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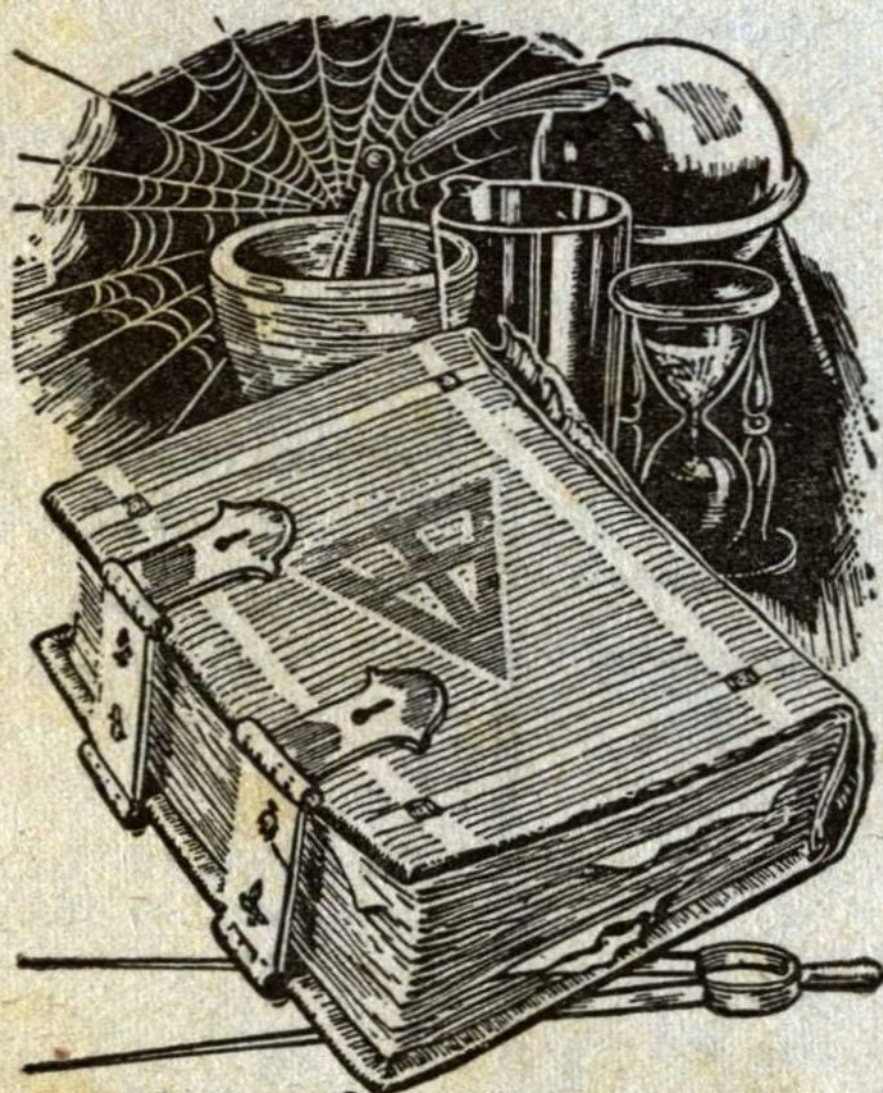
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FANTASTIC

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

NOVEMBER 1962

Volume 11 Number 11

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF

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Editorial and Executive Offices
One Park Avenue
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ORegon 9-7200
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NOVELET

PLANETOID 127 (Fantasy Classic)

By Edgar Wallace 75

SHORT STORIES

AWARENESS PLAN

By David R. Bunch 71

THE MOZART ANNUITY

By Arthur Porges 119

SERIAL

IT'S MAGIC, YOU DOPE

By Jack Sharkey 8
(Part one of two parts)

FEATURES

EDITORIAL 5

ACCORDING TO YOU 6

COMING NEXT MONTH 70

Cover: Lloyd Birmingham

Illustrating *It's Magic, You Dope!*

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FROM time to time one has hopes for the psychologist. As a man who probes about the mysterious recesses of the sensory system, one likes to think he develops a certain tolerance (if not understanding) of the ways whereby man manages to stand the turmoil of the world.

But just when one gets one's hopes up—somebody lowers the boom. In this case, the boom was lowered for me by an item in a recent issue of *The American Psychologist*, a monthly journal of The American Psychological Association. It first reprinted a small advertisement from a Washington, D.C., newspaper, which read as follows:

TOUCHSTONE

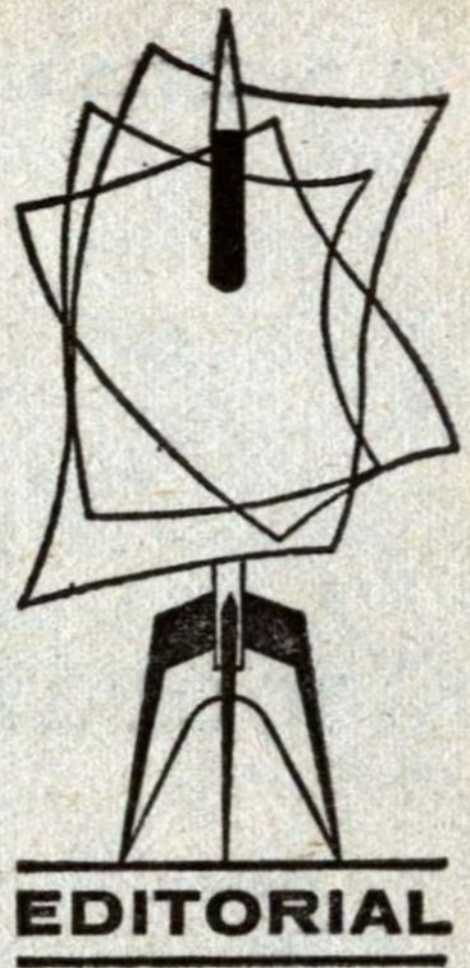
What is a touchstone? It is a stone of secret calmness. Finely cut and exquisitely polished onyx. Pleasing to the touch, psychologists say they relax nerves and soothe daily tensions. Especially appealing to the doodler, key-chain twirler, excessive smoker—just about everybody. \$4.95

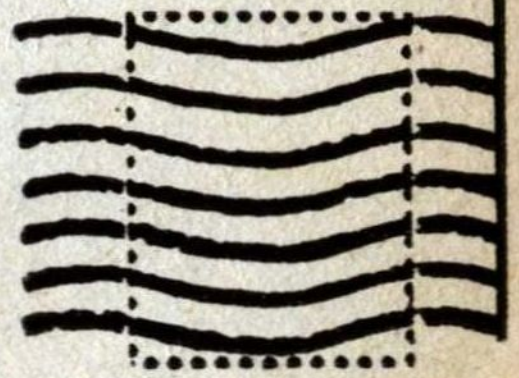
Then the magazine's commentator brusquely observed that such a "tranquilizing amulet" is "tops for the man who has everything—if he will also believe anything."

Now, that seems to us to be giving short shrift, indeed, to a device that has anciently been known to bring peace to the mind, to inhibit tensions, to induce creative thought. "Rubbing stones" are common possessions of wise men in the Orient; Middle Eastern people fondle "worry beads" to the same end. And who has not occasionally been lulled into at least temporary peace of mind by caressing a smooth and intricately shaped stone found, perhaps, on a beach or by a lake.

Psychologists do not seem to object much to tranquilizing drugs—which in their unknown side effects may be doing serious damage to both soma and psyche. Why, then, poke fun at a tranquilizing amulet, which has been an artifact of man for thousands of years.

Or do the psychologists, who are beloved of stimulus-and-response, just naturally resent anything that cuts down the intensity of the response? Let me go a step further. Let me say that the world might be a better place to be in if there weren't so darned many stimuli to respond to. Or if there weren't so many leaders of nations ready to respond at a hair-trigger's notice. Perhaps every President, Premier and Party Secretary should have a tranquilizing amulet with him at the next conference on nuclear disarmament.—N.L.





According to you...

Dear Editor:

Is Fred Patten some kind of a nut? Oh, I agree with him that Barr and Schelling are good artists (especially Schelling—he's better in interior work in *Galaxy* though) and Emsch and Schomburg are also very good but I almost flipped with dismay when he said "get rid of Birmingham and Summers." Concerning Birmingham, he must be referring to the July issue of *AMAZING*—that cover was, I admit, a terrible goof, and sometimes his paints do seem to be a bit watery. But get rid of him? Just look back at his very first cover for you—November 1961 *FANTASTIC*—and then ahead to one particular masterpiece on your April *AMAZING*.

Mr. Patten becomes generous when he says "you can use Birmingham on interiors; he's shown in *ANALOG* that he can do

those passably." Very generous of him. Of course, I wouldn't know what he does in that magazine he mentioned, because I avoid it like the plague.

"On the other hand, Summers should be axed entirely," says he! Some (in fact most) of Summers' covers have been a bit sloppy, and I'd be the first to admit it, but on interiors he can be great if he tries. So he is a bit untidy here too sometimes. But his illos have an atmosphere of weirdness about them, which I believe could not be achieved by good clear illos like those of Adkins for an sf story. However, it would be interesting to see what a good clear Adkins or Emsch illo would do for a weird tale. Maybe I'm just used to seeing Summers' type illos on weirdies; but if others would work just as well, why didn't Adkins take advantage of his opportunity instead of illus-

trating his story in a rather Summers-ish style? I hope I've made my point.

By the way, the Aug. FANTASTIC was great. Do you always save fantasies for your summer issues?

Bob Adolfsen
9 Prospect Ave.
Sea Cliff, N.Y.

● *Point made.*

Dear Miss Goldsmith:

I have been reading FANTASTIC for about a year now and I must say that I think it to be a very good magazine of fantasy.

I have just finished reading the August issue of FANTASTIC and I believe that it is the best issue you have put out since I first started reading the magazine.

"The Titan" by P. Schuyler Miller was an excellent piece of fantasy which I enjoyed thoroughly and sincerely hope you will print more of his stories in the future. However, I can't say the same for Rosel George Brown's "And A Tooth," Albert Teichner's "Continuity," or Robert F. Young's "Victim of the Year." The first two stories mentioned were interesting but confusing, as for "Victim of the Year," does Mr. Young have to resort to Plot Manipulation to resolve the ending? It could almost be considered a "Deus Ex

(Continued on page 126)

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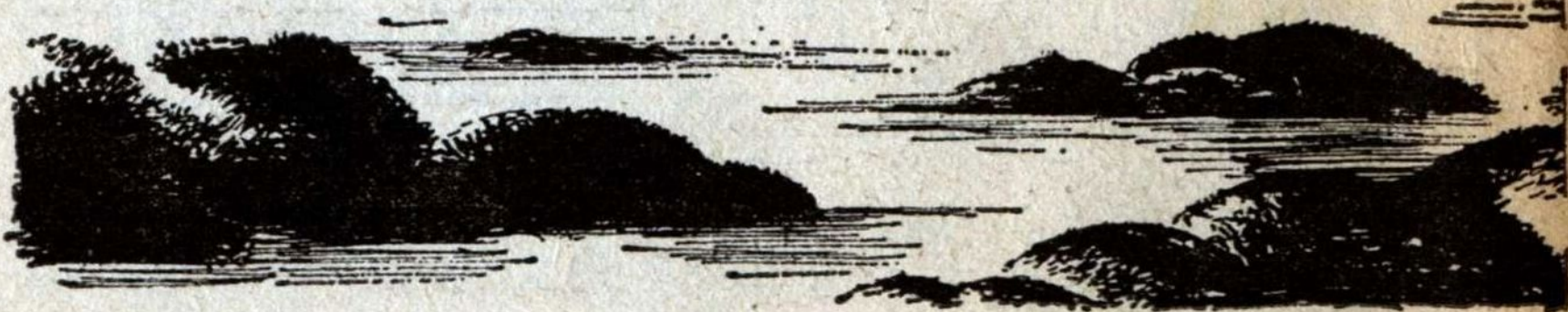
By JACK SHARKEY

(First of two parts)

CHAPTER 1

IT was the same two guys. I spotted them standing down at the end of the dark street, just beyond the cone of light cast by the street lamp. They were pretending to be neighborhood people, carrying on a casual conversation on the corner, but I knew they were the same guys I'd seen standing outside the library when I'd left it a half hour before, in downtown Chicago.

I was quite curious, but lacked the nerve to approach them and ask what they wanted. They might want my wallet and watch, and then where'd I be? So I just slammed the door of my sedan, and started up the walk toward Susan's house, pretending I hadn't noticed them. I wished there were more people out on their porches, but the autumn evenings had been turning colder, and hardly anyone came out.





Birmingham

I rang the bell of the two-story bungalow where Susan lived with her folks, and was reassured to hear the sound of footsteps coming to answer the chimes. Mrs. Baker, Susan's mother, opened the door.

"Hello, Al," she said. "Susan'll be down in a minute. Here, let me take your hat." She rambled through some more mother-greeting-suitor talk, and I finally wound up in the living room, sitting in the center of the sofa, alone, while Mr. Baker, Susan's father, puffed at his pipe and tried to engage me in light conversation on the subject of burglary. Garvey Baker was the night-watchman at the Marshall Field's store up near Lake Street in Oak Park. He was usually about to go out to work about the time I showed up to see Susan. It helped.

AS long as we were on the subject of crime, I mentioned those two guys who seemed to have followed me from the Loop. Mr. Baker laughed. "You've been reading too many mystery books," he said with an infuriatingly paternal smile.

"Yes, sir," I said, anxiously awaiting the moment when he would lift his gold watch from his vest pocket, say, "Well, better get down to the store before the thieves strip it bare," and go. Mrs. Baker came in with a tray.

"Thought you might like some cookies and lemonade," she explained, setting the tray down on the endtable beside the sofa. I thanked her, and she laughed and went out into the kitchen again.

"Well," said Garvey Baker, getting ponderously to his feet, and glancing at that gold watch, "better get on up to the store before the thieves strip it bare." I was glad to hear the front door close behind him. Then a light patter of feet on the hall stairs announced the arrival of Miss Susan Baker, and I jumped gratefully to my feet.

"Al," she smiled, coming across the room to me, her hands outstretched to lightly grip mine.

"Hi, Susan," I said, taking hold of her fingertips for that brief moment before she'd deftly tug them free.

"Do you like my dress?" she said, pirouetting. "Pop got it at his discount. Isn't it adorable?"

I said it was, and she sat beside me on the sofa. Perhaps "beside" is too strong. It was a three-seater; she and I filled the one and three cushions.

"Your mother made lemonade for us," I said. "Here it is, on the tray."

"Oh, how nice!" said Susan, her eyes dancing. "Wasn't that nice of Mom, Al?"

I said it was, and we sat a while longer. Then, getting up a

little courage, I turned to her and said, "Would you like some?"

"Oh, please," said Susan, brightly.

I arose and poured out two glasses of lemonade, gave one to her, and sat back with the other, on the two-cushion.

"Al—" said Susan. "Please."

I moved back to the one-cushion.

"Cookie?" I asked.

"Al!" gasped Susan, her eyes round and startled.

"I mean, do you *want* a cookie?"

"Oh. No thank you. But thank you for asking me." She began to sip her lemonade. I began to sip mine. I searched my mind for a topic of conversation. (The Bakers had no TV.) I found one and made the most of it.

"Two men followed me from the library today."

"Goodness," said Susan. "Why?"

"I don't know," I said. "To rob me, maybe."

"A librarian?" Susan laughed lightly. "You barely make enough to support yourself, let alone support a wife . . ."

"Mr. Garson says I will get that ten percent increase at the end of November," I pointed out. "I will have been with the library five years."

"And then we can have our June wedding, as we planned," said Susan. "Won't it be nice?"

"Nice," oh, yes, I guess so.

"But what about your hours?" she said with a tiny pout. "You always come over so late, Al."

"You have to have seniority to get the early shift."

"That may take years," she sighed.

"I know," I said. "But at least I can sleep late in the mornings, after we're married."

"Al!" said Susan.

"Sorry," I said, not sure for what.

SUSAN flashed me a look of deep longing. "I think I will have that cookie, now, Al . . ." she murmured.

All at once, I wanted to scream.

"I said, I think I will have that cookie, now, Al," Susan repeated demurely.

I couldn't stand it any longer. Eschewing caution, I set my lemonade back on the tray, reached over and took Susan's and put it beside mine, then I slid onto the two-cushion and grabbed her by the upper arms. "Susan—!"

"Al!" Her voice was a panicky squeak. "Have you gone mad? Mother might come in!"

"I don't care," I grated. "I've got to talk to you about something more important than cookies or lemonade or my life at the library."

"Al, you're hurting me!" she

said, tiny crystal tears twinkling upon her lower lashes. "How can you behave so horridly to me?"

"Susan," I groaned, "you're not even listening to me! Once—just this once—stop blathering all your usual inanities and give me your attention, please!"

"A gentleman," blathered Susan, "never uses fierce language like that in the presence of a girl he thinks of as a lady, so I can only assume that—"

"*Stop!*" My growl was so ferocious that some of the painted-doll cuteness faded from her face, and a look of genuine adult apprehension overrode her features. She stared at me, blinking rapidly, then said she would listen if I'd only let go of her arms. I let go. She listened.

"Susan," I said, talking fast, and trying to put all the misery and frustration of my soul into words, "there must be something more than this. I mean, I should be the happiest man in the world, but I'm not. I don't know why. Here I am, with a steady job, chances for advancement and retirement, engaged to a lovely, young, intelligent girl, whose folks like and approve of me, with a raise in pay due in a few months, and my wedding date set for next June, and *it's driving me out of my mind!*"

"What is?" asked Susan, blinking stupidly.

"This! All of it. Cookies. Lem-

onade. You. I—I don't know. It's just that . . . Well, I keep having the feeling that life has much more to offer, that's all."

"What could it possibly?" she asked. "You love me, and I love you, and we will be married and live happily ever—"

"*Stop!*"

She stopped.

"Look, Susan—Honey—Darling . . . Oh, what's the use!"

Susan lowered her eyes and spoke in a hushed tone. "Are you trying to tell me you don't love me?"

I LOOKED at her, her long black lashes lying against her pale rose cheek, her lovely hair a golden aurora about her head, her trim little figure a pulse-maddening package in a royal blue dress with a lemon-colored belt . . .

Of course I loved her!

"I love you more every time I see you. But I still want to scream at you," I sighed. "I don't know why—Maybe because I constantly feel I'm not *reaching* you . . ."

"You know what Mom and Pop feel about—"

"Not like *that!* I mean conversationally. No, I don't mean that, either. It's like we don't *relate*, or *mesh*, or come in at the same terminal. Does that make sense?"

Susan looked into my eyes. "There's Another Woman, isn't there!" she declared. She hadn't

understood a word I said. I stood up tall, glaring down at her.

"I wish there *were!*" I declared back at her. "Maybe life would have some excitement, then!"

"I suppose, Albert Hicks," said Susan, jumping up to face me, "You'd be happier if I did a *fan-dance* when you came over! Would *that* be exciting?!"

"Darn tooting!" I snapped.

"Oh, Al," she whimpered, hiding her face in her hands. "That's an awful thing to suggest!"

"I didn't suggest it, I simply endorsed it!" I strode angrily into the front hall, grabbed my hat from the hall tree, and was just reaching for the doorknob when Susan came running after me.

"Don't go!" she said, catching me by the arm. "If—If you want a fan-dance, I'll—I'll do it. Even that. Anything, Al. Only—Don't go. Please don't go!"

I looked down into her earnest little face and melted. I took her gently into my arms and held her, slowly shaking my head. "Honey, honey—I didn't mean that about the dance. I just—I don't know. Maybe I need to get off someplace and think. I'm a little upset tonight. If I just drive around for awhile, maybe I can settle my mind a little. I'll see you later."

I kissed her lightly, then went out and shut the door behind me.

I FELT like a heel as I drove away from the curb, trying to get my mind back into a calm, orderly state. My own house was just around the block from Susan's, so I decided to drive the car there and leave it. I'd get more thinking done walking than driving. I pulled into my driveway and doused the headlights.

Just ahead of the nose of the car, and slightly to its left, I could see the bright yellow rectangles that were the kitchen windows of Susan's house. Now and then a shadow moved past them. Probably Mrs. Baker, making more cookies and lemonade. A smaller shadow trailed after the first one. That would be Timothy Baker, Susan's younger brother. I'd met him relatively few times, since Mrs. Baker—bless her—felt that a boy of approximately ten years could get in the way of any even moderately romantic discussions between a girl and her fiance.

I got out of the car and locked it, but just as I was about to walk back out toward the street to begin my meditative peregrinations, I remembered the six-pack of beer in my refrigerator and the remnants of a loaf of rye bread and some ham from Sunday's dinner. It took but a moment's thought to realize that they were just what I needed to take away the taste of cookies and lemonade. I abandoned my

walking plans, and went into the house.

Relying on the light from Susan's kitchen, I made my way across my own kitchen in the dark and started hunting around for the bread. Just as I espied it on the cupboard shelf, a shadow flitted across the light, and I turned my head to see the silhouette of a man out in Susan's yard, messing around with something on the lawn.

With a small start, I recalled the two strangers who had followed me from the library. I couldn't tell in the dimness if this were one of them, but whoever he was, he had no business in Susan's yard.

