her name or where she lives, and we can't find out until morning unless Dave can tell us."

"That's a shame," Mary said.

The waitress came and took our orders. We drifted into silence. The food came. We ate.

Suddenly Leonard slapped his hand on the table.

"Pentathol!" he said. "Isn't that the truth drug? Aren't people supposed to answer questions while under its influence? Why do we have to wait until he recovers consciousness?"

Mary Parks blinked at him. Suddenly she nodded.

"We could try it," she said. "I know they wouldn't let us if we asked, but I know he's in three twenty-four, a private room, and maybe we could sneak in and try him with some questions." She looked scared. "If we got caught I'd be fired though."

"Then you stay out of it," I said. "Leonard and I will try it, and if we get caught they can't fire us."

"No, Sam," she said. "I'm coming with you."

Leonard chuckled. "Let's go then," he said, getting up.

We went back to the hospital by the front entrance so as to bypass the basement emergency entrance. As we crossed the lobby Mary stepped ahead of us as though escorting us. The woman behind the counter glanced at us idly and returned to her magazine of True Confessions.

We rode to the third floor in silence, the draft down the elevator shaft sounding like an eerie ghost. In the third floor hall we encountered no one. We found the door with the numerals 324 on it, and silently pushed it open.

Inside, a single feeble light cast visibility throughout the room. Dave lay on the only bed in the room. He was as motionless as death.

"He knows your voice," Leonard said. "Maybe he will answer you."

I went up to the side of the bed. Mary and Leonard stayed at the foot. Mary's eyes were very round. She reminded me of a wet sparrow, and for some reason that made me feel good.

"Dave!" I whispered. "This is Sam. Where is Elena?"

He didn't answer.

"Dave!" I repeated. "Where is Elena?"

His lips quivered as though he were trying to answer.

"Let me try it," Leonard said.

"Dave," he said. "You must try to answer me. What is the name of your landlady?"

His lips quivered again. He opened his mouth. He seemed trying to answer. Then he grew lax.

We watched him a few seconds.

"It's no use," Leonard said. "We'll just have to wait until he's conscious." He started to turn away.

"Look!" Mary whispered.

Dave's lips were quivering again. Slowly his lips formed words.

"Alice Crestley," he said, forming each syllable as though it took supreme effort.

"That's it!" I said. "I remember now. Alice Crestley! We've got it!" And I'm damned if I know how Mary Parks got in my arms and kissed me.

She seemed more excited than either I or Leonard.

Then suddenly she froze with startled surprise.

"Alice Crestley?" she said.

"Isn't she the old lady who was murdered last night?"

We had gone back to the restaurant from the hospital, mainly because we could be natural there. Mary and I sat at the counter while Leonard went to the bank of telephone booths. The waitress had come, and we had ordered coffee for the three of us.

While Mary and I waited for Leonard to come back I gave her sidelong glances. I was wondering about her. She was spunky. That was the word. She reminded me of one time I went deer hunting with two of my mechanics one week end, and when we didn't find any deer by noon we knocked off and had lunch, and there was this chipmunk sitting on a log, and I shot at him and missed, but the wind of my bullet knocked him off the log. He picked himself up and came over and begged for something to eat, and I fell in love with him because he was so spunky. Mary was like that. She had adopted us. She was sticking to us.

Her hair wasn't the deep shade of auburn that most redheads pay three or four bucks a week to keep up. She seemed flat-chested, but I knew that a dress can fool a guy.

In short, she was the kind of girl I could go for for keeps. And the thought scared me. I wasn't looking at her, while we waited. Instead, I was looking in every direction but her.

Leonard came back from the phone booths. He slid into the seat beside me and sampled his coffee.

"Everything is settled," he said smoothly. "Mrs. Crestley lived on Lake Park Avenue. We'll drop Mary off wherever she lives, then go pick up Elena and come back to the hospital with her, and wait until Dave wakes up."

"Oh, no," Mary said calmly. "I've seen it this far, I'll see it through to the end."

"Damn it!" Leonard said harshly. "Do as I say! You'll just be excess baggage from here on in."

"So what?" Mary said. "You owe me something. I'm sticking."

"Look, Miss Parks," Leonard said patiently. "Sam can see you tomorrow. He'll be coming to the hospital to see Dave."

Her face became bright red. "I'm sticking," she said. "You can't get rid of me that easy."

"Okay!" Leonard said with a deep sigh. "Okay! But you'll be sorry!"

I grinned and squeezed

Mary's hand under the counter. She flashed me a brave smile, but she was scared.

"We have no time to lose," Leonard said. "Our first stop is—the police morgue! We're going to steal a body."

"Maybe I ought to go home," Mary said, looking sick. She stuck her chin up and added, "But I won't!"

"How much money do you have on you in cash, Sam?" Leonard said, taking a sip of coffee.

I searched my pockets, piling their contents on the counter. A lot of it was checks, but when I counted the actual cash it was over four hundred dollars.

"And I have two hundred dollars and some change," Leonard said.

"I have twenty-seven dollars and eighty-three cents," Mary said.

"Six hundred and fifty some dollars," Leonard said. "Maybe it will be enough."

"What's it for?" Mary asked, beating me to the question.

"We're going to have to bribe the night attendant at the city morgue into letting us borrow a body," Leonard said. He scooped up the money. "Let's go," he said.

I will swear to my dying day that it wasn't the four hundred dollars the night attendant took, but Leonard Vincent's hypnotic eye. With my sweaty hands gripping the steering wheel, we nosed out of the morgue driveway with the cold corpse of Alice Crestley in the trunk compartment of my car, wrapped in a sheet.

Mary sat between Leonard and me in the front seat. The night attendant at the morgue watched us with a pathetic expression. He had sold his Future for a measly four hundred bucks, he was sure.

Then we were creeping along through the darkened streets of Oakland, with a corpse in the trunk compartment. A corpse so cold I half expected ice to form on the outer surface of the trunk cover of the car. A corpse we had promised to return before dawn.

Why? Because Leonard Vincent commanded! I can explain it no other way. He was no longer the man I had known and played chess with. A power seemed to emanate from him, surround him, make him seem larger.

Nor was it my imagination. The streets of Oakland cleared before us as though by magic. Cars pulled quickly to the curb and stopped, and I

could see the startled faces of their passengers as we went by. We came to a red light and Leonard told me to keep going, and cars that had the green light with them stopped with a shriek of burning rubber, and I could see the startled eyes of the drivers. Into their lives had come something inexplicable. They had stopped without knowing why, and seconds later an ordinary looking car had sped through the red light. But was it ordinary, they would ask themselves. Then they would shrug off the feeling that possessed them. Rationalize rationalize *rationalize*—until their modern world of car payments and TV commercials was comfortable once more.

I would do my own rationalizing later. Right now I rode with a corpse in my trunk compartment, a girl named Mary Parks beside me, and a high priest of Darkness, older than our mechanized civilization, older, perhaps, than the Sphinx.

We quickly reached Lake Merritt. I wasn't sure where Lake Park Avenue was, but Leonard seemed to know the right direction like a homing pigeon or the needle of a compass.

The house was a three-story mansion type, built early in the century but well kept up. A driveway went from the street under an arbor extension to the side of the house. Leonard told me to drive right in.

The house was dark. If anyone were there, they must be asleep. Was Elena there? The entity that had called herself Alice Crestley, that now inhabited Elena's body? Was she perhaps peeking from a darkened window, recognizing her enemy, Leonard Vincent?

Mary Parks was pale as a ghost as I lifted the trunk cover.

"I'll carry her," Leonard said. "You see about getting the door open, Sam."

I helped him get the sheet-wrapped body out of the trunk and into his arms. Then I took my lock kit and pencil flashlight and examined the lock on the side door, a couple of steps from the car. It was an old Yale. Its tumblers would be loose and respond quickly to the kicker, the little trigger activated probe in my kit that is standard with all locksmiths. It took less than thirty seconds to get the door open. I put my lock kit back in the trunk compartment.

Then, with Mary Parks

gripping my hand, I went in ahead of Leonard and located the light switch. The darkness vanished. We were in a large room expensively furnished, with thick rugs and plenty of ornately carved walnut furniture.

"It's probably in the basement," Leonard said. "Find the stairs to the basement. What I'm looking for is a room with no furniture, and a design in the floor something like the design on the talisman, Sam. It has to be here in this house. It's the soul exchange pentagram of the Cult of Osiris. We must find it as soon as possible."

I went looking. It wasn't in the basement. It was on the first floor, in the back of the house.

I turned on the lights. The room was about fifteen by twenty feet. There were built-in benches around the wall but no other furniture.

The floor seemed made of sand, smooth and densely packed. A design dominated the open expanse of floor. A five-pointed star whose two legs stretched almost to the wall on the side where I stood, whose two side points were shortened, and whose upper point extended into a disk of gold dust three feet across, that gleamed like the face of some giant sun.

In the center of the five-pointed star design was an oval of pure white sand a little less than three feet wide and six feet long. It was bordered by a black rim that served as the base for closely spaced hieroglyphics. And distributed over the rest of the star, and outside it, were more of the Egyptian figures, like those at Dave's house.

Yet, as I stood there looking at the design, it seemed more than just a design. A force seemed to pulse through it and the atmosphere above it like the silent power that pulses in a huge power plant. And the room seemed to grow and grow, expanding to infinity, while the golden disc seemed to *be* a giant star, light years away across space.

I pulled my eyes away from the design by an effort of will, and turned to leave the room.

And Elena stood in the open doorway, a gun in her hand.

"Mr. Springer," she said. And my last doubt vanished. This was not Elena. Every inflexion of her voice, the expression around her lips, was unmistakeably that of a woman I had seen only once, a year ago. The old lady that Dave and Elena had rented

their duplex from, Alice Crestley.

Even without her speaking I would have known. Her eyes were not Elena's. And on her forehead was the same scar, vaguely like a white spider, that I had seen on the forehead of Alice Crestley.

"You aren't Elena!" I blurted.

"Why of course I am, Sam," she said. Her lips curled in a mocking smile. Her knuckle whitened on the trigger. "Now!" she said. "You're going back to the front room and tell Leonardo that there is no such room as this in the house."

"He won't believe me," I said.

"Perhaps not," she said. "But it will give me time to destroy the pentagram."

A chuckle sounded in back of her. "It's too late for that," Leonard Vincent's voice sounded, crisp and bitterly triumphant.

She jerked her head around. I leaped toward her and got my hands on the gun.

There was the deafening sound of a shot. Then I had the gun. For a brief second Alice Crestley glared at me with hate-filled eyes, then she darted past Leonard and was gone.

"Let her go," Leonard said, striding into the room with his sheet-wrapped burden. "She'll be unable to get far."

Mary came into the room at his heels and clutched my arm, her eyes terrified.

Leonard strode across the floor to the oval of white at its center. There he gently lowered his burden, and straightened it out until it was entirely within the oval.

He worked the sheet away from the head.