I spun about and raced for my front door. I hurried to the corner, raced for Susan's street, and turned onto it, figuring to trap the guy between me and Susan's back fence. Halfway there, I saw the second man on the front lawn of her house, also fooling around with some kind of gadget. The thing glinted with metal and glass, and stood on a short tripod. Suddenly, the other man joined him, carrying his own counterpart of the gadget, and they jumped into a car and drove off.

Baffled by their conduct, I kept on toward Susan's, and turned to start up her front walk. My feet brushed autumn grass. I looked down. The path was gone. I

looked up. So was Susan's house. Susan's had been the last in a row of houses before a small park. Now the park was twenty-five feet wider. Not even a hole where the foundation had been. And where the sofa I'd last seen Susan upon should have been, there stood a lofty elm, looking as though it had been rooted there for twenty years.

CHAPTER 2

BACK in my own house, a few dazed moments later, I held off calling the police. I'd seen too many movies about people trying to convince policemen of the truth when the truth was slightly out of the ordinary; and this was anything but a slight extraordinariness. What I needed was someone to back up my story, and the likely person would be Garvey Baker.

Looking up the Marshall Field's number, I dialed quickly, and stood tapping my foot as the buzzing at the other end of the wire repeated without interruption. On the fifteenth buzz, someone picked up the phone.

"Watchman," said a voice.

"Mr. Baker?" I said. "This is Al."

"This ain't Mr. Baker. This is the watchman. Call back tomorrow, maybe he'll be in then."

It wasn't even Garvey's voice. As I tried to explain my distress,

the man hung up and left me with a dead line to talk to. I dropped the phone back into the cradle, more shaken than before I'd made the call. One more unlikelihood to tell the police. One that might buy me a jacket with buckles in the back, and not Ivy League, either.

There was one other way left—Or was there?

Feeling an uneasy tremor in my stomach, I reached out a slow hand for the phone book, and carefully checked through the Bs. There were seven Bakers listed. But not a Garvey, Susan, Timothy, or Maggie (Mrs. Baker's given name). And not one at the right address.

Susan's picture! Upstairs on my bureau! I raced up the stairs to look for it. The frame was there, and there was a picture in it, too. A picture of Annabel Simmons, the girl I'd dated before meeting Susan. I'd certainly not kept *her* picture . . . After a brain-racking moment, I remembered definitely that I *had* thrown it away. But here it was, as if it had never been gone; as though I were still going around with Annabel.

On a sudden unearthly hunch, I raced downstairs and dialed Anabel's number. In a few seconds, there was a soft, slightly husky voice awakening pangs of nostalgia in my ear. One would never believe we'd separated

like outraged tigers a few months back, with Annabel vowing she'd rather go to the electric chair than ever see my face again.

"You—You're not mad, Annabel?" I said shakily.

"Mad? Mad, Albert? About what?"

"The fight. The fight we had."

"Fight?" Her bewilderment sounded genuine. "What fight are you talking about?"

"Look—" I persisted, evading the query. "When was—precisely, now—the very last time you saw me?"

"Oh—As precisely as I can recall, it was something in the neighborhood of fifteen minutes ago. You just now brought me home, Albert. Remember?"

"That's impossible," I groaned, and hung up.

IN approximately thirty seconds, the phone jangled sharply, and when I lifted it to my ear, it was Annabel again.

"Albert, are you all right?" she said. "Because if you're feeling under the weather or anything, I don't mind dropping over . . ."

"No," I said swiftly. "Don't come over."

"Why not?" she said, with a definite shading of suspicion in her tone. I vividly recalled Annabel's excitably jealous nature, then, and thought fast.

"Because it's—too late, uh—honey—It wouldn't be right for you to come to a man's house all alone. It's past midnight."

"Silly," she said. "I'll bring Elizabeth, then." Elizabeth was Annabel's niece, who sometimes stayed with her when her parents were on vacation. "I'll pry the child loose from the Late Late Show and drag her along."

I was out of excuses. "Sure," I sighed. "Why not?"

My head was whirling as I hung up. Then I had my first flash of realistic inspiration. Suppose, instead of trying to figure *what* had happened, I thought about *why*. Never mind how the house was made to vanish; figure by whom. And I could guess that already.

THE man for whom the now-expanded park beside Susan's house was named. Geoffrey Porkle. Porkle Park was only a few houseless lots, really. Barely a stretch of grass and trees. He had been trying, with little avail, to persuade the home-owners in the neighborhood to sell out to him, that he might further extend the confines of his pent-up park. The comfortably settled suburbanites had all refused. Garvey Baker, and I myself, had each been approached. I doubt if there was a casual passerby in Oak Park who had not been collared at one time by one of Por-

kle's representatives, with rabid urgings to sell out. So, in something which involved such a sudden extension of Porkle Park, Geoffrey Porkle was the natural suspect.

While I was still wondering what to do with my suspicions, the doorbell rang, and I went to let Annabel in. She entered, with her short blonde monster in tow, and began to remove her gloves. Elizabeth tilted back her curly golden head and gave a loud shriek. I was about to formulate some innocuous question that would clarify my curiosity about my unremembered recent association with Annabel without making her think I'd popped my cork when the doorbell rang again.

"Who can that be?" asked Annabel with green suspicion.

"Who *might* that be?" I corrected, my pre-library master's degree in English coming to the fore. "It 'could' be anybody; it 'might' be relatively few people."

"Oh, shut up and answer the door," said Annabel, smoothing Elizabeth's hair. Elizabeth grunted like a pig, then gave another scream. I went to the door and opened it.

"Evening, Hicks," said Mr. Garson, my superior at the library, lumbering in. "I was driving by and saw your lights, and thought I'd drop in and see how you were doing on your report."

AT that moment, Elizabeth screamed again. Garson was visibly shaken. "Good grief, Hicks, what was *that*?!"

"That was Elizabeth," I said, gesturing him ahead of me and following him into the parlor. "She screams."

Annabel rose to her niece's defense immediately. "It's for her lungs," she said. "Her singing teacher says that a little screaming now and then develops lung-power."

As I made introductions, Elizabeth grunted like a pig.

"Lowers the voice," explained Annabel. "I want her to sing *Carmen* some day, don't I, sweetums! But it calls for a contralto."

"She—does this all the time?" asked Garson, his face a blend of fascination and revulsion.

"Only indoors," I said.

"Elizabeth can sing *The Song of the Flea* in Russian," said Annabel, with unpardonable pride. Elizabeth stuck her tongue out at Mr. Garson and made a vulgar sound.

"How nice," he murmured, looking nervous. "But isn't that a baritone number?"

I shook my head. "Bass. Anyone can sing *Carmen*; Lizzie has her sights on *Boris Goudanov*."

"Albert!" Annabel was smiling, but her undertone was a hacksaw on broken glass. Garson cowered like a trapped rabbit.

"Perhaps," I said with evil

genius, "Elizabeth could be persuaded to sing a few numbers for you while I finish that report, sir?"

Before I even completed the sentence, Annabel was moving toward my spinet, flexing her fingers, and Elizabeth was inflating her bony chest. "Hicks—" said Garson, trying to think of some way to avoid the impending menace of Elizabeth's lungs.

"Only be a short while, sir," I smiled, opening my study door and hurrying inside. I shut the door, locked it, then ducked out the connecting door to the kitchen and locked that, too. As I got into my sedan, even the walls of my house could not quite muffle the shrills and grunts that split the air of my living room.

* * *

PORKLE'S house was midway between my house and Marshall Field's store. There were lights on at the side window. I parked up the street, then hurried back on tiptoe.

The windowsill was just higher than my head, but by resting one shoe atop a garden-hose faucet beneath it, I could raise myself high enough to see into the room.

Inside, a man sat at a desk, talking to a taller, thinner man, who was smiling to himself as he filled the bottom of a snifter with

brandy. I couldn't be sure they were the two men I'd seen loitering earlier from their faces, but any doubts I might have had were dispelled by the presence of the two tripod-gadgets near the desk.

"You're *sure* there's no return from Drendon?" said the man at the desk.

"No, Geoffrey," said the other man to the would-be Park Czar. "I'm not at all sure. If people can be sent there, there's undoubtedly a way to get them back. How, I don't know, but the probability does exist."

"Damn it, Courtland," growled Porkle, "I wish you'd stop trying to be so inscrutable! Are we safe, or not?!"

Courtland, swirling his brandy in the snifter and inhaling its bouquet luxuriously, said, "Believe me, the odds are well with us. These vanishments—objects plus all record of their existence—have an opposite reaction, a sort of mental corollary in the minds of the vanishees."

"You mean they won't remember Oak Park? The U.S.? Earth?" said Porkle, his eyes widening. "But that's marvelous! Fat chance of returning if they don't recall—"

"But they *do* recall that there is an Earth, Geoffrey. Don't forget Drendon is a relative of Earth's, due to—"

"Spare me the details!" mut-

tered Porkle, much to my annoyance. I'd been itching to find out what or where this mysterious Drendon was. "But," continued Porkle, "you said something to me about the unlikelihood of survival there."

"Their occupation while being transferred does, of course, influence their Drendon-shape, somewhat. But even a person who is adapted into Drendon-form will find that life there is fraught with dangers, even for the regular inhabitants."

I tried to recall what the Bakers might have been involved in when this odd translation occurred. Maggie Baker had been out in the kitchen, probably cooking. Timothy would have been tagging after her, asking kid-questions about her preparations, like a student of domestic science. Garvey Baker would have been at work watching the store. As to Susan, I didn't know. Last I saw of her, she'd been sitting mournfully on the sofa, looking lost and lorn, in the spot where the tree had materialized. I hoped earnestly that she hadn't become a Drendon-type weeping willow.

"You see," Courtland was continuing, "Drendon is an entity, as befits any enchanted woods. Drendon does not precisely *have* a tree; part of Drendon *is* a tree. And all the trees, like Drendon, are quite alive, and more or less

intelligent according to age and species.

"Oh, you can't tell it at a glance, but just attempting to take an axe to one might bring on frightful results. And then, it has animals, too." His voice lowered here, and reminded me chillingly of one of those old-time horror-tale tellers on radio in the thirties. "Some animals slither in the gloom on nefarious missions of slimy terror, some bound about in gay abandon, frolicking on the sward in the hot glow of that ridiculous sun which only sets on certain occasions. Some you can go up to and kick without temerity; others you dare not even let know you're within shouting distance if you know what's healthy. And this latter sort are not only monstrous, they are well in the majority, and you can count it a day well spent if you narrowly escape death walking from the front door of your house to the mailbox. They prowl the forest incessantly, and are never sated!"

"Stop!" said Porkle, his plump face grey and greasy with sweat. He swabbed his thick features with a silken kerchief. "That's enough. I get the picture!"

"It's an intriguing place, really," said Courtland, disappointed in the other's lack of enthusiasm. "A mythophile's dream, Porkle, with its monsters,

beasts, furry fauns, sly satyrs, vampires, werewolves, wyverns, centaurs and such. Always, day upon day, in this overgrown, vegetation-choked locale, every moment of life is precious, every life is in deadly peril, what with deadfalls, quicksands, pits, things that scream, things that slurp, things that impale you on their horns, things that crush you in their grasp, things that bite, things that stomp, and things that can do anything the other things can do, and much better."

"Please," said Porkle, weakly. "No more. I take your word for it. It's very unlikely we'll ever hear of the Bakers again, or that Hicks character."

THIS last phrase stymied me for a second, until I recalled that these two men had followed me to Susan's house. Then it started making sense. Susan's father had refused to sell; so had I. The plan might have been to kill two birds with one stone, getting me while I was inside Susan's house along with the family. But they hadn't known I'd leave the house so soon, or that I had left in fact. They still assumed that I had been translated into Drendon—wherever it was—with the others. Which gave me a slight leverage.

Dropping to the ground from my perch, I dusted the window-



sill grit from my fingers and strolled around to the front door. A touch of the bell evoked muted chimes inside the house, and in a moment, the tall scientific half of the duo, Courtland, was opening the door to me. "Yes?!" he said, scowling deeply. (It was, after all, nearly two in the morning.) "What is it? What do you want?"

"My name is Albert Hicks," I said, pleased to hear the quick intake of his breath. "And I want your scalp, if you don't mind."

"Hicks!" he echoed numbly. "But how could you—?" Then a trace of his suave demeanor returned, and he said smoothly, "I'm afraid I don't follow you. But won't you come in?"

I kept my eyes on him as he shut the door behind me. Courtland wasn't the sort I trusted where I couldn't see him. He led the way toward the room in which I'd seen himself and Porkle discussing my supposed fate, and I went inside warily. At the desk, Porkle looked up blankly.

"Who—?" he began, but a wave of Courtland's hand silenced him.

"You were saying something about a scalp?" smiled Courtland, as I sat gingerly on the edge of a chair.

"Yes," I said, keeping my voice as politely sardonic as possible. "I think it's rude of people

to shunt other people into strange woods without asking them first."

"What?" gasped Porkle, jumping to his feet. "Who is this guy, Courtland?"

"I'm Albert Hicks," I said grimly. "Lately of Drendon."

PORKLE'S face went chalky to the hairline, and he dropped back into his swivel chair with a soft squeal of alarm. I turned to Courtland. "Doc, when you send people away like that, you ought to make sure it's for good. Your gimmick wore off in an hour, and we all popped right back where we belonged. Shame on you."

"You're lying," Courtland declared flatly, his eyes lustreless and deadly. "That cannot happen."

"But it has!" quailed Porkle. "Look! Here he is. If he didn't go there and back, then how does he *know* about Drendon?"

Courtland's shrewd eyes flicked about the room, and I felt a faint chill of panic as his glance came to rest upon the window, its lower edge slightly ajar. A mirthless smile uptilted the corners of his thin mouth. "I think I understand," he said, stepping back from me and drawing a slim blueblack automatic from inside his suit jacket. I stared helplessly into the barrel of the gun, no longer feeling

very clever, as Courtland reached for one of the tripod-things and touched a dial on its back. A soft throbbing hum began to issue from the odd construction atop the tripod, and in another instant the sound was received and echoed by the other machine, a few feet away.

Between the two things, the air began to shimmer and writhe, like air above a hot pavement in summertime. I didn't need a scientific education to know I was looking at the doorway to Drendon. Courtland motioned to me with the muzzle of his automatic.

"If you'll just step between the transmitters?" he said gently. Something in his tone told me that he didn't much care if I went through alive or dead. This gadget of his, discounting any other advantages it might have, was the ideal way to dispose of occasional corpses. If I didn't walk through that shimmering gateway, there was a good chance I'd be plugged through the head and simply dumped through.

I got to my feet and tried the only trump I seemed to have, Porkle's distrust of science. With a smile and a shrug, I stepped toward that pulsing blur as if I wasn't scared stiff, and said, "All right, if you insist. But I'll only reappear in an hour."

Even Courtland looked uneasy at my bluff, and his momentary

expression of uncertainty was all the impetus Porkle needed to crack.

"You idiot!" he raged at Courtland, coming out from behind the desk. "I *told* you your stupid scheme was—!"

"Porkle!" Courtland yelled, spinning to face him. "Watch where you're—"

But Geoffrey Porkle's pudgy form was already a frozen statue of stupefaction in the grip of that eerie force between the tripods, and then, with a gentle *pop*, he was gone. And that's when I stepped forward and shoved the distracted Courtland right after him.

Caught off guard, he had only an instant to turn his malevolently contorted face toward mine, his lips forming a curse—Then he vanished.

AN instant later, the house did the same, and I was dropping down about five feet to the ground. My landing was cushioned by soft grass, and when I looked about, there was nothing left of Porkle's house but the two gadgets on their tripods, lying on the velvet lawn. I went over to them, but their humming had ceased. I lifted one and shook it. A rasping tinkle inside it told me that something had gone bust in the crash. However they'd functioned, they were beyond it now.

And there went my last chance of locating Susan.

Still dazed from the fall and my narrow escape, I got back to my car—the driveway was gone with the house, leaving my car in the midst of an open lawn—and drove wearily back home-ward. I felt lost, and sick. I was completely out of schemes, now. No matter how I tried, my mind could supply no solution to the problem. Susan and her family were lost, and there didn't seem to be much anyone could do about it.

Porkle and Courtland were likewise lost, but that in itself was a small loss. I could only hope that whatever they'd become translated into in Drendon would not be as menacing to Susan as their Earth-counterparts had been.

If only there were someone I could tell, someone who'd believe me despite the way the facts looked. But the only one I'd ever felt that close to was Susan. And she already knew more of Drendon than I did.

It was only as I rolled the car back into my driveway that I heard the shrill gurgle and growl from within the house, and remembered Annabel, Garson and Elizabeth. Elizabeth was busily rendering—maybe 'rending' is a better word—*Old Man River*, at a pitch that made William Warfield's seem like a soprano.

As I tiptoed into the kitchen and once more let myself into my study, I had a momentary pang of regret about the callousness with which I'd shoved Courtland smack out of this world. "Well," I said to myself, sagging wearily against the paneling of the door to the living room (awaiting the climax of Elizabeth's number, unable to forge the smile of required enjoyment on my face if I emerged while she was still at it), "it was him or me!"

Stubbornly trying to reinforce my decision with a jut of my lower lip, my English background came to mind, and I automatically self-corrected, "That is, 'he or I'."

Out of the darkness behind me, a voice asked, "What's the difference?"

"A pronominal object of the verb 'to be' always remains in the nominative case, rather than the objective, because—" I frowned. By all rights, I should have been completely alone in my study. I had the only key to either door, and they'd both been locked while I was gone.

"Because what?" the voice prompted.

"Because 'to be' expresses an equality rather than a result . . ." I said, slowly turning around. I saw no one, what with the blinds being down. I reached out a hand for the light switch, intensely curious . . .

"No, please!" said the voice. For the first time, and with a sudden quiver in my stomach, I noted that it was a *female* voice. A rather pretty one. "Why not?" I asked.

"Because," said the voice, "I have no clothes on."

"You're joking," I replied, knowing somehow that she wasn't. My forehead went clammy at the thought, when I considered that my boss and Annabel were just beyond the door. The sturdy oak door suddenly assumed all the protective qualities of sawdust to my shaken mind.

"Well," said the voice, "dramatizing, maybe. But I'm certainly not clothed by your standards."

"You leave my standards out of this," I snapped. "Where do you get off prying into my standards?"

"I mean people's standards in this era." The voice had changed location, and now seemed to come from the vicinity of my unseen leather armchair.

"This—This era?" I asked, groping toward the chair.

"Yes," came the reply from the bookcase, halfway across the room.

I began to feel irritated. "Stop moving around like that!"

"I have to," said the soft, thrilling voice, "or you'll catch me." Her logic was beyond dispute.

"Well," I said, disgruntled, "if

—if you'll stand still, I'll stand still."

"All right. But if you move, I move."

I NODDED, then grunted at the foolishness of nodding into the dark, and seated myself carefully in the armchair. The situation was without precedent in my life. I wasn't quite sure how to proceed. Or even *if* to proceed.

"Now then—" I snapped on my lighter, going through the motions of igniting my cigarette, but actually trying to pierce the gloom by the dancing flame of the wick, "What are you doing here dressed like that? Or perhaps I should say *not-dressed* like that?"

"Right now, I'm observing you from the bookcase."

"In the dark?" I almost ignited the end of my nose. I hurriedly thrust the lighter into my pocket. Smoking could wait.

"Why not?" said the voice, and then the speaker laughed, and I suddenly found myself a boy again, on a hot day in July, running barefoot through warm grass toward a glittering cold creek. Then I was back again.

"Laugh again," I said.

"All right," said the voice. "Say something funny."

"I don't know anything funny," I admitted sadly.

"That's funny enough," said the voice, laughing again.

Once more I was on my way through the grass to the creek. And back again. "That's the damndest thing. You won't believe this, but when you laugh it's as if—"

"You're out on the countryside, right?"

"Uh—Yes," I said, surprised. "Does this always happen when people hear you laugh?"

"Retention of childhood memories. Called nostalgia. You remember hearing me laugh as a child, and whatever you were doing at the time, it comes back when I laugh again. Simple."

I frowned, growing apprehensive. "See here, now, are you someone I knew as a child?" My slowly forming image of a curvy cutie was fading into oblivion. After all, she might be twice my age. I hated older women with girlish voices. Especially alone in the dark with me. Not dressed according to my standards.

"Honestly!" Exasperation colored her words. "I never saw you before in my life. When I say me, I mean we, but really mean me as a profession rather than as a person."

"Profession?" I choked. This had dire associations in my mind; moreso with Annabel and Garson in the next room. I was cold all over. "What is your profession?"

"I'm a woodnymph," tinkled the voice.

I CONFESS I sat quite still for a long moment, thinking this over. Then I said slowly, still quite dizzy, "You're a woodnymph—Like in the stories? Young, beautiful, diaphanous gown, hair like the color of autumn leaves, and all that?"

"Yes," said the voice, sweetly.

Completely nuts. I sighed to myself sadly. And such a nice voice, too. But nuts or not, she might *still* be young and beautiful. Would Annabel or Mr. Garson believe that she was nuts? It took me two seconds to answer that.

No. That was the likely conclusion. Of course, if I said, "Tell them who you are," and she said, "A woodnymph," they'd think she was nuts. But if I walked out of my study with a girl who wasn't "dressed according to my standards", I'd never have a chance to play quiz with them.

Then again, maybe she *wasn't* in anything wispy—She might be wadded into a Mother Hubbard and combat boots for all I knew. A nut wouldn't know the difference, would she?

"May I turn on the light?"

"Why?"

"I've never seen a . . . um . . . woodnymph before—"

"No one has," said the voice, with finality.