Beside me, Mary sucked in her breath sharply. Her fingernails dug into my arm.

For the second time in my life I was looking at the face of the old lady, Alice Crestley. This time it was a dead face. The eyes were open and staring, but dead and dull surfaced. The face was lifelike with its California tan and many wrinkles.

A white spider seemed to be crouched on her forehead above the right eye.

Leonard straightened up. He looked down at the face for a moment with an expression of compassion, and I suddenly realized that he was looking—not at the corpse of Alice Crestley—but at the soul of Elena, imprisoned within it!

Then he went to stand on the disc of gold, turning so

that he faced the corpse, and lifted his hands toward the ceiling.

He spoke. And the words he uttered were alien, from a tongue long forgotten by man, but so basically rooted in man's destiny that their meaning seemed to lurk in the dark recesses of my mind as I listened.

As he intoned his ancient syllables the atmosphere of the room seemed to chill. No breath of air stirred, yet it seemed that cosmic gales rushed in and around us from the gulf of space far out between the stars.

Suddenly I sensed a presence behind me in the doorway. I turned my head.

Elena was standing there —Alice Crestley in Elena's body. Her eyes were glaring insanely. A fleck of foam was at one corner of her mouth. The spider on her forehead was no longer white but an evil red.

In my ears Leonard's voice droned louder and louder as Alice Crestley stepped into the room. Her eyes were fixed in horror on the dead face of the body she had once occupied as she now occupied Elena's.

Leonard Vincent held out his hand toward her. She went past me and stepped into the pentagram, drawn against her will.

Then, my eyes and my mind seemed to trick me. The pentagram seemed to rise a few inches from the floor and become misty, with strange flowing forces churning under its surface. The body of the old woman, encased in its white sheath, seemed to sink in and turn gray.

Alice Crestley turned toward me, trying to escape. The spider scar on her forehead turned bright red—and blurred as though going out of focus. It had vanished, leaving clear unbroken skin!

The floor beneath my feet trembled. From far away, or far below, came a deep rumbling as of an earthquake.

A breath of ice brushed past me toward the door.

"Sam!" It was Elena's voice! Elena's! Coming from her own lips!

"Elena!" I said, leaping forward to catch her as she fainted. "Thank God!" I breathed.

A moment later Mary Parks pushed me aside. She had a wet towel in her hands. Where she had gotten it I don't know. I stepped back as Mary bent down and wiped Elena's face with the towel.

I looked around. Whatever

had been in this room was gone. The pentagram design on the floor was—just a pretty design, a little too geometrical. I looked up at Leonard. He was—just the man I played chess with two or three times a week.

And the sheet encased body in the oval of white was just a corpse.

Everything around me was sharply clear, real.

"Mary can take care of Elena, Sam," Leonard said. "I think we'd better get Mrs. Crestley back to the morgue as soon as possible."

"Hurry back, Sam," Mary said, giving me a scared grin.

"Sure," I said.

I followed Leonard out to the car, thinking how I would hurry back to Mary, and how I would hurry back to her from now on. She was the kind of woman I had been looking for without knowing it. A skinny girl with faded red hair, and a spunky heart.

On the way back to the morgue no cars fled from our path. And we stopped for red lights. Things were back to normal. Or almost normal. I found myself still glancing nervously in the rearview mirror for some nameless menace that might sneak up from behind.

"Some fun, huh?" I said to Leonard.

He took a deep shuddering breath and let it out slowly.

"It's over," he said. "For you it's over."

"And for you?" I dared to ask.

"There are two more of the Cult, I think," Leonard said. "Then I can *die!*" There was infinite longing in his voice.

"You sound like you've lived as long as you say Mrs. Crestley did," I said. "But you don't have any scar on you."

"No, Sam, there's no scar on me," he said. "Fresh bodies—that's the easy way, the evil way. There's also a hard way, the way I had to take to remove the curse I set loose on this earth almost three thousand years ago."

"Who are you?" I asked, my hands gripping the wheel, my eyes straight ahead. I thought I knew now. I felt sure he was the legendary Osiris, and later Leonardo da Vinci, and God knows who else.

"It's better for you not to know, Sam," he said gently. "The less you know the easier you will forget. After tonight you won't see me again. I have to go on searching . . ."

I turned the corner and coasted to a stop by the City

Morgue. The night attendant rushed out, almost crying with relief.

We took Elena to the hospital to be with Dave. Mary had a private talk with the night nurse, and before we left another bed had been wheeled into the room and Elena had been given a sedative that would make her sleep until noon.

The dawn light was behind the Berkeley hills to the east as we turned off San Pablo up to Ordway where Leonard's car was parked in front of Dave's duplex.

We had not spoken since leaving the hospital. Now, as I pulled up across the street from Leonard's car, I asked wistfully, "You're sure I won't see you again, Leonard?"

He opened the door. "Someday, perhaps," he said. "If you ever need me I'll come. Good-bye, and good-bye, Mary." His voice was gentle and sad.

He walked across the street to his car, not looking back. When he got in and closed the door I felt like crying. His headlights went on. His car moved slowly away from the curb, picked up speed and disappeared.

Mary Parks touched my arm. I turned my head and looked at her. "Take me home, Sam," she said.

"Sure, Mary," I said. I started to shift into low gear, but suddenly I became uncomfortably aware of an irritation. I reached into my pocket and my fingers encountered a coin—and I realized with a start that Leonard had forgotten to take his talisman back. Or had he? Maybe he had left it with me as a means of contact.

Suddenly, as though Leonard Vincent were still in the car, his voice whispered in my ear, "Kiss her, you fool!"

I twisted around in the seat until I was facing Mary. She turned to look up into my face.

She seemed almost as scared as I felt. But she didn't resist at all as my arms went around her.

THE END

THE GARDEN OF FAST

By DICK ASHBY

He raced sports cars . . . he made love to beautiful women . . . he gave them dangerous gifts . . . he deserved everything he got.

AS A NOBLE horse grows old and tires more easily, mutely and without complaint, so did the Gordini race into the autumn weeks of its life. Lesser cars, but better kept, slipped past on the rough curves of Watkins Glen, and the merciless pressure at Thompson boiled it dry. So he sold it to a dealer in such things to be disemboweled for its parts and bought a cheap flight West—away from New York's winter, and away from the bitter hostility of acquaintances who had begun to understand him. It was time to hunt again, not for the thrills of a sporting chase, but from want and necessity.

The huntsman went to his task well-armed and dangerous, for just beneath the polish of his charm lay a primitive's amoral ability to spot the crippled animal and cut it from the herd. And having separated it, by wit or lust, by an imitation of compassion, by whatever deadly need that had made it slow and glance behind, he would eat of it while it lived.

He had not before been on the Coast, but the hangouts of the sports car crowd were easily found, and there—by instinct, and by the unvarying pattern of the hunt—he met those who would unwittingly point the way. Through a scattering of polite young amateurs who drove cautiously against each other—not to win, but to grime the white lilly of their life with dirt and Castrol and the assuring, positive masculinity of a hot engine—he moved and learn-

ed. Through the older members of the set who organized and formed committees and judged events, or played with gleaming vintage cars as children play with bright bits of glass and precious trash—he moved and charmed. And finally, now moving with ease and favor among the rich, he found her.

He had heard she was beautiful, but it was almost short of truth. Her body, tall and moulded beneath her simple sheath, promised such warmth and softness that his fingers ached, and her eyes were calm and gray beneath dark lashes.

He knew that she was thirty-five, and that the firey traffic accident which had killed her wealthy husband and their only child, had—for a while—sent her mind into the black and unreachable corridors of absolute grief. There had been months of delicate therapy before she had returned, and after that, months of solitude behind the walls of her estate. Only recently, giving in to the insistance of friends who loved her and whom she could not hurt, had she begun to emerge.

She stood beside a pool, beneath a festive string of paper lanterns, watching the dappled dancing of their light. He took her a drink which she accepted.

She smiled politely. "Do I know you?"

He shook his head.

"Then, ought I to know you?"

He nodded. "I am sure you should."

"Why?"

"Because you're going to waste. You need me."

She gave him back the glass. "Good night."

"Stand still or I'll shove you into the pool."

Gravely, curiously, she inspected his acquiline features. "Yes, you probably would. And our host would be terribly embarrassed and try to hit you, and because he is much older, you would manage to hurt him."

"You're right."

"You must be drunk."

"I never drink." For the first time he smiled, a flash of strong white teeth against the darkness of his tan. He took her arm. "Now let's go over to that bench and talk."

For a moment she resisted, then—prompted in part by curiosity and pique, and partially by that bitter magic which so often draws a superior woman to an utterly inferior man—she let herself be led away.

When they were seated she asked, "Why did you say I need you?"

"Because you're lonely. Lonely as only a beautiful woman with money can be."

"Oh." She smiled to herself. "What would you have me do? Give away my money? To you?"

"I have no need of it."

"Then perhaps I should stop wearing makeup."

"You would be as lovely as ever."

"Ha. You should see me in the morning."

"I would like very much to."

I allowed that one, she realized. "Are you always so direct?"

"I believe so. Once I raced fast cars. I was quite good, but it affected my social graces."

"Why did you stop racing?"

"Sometime I will tell you. Not now." He lit a cigarette, took it from his lips, and passed it to her.

It came too soon, she thought . . . this small act of intimacy. Such a thing should come about only by the naturalness of a much larger sharing. The thought was strangely disturbing. She exhaled a slender plume of smoke against the night sky. "What's it like to drive a race?"

He told her it was a great confusion of noise and color and whipping wind, and how at great speed one seemed to enter an altered world where time became almost tangible and where one might see visions.

She listened without comment. Never, she decided, will I tell him that as he speaks I think of bull fighters—graceful and tall, a little foolish to be doing what they do, but very brave to do it.

He broke off abruptly and stood. "Shall we go?"

She searched for the words to say no, then took his hand. Dear God, she thought, what am I doing?

Their departure caused a flurry of comment and (among the men) considerable envious speculation, but because it was they who had finally succeeded in luring her into the world, they pronounced it healthy and natural, a good sign.

"Drive fast," she told him when they were out of town and into the winding canyon roads of the Pacific range. "Race."

"With whom?"

"With me."

He pushed her heavy Lincoln into a tight curve and

took it around, drifting, tires screaming, then flung it up a narrow straight edge of mountain at nearly a hundred. At the top they plunged suddenly into heavy fog. He slowed to fifty, to half that, then pulled the car off the road onto a grassy trail. Somewhere out in the still-warm night a mockingbird called. He switched off the headlights and the impenetrable darkness enveloped them, rich with sage and salt, and faintly spiced with her perfume. He helped her from the car.

And in the style of his driving—with energy and verve, but with an utter disregard for the complex steed beneath him—he took her.

In the days that followed, she abandoned herself to him in a sensuous, golden rubato of sunlight and music and silence, of ecstasy and dreamless sleep. When he sensed that she was sweetly lost between satiety and the delightful memories of her hunger, and utterly unable to distinguish pity from love, he told her why he had stopped racing.