"Well—I wouldn't mind being

the first man to see one," I hazarded.

"Who would!?" said the voice, and that strangely nostalgic laugh tinkled again. I had to forcibly wrench my emotions back from that warm grassy stream-side field.

"I can't just talk to a voice. Do you have a name?"

"My name is Lorn," she said, in a voice that was a velvet caress. It made the backs of my knees itch.

"It's certainly a pretty name," I said sincerely.

"Naturally. All our names are pretty. Because all of us are pretty."

Curiosity was killing me. I began to wonder if I could edge toward the light without her noticing. She might just be kidding about seeing me in the dark. "This requires some thinking," I said, as a ruse to preclude the necessity of my speaking for a few moments. Carefully, I eased myself out of the chair and groped my way toward the light switch. My fingers touched it, and I whirled as the fluorescent ceiling light sputtered and popped on. The top of the bookcase was void of tenants.

However, in the center of the room, *something* was standing, watching me balefully from beneath lowered brows topped with bone-colored horns. From the waist upward, excluding those

pointy, inch-long horns, it was a youth of about ten years, but from the waist down it seemed to be wearing dark brown angora tights. It smelt slightly.

"You're a woodnymph?" I gasped, disappointment mingling with shock at the sight. Woodnymph it might not be, but human being it could not be. For answer, I received a guttural growl from the thing.

And at the same moment, a suppressed giggle came from behind my armchair. "Lorn?" I queried, hopefully taking a step toward the chair.

THE thing in the center of the rug made a motion with its head that demonstrated forcefully the fact that those horns were more than ornamental. Its small cloven hooves pawed the carpet like those of an animal about to attack.

"Timtik!" said Lorn from behind the chair. "Don't gore him unless you have to. He's really rather nice."

"I don't trust humans!" rasped Timtik, his voice the kind of sound you hear over a tin-can-and-string telephone. "You saw the way he tried to sneak a peek at you, Lorn!"

I was nonplussed. "Who or what is this thing, Lorn? He looks something like a satyr, but his size is too—" At this moment, a bit of lore regarding the

behavior of woodnymphs and satyrs passed across my mind. Their almost symbiotic relationship was so firmly rooted in ancient mythologies that somehow I began to feel that if she was a woodnymph, and this was her current flame, and he was only four feet tall—Might not *she* also be—?

“Lorn—” I said haltingly. “Are you—Are you and he—um—” I stopped, dismayed.

“Nonsense,” said Lorn. “Timtik is a faun, and that’s not quite the same as a satyr. He and I are just good friends. Why, I don’t even *have* a steady satyr!”

I felt ice in my stomach and my heart seemed to be pumping gelid sludge. “Then—You *do* . . . um . . . date satyrs?”

“Well, of course! Why not!”

I scratched my head. “I dunno. But in all the portraits I’ve seen, they look so—well—repulsive.”

“Let me put it this way,” said Lorn. “If *you* lived in a world peopled by, say, bald-headed women with bad teeth, what would *you* do?”

“Shoot myself,” I said.

Lorn sighed. “I mean if you *did* go out with someone. You see, Albert, satyrs are all I’ve got. That’s the reason I date them. Those stories you heard were just about the *bad* satyrs. Some of them are perfect gentlemen, and a few are even shy.”

“How did you know my name?” I asked.

“I heard your wife mention it, Albert,” answered Lorn.

“My wife?” I was momentarily perplexed. Then a small light flickered in my head. “Oh, you mean Annabel. She’s not my wife. She’s—” I glanced at the door, then lowered my voice. “She’s not even much fun to have around for long. Much too bossy.”

“I’m so glad!” Then Lorn’s voice quickly extinguished the sparkle in its intonation and added, “But you *do* have a wife around, don’t you?”

“No,” I admitted, shaking my head. “At the moment, I have nary wife, nor fiancée, nor even a close friend of the opposite sex.”

“Oh,” said Lorn.

THERE was a pause of about ten seconds’ duration, during which Timtik scratched idly at the thatch of fur on his haunch with talon-like fingernails.

“Oh, well, in *that* case—” Lorn said, and stood up into view from behind the armchair.

I sat down. On the floor. Hard. She stood there, smiling at me, deep blue eyes crinkling beneath flaming copper brows, long unruly coils of hair falling to her creamy shoulders like a sunrise—like a sunset—like an explosion in a ketchup factory! Her lips were soft, pink, and un-

painted, and I could feel their moist warmth at ten feet. Those waves of flaming hair fell like coiling cataracts to her bare shoulders, and below that—Well

—
I looked in wonder as I clambered back to my feet.

She'd been right. She had no clothes on at all by my standards, but she was not exactly bare, either. From her arching clavicles to her tiny toes she was swathed, or wrapped, or festooned, by a silky, satiny, gauzy, fluffy veil-type thing, its shades mingling emerald and viridian, like the color of moss on a bright but overcast day.

How it stayed up, on, or around, I had no idea.

"That's an unusual garment you're—uh—wearing, Lorn. How—How in the world do you keep it up?!" I blurted.

"It's magic, you dope!" Timtik muttered, clomping his impatient hooves on the rug. He'd ceased his guard-stance once Lorn had risen up from behind the chair like the sun coming over a jungle valley at dawn—like a torch-haired South Seas volcano-goddess—like . . . I restrained myself from bursting into poetry. It was an effort.

"It's my diaphanous drapery," Lorn beamed, turning about to give me the complete vista. It dipped so low in back that I could have counted all her ribs if I'd

wanted to put my hands on her bare back. And suddenly I wanted to, very much, but she'd already completed her rotation and my chance was gone.

"It never falls off?" I said, amazed. "Kind of looks as though if a gust of wind came prowling—"

Lorn shook her head decisively. "Not unless I wish it off."

Timtik began to show some interest in the conversation. "Lorn is the only one who knows the magic words that drop the drape. Maggot taught her when she wove it."

"Who taught her?" I'd been oddly stirred by the name.

"Maggot," said Timtik, impatiently. "She's a witch lives in Drendon."

"Drendon . . ." I echoed, savoring the word. And then realized, with a dizzy feeling in my brain, that I knew these two here before me in my study.

It was Susan Baker and her brother Timothy. And "Maggot" could only have rung that dull bell in my mind if it were Mrs. Maggie Baker, Susan's mother.

A LOT of things danced through my brain in a few short instants, even as my lips tried to make intelligent response to the faun's statement. Maggie Baker, switched into Drendon from cooking things in her kitchen—simply became the

Drendon equivalent of a mixer, brewer, or concocter: a witch. And Susan, still in the throes of her unwonted urge to *do me that fan-dance*, sitting sad and—of course—*lorn* in the spot where the tree had appeared, had become a tempting, winsome, lovely creature whose proper appellation would be wood-goddess, or tree-goddess.

Not that I was sure yet. The face of Lorn might be the face of Susan, but where Susan's had always been reserved, vapid, and a bit lovably dopey, Lorn's was pert, peppery, and lovably dopey. The flame-colored hair had been a distraction, as had that "diaphanous drapery". But a sharp look now made me surer than ever that I was facing the girl I'd lost forever scant hours earlier. She was disguised somewhat, but all the differences seemed to be for the better.

And she treated me like a stranger.

I wondered if some word-associations might trigger her memory. "Drendon," I said carefully. "Why, that's the name of a forest, isn't it? Sort of contiguous with—um—Earth-Normal? Here, where only a little of it shows, we call it Porkle Park." I didn't know how much of what I said was true, but I had to see if they'd react at all.

Timtik reacted first. With disgust.

"Humans!" he spat. "Who could name something as lovely as a park something like 'Porkle'!?"

"I'm glad we live in Drendon," said Lorn. "It's a much prettier name."

"Then," I said, wonderingly, "it is contiguous with Porkle Park?"

"Only right here," Lorn said briskly. "Our homeland is tangent to the park here, but we live in an entirely different—what?" she asked Timtik quizzically.

"Dimension is the closest word the humans have for it," muttered the faun.

"You see, that's why we're here in the first place," said Lorn, smiling a blithe smile that any self-respecting temptress would have depleted her bank account to learn.

I fought a vertiginous impulse to leap the distance between us and cover her face with smoldering kisses, and quaked a little at the unfamiliarity of the feeling within myself. This wasn't like me. I was a librarian and a gentleman. And she was, after all, only a rag, a bone, a hank of hair . . . But what a rag! What a bone! What a hank of hair! I cleared my throat, and said puzzledly, "What made you come calling on *me*?"

For the first time since I'd seen him, Timtik lost some of his sullen impertinence. He actually

looked embarrassed. "It's kind of my fault, Albert," he admitted, hanging his head. "I tried to hide the key from Lorn, and—"

"Timtik is a prankster, Albert," said Lorn. "He took the key from me to hold it for me (he said) because I didn't have any pockets—" (A bad choice of topic; my eyes were again drawn to those draperies of hers, and my breathing became slightly impaired.) "Albert—?" said Lorn, a little concerned. "Maybe I should leave. You don't look so well."

"I'm fine. I'm just not used to—to—I'm fine. Please go on."

WELL, once Timtik had the key, he tried to make me catch him to get it back, and you know how no one can outrun a faun, but he tripped, and I managed to lay hold of his hoof—" (I had to repress a shudder) "—so he threw the key, and it came in here, and just as we'd sneaked inside to find it, you came in. That's all."

"All but one thing," I said. "What key?"

"The key to Drendon, stupid!" grunted the faun in his metallic rasp. "We can't get back to our dimension without it, and Lorn'll catch hell from Maggot for keeping me out this late as it is!"

"Me keeping you out?!" Her lovely face was alive with icy rancor. I watched her features

with numb joy. She's beautiful when she's mad, I thought, and wished with biting regret that someone hadn't already coined that phrase. Then the happy thought occurred to me that perhaps the cliché hadn't yet penetrated her dimension.

"You're beautiful when you're angry," I ventured.

Lorn stopped harassing Timtik. "Why—Why, Albert! That's the loveliest thing anyone ever said to me. I'm so glad I showed myself to you."

"You're glad!" I said, my stomach doing cartwheels. "I've never been so happy in my life."

"Well, now that he knows why we're here, let's take the key and go," said Timtik, peering about the room.

"Go!?" I felt my world crumbling into—well—crumbs. I'd been somehow deluding myself that I was going to spend the rest of my life just looking at Lorn, just staring at and drinking in her loveliness, not eating, sleeping or anything, never leaving the room again. Just me and Lorn, and—Well, maybe Timtik could've been bribed to leave us. But would a faun have any use for a quarter? Or an ice cream cone?

"We have to go, Albert," said Lorn, her face sweetly sad. "But I will remember you always, and all that sort of stuff. Now, where's that key?!"

I felt she could have looked just a *little* more miserable about our parting, but Lorn was already down on her hands and knees, peering under furniture, and Timtik was clumping about making an awful racket, yelling, "Here key!"

Nothing happened, except to Lorn's expression. She became pale and apprehensive. "Call again!" she said.

Timtik, too, looked uneasy. "Here, key!" he shouted. Again nothing happened. Timtik looked genuinely scared. "The spell doesn't work, Lorn!"

"But it has to!" she said, rising gracefully from her ungainly crouch on the carpet. "If a spell works, it works, that's all. If the key can *hear* you, it *must* answer."

I felt a growing concern for their plight, despite my desire that they both remain until I could get them unbrainwashed and back into their proper identities—Though I wasn't sure I wanted Susan to change *all* the way back . . .

"Maybe," I said helpfully, "Magic won't work in this dimension?"

Timtik stopped clumping. "That's a horrible idea—Maybe—Hey, *Lorn!*"

She gave a tiny shriek, but her hands moved in time. That diaphanous drapery of hers hadn't sagged much, and only exposed

a few extra inches of smooth pale flesh. But it was enough to turn my knees to water and bring the water to a boil. "I guess," I ventured not unhappily, "you're stuck in *this* dimension, huh?"

The resultant anguish on their faces made me feel *that* high. "Well, maybe—Maybe it's because *you* don't belong here that your magic didn't work. Maybe if *I* called—*Here, key!*"

"See me? See me?" squeaked a little voice. "Whee! Me! Me!"

"*There* she is!" said Timtik pointing.

I LOOKED atop the bookcase and saw what at first seemed to be a dry twig; then it wriggled, and I saw that it was alive after a fashion. Lorn and I sprang for it at the same moment. We crashed front to front, and somehow I found my arm around her waist, while my free hand scooped up the key. My hand scooped reflexively, because at the moment of contact between us, everything was forgotten but Lorn, Lorn, *Lorn!* And she certainly was staring at me as though something marvelous had occurred.

"Albert," she sighed, with wonder in her voice.

Timtik watched, aghast. "Lorn, he's from another dimension!" he warned.

At that moment, the key wriggled in my hand. I looked at it,

and realized that I held the—well, the *key*—to Lorn's departure, and that without it . . .

I repressed an urge to chuckle, but could not repress the surge of just plain selfish desirous meanness that welled up inside me as I brought up my other hand behind Lorn and prepared to crumple and snap the key like the twig it most resembled—Fire lanced through my fingers! I almost dropped the thing, but the glow which had momentarily heated the twig faded as soon as I ceased twisting it.

Timtik went pale (to the waist). "Lorn! He tried to destroy the key! He did! And Maggot's counter-spell worked; I saw it. He doesn't want us to go!"

Lorn was looking into my face, sighing gently, her breath in my nostrils sweet and warm and moist as fresh-cut grass. "Who cares?" she said dreamily. "This beats satyrs all get-out!"

Timtik's face contorted tearfully. "But Lorn. Maggot will be expecting us, and you're supposed to be taking care of me, and I'll never get home again, and—" Here he broke down completely and blubbered salty tears into the hem of Lorn's diaphanous drapery, the horns coming dangerously near to snagging it. Lorn put her hand gently to my chest and pushed me back, with a reluctant smile. "He's right; I'll have to take him home."

"No, Lorn," I said. "Don't go. You must stay with me."

"Well, Albert—" Lorn looked perplexed. "I *want* to, of course, but I did promise Maggot I'd bring him home tonight. I'll be back. Honestly I will."

I fought for time, hoping to alter her decision. "But why did you come here in the first place, then? Merely to enchant me and then leave me a broken husk, seeking in vain for beauty I shall never view again?"

Timtik gagged. "Boy, is he corny!" He seemed quite recovered from his spate of tears. Lorn shot him a cold glance of deep reproach. "I think he's charming!" she said staunchly. Then to me, "I'd never heard of Earth, or anywhere outside Drendon, until Maggot decided to send Timtik out to spy on humans, to get experience. She needs someone to make the transition now and then, to keep her posted, especially on anything scientific. She likes to think she keeps Drendon up-to-date in its technology."

"I'm studying under her," said Timtik, proudly. "I'm an apprentice witch."

MY knowledge of gender triumphed over strained credibility. "Warlock," I corrected. "Boys can't be witches."

"All right," Timtik muttered darkly. "Warlock, then."

"He had to see people," Lorn went on. "It's part of his training so that, someday, when he has to cast a spell on a human, he'll know how to make the doll."

The hair prickled on my neck. "Dolls? You mean voodoo?"

A light shone in Lorn's eyes. "You know voodoo, Albert?!"

"Just the word," I admitted anticlimactically.

"It figures," Timtik muttered, again darkly.

"Well, anyhow—Maggot thought Timtik was too young to go alone, and she was mixing a batch of hell-brew to feed the Thrake, so the Kwistians couldn't get into our section of Drendon, and so she sent me. I'll do anything for excitement, and Maggot knows it, so she sent me to watch humans with him, and we were on our way back when he tossed the key in here—"

"Wait," I said. "If there are no humans in Drendon, why learn how to voodoo them?"

"Practice, you bonehead!" snarled the faun.

I bestowed my most withering glance upon his horny forehead. "People who live in glass houses —"

"—shouldn't take baths!" finished Lorn. "That's an oldie. Do you know this one: Too many cooks—"

"Make light work," finished Timtik.

I felt like a character onstage

who'd forgotten to read his part of the script. They were talking my brain into a tangle. "Look, Lorn," I said, taking advantage of the speaking of her name to hold her closer, as if for emphasis, "if the key won't answer when *you* call, maybe it won't work to take you anywhere. Maybe it only works for me—"

"Well, I like that!" the key shrilled angrily. "I would *too* work for them, except that it was so warm and cozy in here that I got just a wee bit sleepy and dropped off just the teensiest bit and didn't hear them calling me, but I did hear you, so that's when I answered, so there!"

Timtik was intrigued. "If that's so, then why did Lorn's drapery start to sag?" A shocked expression widened his eyes. "Unless she *wanted* it to—!"

"I did not!" said Lorn, pink with indignation. "When it was intimated that spells might not work here, I simply tried my drape-dropping spell to test the theory. It worked perfectly. That's all. Of all the nerve, Timtik!" She was quite put out, and I was about to intercede to prevent any physical violence, when suddenly—

The faun froze in position, eyes alert, breath hushed. Lorn, too, had gone rigid, tense. I looked left and right. "What's wrong?" I said, feeling uneasy myself. "Is something—?"

AUNT ANNABEL!" came a familiar shriek behind me. "Albert has a LADY in there with no CLOTHES on!"

Too late I slapped my hand over the keyhole.

"Elizabeth," I said lamely. "She spies."

"No time to lose! Come on, Lorn!" said Timtik.

"Hicks!" came Garson's shocked voice through the oaken paneling. "What's going on in there! Open this door!" I couldn't tell from his tone if he wanted to stop the scandalous goings-on or take part in them.

"Oh, Albert," said Lorn, taking the key from my numb fingers. "I can't come back if there's going to be trouble. Maybe it's best if we never see each other again . . ."

Her beauty was unmarred, enhanced, really, by two crystal tears issuing over her rose-flushed cheeks. Her lovely eyes were cloudy, and my heart wrenched painfully to see them so. "No, Lorn," I pleaded. "Don't go—!"

My outstretched hand clutched the air she was just vacating, as she glided swiftly toward the window, soundless and deft on her small bare feet. Timtik had the window swiftly yawning wide against the night, and was helping her over the sill. I stood frozen, dazed at the abruptness of Elizabeth's yelp and the

strange duo's precipitate departure. I watched the last trailing gossamer bit of the viridian drapery slither like a foaming green mist over the sill, then snapped out of my bewildered trance. I dove through the air, fingers out to grasp that last fleeing foot—

"Albert!" Annabel was shrieking. "Open this door at once! How *could* you! And in your own *home*!"

But even while Garson was cursing, and Annabel was alternately urging and egging him on and begging Elizabeth not to listen to him, and the hinges were screaming with the pounding strain, I was coming down toward the windowsill like a pouncing leopard after its prey, and my fingers were closing tightly over the wisp of veil remaining, and I was yelling loudly a single word—"Lorn!"

There was an abrupt, sharp click, a strange sort of tremor throughout my trunk and limbs and mind, and then my face smacked stunningly against hot, moist earth where it should have met the parquet flooring of my study.

CHAPTER 4

I LAY there, slightly stunned, for an instant, then managed, with a soft groan, to roll over on my back. I tried to catch my

breath and get my mind in order. As my mind sent out fingers to test for broken limbs or at least a few frayed tendons, I heard the voices of Lorn and Timtik, and slit my eyes to see them. I was prone at their feet, or rather, at her feet and his hooves. I lay where I was, and simply listened, for the moment.

"Pour water on him, Lorn," suggested Timtik.

"Do you have any?" Her voice was plaintive with worry about me. I liked that.

"No, but I think I can make some. Maggot showed me how," he said. Timtik proceeded to cross his fetlocks, fall down, swear, get up again, re-cross his fetlocks, fall down again, and swear again.

"That's a fascinating spell," Lorn enthused.

"Spell, nothing!" muttered the faun. "I can't even assume the primary position. Oh, for a pair of feet! Sometime *you* try standing with *your* fetlocks crossed!"

Lorn frowned prettily. "Maybe you could tell *me* what to do, and *I* could assume the primary position?"

Timtik rubbed his beardless chin between thumb and forefinger, carefully sheathing his talons as he did so. "Well—All spells are very secret, you know. I can't give them away; Maggot would be awfully angry."

Lorn nodded briskly. "Very well, then. I'll cross my legs, and you do the rest, and maybe if we hold hands it'll work. What do you think?"

Timtik pursed his lips. "Not a bad idea. Let's try."

Lorn carefully crossed her legs, gripping the faun's hand for a reason that seemed to be equal portions of necromancy and balance, and Timtik began his spell. It was quite a spell. His cabalistic incantation was punctuated with waving arms, and grunts and groans, sounding like a banshee in a beartrap. Suddenly, a tiny cloud, pink in color, began to materialize about two feet over my face.

Timtik frowned and howled some more. The cloud darkened and began to quiver. The faun emitted a savage curse, and the cloud sparked a bolt of lightning about three inches long.

Lorn whistled in appreciation. "It's working!"

"Quiet!" growled Timtik. "I'm not through yet!"

He began snapping his fingers, increased his howl, and moved his haunches in that motion Hawaiians call "around the island" when the hula is in full swing.

The cloud was quite black now, like a blob of inked cotton, and the lightning bolts were flashing on and off like flashbulbs at a Hollywood premiere.

Suddenly there was a grinding noise, a little gasp, and the cloud exploded into nothingness. And at that same moment, I received about a cupful of water full in my upturned face.

I sat up gasping and sputtering. "That was cold!" I complained, wiping at my dripping features.

Timtik, crowing his delight, was dancing on the sunlit sward. "Oh what a witch I'm gonna make!"

"Warlock!" said Lorn, then looked to me for approval. I smiled my approval back at her. Who could disapprove of Lorn!

"All right—Warlock!" Timtik muttered. "But whatever I become, I'll be the best damned enchanter this forest has ever seen, that's for sure!"

I TOOK a deep breath of the warm fresh air and sighed, then looked around at the bright greenery of the forest that impinged upon the glade in which I'd landed. "It's certainly beautiful here," I said. "A guy could sit here and look at nature forever."

Timtik suddenly turned his gaze upon a dusty grey globe, about the size of an orange, burgeoning on the ground near my right hand. "No you couldn't, Albert," he said. "That's a hot-sy!"

Lorn took a backward step

such as a woman might do on hearing the word "bug". Her eyes widened. "You're right, Timtik! Let's go, quickly. Come on, Albert."

I looked again at the globe, which was now the size of a grapefruit. "A *hotsy!*? What does it do?"

Lorn and Timtik each grabbed an arm and hove me to my feet. "We'll explain later. Don't just sit there, it's almost *ripe!*"

I found myself stumbling along toward the encroaching edge of the woods with them. I shook their grips free of my arms, impatiently. "But what is a *hotsy?*" I looked back at it again. It was easy to see it. Already the size of a medicine ball, it was turning dull crimson. Then the grass about this ruddy spheroid began, abruptly, to smoke. Then it turned black and died. And still the *hotsy* grew, swollen and bloated, and radiating raw heat that I began to feel, a good sixty feet away. I no longer needed warnings from the woodnymph and faun. I turned on my heel and dashed after them (they hadn't halted their flight when I had).

Then, just as they were about to penetrate the first fringe of the woods, Lorn halted dead, and Timtik jumped backwards a good yard. "They're *coming!*" she cried, throwing herself flat on the earth. Timtik was pivoting

about on one hoof, looking from the quivering globe to the forest and back again. Then I heard the sound. Off in the tanglewood, there was a hissing, buzzing, swishing, whizzing of angry noise. The sound was too much for Lorn. She jumped up again. "I'm afraid!" she whimpered to Timtik. "I can't stay here!"

"The other side of the hotsy, it's our only chance!" shrieked the faun, galloping off without her. I stood as he passed me, his head down and tiny hooves throwing up divots from the sod. Then Lorn rushed up to me, and right by me, yelling, "Run. Albert! Run!" I ran.

THE three of us, with Timtik's lead growing by the second, skirted the bulging diameter of the hotsy at a distance of ten feet, and even there my entire hotsy-side felt half-cooked before I got beyond it. The thing was almost ten feet high, now, and sagging horribly, like a huge scarlet-and-orange paper bag filled with wet mud. And just as we stumbled to a panting halt at the edge of woods bordering the opposite side of the glade, the hotsy was riven from within by its internal pressures, and splayed sluggishly open, disgorging a steaming red viscosity cluttered with small spheres. It looked like overgrown salmon roe, glowing with an incandes-

cence that was nearly blinding. This gleaming glut of globes lay there for only an instant, and then the whizzing sound, which had been growing more piercing by the instant, reached a peak, and I cringed back, startled by the blue-white cloud of tiny flying things that came out of the other rim of the woods, at speeds well surpassing any bug I'd seen, ever.

Lorn clutched my arm, leaned her mouth to my ringing ear, and shouted, over the chaotic racket, "*Frost flies!*"

As the insects reached the goal of the globes, and crashed head-on, there came a keening screech, such as a warm coin makes on a block of dry ice, except that it would take all the coins in the U.S.A. on all the dry ice in the world to duplicate the volume of the shattering sound. The blue-white bugs glowed red, the globules shiveled into rime-coated raisins, and the erstwhile blast of heat became a sudden wintry chill in the air. As quickly as they'd come, the flies left, their reddish bodies turning blue-white again as they zoomed off and disappeared in a direction at right angles to the one they'd approached the glade at. The ensuing calm was downright soothing.

Lorn sagged against me and sighed. "That was very close. We were almost destroyed, you

know." I hadn't *known*, of course, but I'd most certainly *suspected* something of the sort.

"Are those things as dangerous as they sound?"

"They live on heat. Any kind of heat. Body heat, for one," said Timtik. "And the hotsies live on cold. So they get along fine."

"They—they fly so *fast* . . ." I remarked, shivering.

"Have to," said Lorn. "To get from one hotsy to the next. They need the heat for enough pep to get from one hotsy to the other. They use it up fast. If they don't make it, they die. Not that anyone *cares*."

"I guess a metabolism like that *would* keep you on the go," I agreed. Then, to change from an unpleasant topic, "By the way, where are we bound?"

"Well," said Lorn, "I have to take Timtik back to Maggot, first, then—" She gave me a sideways look.

"Then?" I said, my voice cracking.

Lorn shrugged, and gave me a friendly twitch in the ribs with her elbow. "We can maybe play charades or something."

Inside my collar, my neck did a brief imitation of a hotsy. "Uh—" I said intelligently.

Timtik tugged impatiently at Lorn's diaphanous drapery, then. "Let's go, Lorn. I'm getting hungry."

"All right, Timtik." Lorn took

his hand, and I took hers, and we headed back across the glade, past the scene of the fly-hotsy encounter. In the circle of withered black grass, nothing remained, not even a wrinkled raisin. But my eyes stayed peeled for any more of those swift-growing grey globes. It had been a close call, I began to realize, with delayed shock. One had a choice of running from the flies into that hellish heat, or from the heat into the deadly bullets of heat-hungry bugs.

AS though sensing my thoughts over that scorched earth, Lorn said, "I saw Dalinda, another woodnymph, get caught in the middle, once. It was awful. She ran from the flies, and fell against the side of the hotsy, and as her front burnt up and turned black, the flies struck, and her back turned blue with spots of frostbite. It took more than five minutes until she was completely gone. The flies sat on her, and as the hotsy heated up a hunk of her they bit into it, and she screamed and kicked, and—"

"Lorn," I choked, feeling deathly ill, "I get the picture!"

"But don't you see what we missed, Albert?"

I saw, and nodded. "And I'm going to follow you and Timtik and do every single thing you say."

Timtik tugged Lorn's hand. "Come on, Lorn, huh? I'll be late for supper, and Maggot will whip me." Lorn nodded and picked up her pace. Together, the three of us entered the emerald gloom of the forest. The ground under my feet was springy as the base of a needle-floored pine forest, and the bushes were very strange.

As we'd near one in the gloaming, it seemed to fold back upon itself until we passed, then close up the gap behind us.

"Hey," I said, slowing my pace. "The way these things go shifting around, I'd never get out of here without help. Is the woods always so lively?"

Lorn smiled. "That's one of the handy things about being a woodnymph. The trees and shrubs and vines move aside for you. But don't worry, Albert. You'll have me with you on trips."

"If Maggot lets him make any," said Timtik, mysteriously. "She might not want a non-resident roaming around the woods."

"You're teasing," I said uneasily. "She wouldn't stop me."

"Of course not, Albert," said Lorn. "I'll even take you on a tour as soon as we get Timtik to Maggot's cave."

"She lives in a cave?" I asked, stepping around an idiotically-grinning froggish thing that squatted lazily upon our path.

"Sometimes yes, sometimes no," Timtik explained. "Her dwelling changes with her moods."

Lorn tugged at me, as I lagged behind for another look at the froggish thing, which was now in the process of being consumed alive by another froggish thing, and looking quite rapturous about its grisly fate. "They're making love," said Lorn, pulling me along.

"But—It looks like the big one is *devouring* the little one!"

"Why not?" Lorn's voice was tinged with impatience, as a parent speaking to a beloved imbecile child. "Haven't you ever heard of being so deeply in love with a person you felt like just eating him up?"

"Well, sure. But if they *really* do it, how do they reproduce?"

"They don't," said Lorn with a shrug. "They never get the chance. One look and it's love, and the next thing you know, it's dinner."

"But," I persisted, peering back into the fronded gloom, trying to catch the finale of the catastrophe, "if that goes on, the species will dwindle!"

"Oh," said Lorn, matter-of-factly, "it has."

"Then why haven't the forest people set up a sort of—um—preservation program?"

Lorn looked at me. "Who'd want to preserve one of those?"

AT that moment, a mewling twang in the region of my upper trunk reminded me that I never had gotten around to making myself that ham sandwich back home. It seemed ages since I'd first thought of doing it. "Lorn," I said, "I'm getting hungry, too. Are there any restaurants, or—No, I guess that's out of the question. But is there any food available?"

Lorn paused, despite Timtik's impatient grumble. "I think Maggot should have enough to go around. I'd planned on joining her and Timtik for supper. You can probably sit in, too, if you don't mind a meal cooked by a witch."

"Well, if it's something familiar, I suppose I could manage to swallow—"

Lorn proceeded to move onward. "If you're that choosy, Albert, you're not as hungry as you think."

"But Lorn," I pleaded. "A witch's cooking sounds so—"

She had not paused, however, so I had to drop the subject and hurry to keep up with her before the shrubbery snapped back into my path. I came abreast of her, and she gripped my arm suddenly, making me go warm all over for the next five steps. Above us, then, something screamed, a raucous sort of scream, and a moment later, there came a crackling of branches, and some-

thing plunged to the path ahead of us with a sickening crunch.

I thought some magnificent bird had crashed, but only for a moment. As the bushes twisted out of our way, I saw that the broken wings, a good fifteen feet from tip to tip, were growing out of the back of a mannish creature, bronzed of flesh, right fist still clutching the haft of a slender, wicked-pointed brass trident. "A Kwistian," said Lorn. "That means we're getting near the Thrake."

"Thrake?" I stepped gingerly about the corpse. "What's that?"

"A blue thing about five inches long, and it does something no one understands to the wings of the Kwistians," said Timtik, kicking the corpse over on its back. The face was only semi-human, I saw with near-aversion. In lieu of nose and mouth, it sported a beak like a parrot's. And the eyes, human in size and shape, had no lids or lashes, just a nictitating membrane just now moving to cover the glazing yellow sclera. It was a mean face. Lorn shivered.

"Those beaks—Horrible. They eat people, you know."

Just about to touch the beak, I withdrew my hand in haste. "Eat people? Lorn, isn't there anything friendly in this forest?"

"Just me . . ." she said softly, closing one dark-lashed eye in

a slow wink. Then she turned back to the path again. "But come on. I have to get Timtik home."

"People," I said thoughtfully as we moved onward, "should be rough on those beaks. You need teeth to get through thick muscle. They might give a sharp nip, or take off a finger or toe, but—"

"They—They cook their victims first," said Lorn, with a kind of uneasy twitch of her slim shoulders.

"In the *flame-pits!*" embellished Timtik, his eyes a-sparkle with excitement. "*Alive!*"

Lorn went ashy pale. "Timtik—Please!" At her words, he became suddenly subdued and repentant.

I FELT some of their tension, and asked, "What is it, Lorn? For a girl who described death-by-hotsy a few minutes ago, you look almost ill."

Lorn smiled wanly. "It seems that the Kwistians prefer woodnymphs on their menu. They don't always get us, of course, but they're always trying. Sometimes they get a lot at once, and eat them one at a time, fattening up the rest in cells in that dreadful Sark!"

"Where did you get this information?" I said, puzzled.

"I think the Thrake told Maggot," said Timtik. "No one

knows how it stops the Kwistians from flying, but it does. Some people say it's really the soul of a maiden who died in a flame-pit, and this is how she gets her vengeance for her awful fate!"

"Gosh," I said, impressed, "it must be a handy thing for the woodnymphs, this Thrake."

"You said a mouthful," said Timtik.

"But," I asked, still at sea, "don't the Kwistians know by now not to fly anywhere near the Thrake?"

"They don't know where it's at," Lorn said. "They know only that it's in Maggot's hut. But she keeps her dwelling on the move, so they won't find it. The forest folk are all very glad to have Maggot around."

Timtik nodded proudly. "She's the oldest, wrinkledest, wisest witch there is. Everyone always says, 'If the monsters make you holler, Maggot has counter-spells, five for a dollar.'"

"Of course," the woodnymph interjected, brushing idly at her burnished tresses, where they'd fallen across her cheek, "no one knows where she lives, and if they did, no one uses dollars here."

"But the free word-of-mouth advertising helps her reputation considerably, and she always gets enough things in barter to keep her in health, so she can go on

making her hell-brew for the Thrake."

I pretended to follow most of their dizzying conversation, and trailed along for about ten paces. Then I stopped dead. "Lorn—?"

"Yes?" Her eyes were inquisitive, and she paused.

"You don't know what this dwelling looks like, currently?"

The golden-red head shook lightly from side to side.

"And if you did know, it might still be anywhere in Drendon?"

I added, while my stomach growled piteously. She nodded.

"Then," I said in annoyed perplexity, jamming my fists against my hips, "how do you know where we're *heading*?"

"I don't," she said brightly. "It's always this way, Albert. We just meander here and there, hoping she's outside gathering herbs or something. Though Timtik can spot her place nine times out of ten."

LORN turned back toward our path again, and I could only sigh and go tagging along after her. I couldn't think of an argument with such total illogicality. In a way, I kind of missed the Susan-side of Lorn. Susan wasn't so flashily seductive, but she had a brain on her shoulders, so to speak.

"Let's hurry," said Timtik, picking up the pace.

"It never takes too long," said Lorn to me. "Maggot sometimes senses our approach."

I eyed the clustering heavily vined growths through which we were wending our labyrinthine way, and said, in some doubt, "Through *this*?"

"She uses magic, you dope!"

Hot and hungry, and sore of foot, I had suddenly had enough of the faun's impudence. "Half-goat or not," I snapped, "you still have a behind I can paddle!" I lunged for him and my hands closed on the breeze of his departure. With a crow of delight, he was leaping away, gurgling his enjoyment. No one can catch a faun in full flight, barring a faunic mishap, and in the tanglewood we trod I couldn't have paced a whale on roller-skates, but I was too mad to act with intelligence.

Lorn ran after me, as I crashed and plunged through the grasping shrubbery after Timtik. She shouted my name, and grabbed my sleeve just as I broke through an intricately tough tangle of the growths. I found myself swaying giddily on the brink of a short but steep embankment, and then Lorn came up too fast against me and we both went sprawling down the sunny slope through a welter of musky-scented flowers, and slid for a short distance on some sort of glassy-topped substance.

When I clambered to my hands and knees, I saw that we were on a bright green glossy path, in the midst of thick purplish moss. The moss spread out in all directions, as broad as the surface of a mountain lake, but quite still. Then I noticed that—although I could have sworn we'd slid from the base of the embankment—there was nothing but more moss between us and the edge of the woods, a good broadjump away.

Lorn sat up, looked about, then gave a frightened whimper.

"What is it?" I stared at her, apprehensive. Gone was the self-composure she'd heretofore exhibited. She was squealing and moaning, and biting her lower lip in terror, and wringing her hands. "Albert—" she said weakly, "we're in the mossfields of Sark!"

"The what?"

"They surround the castle. Sark is the castle where the Kwistians dwell. That's where this path leads, and there's no getting back."

I looked at the edge of the path behind us, cut off as smoothly as with a knife, and took a step back from the edge to get a running start for the jump that might take me to the embankment. A distance of path equal to my pace shimmered, faded and vanished. Behind us, the path was self-destructive.

We could only go forward. To the castle where the parrot-beaked flying cannibals were waiting. I was debating the usefulness of sitting down beside Lorn and joining her in a good long cry, when I remembered the faun. "Where's Timtik?" I said, glancing about. "If he's still near the brink, he can tell Maggot, can't he?"

Lorn's face lighted with the first trace of hope I'd seen since our skid onto the green path. "Of course!" she said. "We can wait here till she figures out some way to rescue us."

"*Timtik!*" we yelled together. "TIMTIK!"

THE all-enshrouding green growths at the edge of the woods remained unbroken. It was as though Timtik had never been with us at all. The sun beat down upon us, stark and hot. And a few inches at the end of the path made an impatient disappearance, forcing us to move backward, and the instant we did so, even more path evaporated. We were a good thirty feet from the embankment's nearest point.

"Is that moss as dangerous as it looks?" I said, its alien purple hue having repelled any thoughts I'd had of trying to tread upon it. "What's under it—Monsters? Quicksand?"

"No one knows," said Lorn, her voice panicky. "But it's sup-

posed to be death to fall into it. Don't leave me!"

I hesitated, then took a step onto the soft velvet stuff. It gave, parted, and I oozed downward into black muddy bog to the knees as I swiftly grabbed for the edge of the path. Then, just as Lorn gripped my arms, the soft wet feel of the mud changed, as something slithered in the thick slime, and then sharp burning pain grated on my flesh like razor-scrapes, and I was yelping as Lorn managed to drag me back onto the path.

I looked down. My legs were spotted with pinkish burns, and a few ugly white blisters; my trousers, shoes and socks were gone wherever the mud had flowed. I had slightly less pants left than go into a pair of Bermuda shorts.

"It's no use, Albert," Lorn sighed. "We'll have to either go onward to the castle of Sark, or stay here and fall into that stuff when the path vanishes again."

"Well—" I said uncertainly, "the moss is *sure* death . . . I guess the castle's our best bet, if only because it'll put off our destruction until we can get help from Maggot, maybe—"

"I hope," said Lorn, lovely beyond my wildest dreams, "Tim-tik gets to Maggot in time."

"And," I added with a weak smile, "that Maggot gets to *us* in time."

NOW, shortly before this time (albeit I didn't learn of it in detail until much later from Maggot—who can apparently find out *anything* she has a mind to) there were things afoot that were going to have extraordinary, if not downright dire, effects on my fate. It seems that, at the moment Lorn and I were asprawl on the edge of that weird green path, still confused from our tumble down the embankment, things were happening at that ancient cannibal stronghold, the castle of Sark . . .

* * *

The green buzzer flashed and crackled.

Cort, drowsing in the sunlight by the great stone casement of his laboratory, clacked his beak in annoyance and peered at the panel of lights. As his eye ascertained the source of the noise, his insouciance fell away from him like a cloak, and he hurried over to the panel, his long, cruelly taloned index finger punching the Stop button. The buzzing and flashing ceased instantly, and the core of a dull crystal disc upon a squat stone tripod began to coruscate with jabs of cold blue light. Cort passed a hand commandingly above its surface, peered into its depths, and the face of Kwist, the winged emperor, swam into sharp focus.

"Well?" snarled Kwist, evilly.

"Woodnymph," said Cort.
"Just now hit the path."

Kwist wiped a bit of spittle off his beaktip. "How soon is she expected?"

"Give her about an hour," said Cort, after a quick mental calculation.

"I'll have the flame-pits stoked up," said the emperor, with a blissful glow in his bright yellow eyes. His image faded swiftly, and the crystal went dull and opaque.

Cort rubbed his hands together gleefully, and hummed tunelessly as he moved to the casement to survey the vista of the purple mossfields. The vista from that high vantage point was a broad one indeed. Not only due to the giddy height of the casement, but also to a salient feature of this strange dimension that made it exceedingly alien to the ordinary topography of Earth—

* * *

"There's no horizon!" I gasped.

Lorn shook her head. "No, there isn't. Drendon is a perfect plane surface."

I looked with wonder at the sight I'd just become aware of, the sight I'd been unable to detect in the depths of the forest. Land, moss-covered to the rim of the distant forest, rolled back in all directions from where I

stood, until it merged by perspective into a solid dark color, which still continued onward and onward. "That's impossible," I said. "It has to *end*, doesn't it?"

LORN shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't. No one has ever been ambitious enough to walk far enough to see."

"But if this place is a plane, how can it be contiguous with Earth?" I asked, scratching my head.

"Well," said the woodnymph, scowling as she searched her mind for a solution, "it's—it's as though your planet were an orange, and our land were a table on which the orange lay. At the point where the orange touched the table, the two would have a common point of existence."

I suddenly got the picture. "And Porkle Park is the contact point! The gateway to your dimension!"

"Right," said Lorn. "By now, we're probably miles from the park, and centuries from your era."

"Centuries. . . ?" I felt suddenly cold inside.

"Yes. The farther we get from the park, the farther from that moment when we left Earth. We have no time here as you do there. Your time depends on *when*, ours on *where*."

I PUZZLED this out slowly. If it were true, it meant that there were an infinity of contact-points with Earth, each at a different age of Earth's existence . . . "Um—What time is it now?"

Lorn frowned, glanced about her, and seemed to be calculating. "Well, Albert, in this direction it's about late eighteenth century, your time. If we had a key, we could arrive on the Earth that touched Drendon at this point, during the French Revolution, I believe."

"That's better than the flame-pits, isn't it? And I can speak a little French—'*Voulez-vous*'—" No, maybe *she* could speak a little French, too. "How," I went on, "did Drendon happen to contact Earth in the first place?"

"It didn't come to Earth. It almost went *from* it. Remember that orange I mentioned?" I remembered. "Well, it's as though our dimension had once been the skin of that orange. But at the Edict of Banishment, it spread away, leaving Earth except at one point. It's always touched the Earth since then, but always at a different time, and a new point."

"What was this Edict of Banishment?" I asked.

"Merlin did it," said Lorn. "With his semi-scientific thaumaturgics. It was at King Arthur's request. Don't you know your own history?"

"History? But Arthur is a legend, a myth . . ."

"Is Drendon a myth?" asked the woodnymph.