"Once it was all I needed. I drove, I lost, I won, I traveled, and I thought it was the world. But one day, recently, that world came all apart."

"Darling!" She tried to hold him, but he walked away.

"A specialist told me I had a year to live. Inoperable cancer, something to do with the exhaust fumes that I had breathed so long and loved so foolishly."

A numbing fist clutched at her heart. "Doctors can be mistaken," she whispered.

He shook his head. "There is no hope, my dear. I saw everyone, I refused to give up. Then, when I finally bowed to my sentence, I sold my racing car for money to live my remaining days in comfort." He allowed her to come into his arms and weep. "There, there," he soothed. "Be glad I told you all this before you did something silly like falling in love with me." He put his handkerchief into her hands. "One thing, though, I regret. I would like to race again. Just two or three times, perhaps. But . . ." He shrugged philosophically. "One can't have everything."

It developed, however, in the ensuing hours of talk and tears and tenderness, that he could have a car. With gentle skill, so as to save his pride, she made him understand that it would bring her happiness. This he found impossible to refuse.

She bought him a Mark XI

Lotus, bright red. He bought —as a token of his gratitude —a detailed scale model of the expensive import for her, complete with its helmeted driver behind the wheel.

His first race was on the fast Riverside circuit, a tricky three-and-a-quarter miles of tight bends and smooth deceptive straights. The qualifying run was all she could bring herself to watch, for as the Lotus snarled by at an announced hundred and seventeen, she became depressed and dizzy, and her mind sickened with the old forbidden images of fire and a screaming child.

When she returned home alone that night, chilled by a winter fog and by the terrors of love, she found an unexpected solace in the tiny model car, and its immaculate undamaged innocence. She slept with it nearby, and on the following day, race day, she made of it a sort of shrine.

One can ask no more of a charm than that it be successful, and when he returned to her unharmed (with a victory in his class, and fifth overall) the rites of her anxious ritual were set. She was supremely uncaring when he pronounced it childish, superstitious even, for she could tell he was strangely moved.

In an angry attempt, during his fifth race, to keep a Maserati from passing, he went into a corner too fast and spun out, smashing the flat snout of his car against a hay bale. He was sullen that evening and unamused when she tried to brighten his mood by sticking a small strip of adhesive bandage over the nose of the model. "That should fix it."

He misunderstood. "Of course they can fix it. It'll be ready in time for Pomona, day after tomorrow." He glared at the scale Lotus. "God how I hate it when the really fast ones go by. I wish I'd gotten a Ferrari."

She smoothed the edges of the strip against the sculptured hood. "Aren't they terribly expensive?"

"Expensive?" He frowned thoughtfully at her. "For some people they would be." Slowly, he warned himself, slowly and lightly. He made himself smile and reached for her. "But we'll talk about that some other time."

They talked of it the following day when he took her with him to pick up the repaired Lotus. The garage was a din of high-strung engines being tuned, of drill and hammers working metal. The smarting

stink of paint clashed with that of gasoline. Impatiently he examined the flawless work that had been done on the car, then took her into the relative quiet of an empty office. "Only two hundred and fifty dollars," he said and turned away as she made out the check. "There's a Ferrari over there in the corner." He pointed through the grimy window. "See? Over there where they're welding."

She tore free the check and handed it to him. "I'm terribly sorry to have to tell you this, dear. Ashamed."

"Of what?"

"You know I love you, don't you?"

"Go on."

"I begged with them for more money. I called them this morning and begged."

A vein against his temple began pounding visibly. "Called whom?"

She sat at the littered desk and put her face in her hands. "The lawyers who handle my estate. I asked them for a bigger allowance, but . . ."

"Allowance?" He took hold of her shoulder and pulled her around. "It's your money, isn't it?"

She shook her head. "I can't touch the principal of the estate until the trust company, the executors, have decided that I'm . . . I'm . . ." A tear glistened in each eye. "That's what makes me so ashamed. They don't think I'm fully recovered from that . . . that breakdown. The doctor doesn't either."

He let go of her. "And all you've ever had is an allowance they dole out to you?"

She nodded. "Does it make so much difference, darling?"

"You crazy bitch," he whispered. "Any difference! Why the hell do you think I picked you up? Your hot little body? Why the hell do you think I fed you that trash about being sick? To hear myself talk?" He jerked her head up by the hair and slapped her, hard. "You crazy, crazy slut."

He left, and through the open door she saw another, larger door begin to open slowly. Inside, she knew, was a long dark room with shadows where she had lived before. She wondered why it had once frightened her to be there. It was a quiet place, a perfect room of peace. Just the place for her to take her splendid shining hatred and to watch it grow.

It was a LeMans start, with the drivers sprinting across the track for their cars at the starting gun.

She took the little red Lotus

from the mantel and placed it on the cold smooth stones of the hearth. She rolled it back and forth, back and forth.

He accelerated into the first turn, well ahead of the pack, with only a pair of D-Jags ahead.

She remembered that the grill was fixed, so she ripped off the adhesive tape.

A Mercedes began dueling with him for the inside entry to the next turn.

She sang a tuneless little song and touched the tiny doll-man behind the wheel.

He forced the Mercedes into the awkward outside position at the turn.

Some adhesive still clung to the hood. She scratched at it with her nails.

What had happened to the dangerous Porsches, he wondered. Those were the cars in his class to beat.

The adhesive wouldn't come off, so she dissolved it with the lighter fluid, smiling very brightly, singing softly.

Even the veteran drivers were sickened by the greasy stench that clung to the blistered wreckage of the Lotus. "Poor devil," said one. "That cockpit blossomed up like it was filled with gas and somebody lit a match. It must have been hell."

It was.

THE END

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF FANTASTIC, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1958.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

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Business manager, Howard Stoughton, Jr., 1 Park Avenue, New York 16, New York.

2. The owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual member, must be given.)

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5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

HOWARD STOUGHTON, JR.,
Business Manager

[SEAL]

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 18th day of September, 1958.
WILLIAM PROEHMER, Notary Public
(My commission expires March 30, 1960.)

In space off Venus, two descendants of a famous family face each other in the tense, climactic episode of the saga of . . .

THE TROONS OF SPACE

Venus A. D. 2144

By JOHN WYNDHAM

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

AFTER George Troon had read the message, he pushed it across to his second-in-command. Arthur Dogget took it, considered it, and then nodded slowly.

"So it's out at last. I'd give a lot to see the Rio papers today. Apopletic'll be an understatement for 'em," he said, with some satisfaction. "It ought to be fun. Two hundred million Brasilieros all steamed up and demanding immediate action. What do you think'll happen?"

Troon shrugged.

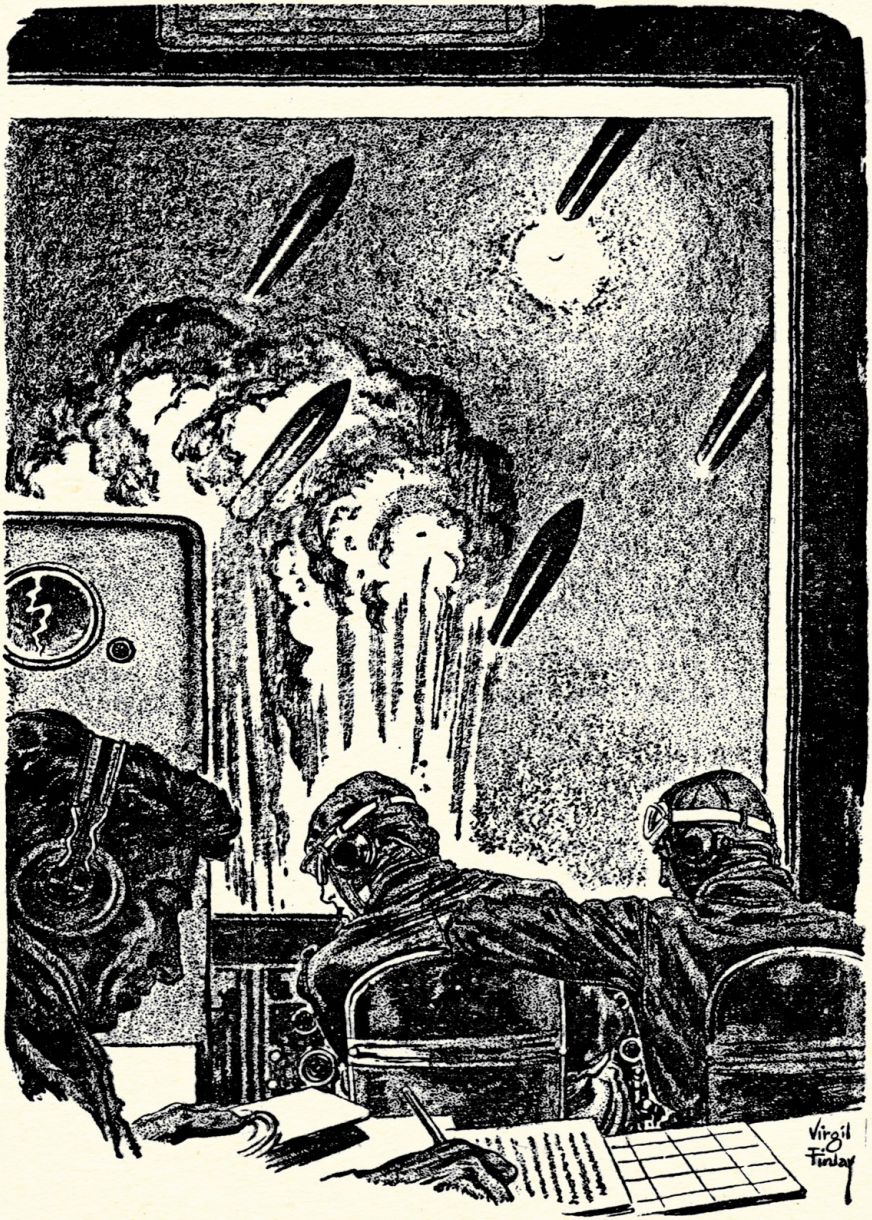
"As far as we are concerned, no change. Even a million million wrathful Brasilieros can't affect celestial mathematics. The powers that be have still got to wait for next conjunction before they can come after us. Meanwhile, I suppose the government will throw a few Ministers to the wolves, and assure everybody that retribution is well in hand."

"They're lucky they've only got six months of it to weather. What surprises me is that they managed to keep it dark so long," Arthur said. "Anyway," he added, "as far as I'm concerned, the thing that matters is that we beat 'em to it —such as it is—and that's one thing they can't undo."

"No," Troon nodded in agreement, "there's nothing they can do about that."

The two of them turned as if by common consent to look out of the window.