I looked at the unsetting sun, the horizonless vista, the purple moss and the green path. "I guess not," I had to admit. Even minus those clues, Timtik's hooves were proof enough.

"Well then!" said Lorn. "So he banished Drendon—"

"Why?" I asked.

"The Kwistians, naturally!" she said irritably. "They were spoiling all his knight's fun. It was hard enough slaying dragons and things without having flying men always pricking your horse's flanks with their tridents, and sometimes swiping your lance, or carrying off the maiden you'd ridden for leagues to rescue. So Arthur banished them. Merlin made a powerful spell, and sent the Kwistians and their ilk away from Earth, leaving only one contact-point, in case they should become better-behaved, or that Arthur should change his mind. He planned on checking every so often."

"You say 'planned' as though he flubbed up," I observed, completely fascinated. "What went wrong?"

"The scheme backfired. The dragons went with the Kwistians, and so did the other so-called mythological entities of Earth, and the knights were left

with nothing to fight. So they got lazy, and then Lancelot started giving Guinevere the eye, and things kind of went to pot. Arthur decided to switch back, fast, then. It's better to have a dragon in the garden than a paramour on the porch. But Merlin couldn't do it. In banishing Drendon, he'd weakened himself more than he'd planned—he was part-monster himself, you recall—and in his weak human condition, he couldn't pull a rabbit out of a hat, let alone a whole dimension back from limbo."

"Funny," I remarked, "but I don't remember any mention of flying cannibals in the Arthurian Legend. Dragons, yes; them, no."

"Well, of course not, Albert!" Lorn said scornfully. "When they were officially banished, their names were struck from the rosters of creatures. It was forbidden to even *mention* them, let alone write their history. So here we are, in Drendon." She passed a hand before her face, and a lot of her Susan-self shone through her features for a confused moment. "Anyone who—who enters here—has to *attune*, or perish."

"Attune?" I asked, although "perish" was the word that bothered me.

To fit with things here, like—like me and Timtik." She held

her lovely face between her hands, and closed her eyes tightly, trying to evoke an elusive memory. Then she shook her head and dropped her hands. "The trouble is," she said with a friendly glance, "the timelessness here gets at your memory, and you find it hard to think of anything that might have happened—*before . . .*"

"Then why haven't I changed?" I asked. "I'm here . . ."

"Oh," she said nonchalantly, "you will. It just takes a while to readjust to environment. If the change were a swift one, Timtik and I would have reverted to some sort of Earth-creatures when we showed up at your house. But we weren't out that long."

"Well why didn't you *stay*, for pete's sake!" I moaned, just realizing the opportunity I'd muffed back in my study.

Lorn was incredulous. "And leave Maggot here alone?! She'd go out of her mind without us."

"Why couldn't she leave with you, then?" I inquired reasonably.

"Because of the Thrake, silly! She can't leave it and she can't take it away."

I shook my head, dizzily aware that she was getting me onto one of those conversational merry-go-rounds again. "I give up. This is too much natural history

in one dose. Look, Lorn, why don't you and I scoot out of here to the French Revolution? We'll be safer among the *jacquerie* than with flying cannibals. And Maggot can probably reach us sooner or later . . ."

"But I have the key to *your* time, not that one." She held it up for my inspection. "This only works at one point in Drendon, the spot where it touches Porkle Park." I looked at the little thing, which resembled an undernourished mandrake root, and an idea glimmered into life.

"Lorn . . . that thing can talk, right? Well, *it's* light enough to travel *over* the moss. We could send a message to Maggot!"

"What message?" Lorn sighed. "*Goodbye?*"

I grimaced in exasperation. "Lorn, how can you be so intellectual in your speech sometimes, and then revert to downright idiocy?"

"Rote," said Lorn. "I sound bright when I'm quoting information I've gotten from Maggot, but it's all rote. I can recite, but I can't figure very well. All I just told you about Drendon was memorized fact. I couldn't *explain* any of it."

"That's crazy—" I protested, "If you know you *don't* know —"

"Who," said Lorn stubbornly, "discovered America?"

"Columbus," I retorted automatically, before I had a chance to wonder why she'd asked.

"How did he travel?" she went inexplicably on.

"By boat. The Nina, the Pinta, and—"

"Can *you* sail a boat?"

"Well, no . . ." I admitted.

"Furl a sail?"

"No . . ."

"Chart a course?"

"No."

"Command an expedition? Speak Italian and Spanish?"

"No," I said, my replies growing softer by the second.

"*Columbus* could!" said Lorn, as though she'd made a point. I stood there on that strange green path, staring into her face for a long moment. Then my frustrated soul wrenched a cry of misery from my heart.

"*So what?!*" I shrieked.

"Albert," said Lorn, with weary patience, "can't you see that your position is exactly like mine? You *know* Columbus discovered America by boat after getting money from the Spanish queen and you let it go at that. You couldn't explain *how* he sailed to the west, or *what* he said to cozen the queen, or *where* they got the lumber for the ships, or *why* he picked that time to make his trip, could you?"

"No," I said, "I guess not. But—"

"So," she interrupted triumphantly, "how do you expect me to understand precisely how Drendon came to be when you—an adult male of supposedly average intelligence—cannot even explain the discovery of America!?"

I STOOD there, completely stripped of erudition, feeling intellectually naked. What, after all, did anyone know about anything, when you got right down to it? Taking discretion as the better part of valor, I changed the subject violently back to where it had been a few moments before. "Lorn, *about* this key—"

"*What* about it?" she said brightly.

I almost shouted, then controlled my vexation and said softly, "If we send this keytwig thing to Maggot with a message, then she can save us, can't she?"

Lorn wrinkled her brow. "I don't know, Albert. But I suppose it is worth a try—" She set the key upon the path, where it stood expectantly on its skimpy root-legs. "Key, can you take a message to Maggot?"

The key squeaked delightedly. "Yes. What message?"

"Help!" said Lorn.

"Isn't that rather brief?" I asked.

Lorn shrugged. "We'll be lucky if the key remembers *that*.

Her brains can't be much bigger than a grain of sand."

"Help?" giggled the key, scurrying about in an eager dance of impatience. "Help? Is that right?"

"Perfect," said Lorn. "Now, hurry!"

With a shrill snicker of mirth, the key danced away from us over the lavender moss-tufts, screaming "Help!" at every bound.

"There!" I said, happy that the moss didn't suck it into that corrosive mud with its slithery occupants, "I guess we're all set, now. When Maggot gets the key and hears the message, she'll know we're in trouble, and—"

"How?" said Lorn, looking suddenly pleased.

A numb apprehensiveness touched my heart. "Lorn—This key—It's the only one to the woods, isn't it?"

Lorn stepped back from me, apparently frightened by my cold intensity. "No. Maggot will give them to any reliable person who wants a peep at the Earth people . . . Why? Is it important?"

I smacked the palm of my hand to my brow. "*Important?! Lorn, how the hell will Maggot know who sent the message?*"

"I don't know. I didn't think of that."

I turned and stared futilely in the direction the key had gone.

It was no longer visible, but I could hear a wispy treble repeating, "Help! Help! Help!" in the dim distance.

I turned and glared at Lorn, my hands clenching— Then, seeing her eyes fill with fright, I melted, and simply reached out and pulled her to me. She tensed as I touched her, then slipped her own arms about me and relaxed against my chest, sniffing softly. "I'm sorry," she said. "I *told* you I wasn't very bright!"

Holding her there in my arms, warm, soft and helpless, I couldn't stay even a little angry. "Lorn, Lorn . . ." I sighed. "I don't know, I just don't know!" I chuckled with helpless hysteria at the stupidity of what had just happened. "You're such a lovable dope!" I kissed her behind the ear. "And I'm nuts about you."

Lorn sighed and snuggled closer. Then something occurred to me. I looked back at the edge of the green path. It was clear up to my heels, but had advanced no further. "Lorn," I said elatedly, "we've been here for many minutes, and the path hasn't dissolved any further!"

She looked. "Is it broken?" she queried hopefully.

"I don't believe so. It's psychological! It wants to scare us into moving, but doesn't want us falling into the moss fields. By standing still, we call its bluff!"

"Wonderful," said Lorn clapping her hands and doing a small dance of delight on that fatal brink before I grabbed her again. "So what shall we do?" she asked.

"Stay right here," I replied. "Maybe Timtik will get to Maggot with news of us, or she'll figure out where the key came from. But it's better than walking." I held her tighter. "Much better than walking."

"Will we be rescued soon?" asked Lorn, cuddling near me, her flaming hair wafting a scent of fresh blossoms to my nearby nose.

"I sincerely hope not."

CHAPTER 6

TWO hours!" growled Kwist, standing arms akimbo in the archway of Cort's laboratory. Cort, jerked awake by the words, took a second to orient himself, and then realized that it was indeed later than he'd expected. Hiding his own puzzlement, he said testily, "So?"

"So where's the woodnymph? I'm as empty as—as your head!" the emperor grunted. "And while we're at it, how come no 'Your Imperial Majesty' in your responses, eh? I thought we had that out the other day!"

"We did, Kwist, and I won the toss, remember?" Cort deliberately turned his back on the em-

peror and stalked to his lab table, his huge white wings rustling in fury.

"Ha!" shrieked Kwist. "You used some of that stinking magic of yours to win. You *never* lose a toss!"

"All the more fool you for bothering to call the toss."

Kwist strode to his vizier and spun him about with a snarl. Then he took a quick backward step as Cort's sparking yellow eyes flashed ominously. "Don't you ever do that again, Kwist! Let's get it straight who's running things around here. You wouldn't last *that* long—" he flipped thumb and forefinger with a sharp crack "—without my science and wizardry to back you. I'm the power behind your throne, and the sooner you stop pretending otherwise, the better for all of us!"

Kwist seethed in impotent rage. "All right—Maybe I can't run the empire alone, but listen here: You have certain responsibilities, whether you like it or not, and the primary one at the moment is the getting of *food* for the rest of us! And I simply wish to know, **WHERE IS IT!?**" His anger was a physical pain, setting his great wing-muscles quivering.

Cort, albeit the brighter, was the weaker of the two, almost in inverse ratio. He frowned, uneasily, at the visible tension in

the other's tall powerful frame. "I don't know," he replied desultorily. "Let me look at the indicator board."

He waved a hand through a bank of lights on the wall, and a large blank panel glowed into topographic life, a map of the moss fields. From the black square at its base, marking the location of Castle Sark, a thin green ribbon ran erratically up the board. Its upper extremity, within the heart of the moss fields, lay motionless.

"Damn that woodnymph! She's staying put!" snapped Cort. "I thought those creatures were too dumb to reason out the path's operation."

"Are you sure it is a woodnymph?" asked the emperor.

Cort quirked a feathery eyebrow. "Certainly. If any other creature fell into the moss fields, it would sink and be destroyed. Only a woodnymph can activate the path. Once activated, of course, it will take any amount of traffic that cares to join her in her fate, but there must be at *least* one woodnymph present to trigger the path's initiation."

"Well," said the monarch, impatiently, "what do we *do* about her? Let her loaf while we starve?"

Cort looked coldly at the emperor. "You're the ruler around here; pull some rank on your Imperial Guards, and send a

couple of them out after her.”

Kwist, about to challenge the other's impertinent attitude, decided it could wait until his hunger was assuaged. He simply nodded. “All right, Cort.” Then he had an afterthought. His physical advantage was of no use when Cort used wizardry or science against him. Might as well make harmony among the upper echelons—“And,” he said with bad grace, “I'm sorry I shouted at you like that. Lost my head.”

“Ha ha,” Cort said mirthlessly. Kwist turned a bit pink, but spun about and strode away without further argument, vanishing through the great stone archway. Cort listened to the monarch's voice raging in a distant corridor and then the air in the courtyard below his open casement was thumped by great pinions. In another moment, two graceful Imperial Guards, tridents poised deftly, soared up into the open sky and sailed swiftly out over the path snaking through the moss fields, seeking their prey . . .

* * *

LET'S lie down,” said Lorn, adding, as my eyes bulged a bit, “I'm tired of just standing here.” My voice wouldn't quite work, so I nodded bravely and slowly lay back onto the shim-

mering green pathway. Lorn flopped gracefully beside me, and we lay there in silence. Then —

“The path is cold and hard, Albert,” said Lorn. “May I rest my head upon your strong warm shoulder?”

“Oh . . . Why not!” I croaked, nervously.

Her head, with its glorious tresses, snuggled down against my right biceps and pectoral. There was a lull. Then—

“May I slip my arms about you?” she asked gently.

While I tried to think of a reply that wouldn't abet the adolescent squeak which was starting to possess my larynx, she went ahead and did it anyhow. Another lull. Then—

“May I give you a fond kiss?” asked Lorn.

I tried to come up with an answer, pursed my lips in deep thought, and then her soft warm mouth was pressing lightly down upon mine, and if I had felt about one percent happier, my hair would have caught fire.

“Comfy?” Lorn whispered, returning her head to my shoulder.

“Uh-huh,” I grunted, after swallowing three times in succession.

“Ssh!” Lorn held a finger to my lips. “Don't talk. It spoils it.”

“I won't,” I promised.

"Now," she sighed, "let's have a nap, and maybe when we waken, Maggot will be here, and we'll be rescued."

"Good thinking," I mumbled. The sun was warm and soothing, and I felt I had been awake an awfully long time. Even Lorn's presence didn't alleviate the weariness in my body, more used to sitting in a chair while I pored over dusty tomes than pushing its way through a tanglewood. I closed my eyes, sighed and relaxed.

When I was still hovering on the border of sleep, I felt Lorn stir. I guess she'd grown tired of leaning on me, once my attention had lagged. Not to mention the sharp stubble sprouting on my face, undoubtedly irritating to a woodnymph's tender skin. I peeked up at her, but she was only standing with a hand shading her eyes, peering out over the fields in the direction the key had taken. Then my fatigue caught up with me, and I dozed off . . .

* * *

Blue water foamed on baked sand, and white froth boiled about my waist, while surging seas tugged strongly against my legs. I was watching her, there on the shore. Rosemarie, my first love. I was ten, and she was seven. I waved to her, shouted her name, and then she saw me, and immediately pretended she

didn't, until I plowed my way against the resisting water to the shore. She turned then, shyly, and gazed serenely at me with warm brown eyes. Her smile was gentle, mature for her years. I returned her gaze, unashamed, she blushed and lowered her eyes.

Then those selfsame eyes opened very wide, and her mouth followed suit. "Your knees!" she said, backing away and pointing. "Albert! You're knock-kneed!" A giggle broke from her, and then she was joined by a covey of girls her own age.

"Albert is a knock-knee, Albert is a knock-knee!" They sang it loudly, and gestured at me, and one imitated my stance as she crossed her eyes and stuck out her pink tongue.

I turned about and plunged once more into the concealing waves of ocean, striking out for the horizon, my face stinging hot with agonized mortification. I wanted to drown, to die, to get a chill, to never see them or anyone again. Then I got a mouthful of water, and it gagged me, and I sputtered and turned back. Drowning was much too unpleasant a termination. But I would never speak to Rosemarie again. Never! . . .

* * *

THE taste of salt was strong in my mouth as I came awake,

but as the hot flicker of the burning sun dappled my closed eyelids with lemon and orange flashes, the taste faded along with the mental image from my childhood, and I realized that it had been, after all, only a painfully traumatic dream-memory. I lay there a moment, eyes shut, thinking. Thinking about Lorn, with whom—Susan-side or no Susan-side—I was suddenly very much in love, the very least reason for which being that although the moss had eroded my trousers to the thighs, exposing to her eyes my secret shame, she'd never said a word, cast a glance, smothered a smile. My heart thumped cheerily in my chest, percolating with passion.

"Lorn—" I said, sitting up on the path and blinking my eyes into focus. "*Albert . . . Albert. . . !*" carried her voice.

I got my vision functioning and stared. About thirty feet down the path, Lorn was running frantically toward me, her face alight with happiness. For a moment, I couldn't see how our situation was any different than it had been, then I followed her line of sight and saw the short, straining figure moving toward us through the moss.

Timtik, balancing precariously upon the upper curve of a vaguely saurian-shaped log, was shoving strenuously into the deep black bog beneath the moss

with a long hardwood pole, and actually making progress toward us in that muck. Behind him, twisting into the distance, lay his wake, where the thick black ooze had not yet been recovered by the furry purple growth. His progress must have been about one foot per stroke of that pole, and the strain was showing in his face. His upper body, the non-goatish part, was a perfect scintilla of shiny sweat.

"Hi!" he croaked weakly, in that tin-telephone voice, as the nose of the log nuzzled the end of the path near my heels. "You dopes could've stopped walking about a mile back, couldn't you?!" he grunted. "This is hard work."

"Oh, Timtik," Lorn said compassionately, "You look nearly dead."

"Don't worry," he said in his grumpy way. "On the return trip, Albert can do the work. This is my contribution to this rescue. Let *his* muscles sprain for awhile."

Lorn had run to the edge of the path, and was about to step aboard the log, but Timtik waved her back. "Hold it, dopey!" he snarled. "Let Albert get aboard first. Soon's *you* step off, the path'll vanish, and I'm not up to tugging Albert out of the moss."

"Thank you," I said sincerely, hurrying forward and stepping carefully onto the rough cylin-

der. Balance, I could see at once, was going to be somewhat of a problem. I was actually grateful when he handed me the end of the pole. Poling might be work, but it'd keep me upright. I hung on tightly, as Timtik sheathed his claws and assisted Lorn gracefully onto the corrugated bark surface. The instant her rearward foot left the path, the entire green serpentine hissed like a drop of ginger ale on a hot griddle, and shimmered quietly out of existence.

Lorn took a seat near the shoreward end of the log, leaning comfortably back against the upthrust of a short stumpy limb. How she managed comfort with her bare back against that rough surface, I don't know; I guess her being a wood-nymph had something to do with it. She was quite at home with anything wooden.

Timtik lay gently down upon the logtop on his back and lazily crossed his fetlocks. "Pole away, Albert," he smiled, and shut his eyes.

I SHOVED with the pole, aiming the shoreward end of the log by means of Timtik's still-visible wake in the bog, and we started moving. My stroke was just a bit better than his, if only because I had longer arms, and we started sliding slowly over the muck at about three feet per

effort. After ten hearty shoves, my back and shoulders started mumbling polite protests. After twenty, they were murmuring uneasily, and after twenty-five they were starting to whimper. And Lorn and Timtik let me struggle alone.

"Hard work," I said between tight lips, shaking my head to flick away the sweat droplets from my eyebrows.

"What did you think it would be?" asked the faun, with an unpleasantly contented smile.

I opened my mouth to reply, but Lorn, sensing a hum of antagonism in our tones, interrupted deftly, "Timtik, tell us what happened since we last saw you. Why didn't you answer when we called?"

"Didn't hear you," he said simply. "And of course, I never expected *you* to go near the moss fields; I forgot you had old Fumblefoot along."

"Now look—!" I muttered angrily.

"Please tell us what happened," said Lorn, swiftly.

"Oh, all right," said the faun, with easy nonchalance. "Right after Albert started chasing me, I located Maggot . . ."

As his metallic voice droned onward, I managed to cut down slightly on my stroke. If they noticed, they were nice enough not to mention it. And I listened in interest to his tale . . .

IN the shadowy thickets of Drendon, beside a sluggish swampy morass of dank fetid earth, lurked a blob. It gave a quiver now and then, its off-pink color deepening to red, then back to off-pink. Every so often it hissed and seemed to shrug. To most of the forest folk, it had the outward appearance of a Wumbl. A Wumbl, to the uninitiated, was a protoplasmic atavism. Very like an amoeba, it differed mainly in size. It stood about eight feet high (when it was standing), but attained a mean horizontal diameter of about thirty feet when it flattened out to expand its pseudopods and flow along the ground after food. Worse still, it took on the color of the ground over which it slithered, and unless a traveler were quite careful about where he set his foot, he might suddenly find himself ingested whole into that loathsome body, encased abruptly in tough, rubbery walls filled with a viscous jelly which would then begin to ooze digestive juices all over him. Wumbls were very unpleasant creatures.

But, as noted, this thing had a Wumbl's *outward* appearance. Actually, it was not any such thing, but just seemed to be, as camouflage from prying eyes. No one who spotted a Wumbl ever paused to check its authenticity. Wumbls could move faster than

whippets when aroused, and they were aroused by anything that looked even a little bit edible, and they ate anything at all, so—

Well, it was at this particular thing that Timtik ran, full tilt, just after avoiding my clutching fingers. Had he been an elephant, he might possibly have stood to defeat a Wumbl, for his tusks could rip a gaping hole in the hideous body and let the viscous matter burst out, sure death for a one-celled creature. But Timtik's horns were barely long enough to be worthy of the name, and he would be helpless against such a monstrosity.

But rather than cease his precipitate pace, he only moved the faster when he espied it. "Ho, Maggot!" he cried, dashing up to the side of the awful thing. There was a moment's quivering hesitation in the Wumbloid, then a rectangular slab appeared in its side, and swung outward on creaky hinges.

"Come in, Timtik," said Maggot the witch. Timtik sprang lithely through the gap, and the gap sealed over immediately. Maggot looked up at the faun from over a steaming cauldron of noisome stuff, her coarse grey hair dank from the rising fumes, her eyes bleary from lack of sleep. "You're late," she chided as she stirred the mess. "Sit down and have your supper."

"Lorn's in love with a *human!*" said Timtik, glad to be the primal purveyor of the latest scandal.