The prospect there was an average Venusian day. The sky was simply a luminous white mist. Visibility was that



At last the long awaited formation appeared on the screen.

within a layer of thin cloud, changing range quite rapidly as the mist drove along in a twenty-mile-an-hour wind. Most of the time one could see the sparse, high reeds that began forty yards away from the dome. They were slightly bent, and rippled in the wind like stiff hairs. Now and then the mist cleared enough for some minutes to reveal the tall, astonishingly flexible trees that someone had named feather-tops, swinging back and forth in great arcs, two hundred yards away. The ground itself, both near and further, was covered with a matting of pale succulent tendrils, the Venusian equivalent of grass. Even at its clearest, it was not a view to inspire. Almost a monochrome study; shadowless, with only here and there a fleshy stalk showing a faint flush of pink, or a slight tinting of green to break the monotony of pallor. And over all, and all the time, there was the mist condensing; drops of water running down the etiolated stems, showers of them torn from the plants by sudden gusts of wind, endless rivulets of them trickling down the windowpanes.

"It's all very well for us," Arthur remarked. "We've been financed to do what we wanted to do—make the first successful landing. Now, as far as I'm concerned, anybody can have it, and welcome."

Troon shook his head.

"We weren't financed just to make a record, Arthur—nor just to give it away again. Part of our contract is to hold on to it."

"Maybe if your Cousin Jayme could see what it's like he'd think again," Arthur suggested.

"Not Jayme," said Troon. "He knows what he's doing, always did. The trouble is that, like his old man, he has such big ideas that you only see bits of them. No, he's satisfied, he's pleased."

Arthur Dogget looked out of the window again, and shook his head.

"If he's pleased with this, there must be a lot more to it than we can see," he said.

"I've no doubt. He and his old man are campaigners in a big way—kind of civilian field-marshals, and with complete confidence in themselves. The old man was never a bit impressed by the mere size of a job he took on, so he always kept his head—Jayme's the same way."

"One of the things I've never understood," Arthur said, "is how a cousin of

yours, and an Aussie citzen, comes to have a Brazzie name like Jayme Gonveia?"

"Oh, that isn't too difficult. When my grandfather, Geoffrey Trunho died on the first expedition to Mars, he left three children: Anna, George, and Geoffrey, my father, who was born either posthumously, or at least after he reached Mars. My Aunt Anna subsequently married one Henrique Polycarpo Gonveia—old man Gonveia, in fact—she emigrated with him to Australia, and Jayme is their son.

"Now, Jayme's grandfather Gonveia was a friend of *my* grandfather's, and when my grandfather failed to return from Mars, it was this Grandpa Gonveia who did most of the agitation for a second Martian expedition. In the end he got together a group who put up half the money for it, and shamed the Brazilian government into finding the rest. And his highly speculative share in the success of the expedition there in 2101 was half of the exclusive rights to any botanical finds. To everyone's surprise, some were actually made, along the bottom of the *canali* rifts, and he promptly bought the other fellow out of the half-share.

"For about twenty years his experts grew, developed, and adapted the seeds and plants, and then, as a result, Grandpa Gonveia and his two sons and daughter set out to conquer the world's deserts—which they are still doing. Joao, the eldest son, took north Africa from his territory; Beatriz went to China, and my Uncle Henriques went off, as I said, to Australia.

"Anna's brother, my Uncle George, stayed in Brazil, and his son, Jorge Trunho, is a Commander in the Spaceforce there.

"My own father was sent to Australia to school, and then to Sao Paulo University. After taking his degree, he returned to Australia, married the daughter of a ship-owner there, and was soon sent to manage his father-in-law's office in Durban. At the time of the Second African Rising, when the Africans threw out the Indians, he was accidentally killed in a riot. My mother left with me, still a small baby, went home to live in Australia where she changed our name back to its original form of Troon."

"I see—but it doesn't really explain how your cousin Jayme comes to be involved in this business. I'd have thought he'd be much too busy reclaiming deserts."

"Not while his old man is still in the chair. They're too much of a kind. After he had had a year or so of the desert-blossoming business Jayme could see a lot of will-clashing ahead, so he started putting his main interest into other things. Well, I suppose that, what with the Gonveia strain and the Troon strain together, it was more or less a natural that he should get to thinking about space. He hasn't the Troon urge to get out into space; the Gonveia strain is stronger — he only wants to operate it—and the more he looked at space, lying out here with nobody doing anything about it, the more it irked him. After a bit, he got his old man interested, too, and then other people—which is why we're here today."

"Until the Brazzies arrive to throw us, and his interests, out," Arthur put in.

Troon shook his head.

"Don't you believe it. Jayme isn't the kind that gets thrown out—nor's the old man. I'd put the old man down as the richest, as well as the most valuable, immigrant Australia ever had; and there must be a goodish part of the Gonveia family fortune sunk in this. No, take it from me, they both know what they're doing."

"I hope you're right. The Brazzy in the street must be tearing mad now he's heard about it—he's pretty proud of that 'Space is a Province of Brazil' stuff."

"True enough—even though he'd have more to be proud of if he'd done more about it. All the same, when you look at the difference the Gonveia family has made to the face of the earth with the hundreds of thousands of square miles of deserts they've salvaged, I think they're a good bet."

"Well, I hope you're right. Things'll be a lot less sticky for us if you are," Arthur Dogget replied.

Presently, when Arthur had gone off, leaving him alone, Troon looked at the message again, and wondered how his cousin was handling things back on Earth.

His thoughts returned to a day, three years ago, when a small private aircraft, dead on its appointed time, had hovered over his house, and then put down on his landing-lawn.

Out of it had emerged Jayme Gonveia, a large, active young man in a white suit, white hat, and blue silk shirt, looking rather too big to have fitted into the craft that had brought him. For a mo-

ment he had stood beside the machine, looking round the estate of George Troon, noting the carefully spaced, thick-limbed Martian-derived trees that were something like spineless cacti, and the no less carefully arranged bushes of complementary kinds, examining the mesh of wiry grass beneath his feet, and the blades of wider leafed grass coming up, sparsely as yet, through it. George, as he approached, could see that, somewhat cheerlessly institutional as the calculated precision of the prospect appeared at present, Jayme was approving of it.

"Not doing badly," he had greeted George. "Five years?"

"Yes," said George. "Five years and three months now, from the bare sand."

"Water good?"

"Adequate."

Jayme nodded. "In another three years you'll be starting real trees. In twenty you'll have a landscape, and a climate. Should do nicely. We've just developed a better grass than this. Grows faster, binds better. I'll tell them to send you some seed."

They walked towards the house, across a patio, and into a large, cool room.

"I'm sorry that Dorothea's away," said George. "She's gone to Rio for a couple of weeks. Dull for her here, I'm afraid."

Jayme nodded again.

"I know. They get impatient. The first stages of reclamation aren't exciting. Is she a Brazilophil?"

"No—not really," George told him. "But you know how it is. Rio is lights, music, dresses, centre of the world and all that. It recharges her batteries. We usually go a couple of times a year. Occasionally, she goes on her own. She's plenty of friends there."

"Sorry to miss her," said his cousin.

"She'll be sorry not to have seen you. Quite a time since you met," George responded.

"Nevertheless," said Jayme, "it does make it a little easier to talk confidential business."

George, in the act of approaching the drink-cupboard, turned round and looked at his cousin, with a lifted eyebrow.

"Business?" he remarked. "Since when am I supposed to have known anything about business? And what sort of business?"

"Oh, just the usual Troon sort—space," said Jayme.

George returned with bottles, glasses and syphon, and set them down carefully.

" 'Space'," he reminded his cousin. " 'Space is a Province of Brazil'."

"But it is also a kind of madness in the blood of the Troons," Jayme replied.

"Now put under restraint for all of us—except, I suppose, for Jorge Trunho."

"Suppose there were an escape-route?"

"I should be interested. Say on."

Jayme Gonveia leant back in his chair.

"I have by now," he said, "grown more than a little tired of this 'Province of Brazil' bluff. It is time it was called."

"Bluff?" exclaimed George.

"Bluff," Jayme repeated. "Brazil has had it easy. She's been sitting on the top of the world so long that she thinks she's there for good, as a provision of nature. She's going soft. In the chaos that followed the Northern War she worked, and worked hard, to put herself on top; and since then, there have been no challengers to keep her on her toes. She's just sat back over the matter of space, too. When she first proclaimed it a Province she reclaimed the damaged Satellites, and made three of them spaceworthy again, and she took over and improved the old British Moon Station. But since then . . . !

"Well, look at the record . . . Nothing at all until Grandpa Trunho's unlucky Mars expedition in 2094. There wouldn't have been a second expedition there unless Grandpa Gonveia and his pals had pressed for it in 2101. The third, in 2105, was financed entirely by public subscription, and since then no-one has set foot on the place.

"They abandoned the smallest Satellite back in 2080. In 2115 they abandoned another, keeping only Primeira in commission. In 2111 a newspaper and radio campaign on the neglect of space forced them into sending the first Venus expedition—and a shabby affair that was, scandalously ill-equipped; never heard from once it had entered the Venus atmosphere, and no wonder. Ten years later they allowed a learned society to send another ship there—by subscription again. When that, too, disappeared, they just gave up. In the twenty years since then nothing further has been done, nothing at all. They've spent just enough to keep Primeira and the Moon Station habitable, so that they can hog their monopoly of space and, if necessary, threaten the rest of us from

there, and that's all. What a record!"

"Far from admirable," agreed George Troon. "And so—?"

"And so they are going to pay the usual penalty of neglect. Someone else is going to step in."

"Meaning Jayme Gonveia?"

"With a kind of syndicate I've got together. It's unofficial, of course. The Australian government just can't afford to know anything about it. Support for any idea of the kind would definitely be an unfriendly act towards the Brazilian people. However, we naturally had need of designers, and of the use of yards to build the ships, so that there is--well, a little more than a liaison between us and certain government departments. Nominally, however, it has to be an adventure with a rather old-world title — privateering."

George kept the excitement that was speeding up his pulses carefully imperceptible.

"Well, well," he said, in a tone that matched his cousin's. "Would I be astray in suspecting that there is a part for me in these plans?"

"So perceptive of you, George. Yes, I remember you as a boy on the subject of space; the veritable Troon obsession. As they never outgrow it, I am assuming that you still hear the 'thin gnat-voices calling'?"

"I've had to muffle them, Jayme, but they are still there."

"I thought so, George. So now let me tell you about the job," Jayme had said.

A year later, the *Aphrodite*, with a complement of ten, including George Troon in command, had set out. She was a new kind of ship, for she had a new kind of task—Venus in one leap, with no help from Satellite or Moon Station. As such, she was devoid of all unnecessary weight; victualled and found only for one voyage and a few weeks more; everything beyond bare necessities were to follow her in supply-rockets.