"Do tell," Maggot muttered toothlessly. Well, not quite toothlessly; she had upper and lower canines yet, and when she yawned, they resembled nothing so much as stalactites and stalagmites in a greasy red cavern. The upper canines protruded over her lower lip when her mouth was closed, and were horribly yellow and rotted. Timtik often wondered if she ever bathed, but he'd thought the topic too delicate to mention to one of her finer feelings. He glanced toward a heap of cobwebby odds and ends on a dusty wooden shelf over the fireplace.

"How's the Thrake?" he inquired.

MAGGOT mumbled scornfully, "If anything had happened to it, would I be wasting my time with this hell-brew?" A muted squeal came from the shelf. "Patience, patience!" grumbled the witch, throwing a fistful of dandelion fluff into the stew. "I have to let it simmer a bit."

The squeal repeated, more shrilly, but a bit weakly.

Maggot shrugged and stuck a dipper into the cauldron, drawing off a slimy clot of hell-brew. It steamed and stank, and Tim-

tik averted his nose. With no ceremony, Maggot deposited the dripping glup on the shelf. "There," she said. "That'll hold you for awhile."

From out of the heap of refuse cluttered upon the shelf, a tiny blue tentacle snaked. It hovered over the mess, prodded it to make sure it was all it should be, and then a small blue thing popped out its tiny head and sniffed the rancid aroma. It nodded as though pleased, and with a squeal of delight, pounced upon the hell-brew and began to slurp it up with repulsive enjoyment, grunting and gurgling with slowly sated hunger pangs. Timtik suddenly didn't feel much like eating.

"You haven't touched your food," said Maggot. "Little queasy about the tummy? Well, old Maggot'll fix that up." From beside the gobbling Thrake she took a small copper flask and twisted out the cork. "Here, drink."

Timtik took it carefully, then shut his eyes and swallowed a manly mouthful of it. His eyes widened, and blurred with moisture. "Hey, that's good!" he exclaimed, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. "What is it?"

Maggot smiled a secret smile. "It's called '90 proof', dearie."

"It makes my ears burn," said Timtik, holding his slightly pointed extrusions.

"It's supposed to," Maggot crooned, running a claw-like hand through his hair. Her eyes flicked the entrance. "But where's Lorn?" she asked. "Not hungry?"

Timtik paused in his dinner and frowned. "I wonder—She may have gone back, but—I didn't think she'd go without saying goodbye, at least . . ."

"Back? *Back?*" Maggot's eyes were suddenly hot red and protruding from their sockets as she leaned over the faun like a hungry hawk. "Back where?"

Timtik shrank down in his chair, thoroughly frightened. "To Earth. She was going back with Albert . . ."

"*With?*" grated Maggot, her canines clacking and sparking in her fury. "He's **HERE?** In **DRENDON?**"

TIMTIK nodded mutely, sliding down in his chair until his shoulderblades touched the seat. Maggot hung over him a moment more, then cracked her palms together. "A human," she murmured thoughtfully. "Here in Drendon . . . Hmmm."

"We didn't *mean* to bring him, Maggot . . ." Timtik had never seen her so aroused before, except once when he'd curiously tried to touch the Thrake. She'd blasted him clear across the room with a bolt of red lightning, and he'd tingled for days.

"You see," he said carefully, "Albert grabbed Lorn's drapery just as she was turning the key, and suddenly he popped into Drendon along with us. He almost materialized on a hotsy, and the frost-flies came and—"

Maggot was suddenly all over him, prodding, prying, feeling, sensing. "Frost-flies! Oh, my little baby faun, they didn't hurt you? Didn't touch you? You're all right?" Her sudden concern was a relief after her anger, albeit Timtik writhed under her touch, which was clammy and repulsive upon his flesh.

He kept answering "No, Maggot," over and over, till she stopped her anxious tactile inspection. Maggot was, in her witch-like way, harsh-appearing on its surface, quite fond of the little creature, and her hot dry eyes would shed their first tears if anything happened to rob her of her beloved apprentice.

"You're sure—?" she said, reluctantly releasing him.

"I'm fine," Timtik insisted. "I led Albert and Lorn to the other side of the hotsy from the frost-flies, and we weren't even touched." Maggot plopped into a chair and sagged.

"What a scare you gave me, Tikky. My poor old heart can't take that sort of thing."

Timtik laughed hoarsely. "Your poor old heart is as strong as solid oak. You did it with a

spell. You told me you did it."

Maggot sniffed and wiped a grimy forefinger across her nostrils. "Well, it's the principle of the thing, Tikky. If my heart *were* weak, it'd surely have stopped . . . But where is Lorn?" she said, peering out through the wall of the "Wumbl", which was, of course, quite transparent to her eyes. Timtik shifted uneasily. "She was right behind me," he mused, "and when Albert tried to spank me—"

"Spank YOU?!" Maggot reared up. "A mere human DARED to—"

"It was my fault," Timtik admitted. "I goaded him into it, because I got mad at Lorn for paying so much attention to him."

"Oh," said Maggot, unrearing a trifle. "Oh," she said, relaxing. Then she shrugged. "Well, if you had it coming . . . You say he *tried* to? What stopped him?"

"I ducked, and he fell, and I ran here, and—" The faun paused. "You don't think he got hurt? Maybe he fell into a Wumbl or something."

Maggot shook her head. "Nonsense. Lorn could have saved him from that fate. Any tree would be happy to slash the Wumbl's membrane for a woodnymph—Unless this was out in the *open*?"

Timtik shook his head. "No, it was in the deep woods, just between here and the moss fields . . ." He stopped speaking, chilled with a terrible thought. Maggot had the same thought.

"My crystal, quickly!" she shrieked.

Timtik bounded across the room to a great casket of a trunk, and began rummaging within it. Over his shoulder flew the contents as he groped away. A shredded bit of cloth-of-gold, a bottle of grave mold, clumps of leaves from the grey ivy vine, two used mandrake roots, a wax doll bristling with pins, a box of assorted rare earths, liquid herb juices, some bat squeezings, and an old dog-eared copy of *Moby Dick*. No crystal. Timtik turned to face the witch. "It's gone!"

MAGGOT slapped her forehead. "What an idiot I am! Of course! I lent it to my cousin Hortense, yesterweek, for the Black Carnival . . ."

"Help!" said a small voice outside the entrance. Maggot hissed a mystic word, and the door opened. In clambered the forest key, struggling across the high sill. "Help!" it giggled dutifully.

"That might be Lorn's key!" said Timtik. "Come to tell us what happened to her!"

"Nonsense. Nymphs aren't that brainy. She'd never think to send a message—"

"But maybe Albert thought of it," suggested the faun.

"Hmmm," Maggot murmured. "Could be."

"Help!" the key re-giggled. "This is fun. I've never been in an adventure before."

"Who sent you?" demanded Timtik.

"Help?" the key said hopefully. Lorn's estimation of its brain-size was more generous than she knew.

"Where is Lorn, and Albert the human?!" asked Maggot, transfixing the key with a steely gaze.

"Help?" it offered despondently. "Is that right?"

Timtik scowled. "This is getting us nowhere."

"Wait," said Maggot. "I'll check the serial number in the sign-out book." She waddled grossly over to a thick ledger on the table and peered myopically at the page that opened to her automatically as she approached. "Lorn's signed out for key number X-54. What's this key's number?"

Timtik picked it up, turned it over, shook it, then scratched his head deftly with an extended claw. "It's rubbed out, mostly. I can hardly see it at all."

"Key!" Maggot accused harshly. "You've been scratching!"

The key sniveled piteously. "But I *itched!*"

Timtik pondered the matter.

"Maybe I could retrace my steps, and see if Lorn fell off the edge of the woods?"

"Too long!" muttered the witch. "The Kwistians might be feasting on Lorn's spareribs before you found your way back to the same spot. No, this calls for swift measures." The key whimpered a little. Maggot threw it a piece of pickled ham, and it carried its prize off to a corner and began to munch contentedly.

"EEEEEE!" said a voice from the shelf.

"The Thrake!" groaned Maggot. "I got so engrossed, I forgot to feed it again. It eats every fifteen minutes lately. I spend all my time making this hell brew to keep it alive, and all I get for my pains is hunger-tantrums!" The Thrake squealed again.

MAGGOT scooped up a fistful of mess from the cauldron and threw it on the shelf. The Thrake quieted. Maggot wiped off her fingers on her dress, leaving clinging bits of the stuff still between her knuckly fingers. Now, where were we?" she asked.

Timtik jumped up, suddenly joyous. "Maggot!" he said, "Don't you have a Finders-Weepers spell on the crystal?"

"Of course!" Maggot snapped her fingers and looked annoyed at her own lack of hindsight.

"Just let me remember the words . . . Hmmm . . ." She dipped into a pocket of her voluminous dress, and pulled forth a pinch of blue powder, which she flung into the flames licking the scorched sides of the cauldron. A brilliant tongue of blue flame shot up, and as it splashed hotly off the ceiling, Maggot chanted:

"Flame get hotter than a pistol;
Bring me back my peeking-
crystal!"

There was a hum, a twang, and a crackling snap, and the crystal appeared in the air between Maggot and the faun. Both grabbed it before it could shatter on the floor. Maggot picked up her spectacles from the table, got them on upside-down, cursed virulently, righted them, and peered into the crystal.

"Oh my!" she said. Timtik, straining his eyes at the sphere, could detect nothing but cloudy swirlings. He was still three lessons away from crystal-gazing. It was one of the more advanced courses, hard to master. "Well, my stars!" said Maggot, "They're all right. They *did* strike the path, but Albert has enough sense not to go any farther, so they'll be safe until that Cort sends someone to find what the delay is."

"But *where* are they?" shouted the faun. "What part of the

moss fields? I can hurry right out there, and—"

"I could bring them back by spell," said the witch. "It's only fifteen minutes work to assemble the paraphernalia, and—"

The Thrake, its shelf once again cleared of hell-brew, started quizzical little whines of hunger. "Damn," said Maggot. "This just isn't my day! Tell you what, Tikky—You start out looking for them, and in the meantime, I'll try to rig a pickup spell on them. If you get there first, fine. If not, I'll pick them up sooner or later."

Timtik was dancing up and down with impatience. "Tell *me* how to do the spell, and *I'll* get them!" he cried.

Maggot hesitated, then reached for some more of the blue powder. "Well, I suppose it'd be all—No!" She replaced the powder with decision. "You're too young to learn how to get anything you want. It'd be dangerous to know at your age. I'm sorry, Tikky, but you'll have to go by boat or something over the bog."

"Oh, all right," the faun mumbled, scuffing one hoof. "But it's a lot of work, when a few magic words could—"

"That's enough, Tikky!" said the witch. She had that red-lightning tone in her voice. Timtik stopped complaining, made his goodbyes, and, after ascer-

taining the approximate location of his quarry, hurried out into the forest . . .

"—and here I am," he finished, yawning lazily.

I'd stopped counting my strokes by now. After the one hundred mark, the less accurately my muscles knew of their labors, the better. "Maggot sounds charming," I said. Timtik peered up at me from beneath furry brows.

"I wouldn't be sarcastic in front of her, if I were you."

"Now, look—" I said, but was interrupted by a sharp cry.

"Look!" gasped Lorn, pointing off behind me.

I turned my head, but the sunlight was in my eyes and made seeing difficult. Then I saw the dark shadows undulating along swiftly over the purple surface of the moss, and high in the sky above them, I caught the glint of a polished brass trident.

"Kwistians!" rasped Timtik, springing upright. "Pole, Albert! Pole!"

I shoved and grunted and strained, but our progress was like that of a turtle fleeing a flock of eagles. In another moment, I heard the thump of immense wings on the hot bright air, and the whistling of the cannibals' rapid passage. I turned about, yanking out the pole from the muck as the only handy weapon to fend off a murderous

swoop of the downrushing creatures.

Even as I raised my mud-dripping weapon skyward, I knew I'd made a fatal error. The tugging of the pole had unbalanced me, and my quick grab for the upright stump against which Lorn had been lolling was an even worse mistake. The entire log began to turn slowly on its longitudinal axis, and the three of us started to topple, woodnymph, faun and myself, tottering back toward the deadly bog beneath the purple moss.

I expected to be impaled like an olive on one of those tridents even before I struck the moss, so close were our airborne adversaries, but they had plans only for Lorn.

She shrieked in fright as the tall bronzed Kwistians, their magnificent pinions spread wide to slow their descent, reached out—each with his tridentless hand—to clutch her arms as she semaphored for balance. And even as they neared her, Timtik—in mid-air on his way into the bog—waved his fingers in a strange way at her, and shouted a weird, short phrase that buzzed like angry bees through the air.

Then the Kwistians had Lorn by the arms and were soaring skyward with their catch, and—And Lorn was *still* beside me and Timtik, in mid-fall on that twisting log, as the cannibals swooped

off with the other her in their grasp . . .

All this had happened within a moment of my yanking the pole from the bog, in one bewildering, rushing speck of time. Then my back struck the yielding moss, and black ooze started to close over my face, and—

Reality shifted, vanished, and reappeared.

Lorn, Timtik and myself were standing inside a small, musty hut, and I found myself staring into a wizened fanged face, that under its wild grizzled hair could only be—"Maggot?" I said, dazed.

"Howdy-do!" said the witch. She glanced at me, her eyes giving a shrewd once-over. Then she smiled, as though in approval, and said, "You're knock-kneed!"

I blushed in shame.

CHAPTER 7

AFTER I had—thanks to a healthy swig from that copper flask—recovered somewhat from the shock of my abrupt transition, I had a few moments of queasy dread about this grizzled creature with whom I was temporarily entombed in the entrails of the false Wumbl. I suppose that Maggot was not at all bad-looking, as witches go, but her appearance clung too tightly to the traits demanded by protocol to suit my esthetic senses.

Had she wanted, she said, she could have been young-looking, and rather pretty, but she took great pride in her witchiness, tradition being a powerful spur in any union, and there was also the notorious prestige involved in aiming for the title of Most Dreadful. Not that Maggot was yet the ghastliest sight available, but she was always in there pitching, taking ugly-pills, wart-sustainer, skin wrinkler, hair-greyer, breath-fetidation capsules, and all the latest creams and lotions from the nearest Black Apothecary Shoppe, to keep abreast of the latest fashions in hideousness.

However, this was her say-so, that she was far from being the worst sight in Drendon. So far as I was concerned, she was the ugliest, most raucous, smelliest, slimiest creature I'd ever beheld in my life, and I'd seen some corkers.

"Another piece of pie?" asked Maggot, holding out a crisply crusted wedge of peach-choked pastry.

"Yes, thank you," I said, wiping my lips on the embroidered linen napkin, and extending my plate with an effort—the plate was solid gold, and quite weighty for all its delicately sculptured filagrees. I had to admit she was a damned nice, almost genteel hostess, if a bit horrible to view. Maggot beamed as I slowly

forked the wedge in wolf-size bites down my gullet and subdued the minor temblor of a sated belch.

"All through?" she crooned, and at my nod snapped her fingers, and whispered a certain syllable. My dishes and utensils vanished with a sparking crack. I confess I jumped a little. It was still hard to accept sorcery, even given the other odd goings-on in this dimension. Neither Lorn nor Timtik batted an eye. But I figured if they could believe in Drendon, they could believe anything.

The Thrake chose that moment to squeal, in a sort of crowing sigh unlike its hunger-plaint. "Hot dog!" said Maggot, drawing a transverse line through four upright ones on the rough oaken wall. "That's the fifth today!"

"Fifth what?" I asked.

"Another Kwistian knocked out of the sky," said Lorn.

"Thrake kind of gloats each time it crimps their wings," mumbled Timtik, absorbed in his third helping of pie.

I eyed the tiny blue horror with misgivings. "How does it do it?"

Maggot pursed her lips and nodded her head sagely. "There's many a one in Drendon Wood wishes he knew the answer to *that!*" she said, throwing weeds into the cauldron.

"I take it," I said respectfully, "it's a secret?"

"One I shall carry to my grave," said the witch. "Can't have those Kwistians zooming around here day and night, hooting and hollering, and spearing poor forest folk on their tridents. Makes for unrest."

I recalled the pair that nearly impaled me back on that log, and shuddered. "Hope the thing doesn't wear out," I said, looking at the voracious Thrake, slupping up mess from the shelf.

"What's night?" asked Timtik, looking toward Maggot. "You just said 'night' . . ."

"That's when the sun goes down," said Maggot. "Like it was when you and Lorn went on your little tour to Earth."

"Oh," said Timtik, returning to his pie. "I thought it was black there all the time."

I RAISED an inquiring eyebrow. "No night here at all?" I said.

"Only on special occasions," said Maggot, swirling the gluey roiling mess in the cauldron with a long wooden spoon.

"Such as?"

"Such as the sun going down. That's always a special occasion."

I thought this over. The logic seemed a bit circuitous. "How's that again?" I murmured.

Maggot eased up on her hell-

brew stirring for a moment. "You see, we use the same sun you do, but we don't revolve on our axis, so it's always noon, here. The only time it gets dark is during an eclipse."

"Makes for short nights," I remarked.

Maggot shivered. "The shorter the better. When night falls here, the Thrake sleeps, and all hell breaks loose. Kwistians zooming around, killing off creatures for the fun of it, or carrying them off alive for their flame-pits . . ."

Her statement reminded me of something that had been bugging me since before our arrival, but my attempts at speech had hitherto been shushed by the witch, as she ordered us all to eat first, talk later. As an abstracted wave of her gnarled hand caused three delicate alabaster demitasses to appear before Lorn, Timtik and myself, I assumed it was the hour for after-dinner chatting, and cleared my throat.

Maggot raised a fuzzy grey eyebrow at me, and her luminous glittering eye fixed me with more absolute attention than I really wanted. "Yes, Albert," she said, as if with resignation. "Now you can tell me whatever it is that's been troubling you since your arrival."

"It's—" I fumbled awkwardly for a starting point, then blurt-

ed, "It's about that *other* Lorn, Maggot . . ."

"Other Lorn?" she said, dropping the spoon into the cauldron, handle and all. "What other Lorn?"

"It's okay," said Timtik, with ill-concealed pride. "I did that!"

"Did what?" snapped the witch, in a voice so terrible that the three of us nearly turned to stone. "Tikky . . . You didn't use the Scapegoat Spell?!"

The faun, his monumental aplomb fading, murmured, "Why—Sure I did. Just like you taught me. I made a duplicate of Lorn, to confuse the Kwistians. You said the spell was handy to baffle an enemy, to make him take a false image of a person instead of the real person . . ."

"*Fool!*" shrieked the witch, her eyes crackling with red sparks. "That spell is never to be used on *others!*"

"But—" faltered Timtik, very pale and afraid.

"On yourself, fine!" howled Maggot, jabbing a forefinger at his chest. "Because even after the bifurcation, *you* know which is you and which is your false self, and can let the false self be captured with impunity. But on another—!" she rasped furiously. "*Which* Lorn did they take?"

Timtik's eyes, already wide and apprehensive, turned to Lorn pleadingly. "Lorn—?" he said. "This is you, isn't it?"

"Of course it is," said the woodnymph, after a swift glance downward to see if she were still present. "I know it is . . ."

"How?" spat Maggot. "A Scapegoat Image believes itself to be real, too. But there is a terrible difference between the true creature and the false."

"What difference?" I asked, with an almost clairvoyant intuition of the terrible truth.

"Either one," said the witch, beginning to pace the floor of the hut, her voluminous garments swirling in her wake, "will pass any test of existence one cares to make upon it . . . *But*—If the *true* self perishes, then so does the *false*!"

"You mean," I said numbly, "that if the Kwistians have the false Lorn, and destroy her, *this* Lorn will continue on alive and healthy, but if they've taken the *true* one . . ."

"She will die in the flame-pits, and this one will simply pop into nothingness," said the witch.

"Oh, dear!" said Lorn. "What can we do to find out which is which?"

MAGGOT regarded her with a smile of irony. "We can sit here and wait, and if you *don't* vanish, you are the real Lorn."

"But if the other Lorn is real—!" gasped the woodnymph.

"Exactly!" Maggot said savagely. "Death for both! So wait-

ing is out of the question. Since we are *not* sure, we must act as though that *is* the true Lorn who was taken, and proceed accordingly. That other Lorn is in terrible danger. Every second brings her closer to flaming death!"

If true, why had we sat calmly eating pie!? I trembled with frustrated rage. "We've got to *do* something! Can't you bring the other Lorn here as you brought *us*? Then maybe Timtik can kind of—um—*merge* the two, again . . ."

Maggot nodded kindly. "A good thought, Albert. But you see, although such a merger is possible, it cannot be done unless the other image is present, and I am afraid that Cort, the wizard, has a neutralizer enchantment on Sark. My magic won't work in Sark from so great a range. If I were *there*, of course—But that's impossible. I cannot leave the Thrake. The forest folk count on me."

"But your house moves," I insisted. "Can't you—"

"It won't go near the castle," explained Lorn sadly. "Cort has the forest bugged with proximity alarms that shoot thunderbolts if the Thrake gets within range."

"But," I said to Maggot, "you've got to do something!"

"I can do nothing," she said pointedly. Then, she, Timtik and

Lorn turned their heads slowly until their eyes rested on my face. I felt uneasy under their unblinking gazes. "I can *help* . . ." said the witch, "but I can't go in person. We need someone who is willing to risk his life, to face terrible danger, to dare the journey to Sark . . ."

"Me," I realized, my stomach hollow and cold and sinking. "You want *me* to go . . ."

Timtik and Lorn nodded eagerly, hopefully. Maggot watched me through slitted eyes, her bated breath keeping her nostrils aflame. "Yes," she hissed softly. "You are the logical one. Timtik is too young, too little. Lorn is too weak, too stupid. I am too valuable right here. Whom else have we to send? You're our only hope."

I looked at Lorn—if this *was* Lorn—with her deep blue eyes, copper brows, flaming hair . . . Could I *chance* her being the true Lorn? Could I stake her young life on odds no better than a coin-flip? I took a deep breath, faced Maggot, and gave a short, mute nod.

"You'll go?" said Timtik, half-rising from his place. Maggot clenched her gnarled fingers till the blood-throb showed in her old white knuckles. Lorn sat tensely, her beautiful eyes locked in half-hope, half-despair, upon my face.

"I'll go," I said.

BUT why not?" whined Timtik, irritably stamping his pointed cloven hooves.

Maggot was at her wit's end. "No!" she rasped, nearly in tears, her voice suddenly as old as her appearance. "You can't go with him, it's too dangerous!"

"But Albert doesn't know the forest. He doesn't realize the dangers; he almost got killed by that hotsy!" Timtik rationalized, tugging at her copious skirt.

Maggot sat down and held her head in her hands. "But Tikky, you're all I've got . . . If anything happened to you—"

"But it won't!" Timtik sobbed furiously. "I know all the spells you've taught me, and even without them, there's nothing in Drendon can catch me when I run full speed. And you're giving Albert some protective spells, and you can watch us through the crystal and help us out. Please, Maggot, please!"

Maggot gave a hopeless shake of her grey head, and smiled wryly at me. "I suppose I'd be annoyed if he *didn't* feel this way. I've raised him to be considerate of others, and kind, and I guess he's learnt his lessons too well . . ." She looked at Timtik. "Very well," she said, wiping at the tip of her nose, and sniffing miserably.

And I found, abruptly, that I had become fond of the ugly old

creature. "Look—" I said clumsily, "I don't think I need tell you I'll try my best to look out for him . . ."

Maggot's withered hand pressed shakily down upon mine. "I know you will, Albert," she sighed. "You're a good man. And Lorn will be a help, too, if she doesn't do something imbecilically fatal, as is sometimes her wont."

She went to her cavernous trunk, still sniffing. "I wish it were possible to give you a map, but it would be no use in Drendon. The forest layout changes constantly."

"Tribes move about," Lorn amplified, "animals change their water-holes, trees decide to un-grow and turn back into seeds—A map a minute wouldn't keep you up to date."

Maggot, rummaging through the trunk, grunted happily and set something on the floor beside her with a clink. I thought it looked suspiciously like a bottle of *Schlitz*. "It is," said Maggot, before I could word my query.

Then she took out a crisp piece of pasteboard and tossed it onto the floor beside the bottle. I squinted curiously at the printing upon it. Maggot again answered my unspoken question over her shoulder. "Commuter's ticket: Long Island Railroad."

The pile grew; to the ticket and the beer were added a spool

of thread, a tube of depilatory cream, and a solid gold molar, roots and all. Then Maggot lifted out something quite heavy from the bottom recesses of the trunk, and set it on the floor with a grunt. It was an ancient Spanish-style cuirass, dull grey, and rather thick, with heavy leathern straps to anchor it upon the wearer's breast.

Maggot stood up and dusted her palms together. "There!"

Realization suddenly flashed upon me. "Those?" I choked, wagging a forefinger at the heap. "*Those* are the spells?" I felt a sudden letdown, like the time I had—at the tender age of six—received a new suit for Christmas when I'd been praying for a bicycle.

"Certainly," said Maggot. "Hold on while I get you a wallet for them."

From a stumpy peg on the wall, she lifted down a dusty leather wallet, the old-style wallet, the kind worn with a long shoulder-strap, and is about the size of a fishing creel. She lifted its upper flap and began to drop the first five items into it, one by incomprehensible one. The beer, the ticket, the tube of cream, the spool of thread, and that molar. As she did so, she chuckled.

I CAME forward and slowly took the filled wallet from her. "Maggot—" I didn't quite

know what to say, but once again she was ready with an answer to unspoken questions.

"You Earth people!" she snorted in disgust. "What did you expect, Albert? I have to make do with whatever is on hand, don't I? These items happened to pop through into Drendon, so they're as good as anything. Remember, a spell is judged not by its trigger, but by its effect! I suppose *you* were expecting mystic powders, distillations of ogre sweat, magic wands—?"

I felt silly, but I nodded. "Something like that."

"Mark me well, Earthman," said Maggot. "These spells will work when you need them. Have no doubts on that!"

Timtik was jumping up and down impatiently, and Lorn seemed to be starting a slow fidget. "Let's hurry," said the faun. "That other Lorn may be on the brink of the flame-pit right now!"

"Hush, Tikky," said Maggot. "Albert, you three will have to get there before those Kwistians arrive at Sark with the other Lorn. This—" She placed the cuirass upon my breast, fastening the straps tightly with a magic word, "you must not remove until it is time." She halted my question with an upraised finger. "You will know it, when the time comes. I promise you."

"But the spells . . ." I worried aloud.

"Use one for each peril," Maggot advised. "It really doesn't matter which is used for which, much, but now and then one will adapt better than another."

"But how do I set them off? What do I do? Or say?"

"You'll figure it out," said the witch. "The usage may not always be the same, so I won't burden you with instructions that could be subject to change in certain circumstances. They will serve you well, though. Really."

I was staggering slightly under the weight of the metal breastplate. Timtik clutched my hand and tugged me toward the door, which opened of its own accord to permit the two of us to emerge into the sunlight. Lorn and Maggot trailed after us, but Maggot halted in the doorway. "This thing must be made out of lead," I remarked uncomfortably.

Maggot smiled gently. "It is, Albert," she said, waving farewell.

"But—" I said. The door resealed, and Maggot was gone inside the hidden recesses of the false Wumbl. Already I was sweltering in the heavy armor, as the sun beat down through the overhanging fronds and leaves of the thicket.

I looked helplessly at Timtik

and Lorn, who were awaiting me at the edge of the woods. "But why is it made out of *lead*?" I asked them. "Why not iron or steel?"

Timtik shrugged. "In case we meet a radioactive dragon, you dope!"

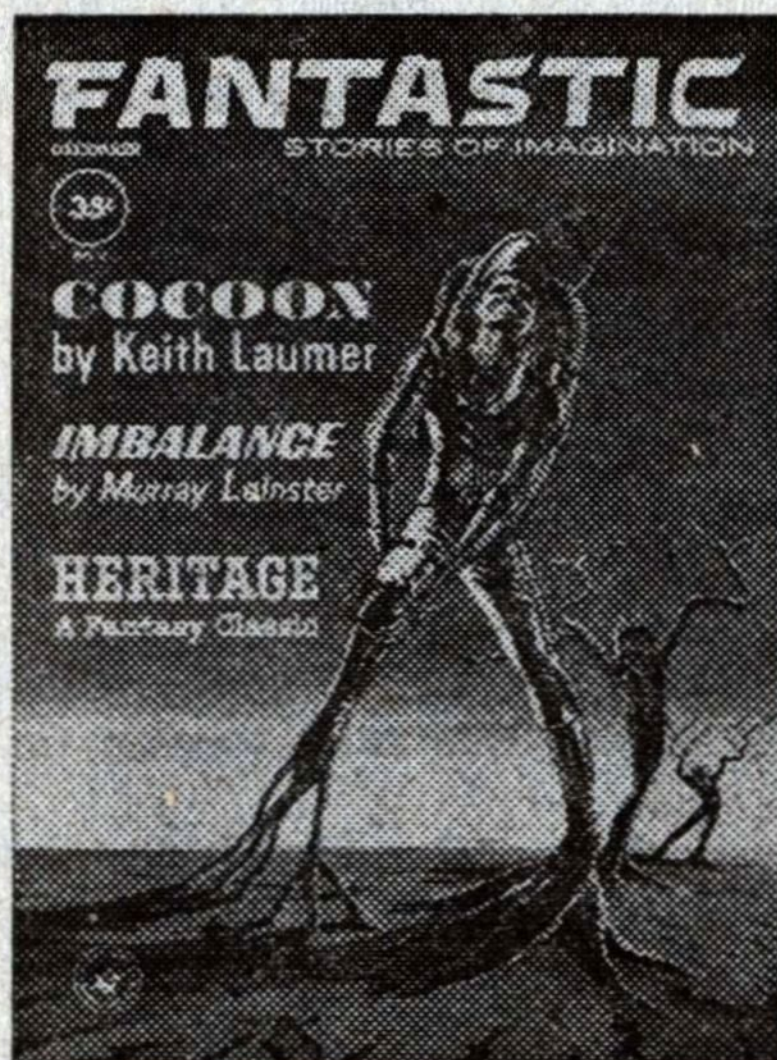
Lorn and Timtik entered the forest, and I followed uneasily after them. "How thoughtful of Maggot—" I mumbled, going frozen-hearted despite the external heat.

"You never know," said Timtik, darkly.

(Concluded next month)

COMING NEXT MONTH

Prepare for a blockbuster of a December FANTASTIC!
For example, three short novelets:



1) *Cocoon*, by Keith Laumer, in which man makes a last great effort to free his imprisoned spirit.

2) *Imbalance*, by Murray Leinster, a light-hearted fantasy in which two and two make five—for good reason.

3) *Heritage*, by E. J. Derringer, a Fantasy Classic in which man reverses the natural order of things.

And we are happy to announce December FANTASTIC will feature the return of a fine artist—Lee Brown Coye, well known for his illustrations in WEIRD TALES. Mr. Coye's work does much to enhance the pages of FANTASTIC. We're sure you'll be pleased to see his art again.

PLUS, of course, the exciting conclusion to *It's Magic, You Dope!*
Don't miss the great December FANTASTIC. It will be on sale at newsstands November 20. Be sure to reserve a copy now.

Choose your weapons and take your places, gentlemen—and ladies. Once again we plan to incite the “antis” and gratify the “pros” with a typically Bunchian vignette.

HILUA was a long man, thin and metal-sharp. With stomach flat as a reptile's he sat at his copper-colored desk in the State Building and had plans. He was number one.

Lofa was a sturdy man, his shoulders broad, his stomach round. Sometimes, at a certain view, the way he sloped into his thighs and his guardsman's long boots, Lofa reminded some men

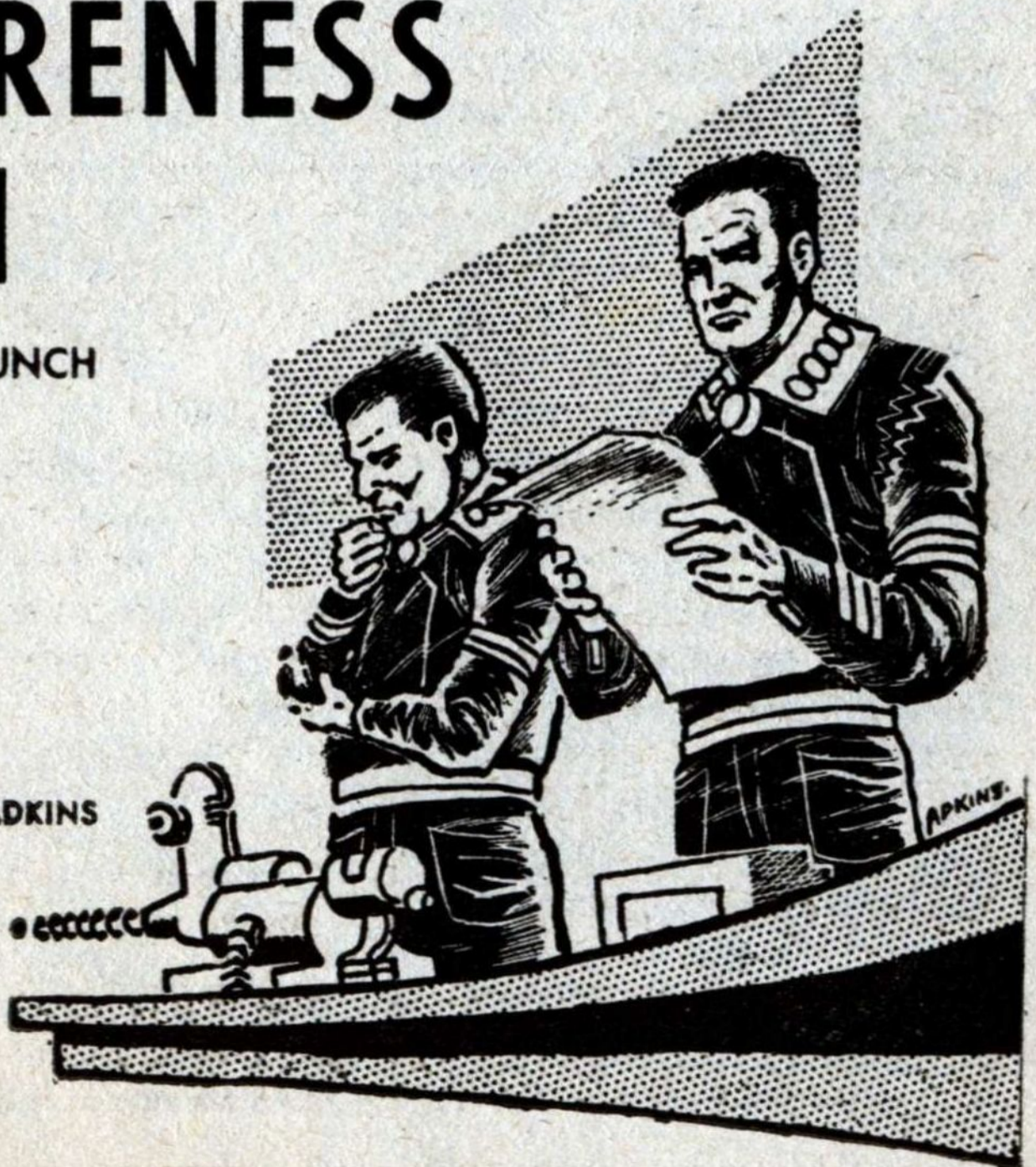
of a top about to spin. Men never said this, however, to Lofa, because Lofa was at times a hard man, though mostly a fantastic dreamer, some held. But he and Hilua made quite a team at the State Building. Lofa was number two.

The State Building was pretty much as the name said. And it was Supreme Headquarters for the wide-spreading services of

AWARENESS PLAN

By DAVID R. BUNCH

Illustrator ADKINS



Awareness Plans. Hilua had long been chief of Awareness and Lofa had long been his lieutenant. Sometimes these two disagreed almost completely on how best to carry out their assignments. But usually from some deep-set regard for one another's position they came to amiable agreement in the end, and the results, generally, were good.

"Lofa," Hilua was speaking in his captain's authoritative voice, "from Piltragon, our headquarters of assignments, we have an assignment. It is a medium-large assignment and will call for our best planning. —Here is the best plan."

Lofa shifted his turnip shape a little and spun two small quarter arcs where he stood in front of Hilua's gleaming desk. —Here is the best plan! Just like that. —Hilua was so preoccupied with the incontestable rightness of "the best plan" that he almost failed to notice Lofa's agitation. But he noticed in time and he thought, since it would cost nothing, he might as well placate his sub-commandant.

IN Lorantan," Hilua continued, speaking more softly now, "that pleasant province in North Laparan, where we vacationed last April, there is need of an Awareness Plan. Remember how the people there were getting that moon look in their faces and

that rock-solid seat to their sitting? Remember how they lay on their beds smiling all the time, just smiling—even when the homage people went through the towns? Remember how when the gorgeous metal flowers came through the yard holes in Lorantan last spring, to celebrate Consolidation Day and World Victory Hour, the Lorantanos did not rise to the occasion? And when the tin Birds swam the colored-vapor air in Maximum Diversion Company's great Shape Display, staged to honor World Supremacy Times, the Lorantanos just lay and dozed, not looking at the Birds, not thinking of the Birds. Even when the up-up music of empire played, from invisible orchestras swung between giant gas bags of silk in the beautiful pink air over Lorantan, did these torpid subject people rise and sing? Hah! They did not. —Recall, oh recall!" and Hilua's voice was vibrant now, "how when the Supreme One's best political disk recited eloquence through the land these grinning nothing-folk did not rise from their beds or their pleasant sitting to rap out any hand-claps! Do you not remember, Lofa, how the Lorantanos were dead to all things but ease and pleasant smiling? Entirely passive, they gave their conquerors no respect, no regard, no recognition whatsoever. Oh yes,

they'd accepted the pleasant living of our technology with a smile, smile, smile! But would they wave flags? Hah! No flags!—Lofa, if you remember, then you know what our problem is. How many Awareness machines, and which ones, would you dispatch there?"

Lofa beamed at once and glowed with the look of a sub-commandant suddenly promoted to supreme chief. "I remember well the Lorantanos," he said. "Ah well. Their plight has haunted me day after day in the State Building, day after day on my duty assignments among the lesser tribes. I have longed for this assignment I have prayed to all the blue and gold new satellites; I feel about these great people strongly; I wish to help them.—Before it is too late!"

Hilua leaned forward a little at his copper-colored desk, his flat-as-a-reptile's stomach eased into the concave velvet of the kidney curve. Only a few times, or maybe never before, had he seen Lofa act so stirred. Hilua was becoming more than ever convinced that his lieutenant could act the sentimental idiot as well as be almost a complete fool when it came to tactical affairs. And Hilua was more than ever glad, for the good of the Consolidation, that there were such trusty clear-eyed men as he, Hilua, for the top spots.

DISREGARDING, indeed not noticing, the contemptuous condescending smirk of his chief, Lofa launched into his plan. "I would take no less than five thousand machines," said Lofa. "In other words, I would take a thousand each of the Basics. The Intricates are for a people far less gone than the Lorantanos. With my five thousand Basics I would fan out in a C curve until I sat on the ridges hemming all Lorantan to the coast. There I would sit quietly through the day and the Lorantanos would not see me, sleeping as they smile and waking as they smile, vacant as all the Automatics they are served by. When night came I would open with no less than a thousand Blams. With maximum intensifiers on the muzzles I would sit back and point them at the sky. For a full hour. While that bedlam was yet echoing off the pink vapor shield that is Lorantan's provincial trade-mark now, I would come in with the thousand Phewsos. Awakened by the Blams, with at least half a smile erased now, for at least thirty minutes the vacant ones must come to terms with reality again and know again that stench that lies just a few dead days and a skin's depth beneath the surface of all life's conquered things. Next I would open with my thousand Starstandos with reflectors and burn the country-

side with light, followed closely by the Sanders shelling the air with grits and jagged glass."

"You have used four thousand Basics," said Hilua. "And you pointed your Blam guns at the sky! Are you through now with your jesting?"

"No, not quite through," said Lofa, beaming Hilua as much of a dark frown as he thought he safely could. "And if you read but jest in my words, you are misunderstanding. The remaining thousand Basics are a thousand Dispenseros for me and my men. We shall sit back on the high ground on that C curve around Lorantan and drink to our great victory. If the Commandant will trouble to notice, Sir, you will notice, Sir, that the Lorantanos have been given back four senses in my Awareness Plan. Count them! The Blams brought back their ears; the Starstandos returned them their eyes; the Sanders with grits and jagged glass made them feel again; and of course the Phewsos cleared the nostrils of all. They can think now, and suffer. Is it not enough? And perchance many will come to awareness sufficiently to crawl to us. Forgetting for awhile the Automatics and the wonderful dead life of having everything served-as-planned perhaps they shall taste

a drink with us, straight out of my Dispenseros. And afterwards, being restored to full awareness and capability for fear, they'll give out tons of respect to their conquerors; they'll remember the hand-claps, Sir, when the Supreme One's best political record plays!"

IN the cold silence of no-answer Lofa looked into the blue-ice gaze of his Captain and felt himself shrinking back into the perfect picture of the useful sub-commandant—gross, sturdy, a little sub-par in the big-decision department, not quite gifted enough by nature to author the super-plan, even a little sentimental at times, perhaps. Silent and aloof now, as befit a Supreme Commandant of Awareness Plans, Hilua handed Lofa his orders. And the sub-commandant accepted these orders almost gracefully, with just the merest twitch into two quarter arcs of spin before he saluted crisply, spun on his heel and went away reading the brief directive that began: "To implement the Awareness Mission to Lorantan with all good dispatch speed one Super Blasto . . ." Lofa's eyes blurred and he could read no farther. He did not need to.

THE END

PLANETOID 127

By EDGAR WALLACE

Introduction by Sam Moskowitz

Illustrator SUMMERS

EACH writer makes a choice of whether to write for the times or write for the ages and then fate decides how successful his bid. To many of today's younger readers the name Edgar Wallace does not even conjure a legend, but during his heyday from World War I to 1932 his popularity as a mystery writer was so enormous that Erle Stanley Gardner, with all the acceptance of Perry Mason, scarcely approaches it. It was estimated that during the Roaring Twenties, one out of every four books in the English language, exclusive of the bible and texts was a work of Edgar Wallace!

His character J. G. Reeder was known throughout the English speaking world and in all he had published 150 novels of which the most famous was *Four Just Men*. He was a master of the cloak and dagger adventure and was so adroit that he could write any sort of theme well.

Though he wrote novels pri-

marily, because they sold best, he was a skilled short story writer, excellent at dialogue and polished in phraseology.

In addition to his books, 17 of his plays were produced, the most successful, *On the Spot*, was based on the life of Al Capone.