A supply-rocket (or "shuttle," or "crate") could be built for a fraction of the cost of a manned rocket. With living-quarters, insulation, air supply, water-purifying system, and all the rest of the human needs eliminated, the payload could be over fifty per cent higher. Launching, too, was more economical; a shuttle could give a ground-boost, and a quick step-boost producing an acceleration several times greater than a human cargo

could survive. Once launched, and locked on to its target, it would continue to travel by inertia until it should pick up the coded radio signals that would check, and take charge of it. There was no more difficulty in directing a supply-rocket to Venus than in aiming it for a Satellite, or for the Moon, and no more power was needed to get it there—though it would require extra fuel for a safe landing against the planetary pull.

The question of supplies, therefore, raised few difficulties. The problems arose over the key-ship, the manned *Aphrodite,* for she must take off under full load, sustain her crew for the voyage, and, above all, be maneuverable enough in atmosphere to choose her landing when she should arrive.

It was the last proviso that called for modified design. Both the previous expeditions were known to have entered the Venus atmosphere. It was after that that something fatal had befallen them, and the general opinion among spacemen was that neither had proved sufficiently maneuverable to pick, and, if necessary to change, its choice of, landing-place with accuracy. On a vapor-bound planet where inspection could not be visual until the last moments, that was essential.

Many years ago it had been supposed that Venus was entirely, or almost entirely, water-covered. That had later given way to the theory that the perpetual clouds were not vaporous, but were formed of dust swept up from an arid surface by constant fierce winds. Several times since then, opinions had swung this way and that between the two extremes until there was general acceptance of the view that the planet was probably waterlogged, but scarcely likely to lack land masses entirely. Radar, however, would not be able to distinguish accurately between marshland and solid ground—or even, with certainty, between either and floating weed-beds, should such exist. Infra-red would tell more, but from a comparatively low altitude. It might well be that the true nature of the ground would be indiscernible above a few hundred feet, and it was imperative, therefore, that a ship which discovered itself to be descending upon a mudbank, or a morass, should have the ability to draw off and search for better ground. It was a problem that had not occurred with Earth landings where a

ship was brought in by an alliance of radio and electronic control, nor had it arisen on Mars, with its dry surface and normally perfect visibility.

In the event, the last stage of the *Aphrodite's* journey had proved the worth of the designers' trouble. Had she not been able to cruise at moderate altitude in search of a landing-place, there would have been an end of her. The cruise gave her the opportunity to discover that the proportion of land to sea over the area she covered was extremely small, and none of it was the high, firm ground she sought.

At last, Troon decided to return to the largest island so far observed—a low-lying mass about one hundred and fifty miles long, and a hundred miles across at its widest, misted over, and sodden under continuous rain. Even then it had been difficult to find a suitable landing area; hard to tell whether the monotonous gray-white vegetation they saw below was low-growing bushes, or densely packed tree-tops; impossible to know what sort of ground lay beneath it. One could do no more than make a guess from the apparent configuration of the ground.

Troon had made six unsuccessful attempts to land the ship. On two of them she got as far as touching the mud, and starting to sink into it, before blasting free again. At the seventh try, however, the tripod supports had squelched through only two or three inches of mud before they found a firm bottom. Then, at last, Troon had been able to switch off, and stagger over to his bunk, past caring or wanting to know anything more about the planet he had reached.

The *Aphrodite's* landing took place two weeks ahead of conjunction. A week later they had picked up the signal of the first supply-rocket, switched on contact, and put it into a spiral. They lost it for an hour or two when it was on the other side of the planet on its first circuit, but picked it up again as it came round, and held it thereafter. It was brought in and landed successfully in a roughly surveyed area a mile or so to the south of the ship.

Of the seven that followed it in the course of the next two weeks, only Number 5 gave trouble. In the final stages of descent she developed a fault which cut out the main drive, and dropped her like a stone for two hundred

feet. She split open as she hit, but luckily it had been possible to salvage most of her contents. The unloading priority had been the Dome from Number 2 rocket; it was badly needed to get them out of the cramped cabin of the *Aphrodite,* and give them shelter from the eternal rain and drizzle into a place where there would be room to live and work, and protect the stores. Even before it was fully ready, however, there had come a message from Jayme, saying laconically:

"They're on to you, George. You have 584 days, or a little less, to get ready for them."

"They," it quickly became clear, meant only certain official circles in Brazil, and their knowledge was severely restricted. A public admission that an expedition had not only made unauthorized incursion into the Brazilian "Province of Space," but had stolen a march on its nominal administrators by achieving the first successful landing on Venus, would involve not only the Space Department, but the whole government in a serious loss of face. The evident intention was to avoid publicity, if possible, while counter measures were prepared, possibly in the hope that if the secret could be kept until a Brazilian expedition had been despatched at the next conjunction there might be no need of the admission at all.

Absence of publicity suited both parties for the present. So long as it lasted, no awkward representations could be made to the Australian Government, and no overt, or even covert, reprisals taken. Meanwhile, both of them employed the interlude which the laws of planetary motion imposed.

On Venus, once the essentials of the Dome were erected, the entire party busied itself with collecting, photographing, preserving, and crating specimens of Venusian air, water, soil, rock, plants, seeds, and insect-type life, working against time to get at least these preliminary, and as yet unclassified, specimens loaded aboard the emptied Number 2 supply-rocket, and despatched as soon as possible towards the now receding Earth. Only when that had been accomplished did they relax, and, turning their attention to the other shuttles, set about making the Dome into as comfortable a habitation as possible.

Back in Rio, the higher levels of the Space Force pulled schemes for Venusian expedi-

tions out of their pigeon-holes, called in technicians, and started to get down to the task of creating a commando which must be ready, not only to reach Venus by the time of the next conjunction, but to take police action when it should arrive.

When the matter of assigning personnel arose, it was almost inevitable that Space-Commander Jorge Manoel Trunho should be among those chosen. His qualifications and record were first-class, and his family's history and tradition would have made failure to include him invidious.

In Sydney, Jayme Gonveia, through his own peculiar channels, received the news of the appointment with satisfaction. There was a place in his plans for Commander J. M. Trunho.

The satellite, Primeira, now alerted, detected Number 2 supply-rocket in the course of its return journey to Earth, and inquired whether it should intercept with a guided missile. A hurried council called in Rio was divided in its opinions. The members could not know that the object detected was simply a freighter. It *might* be the expedition returning. It was true that messages originating upon Venus were still being picked up, in an as yet unbroken code, but they *might* be dummy messages, originating from an automatic transmitter left there as a bluff. If the returning rocket were to be summarily blown to bits, and then turned out to have contained the expedition, or even a part of it, somebody would certainly give the matter publicity, and the public reaction would be bad. The government would be reviled for an act scarcely to be distinguished from murder, and the victims would very likely become heroes overnight. In the end, therefore, Primeira was instructed to make no attack, but to continue observation, and home stations were ordered to be ready to track the object as it approached the Earth. This they did, but had the misfortune to lose it somewhere over the Pacific Ocean, and no more was heard of it.

Thereafter, for more than a year, all parties had worked secretly, and without alarms.

Now that the cat was, at last, publicly out of the bag it caused political ructions in Rio, but made little practical difference. Not even to appease the wrath of the Brazilian people could the conjunction of planets be hastened.

Time had been short enough anyway, and, whatever ministers might say in speeches, preparations could only go ahead as planned.

In Sydney, Jayme Gonveia boarded a Brazil-bound aircraft in order to study reactions at their centre. It was a stage that called for careful observation and assessment, with perhaps a little influence thrown in at critical moments. His only surprise was that the breakdown of security had not come sooner. A leakage he had expected, but he had not foreseen the source of it, and hoped that by the time George Troon returned the details would have been forgotten.

For Dorothea, Mrs. George Troon, after a year of a preoccupied husband, followed by more than a year of grass-widowhood tediously spent in the slowly regenerating wilderness that was her home, was in the habit of making periodical visits to Rio to break up the depression induced by these things. Taken by friends one night to a party which she found unamusing, she had attempted to improve it by several glasses of iced aguadente and passion-fruit, dashed with quinine and bitters. Her intention of raising her spirits had somehow gone wrong, and she had lifted, instead, the sluices of self-pity. She became woefully the neglected wife. And though in the course of lamenting this, she did not actually mention her husband's whereabouts, it became clear that she had not seen him for some little time —clear enough to catch the attention of one Agostinho Tarope, a fellow-guest who happened also to be a columnist on the *Diario do Sao Paulo*. It occurred to Agostinho that a prolonged absence of a member of the Troon family could have interesting implications, and if his subsequent inquiries did not produce many hard facts, he collected enough indications to convince himself that it was worth taking a risk with some pointed comment. Other papers pounced upon, and inflated, his speculations. Nobody was able to produce George Troon to refute the rumors, and the row was on . . .

The Brazzy in the street was, as Arthur Dogget had suggested, tearing mad. He turned out in large numbers, carrying banners which proclaimed Space to be a Province of Brazil, and demanded action against Australian aggression. Replying to an official approach, the Australian

government denied any knowledge of the matter, but undertook to look into the rumors, while pointing out that Australia was a free country of free citzens.

Political and official circles in Brazil were far from unanimous. Factions started to form. Some held the forthright chauvinist view of holding on to space at any cost, others saw it as a regrettable expense, but a strategic necessity, one group considered it a waste of money to maintain Stations and a force which could bring no return, strong complaints about the lack of enterprise in the development of space began to be heard again.

The Space-Force itself was split several ways. Those at the top, and previously in the know, were already resentful at being shaken out of a comfortable routine, and reacted with bluster to the newspaper comments on the inefficiency of the service. The youngest stratum of officers and men began to look forward to action and excitement in the defense of space. Among the men with longer service, however, there was variety of opinion. Many of those who had joined for the great adventure of exploring space only to find themselves stagnating for years in sentry duty showed a cynicism little short of subversive. Plenty of disillusioned voices could be heard asking: "Why stop 'em? All we've done out there for a hundred years is play dog-in-the-manger — and it'll be no better if we do chuck 'em out. If there are others ready to have a shot at really doing a job out there, then let 'em, I say. And good luck to 'em."

It was to this stratum of opinion that Jayme Gonveia was giving his most careful attention at the moment. . . .

Meanwhile, the party on Venus had found its forebearance severely tested.

Once the Dome had been made comfortable, the three jet-platforms assembled, and the island mapped by infrared photography, exploration, in its wider sense, had virtually come to an end. The land was found to be monotonously low lying, with a backbone of raised ground which at its highest points barely exceeded one hundred feet. Much of the coast was hard to determine, for it shelved gradually into a tideless sea in great stretches of swamp and marsh, and the weeds growing out of the muddy water had little to distinguish them from those that

covered the saturated land. Animate life on the island was restricted to insects, a few wandering crustaceans not unsimilar to spider-crabs which seldom came far from the shore, and a few lunged fish, apparently in the process of becoming amphibians. In the sea there was plenty of life, large and small, but the coastal marshes cut off all surface approach, and the disturbance caused by the jets made it all but impossible to net specimens from hovering platforms.

Cautious descents were made in various parts of the island to take samples. Landing on the lower ground was usually out of the question, and even on the higher slopes it was risky. The platform had to hang cautiously just above the growths while one member of its crew probed with a long rod. With luck, there might be rock a few inches below the surface, and it could put down. Far more often there was a bed of dangerous mud where the probe would go feet deep into a mush made by generations of rotting plants, discovering no bottom at all. So there, too, most of the specimen taking had to be conducted with scoops wielded from the platforms.

"A fiery hell," Dogget had proclaimed, "seems a nice clean conception when you compare it with the stinking, rotting slime under the damned, never-ending rain in this place."

Any exploration beyond the bounds of the island was out of the question, for observation had already shown how rare land was, and the platforms were not equal to long-range travel. There was, therefore, no disposition whatever to risk taking them out over the uncharted seas.

The biologists of the party had far the best of it. Poring over sections through microscopes gave them endless interest.

Once the shuttles had been unloaded there was little temptation to go outside the Dome for anything other than a specimen collecting expedition; inside, kept dry and comfortable by a desiccating plant, there was increasing boredom for all but the four biologists. They remained happily busy and, by degrees, the rest drifted into lending them a hand, and into becoming biologists, or at least biologists' assistants themselves.

Troon observed the development with approval.

"Good," he said, "it saves

me getting round to the cliche of 'They also serve—' I'd hate that, because it's not really the statement it appears to be; more often it is an indication that the speaker is getting troubled about morale. So anything for some interest, even if it is only water bugs. Conjunction is a bit too infrequent. Five hundred and eighty-four days is a long time to be stuck on a mudbank."

"I'd doubt if the Brazzies could mount an expedition in less, anyway," Dogget said, "—or whether, if they knew what this place is like, they'd bother to send one at all."

"Oh, they would. Matter of principle. As long as we are here, space is not entirely a Province of Brazil. Besides, it may not turn out to be quite as useless as it seems to us at present."

"H'm," Arthur Dogget said, dubiously. "Anyway, it was a bit of intolerable bombast ever to claim it. Space should be there for anyone who is willing to explore and exploit it."

Troon grinned.

"Spoken like a true Briton. Just what the English said about the undiscovered world when there was the same sort of bombastic assumption over that. In the days of real Papal dictatorship, Alexander VI reckoned the whole place was his to allocate, so in an open-handed way, he gave the Portuguese the East, and the Spaniards the West. And what happened? The very next year that arrangement came unstuck, and the Portuguese enterprisingly claimed the whole of South America, and six years later Cabral took possession of Brazil for them."

"Did he, now? And what did the Pope have to say to that?"

"He wasn't in a position to say anything. That particular Spiritual Servant happened to be a Borgia, and died of a bowl of poisoned wine he had prepared for a friend. But the point is this, claiming things is rather in the Portuguese blood. Vasco da Gama claimed India for them, but they held only Goa; and, of South America, they held only Brazil—until they lost it. Now their descendants claim all space, but hold only a Satellite Station, and the Moon. Their earlier grandiose claims did not keep the British, and the Dutch, and the rest, out of undeveloped territories, and there is no good reason why the present ones should."

"H'm," said Arthur again. "Times have changed, though.

We've got here. But I don't see how, even if the place were worth hanging on to, we could keep up any regular communications between this gob of mud and Earth—not with guided missiles out hunting for us each trip. I'd like to know the real plan. Sometimes I get a nasty feeling that we could be — just bait . . ."

"In a way, of course, we are," Troon admitted. "The existing situation had to be cracked open some way. I think this is a pretty good one. As the matter stands now, a lot of people in Brazil will be calling us pirates, and other, ruder things—though not all of them, by any means. But what about the rest of the world? They'll be taking a very different view of it. I don't mind betting we are popular heroes now, in most places—and on two counts: one, that we have made a successful landing here at last; and the other, that we've wiped the Brazzy eye. Everybody will be delighted over that—which will be the chief reason that the Brazzies are wild. What is more, it puts them in a spot. They have foreign relations to preserve, so they can't just drop a bomb on us, for they would then appear as the big, crude bully; they'd earn world-wide hostile contempt, and very likely plenty at home, too. In fact, if they actually turn any kind of weapons on us at all, they'll be in for a lot of opprobrium. So it looks as if the only way they can handle it, without losing even more prestige than they have already, is to capture us, and run us as ignominiously as possible out of what they claim to be their territory—being careful, on account of public relations, to do us as little physical damage as possible.

"Very well, then. They will arrive with the intention of netting us. But we are here first. We can make preparations for that. *We* have at least as good a chance of netting *them,* if we work it right. And that's what we've got to do."

"And when we have?" Arthur asked.

"I'm not sure. But at least we shall have hostages."

"Your cousin Jayme must have a plan for the next stage?"

"I don't doubt it. But that is as far as he is telling, at present."

"I just hope your degree of confidence in him is justified."

"My dear Arthur, a great deal of money has been sunk

in this affair—including a large part of the Gonveia family fortune. It is evident that cleverer men, with more to lose than you and I, are satisfied that Jayme knows what he's doing."

"I hope you're right—I'd just like to be able to see more of the picture, that's all."

"We shall. I'm willing to bet that the overall strategy is being taken good care of, from the little I know of it. But the local tactics are our affair, of course, and it seems to me the best thing we can do is to work out several plans to suit different circumstances. When we know more about how they are going to tackle it, and what their equipment is, we can fill in the details of the most suitable plan. At present, our information on their plans is still pretty slim, but we shall get more. In the meantime, my idea of preparing a reception for them is this . . ."

The Brazilians, being under no obligation to make their Venus-bound lift direct from Earth, had no intention of trying it. The Satellite, Primeira, offered them a means of starting and building up speed without the drag of gravity, and, naturally, they made use of that. Gone, therefore, even a few weeks after the first intelligence of the Troon expedition's presence on Venus, were Primeira's leisurely days when the only interruptions of her comfortable lethargy were the supply-shuttles and the monthly relief rockets. Orders started to pour in. Sections of the Satellite that had been closed-off and put out of commission years ago were opened up, examined, tested, repaired where necessary, and made habitable again. Quantities of supplies came up in shuttles and, presently, technicians followed them. Soon, long cylinders of a new, ballistic type, containers of air, water, stores, fuel, and the rest were arriving, to be captured, and tethered electronically about the Station. Later on, came sections of larger shuttles. Engineers in space-suits emerged from Primeira, and jetted themselves across the void to start assembling them. In a few months, the whole neighborhood of the Satellite was littered with floating masses of metal, and containers of all shapes and sizes, gradually being drawn together and bolted, welded, and sealed into comprehensible shapes. The work went on continuously in shifts, with artificial

lights blazing during the brief "nights" in the Earth's shadow, until gradually the chaos was tidied into the form of five large, new shuttles. Activity then became less spectacular while the engineers worked inside them, fitting the new hulks with their electrical circuits, linking the remote-controls to the main drive, and stabilizing and correcting jets; testing, adjusting, and readjusting the gear's responses to radio signals which would be their only pilots.

While that was still going on, the ballistic cylinders were opened, and again the area was littered with space-suited men gently propelling cases of all shapes and sizes towards one or another of the shuttles, for stowage. The ballistic cylinders themselves were expendable—it would have cost more to get one safely back to Earth and recondition it than to make a new one, so that when they were emptied a charge was clamped on to them, and they were despatched to crash harmlessly among the lunar crags, where they could no longer be a hazard to navigation.

The work went well, and in spite of setbacks, it was completed a full month ahead of schedule. The area was then clear. The five fully-loaded shuttles, linked by cables, hung in a bunch, revolving about the satellite at a range of twenty miles, and linked to her by radio beam. The Satellite itself, the intricate machine, that had grown up from the first of all the Space-Stations, kept smoothly on its orbit, with two small rocketships in attendance, waiting.

"They are using shuttles, as I told you," Jayme Gonveia informed Troon. "They have, however, improved on our method—presumably because had they to await the arrival of their shuttles as you did of yours, they would be in a weak position and unable to take any action against you until the shuttles should arrive. The idea they have adopted, therefore, is one of unified control whereby they and their shuttles will travel together and arrive simultaneously. The whole group is intended to handle as one ship. This means that you must be prepared to take very swift action before they have a chance to deploy . . ."

The key ship, the *Santa Maria,* came up two weeks before the calculated starting date, and hove-to, hanging in space a mere mile or so from Primeira. She had left Earth

with only five men aboard; the rest of her full complement of twenty were awaiting her on the Satellite. With her arrival, activity broke out again. Figures emerged from Primeira's locks, some of them jetting across the gap immediately, others maneuvering containers out of the dock-doors, and guiding them into a drift towards the ship. Once more, there began a process of testing and checking, which, with the provisioning and final fitting-out, continued in shifts for a week.

Inspected and passed at last, the *Santa Maria* moved off a few miles. The cluster of the five waiting shuttles was brought closer, and broken up. Each of them was urged and juggled into approximately its proper relation to the rest.

When the last was placed, the small tug-shells and thrusters drew off, and made back to Primeira, leaving on each shuttle a party of only four space-suited men, linked together by lines, and equipped with portable jet-tubes to steady their charges and correct drift. In the center, roughly equidistant from all five shuttles, the *Santa Maria* waited. Aboard her, Capitao Joao Camerello, and his first officer Commander Jorge Trunho, watched the tugs draw clear of the area.

"Ready, shuttles?" the capitao asked.

A man on each shuttle acknowledged.

"Good," approved the capitao. "Keep ready. We shall make contact with you in exactly ten minutes from . . . *now*."

The space-suited men clinging to the shuttles continued to check twist and drift in their charges as well as they could.

"Two minutes to alignment," said the capitao. "Get clear of all tubes now, and check your short safety lines. No trouble? Fine. One minute to go now . . . Thirty seconds . . . Ten seconds . . . *Now!*"

The chief electronics officer pressed his first key.

Little jets of flame broke from the steering tubes of the shuttles. Each turned over, rolled, and twisted, swinging round to align itself with the parent ship, firing more small jets to correct and steady the overswing. Presently, all were lying in exactly the same orientation, with their main driving tubes pointed towards the gleaming crescent of the Earth.

"Phase One completed. All well?" inquired the capitao.

One after another the men tethered to the shuttles reported. He went on:

"Positioning will take place in two minutes from—*now!*"

The electronics officer regarded the hand of the clock, pressed his second key, and turned his attention to a small screen in front of him. Outside, more little twinkling bursts came from the shuttles; on the screen, small illuminated figures started to drift very slowly. Presently, the white figure 4 turned green, and ceased to drift.

"Number Four fixed, sir," he reported.

The capitao glanced at the screen.

"Good. Use that as the axis."

Gradually the other figures changed the direction of their drift. One after another they, too, turned green. As the last one altered, the officer reported.

"Formation complete, and locked, sir."

The capitao lifted the microphone.

"Good work boys, and thank you. Commander, you can take your men home now. We shall test control."

The men in space-suits unhooked, kicked off into the void, then levelled their hand-tubes, and set themselves scudding through emptiness towards the Satellite. When they reached it, they were able to look back and see the pattern of their operation complete.

The *Santa Maria* lay relatively motionless. About her, each at a distance of more than two miles, hung the shuttles, at the angles of a huge pentagon. Invisible proximity beams linked them all, each to the *Santa Maria* in the middle, and to both of its neighbors. Occasionally one or another would show a brief twinkle of flame as the automatic gear cut in to correct the least loss of position.

Six Earth-days later, the personnel on Primeira collected round the stationary screen in their spinning home to watch the start. The farewells and good wishes were over, and they watched in silence. A voice aboard the *Santa Maria* came through the loudspeaker, counting the seconds, then Capitao Camarello's order: "Fire!"

From the main tubes of the *Santa Maria*, and from those of all the five shuttles, belched jets of flame, quickly growing fiercer. The whole formation began to move as one. The blast of the driving tubes grew whiter, and fiercer still.

In a few minutes the expedition was gone and, to mark it, a new constellation hung in a bright pentagon against the jet black sky . . .

"*Of course* we keep up radio communication," Troon explained patiently, "and *of course* they'll locate us by it. This is a showdown. It's no damn good their landing in some other part of this pestiferous planet where neither of us can get at the other, is it? The nearer to us they land, the better, because the sooner we can reach them, the better. But God knows what sort of a mess their landing's going to be. We had quite enough trouble in getting just one ship down safely."

"As I understand it," said Arthur, "the whole unit works on a kind of servo system by which whatever the manned key-ship does, the rest do the same. That must be so, I think; the elaborations and complications of five men in one ship controlling five shuttles independently while that ship is descending are beyond contemplation. Therefore, the intention must be to land in the same formation they travel in — a pantagon; though I suppose they may be able to contract, or expand, its size a bit. That being so, all their attention will have to be concentrated on the safe landing of the key-ship, and the shuttles must more or less take their chance. Those chaps certainly can't know what they're in for. You *might* bring off a trick like that fairly neatly on a dead flat prairie, but not on a mud pie. My betting is that it will be only luck if *one* of their shuttles stays upright, and most likely that all of them will sink in the swamps."

"We can't be bothered about that," Troon told him. "What we have to concentrate on is being as close as we can to the key-ship when she comes down, and without having any of the shuttles coming down on top of us. It would help if we knew what distances they intend to keep. We'd better get on to Jayme again, and see if he has any information on the landing drill."

Excellent as Jayme's information service was, it could not help there. Any decision to expand or contract the pentagon formation must obviously, he pointed out, be left to the captain's discretion. His sources continued, however, to give reliable information on the expedition's progress, and as its e.t.a. drew near, the radar was set

searching for it beyond the Venus cloud cover. The formation was first faintly detected at a great height, still moving fast, and presumably closing on a spiral. Troon promptly despatched a message announcing its approach. On its second circuit, still at a considerable distance, but travelling more slowly, it had altered direction, from which he judged that the point of origin of his message had been plotted.

"Make ready," he ordered. "They ought to be down next time."

The party checked that its weapons and supplies in waterproof covers were aboard the three jet platforms, then they climbed into their space-suits, as the best form of protection against the never-ending rain outside, and waited, with their helmets handy.

At last the formation showed up on the screen, seen now from a different angle, travelling slowly in from the north at a mere twenty-five thousand feet. All six ships had tilted almost to the vertical, but the pentagon formation was still perfect, and now in the same plane with the surface of the ground. As they came closer, standing on their main drives they showed simply as a pattern of circular spots which drifted almost to the center of the screen.

The party in the Dome put on its helmets, and made for the platforms, leaving a single man at the radar. He hooked up a microphone, and his voice reached them all.

"Key-ship east-north-east. Estimate five miles. Separation from servo ships, estimate one mile. Appears constant."

The platforms rose a little and skimmed out of the locks, climbing on a gentle slant.

"Don't bother about the shuttles unless the separation alters. Concentrate on the key-ship," Troon told the operator.

"Right, George. Rate of descent slow and cautious. I'd say around twelve hundred a minute. Now a little under eighteen thousand. Steady and vertical."

The platforms sped on travelling a few feet above the tops of the trees which rose out of the tangle of pallid, slimy growths that hid the ground. Presently, Troon brought his to a halt, and sent the other two out on the flanks. Hanging there, with the fronds of the feathertop trees swinging across just beneath him, he switched on the

outside microphone, and heard for the first time the roar of the rockets overhead. The thunder of six rocket-ships descending at once was almost unnerving. He switched off again, and the three of them stood peering anxiously into the clouds above. A few minutes seemed a long time.

"Eight thousand," said the radar man. And a little later: "Five thousand."

One could hear the noise now through the helmet, and feel the buffeting of the sound waves. A man on one of the other platforms exclaimed suddenly: "There's one of them!"

Almost at the same moment Troon's neighbor caught his arm, and pointed up. Troon looked, and saw a brilliant, diffused, reddish light with a quality of sunset, breaking through above them. He sent the platform swooping forward, out of harm's way.

The buffeting grew, until the platform was trembling with it. He could see four glows in the clouds now. The one behind, one ahead, two dimmer ones on either side, but all of them growing brighter. The platform began to sway as if the roaring billows of sound were tossing it.

"Under one thousand," said the radar man's voice.

"They're lucky—dead lucky. Quite a bit of firm ground round here," came Arthur's voice.

Troon did his best to look all ways at once. The flare behind was still the closest. He edged a little further away from it, and then kept his eyes on the one ahead; that, he calculated, must be that of the key-ship. All three men clung fast to their holds as the platform rocked.

It became barely possible to look at the brilliance. Hanging on with one hand, he raised the other in front of his helmet and peered through slits between his gloved fingers. At two hundred feet the flames were stabbing into the ground, and the steam was rising in thickening clouds, to blot everything. A moment later, there was nothing to be seen but a dazzling white nimbus, with its center slowly growing more intense. Troon looked quickly round again; all about them was whitely shining steam. Then, suddenly, the noise stopped; the platform ceased to tremble; the vivid white spots in the steam died. In the abrupt silence of his helmet Troon asked:

"Arthur, have you marked the key-ship?"

"I reckon so, George."

"You, Ted?"

"Pretty sure of her, George. I'll make certain when this steam lets up. She'll have ports. The others won't."

"Well, both of you stay where you are until you can be sure. Then find her airlock side, and close in to fifty yards."

He edged his own platform forward. The air was clearing, but it was not possible to see the ship yet. She was still hidden somewhere in the cloud of steam vaporizing from the sodden ground, but it seemed fairly certain that her landing, at any rate, had been successful, whatever might have happened to the shuttles.

Visibility gradually improved. Before long, he could see the outline of her top. Soon he could make out the upper part clearly enough to see the ports and be sure that she was the *Santa Maria,* and no unmanned shuttle. She was leaning a little, but not dangerously at present. He drove the platform forward towards the steam that still shrouded her base.

Gradually that thinned, too. He was able to see that she had indeed been lucky in her landing place, and the tripod foot on the tilt side showed no sign of sinking further. He took the platform down to a few feet above the ground, and a little closer. The ends of the ship's main driving tubes were still glowing, and the rain was vanishing into little steam puffs before it could actually touch them; the area directly beneath her was seared clear of vegetation, and muddy water was seeping back into it, steaming gently.

Troon brought his platform down to within inches of the ground, and steered it in between two of the tripod legs.

"Let it go!" he said.

His two companions unclipped the straps of a rectangular bale sealed into a waterproof cover, and tumbled it over the side to fall in the mud with a squelch. Skilfully Troon checked the upward bounce of the platform as it lost the weight; then he backed off, and sped away.

"Arthur? Ted? Have you located the airlock yet?"

"Arthur here. Yes, George. It's facing due south."

"Good. Keep it covered. I'll be round there with you."

He handed control of the platform over to one of his companions, and turned a knob on his helmet, putting his headset on to one of the Brazilian Spaceforce's inter-

com wavelengths. In Portuguese, he called:

"Troon calling! Troon calling! Troon calling Capitao Camarello."

There was a short pause during which his platform approached Arthur's, and drew up beside it, then a voice replied:

"This is the *Santa Maria,* Spaceship of the Estados Unidos do Brazil. Capitao Joao Camarello."

"Bons dias, Capitao," said Troon. "And my felicitations, Senhor, upon your excellent landing."

"Muito obrigado, Senhor Troon. And my congratulations to you upon your survival of the rigors of this singularly unattractive-looking planet. It is, however, my regrettable duty to inform you that, by order of the Congress of the United States of Brazil, you and your companions are under arrest, charged with violating the sovereignty of Brazilian territory. One hopes that you will recognize the situation, and accept it."

"Your message is not unexpected, senhor," Troon told him. "But in return I must inform you that since the Brazilian claim to this territory rests neither on its discovery by Brazil, nor upon Brazil's prime establishment here, it cannot be considered to have any validity. I am therefore entitled on the grounds of your unauthorized landing to require that you and your crew should put yourselves under my orders. Until I have your assurance that this will be done, I cannot grant you permission to leave your ship."

"Mr. Troon, you have been informed, I do not doubt, of the strength of our expedition, so may I remind you that there are two of us to one of you—if, indeed, your party has survived the tribulations of such a detestable climate as this appears to be, intact."

"That is quite true, Capitao Camarello, but *we* are not caught in a metal trap. Furthermore, I ought, I think, to tell you that we have your airlock covered. And I must also warn you against an attempt to take off again, should it occur to you to look for a more hospitable landing area. There is, beneath you at this moment, a considerable bale of TNT. You cannot fire your drive without igniting it before you lift, whereupon it may do your ship considerable damage, and will certainly overturn her, thus making takeoff impossible for you.

Your situation, therefore, is awkward, Capitao."

After a pause, the voice replied:

"Ingenious, Mr. Troon. I will take your word for it. But at least we do not have to sit out in the rain in order to maintain our side of the impasse."

"But neither do we, senhor. Unless I receive your capitulation very shortly, we shall simply fix a wire cable round your ship in such a position as to prevent the outer door of your airlock from opening. We shall then be able to wait indefinitely, and in somewhat more comfort than yourselves, for your decision."

Troon caught sight of Arthur Dogget signalling him from the next platform. He switched over to their usual wavelength. Arthur said:

"If he does agree—and I can't see that he's got any choice—what do we do with them, George? Keep 'em handcuffed all the time? After all, they're two to one, as he said. Why should he keep any agreement to surrender?"

"All right," Troon told him. "Just you wait a bit, and see. We'll set down now to save power—but keep an eye on that door. Give it a bullet if it so much as moves."

The three platforms descended carefully, seeking spots where the matting of growth was thick enough to keep them out of the mud, and waited. Troon switched back to the other wavelength, but a full hour passed before any sound could be heard on it; and then it was another voice that spoke:

"Hallo," it said, "George Troon?"

Troon acknowledged.

"Jorge Trunho here," said the voice.

"I was hoping to hear from you, Cousin Jorge," said Troon. "What's the reply?"

"A change of authority," Jorge Trunho told him. "I have now taken command of this ship. With the exception of Capitao Camarello and four other men whom we have put under arrest, we are now willing to carry out your orders."

"I am glad you appreciate that there was no sense in prolonging the situation," said Troon, and issued his instructions. As he switched over, Arthur Dogget said:

"What goes on, George? I don't like this at all. It's a whole lot too easy."

"You don't need to worry," Troon told him. "The Brazilian Spaceforce is riddled with young men who've been frus-

trated for years, and know they're likely to stay that way as long as Brazil has the monopoly of space. They're over-ripe for a change. All that was needed was the opportunity, and someone to organize."

Arthur considered.

"You mean—this was all fixed? You put 'em in a spot to give Trunho the chance to take over? You knew he would?"

"That was the plan, Arthur. The awkward spot made it easier for him to sway the undecided ones."

"I see. All nicely arranged in advance—and by Cousin Jayme, I suppose?"

Troon nodded.

"Under his auspices, at any rate. I told you Cousin Jayme knows what he's doing."

The slow twist on the *Santa Maria* was about to bring the sun into view, but before it could come searing through the port Arthur Dogget pushed the cover across, and fixed it. He looked round the bare, tank-like compartment in which they were confined, then he pushed himself across to his acceleration-couch, fastened the straps to give some illusion of weight, and lay there frowning. At length, he said:

"What makes me kick myself—what really burns me up, is that I knew at the time it was all too damned easy—I even *said* so. God, what a mug!"

Troon shook his head.

"It *should* have been easy—it was intended to be. That part of it would have gone just the way it did even if Jorge hadn't been double-crossing. The whole thing went quite according to plan, until he pulled that fast one when we got back to the Dome. It's no good blaming ourselves for trusting Jorge. We *had* to. Ten of us couldn't have kept twenty of them under restraint indefinitely. It was a calculated risk. Jayme was gambling on Cousin Jorge's Troon blood—that his spaceward urge would be greater than his loyalty to the Brazilian Spaceforce. Well, that was a bad bet—or was it? I'm still not quite sure. It may not have been loyalty. It could easily be that he was reckoning the chances differently. He *could* be calculating that after this shake-up the Brazzies'll really get down to doing something in space—and that he's likely to be in the forefront of whatever they do do. At any rate changing the subject isn't going to sweeten it."

After a tedious journey, they finally landed on Primeira.

Capitao Camarello and Jorge Trunho, dressed in immaculate uniforms for the occasion, led them to the Satellite commander's cabin. The inner door of the room opened, and a voice said, in English:

"My apologies for keeping you waiting, gentlemen."

And into the cabin, dressed in an ordinary suit, stepped Jayme Gonveia.

"But how did you do it?" Troon wanted to know, later on, when they were alone together.

"Less difficult than you might think," Jayme told him. "We put parties aboard the two mothballed Satellites six months ago, and prepared them for action which we hoped would not be necessary. We infiltrated undercover groups both here and on the Moon Station. The rest was mostly a matter of suitable timing.

"I made a mistake over Jorge, though. Perhaps I did not tell him enough. If he had had a better idea of the scale he'd very likely have played straight with us. However, its only effect was to delay the next phase of the operation; we did not want an alarm raised for fear the *Santa Maria* should be diverted, and we need her, intact.

"The radio operators were the key men in the takeover. A week ago, the one here, on Primeira, put over the internal speaker system a message announcing that the Moon Garrison had mutinied, imprisoned its officers, and called upon the Primeira crew to do the same. The moon operator put over a similar message, transposing the places. Both of them put their radios temporarily out of action, for safety, but continued to announce previously concocted messages over the internal system. During this stage, small shuttle-type rockets that we had been holding at the other Satellites appeared close to Primeira, and one landed close to the Moon Station.

"Well, as you know, the Spaceforce was shot through with disaffection. Our undercover groups had worked on the men, and not found it very difficult. They were organized and ready, and were able to take over with very little trouble. Those who wouldn't join us have been transported to one of the mothball Satellites pro tem. The only thing that had gone

wrong was at your end. The *Santa Maria* was on the way back here. If we made an announcement she would be diverted; in which case we should lose not only your valuable selves, but a very valuable ship. So we made no announcement. We reopened radio communications with excuses about electrical interference, and resumed routine messages as though nothing had happened. We have been bluffing for a week while we waited for you and the *Santa Maria*—and during that time we have acquired a couple of shuttles of provisions, as well.

"But in an hour or so now, the news will be broadcast. Camarello and our cousin Jorge have gone over to join the rest of the unpersuadables on the minor Satellite where they will remain until their government sends a ship to fetch them. The exact date and time for that will depend on how long it takes to sink into the official Rio minds that Space is no longer a Province of Brazil. Knowing the Brazzies, it may be a while."

Troon thought the position over silently for some moments, then he said:

"I had no idea you were brewing anything on such a scale as this, Jayme."

"It seemed wise to keep the compartments of the plan separate, as far as possible."

"But now the operation is complete, and you are all set to spring it on them that space has become a State of Australia—"

"A State of Australia!" exclaimed Jayme. "Good Lord, man, do you think I want to start a war between Brazil and Australia? Certainly not! Space will declare itself an independent territory."

Troon stared at him.

"Independent! For heaven's sake, Jayme, space is —well, I mean, out here, in nothing, like this. I never—why, it's utterly impossible, Jayme!"

"On the contrary, George. If you will consider the original raison d'etre of the Satellites and the Moon Stations, I think you will see that Space, as an entity, is in an excellent position to propose terms. One day it may be in a position to do a useful trade, but until then, it can at least be the policeman of the world—and a policeman is worthy of his hire."

George Troon's expression had lost its incredulity.

"Yes, George," Jayme said. "From today, your gnat-voices are just a little closer."

THE END

ACCORDING TO YOU . . .

Dear Editor:

Welcome to your new perch. November's issue seems the transition point from Fairman to Lobsenz. Here are many wishes for a most successful cycle . . . many acceptances, some rejection slips and lots of fantasy. If editors are, as claimed, frustrated writers, it also stands to reason that a frustrated writer may make a first-rate editor.

November issue's article on artificial life forms may well be the progenitor of more of the same or better. Most interestingly written. I particularly like author's sweet and tender reference to "half-cocked occultists." Does little-boy science make fun of its papa-mamma Fantasy?

In each cycle the hardshell laboratorians laugh at the fantastic ideas which they forthwith prove (?) in the next century or so.

Half-cocked scientists have only one-way vision, calling inanimate forms "non-living" or "dead." Would it be any use telling where the indwelling consciousness of, for instance, the mineral kingdom, is now extremely alive and active? While we pulverize, admire, polish and wear the corpses from life-cycle long since passed?

But the amazing amount of "occult" doctrine put forth nowadays, even in so-called science fiction, promises well for the remaining 2100 years of the current Aquarian cycle, does it not?

Miles MacAlpin
7540½ S.W. 51st
Portland, Oregon

• *Oh, yes, the Aquarian cycle. Is that the one that comes with hand brakes and gears?*

Dear Editor:

I must say I was more than overcome when I picked up the November issue of *Fantastic.* The reason: your table of contents. Not the stories but the authors; Wyndham, Bloch,

Young, Garrett. If I had never heard of your magazine those names would have sold me.

The best story of the issue was "Mr. & Mrs. Saturday Night," by Robert F. Young. This man knows how to write. Do you remember his story, "Jungle Doctor" in the old *Startling Stories?* It was one of the best stories I have ever read.

Your magazine grows better and better and may run away from *Amazing*. I look forward to next month's issue.

Phillip Farr
2930 Main Street
Kansas City, Missouri

• *More by Young are coming up.*

Dear Editor:

The American higher education system being what it is and costing what it does, this reader cannot afford to *buy* science fiction magazines any more, but while reading through some behind the news dealer's back, happened to notice the cover of the November *Fantastic.*

Being an art student, the cover impressed me very much. Aside from just being painted by a new artist to *Fantastic* and being very well done, seemed to bring out an inner feeling from the viewer, and engulf him into the picture emotionally. This is something s-f illustrators forget when dashing off illustrations—the mood the picture puts the viewer in.

Can we have more work by that artist?

H. R. Frye
712 West Franklin Street
Richmond 20, Va.

• *You certainly can. Matter of fact, we anticipated you. Just notice who did the cover for* this *issue.*

Dear Editor:

I just purchased the new *Fantastic* and I think it looks like a very good issue. After two bad covers by Keith, the December is an excellent cover. All the stories except "The Troons of Space" look exceptionally good. Please keep printing two short novels or long novelettes like you do in this issue. Also

keep the Slesar stories rolling in, he's great. How about another Alan E. Nourse novel in *Amazing?*

The editorials in the latest issues of *Amazing* and *Fantastic* were very good.

Billy Eden
Box 92, Route #1
Lanham, Md.

• *Glad you like the editorials. Sometimes we wonder if anybody ever* reads *'em, much less likes 'em.*

COMING NEXT MONTH

It's been a long time since we've seen a really good fantasy story about magic. However, the March issue of FANTASTIC takes care of this oversight. **Randall Garrett** takes a genially befuddled hero, adds one beautfiul girl and one fearsome demon, stirs, and produces a potion he calls *Trouble With Magic.*

Concise but powerful, **Robert F. Young's** *The Last Hero* is about as adult a "western" as you could possibly imagine. Not only the hero but the whole world has gone "that-a-way."

And to highlight a crowded issue, a puzzle for you readers. We present two short stories by **Jack Sharkey,** a new and promising author. One is in a serious vein; one in a comic vein. Both are top-notch fantasy. After you've read them, you will be asked a question.

Don't miss the March issue of FANTASTIC, on sale at your newsstand Feb. 19. Ask your dealer to reserve your copy.

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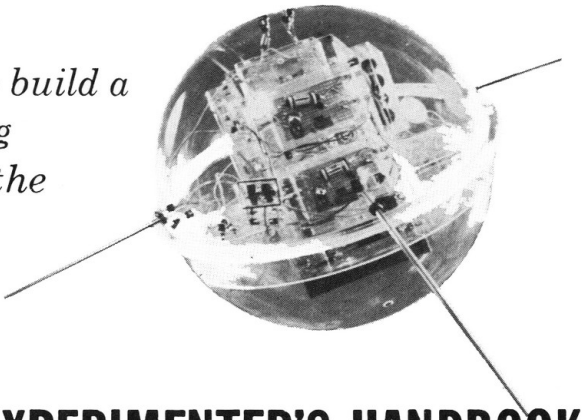

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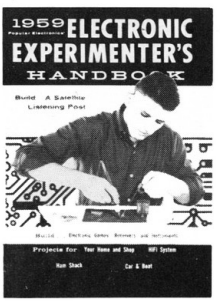

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