Born in England, December 1875, Wallace received his literary apprenticeship as a correspondent for THE LONDON DAILY MAIL. He sold easily and readily on the side and soon was devoting his full time to writing. His income from his stories and plays was fabulous but he was so prodigal in his handling of finances that, following his death (Feb. 10, 1932), it took years of royalties from his books to bail his wife and children out of tight financial straits.

Shortly before his death he came to the United States to plot and work on the script of *King Kong*, which upon its release in 1933 was destined to become one

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of the most acclaimed science fiction films of all time.

To those familiar with Edgar Wallace, science fiction seems a strange area for him to be writing in, but Wallace liked science fiction and had written a number of stories in that vein before. None of them had been too successful, so, with his eye on the cash return he had not wasted too much time on the medium. A novel *Green Rust* had appeared as early as 1920, but almost forgotten today is his short novel "1925": the story of a fatal peace, which makes the prediction that an inadequate peace would make possible a fatal invasion of England by the Germans at a later date. His short story *The Black Grippe* which deals with the results of a disease that renders the entire world simultaneously blind, originally appeared in the *STRAND MAGAZINE* and was only recently reprinted in the British edition of *THE SAINT'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE*.

Planetoid 127 saw its first and only publication in a *Readers Li-*

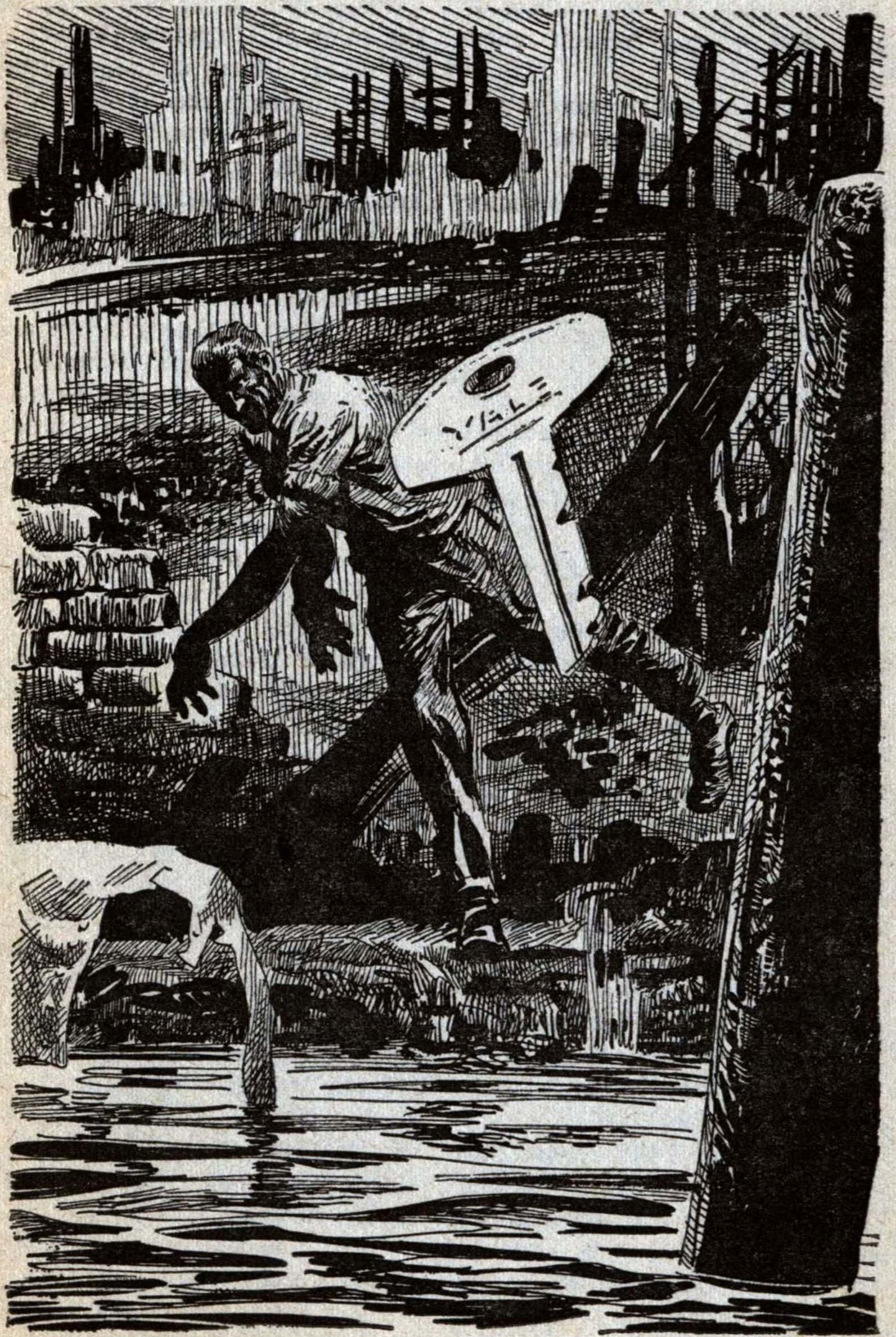
brary edition published in London in 1929. The same volume contained a "crook" story titled *The Sweizer Pump*. *Readers Library* was distinguished for having published in the Twenties and early Thirties a series of pocket-sized hard cover books which were sold in the United States for 25¢. *Planetoid 127* is one of the earliest and one of the best examples of the "Twin Earths" theme in science fiction, a gambit that was even used as a syndicated comic strip for a period. This is the theme that presupposes that there orbits around the sun, always out of sight of our telescopes, another world which is virtually a twin of our own, even to parallel development. In this story, Wallace hypothesizes a duplicate set of people but with a time sequence running slightly ahead of ours so that an observer can virtually see our future. The occasional anachronisms in this story dissolve when we realize Wallace was among the pioneers of this theme, not a follower.

CHAPTER I

CHAP" West, who was never an enthusiast for work, laid down the long pole that had brought him from Bisham to the shade of a backwater west of Murley Lock, and dropped to the cushions at the bottom of the

punt, groaning his relief. He was a lank youth, somewhat shortsighted, and the huge horn-rimmed spectacles which decorated his knobbly face lent him an air of scholarship which his school record hardly endorsed.

Elsie West woke from a doze,



took one glance at her surroundings and settled herself more comfortably.

"Light the stove and make some tea," she murmured.

"I'm finished for the day," grunted her brother. "The hooter sounded ten minutes ago; and cooking was never a hobby of mine."

"Light the stove and make tea," she said faintly.

Chap glared down at the dozing figure; then glared past her to where, paddle in hand, Tim Lensman was bringing the punt to the shore.

Tim was the same age as his school friend, though he looked younger. A good-looking young man, he had been head of the house which had the honor of sheltering Chapston West. They had both been school prefects at Mildram and had entered and passed out on the same day.

Tim Lensman was looking disparagingly at the tangle of bush and high grass which fringed the wooded slope.

"Trespassers will be prosecuted," he read. "That seems almost an invitation—can you see the house, Chap?"

Chap shook his head.

"No; I'll bet it is the most horrible shanty you can imagine. Old Colson is just naturally a fug. And he's a science master—one of those Johnnies who ought to know the value of fresh air.

Elsie, roused by the bump of the punt side against the bank, sat up and stared at the unpromising landing-place.

"Why don't you go farther along?" she asked. "You can't make tea here without—"

"Woman, have you no thought before food?" demanded her brother sternly. "Don't you thrill at the thought that you are anchored to the sacred terrain of the learned Professor Colson, doctor of science, bug expert, performer on the isobar and other musical instruments and—"

"Chap, you talk too much—and I should love a cup of tea."

"We'll have tea with the professor," said Chap firmly. "Having cut through the briars to his enchanted palace, we will be served in crystal cups reclining on couches of lapis lazuli."

SHE frowned up at the dark and unpromising woods.

"Does he really live here?" she addressed Tim, and he nodded.

"He really lives here," he said; "at least, I think so; his driving directions were very explicit and I seem to remember that he said we might have some difficulty in finding the house—"

"He said, 'Keep on climbing until you come to the top,'" interrupted Chap.

"But how does *he* reach the house," asked the puzzled girl.

"By airplane," said Chap, as

he tied the punt to the thick root of a laurel bush. "Or maybe he comes on his magic carpet. Science masters carry a stock of 'em. Or perhaps he comes through a front gate from a prosaic road—there must be roads even in Berkshire."

Tim was laughing quietly.

"It is the sort of crib old Colson would choose," he said. "You ought to meet him, Elsie. He is the queerest old bird. Why he teaches at all I don't know, because he has tons of money, and he really is something of a magician. I was on the science side at Mildram and it isn't his amazing gifts as a mathematician that are so astounding. The head told me that Colson is the greatest living astronomer. Of course the stories they tell about his being able to foretell the future—"

"He can, too!"

Chap was lighting the stove, for, in spite of his roseate anticipations, he wished to be on the safe side, and he was in need of refreshment after a strenuous afternoon's punting.

"He told the school the day the war would end—to the very minute! And he foretold the big explosion in the gas works at Helwick—he was nearly pinched by the police for knowing so much about it. I asked him last year if he knew what was going to win the Grand National and he nearly bit my head off. He'd have told

Timothy Titus, because Tim's his favorite child."

He helped the girl to land and made a brief survey of the bank. It was a wilderness of a place, and though his eyes roved around seeking a path through the jungle, his search was in vain. An ancient signboard warned all and sundry that the land was private property, but at the spot at which they had brought the punt to land the bank had, at some remote period, been propped up.

"Do you want me to come with you?" asked Elsie, obviously not enamored with the prospect of the forthcoming call.

"Would you rather stay here?" asked Chap looking up from his stove.

She gave one glance along the gloomy backwater with its weedy bed and the overhanging osiers. A water-rat was swimming across the still water and this spectacle decided her.

"No; I think I will come with you," she said.

CHAP poured out the tea and the girl was raising it to her lips when her eyes caught sight of the man who was watching them from between the trees, and she had hard work to suppress the scream that rose to her lips.

"What is it?"

Tim had seen her face change

and now, following the direction of her eyes, he too saw the stranger.

There was nothing that was in the slightest degree sinister about the stranger; he was indeed the most commonplace figure Tim had ever seen. A short, stout man with a round and reddish face, which was decorated with a heavy ginger moustache; he stood twiddling his watch chain, his small eyes watching the party.

"Hello!" said Tim as he walked toward the stranger. "We have permission to land here."

He thought the man was some sort of caretaker or bailiff of "Helmwood."

"Got permission?" he repeated. "Of course you have—which of you is Lensman?"

"That's my name," smiled Tim, and the man nodded.

"He is expecting you *and* West and Miss Elsie West."

Tim's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

He had certainly promised the professor that he would call one day during vacation, but he had not intended taking Chap nor his sister. It was only by accident he had met his school friend at Bisham that morning, and Chap had decided to come with him.

As though divining his thoughts, the stout man went on:

"He knows a lot of things. If

he's not mad he's a crook. Where did he get all his information from? Why, fifteen years ago he hadn't fifty pounds. This place cost him ten thousand, and the house cost another ten thousand; and he couldn't have got his instruments and things under another ten thousand!"

Tim had been too much taken aback to interrupt.

"Information? I don't quite understand . . . ?"

"About stocks and things . . . he's made a hundred thousand this year out of cotton. How did *he* know that the boll-weevil was going to play the devil with the South, eh? How did he know? And when I asked him just now to tell me about the corn market for a friend of mine, he talked to me like a dog!"

Chap had been listening open-mouthed.

"Are you a friend of Mr. Colson?" he asked.

"His cousin," was the reply. "Harry Dewes by name. His own aunt's child—and his only relation."

Suddenly he made a step towards them and his voice sank to a confidential tone.

"You young gentlemen know all about him—he's got delusions, hasn't he? Now, suppose I brought a couple of doctors to see him, maybe they'd like to ask you a few questions about him. . . ."

Tim, the son of a great barrister, and himself studying for the bar, saw the drift of the question and would have understood, even if he had not seen the avaricious gleam in the man's eyes.

"You'd put him into an asylum and control his estate, eh?" he asked with a cold smile. "I'm afraid that you cannot rely upon us for help."

The man went red.

"Not that exactly," he said awkwardly. "And listen, young fellow . . ." he paused. "When you see Colson, I'd take it as a favor if you didn't mention the fact that you've seen me . . . I'm going to walk down to the lock . . . you'll find your way up between those poplars . . . so long!"

And turning abruptly he went stumbling through the bushes and was almost at once out of sight.

WHAT a lad!" said Chap admiringly. "And what a scheme! And to jump it at us straight away almost without an introduction!"

"How did Mr. Colson know I was coming?" asked Elsie in wonder.

Tim was not prepared with an answer. After some difficulty they found the scarcely worn track that led up through the trees, and a quarter of an hour's

stiff climb brought them to the crest and in view of the house.

Tim had expected to find a residence in harmony with the unkempt grounds. But the first view of "Helmwood" made him gasp. A solid and handsome stone house stood behind a broad stretch of shaven lawn. Flower beds bright with the blooms of late summer surrounded the lawn and bordered the walls of the house itself. At the farther end, but attached to the building, was a stone tower, broad and squat, and on the top of this was erected a hollow structure—criss-crossed without any apparent order or method—with a network of wires which glittered in the sunlight.

"A silver wire-box aerial!" said Chap. "That's a new idea, isn't it? Gosh, Tim! Look at the telescope!"

By the side of the tower was the bell-roof of a big observatory. The roof was closed, so that Chap's "telescope" was largely imaginary.

"Great Moses!" said Chap awe-stricken. "Why, it's as big as the Lick!"

Tim was impressed and astounded. He had guessed that the old science master was in comfortable circumstances, and knew that indeed he could afford the luxury of a car, but he had never dreamt that the professor was a man wealthy

enough to own a house like this and an observatory which must have cost thousands to equip.

"Look, it's turning!" whispered Elsie.

The big, square superstructure on the tower was moving slowly, and then Tim saw two projecting cones of some crystalline material, for they glittered dazzlingly in the sunlight.

"That is certainly new," he said. "It is rather like the gadget they are using for the new beam transmission; or whatever they call it—and yet it isn't—"

As he stood there, he saw a long french window open and a bent figure come out on to the lawn.

Tim hastened towards the man of science and in a few minutes Chap was introducing his sister.

"I hope you didn't mind my coming, sir," said Chap. "Lensman told me he was calling."

"You did well to come," said Mr. Colson courteously. "And it is a pleasure to meet your sister."

ELSIE was observing him closely and her first impression was one of pleasant surprise. A thin, clean-shaven old man, with a mass of white hair that fell over his collar and bushy eye-brows, beneath which twinkled eyes of deepest blue. There was a hint of good humor in his delicately-moulded face.

Girl-like, she first noted his extraordinary cleanliness. His linen was spotless, his neat black suit showed no speck of dust.

"You probably met a-er-relative of mine," he said gently. "A crude fellow—a very crude fellow. The uncouth in life jars me terribly. Will you come in, Miss West?"

They passed into a wide hall and down a long broad corridor which was lighted on one side by narrow windows through which the girl had a glimpse of a neatly flagged courtyard, also surrounded by gay flower-beds.

On the other side of the corridor, doors were set at intervals and it was on the second of these that Tim, in passing, read an inscription. It was tidily painted in small, gold lettering:

PLANETOID 127.

The professor saw the young man's puzzled glance and smiled.

"A little conceit of mine," he said.

"Is that the number of an asteroid?" asked Tim, a dabbler in astronomy.

"No—you may search the Berlin Year Book in vain for No. 127," said the professor as he opened the door of a large and airy library and ushered them in. "There must be an asteroid—by which, young lady, is meant one of those tiny planets which abound in the zone between Mars

and Jupiter, and of which, Witts D.Q.—now named Eros—is a remarkable example. My Planetoid was discovered on a certain 12th of July-1/7. And it was not even an asteroid!”

He chuckled and rubbed his long white hands together.

The library with its walnut bookshelves, its deep chairs and faint fragrance of Russian leather, was a pleasant place, thought Elsie. Huge china bowls laden with roses stood in every possible point where bowls could stand. Through the open windows came a gentle breeze laden with the perfume of flowers.

“Tea will be ready in a minute,” said Mr. Colson. “I ordered it when I saw you. Yes, I am interested in asteroids.”

His eyes went mechanically to the cornice of the room above the stone fireplace and Tim, looking up, saw that there was a square black cavity in the oaken paneling and wondered what was its significance.

“They are more real and tangible to me than the great planetary masses. Jupiter—a vapor mass; Saturn—a molten mass, yielding the secret of its rings to the spectroscope; Vulcan—no planet at all, but a myth and a dream of imaginative and romantic astronomers—there are no intra-mercurial planets, by which I mean”—he seemed to find it necessary to explain to Elsie, for

which Chap was grateful—“that between Mercury, which is the nearest planet to the sun and the sun itself, there is no planetary body, though some foolish people think there is and have christened it Vulcan—”

An elderly footman had appeared in the doorway and the professor hurried across to him. There was a brief consultation (Elsie suspected a domestic problem, and was right) and with a word of apology, he went out.

“He’s a rum bird,” began Chap and stopped dead.

From the black cavity above the fireplace came a thin whine of sound and then a deafening splutter like exaggerated and intensified “atmospherics.”

“What is that?” whispered the girl.

Before Tim could answer, the spluttering ceased, and then a soft, sweet voice spoke:

“Lo . . . Col—son! *Jaize ga shil?* I speak you, Col—son . . . Planetoi’ 127 . . . Big fire in my *zehba* . . . city . . . big fire . . .”

There was a click and the voice ceased abruptly, and at that moment Professor Colson came in.

He saw the amazed group staring at the square hole in the wall, and his lips twitched.

“You heard—?” I cut off the connection, though I’m afraid I may not get him again tonight.”

“Who is he, sir?” asked Tim

frowning. "Was that a transmission from any great distance?"

The professor did not answer at once. He glanced keenly and suspiciously at the girl, as though it was her intelligence he feared. And then:

"The man who spoke was a man named Colson," he said deliberately; "and he spoke from a distance of 186 million miles!"

CHAPTER II

THEY listened, dumbfounded. Was the old professor mad? The voice that had spoken to them was the voice of Colson?

"A hundred and eighty-six million miles?" said Tim incredulously. "But, Mr. Colson, that was not your voice I heard"

He smiled faintly and shook his head.

"That was literally my *alter ego*—my other self," he said; and it seemed that he was going to say something else, but he changed the subject abruptly.

"Let us have tea," he said, smiling at Elsie.

Elsie was fascinated by the old man and a little scared, too. She alone of that party realized that the reference he had made to the voice that came one hundred and eighty-six million miles was no jest on his part.

It was Chap who, in his awkward way, brought the conversation back to the subject of mysterious voices.

"They've had signals from Mars on Vancouver, sir," he said. "I saw it in this morning's papers."

Again the professor smiled.

"You think they were atmospherics?" suggested Elsie; and, to her surprise, Colson shook his head.

"No; they were not atmospherics," he said quietly, "but they were not from Mars. I doubt if there is any organic life on Mars, unless it be a lowly form of vegetation."

"The canals—" began Chap.

"That may be an optical illusion," said the science master. "Our own moon, seen at a distance of forty million miles, would appear to be intersected very much as Mars seems to be. The truth is, we can never get Mars to stand still long enough to get a definite photograph!"

"From Jupiter?" suggested Chap, now thoroughly interested.

Again Mr. Colson smiled.

"A semi-molten mass on which life could not possibly exist. Nor could it come from Saturn," he went on tantalizingly, "nor from Venus."

"Then where on earth do these signals come from?" blurted Chap and this time Mr. Colson laughed outright.

AS they sat at tea, Elsie glanced out admiringly upon the brilliant-hued garden that

was visible through the long window, and then she saw something which filled her with astonishment. Two men had come into view round the end of a square-cut hedge. One was the man they had seen half-an-hour previously—the commonplace little fellow who had claimed to be a relative of the professor. The second was taller and older, and, she judged, of a better class. His long, hawk-like face was bent down towards his companion, and they were evidently talking on some weighty matter, to judge by the gesticulations of the stranger.

“By Jove!” said Chap suddenly. “Isn’t that Hildreth?”

Mr. Colson looked up quickly; his keen blue eyes took in the scene at once.

“Yes, that is Mr. Hildreth,” he said quietly. “Do you know him?”

“Rather!” said Chap. “He has often been to our house. My father is on the stock exchange, and Mr. Hildreth is a big shot in the City.”

Colson nodded.

“Yes, he is a very important person in the City,” he said, with just a touch of hidden sarcasm in his voice. “But he is not a very important person here, and I am wondering why he has come again.”

He rose quickly and went out of the room, and presently Tim,

who was watching the newcomers, saw them turn their heads as with one accord and walk out of sight, evidently towards the professor. When the old man came back there was a faint flush in his cheek and a light in his eye which Tim did not remember having seen before.

“They are returning in half an hour,” he said, unnecessarily it seemed to Elsie. She had an idea that the old man was in the habit of speaking his thoughts aloud, and here she was not far wrong. Once or twice she had the uncomfortable feeling that she was in the way, for she was a girl of quick intuitions, and though Professor Colson was a man of irreproachable manners, even the most scrupulous of hosts could not wholly hide his anxiety for the little meal to end.

“We’re taking up your valuable time, Mr. Colson,” she said with a dazzling smile, as she rose when tea was over and offered him her hand. “I think there’s going to be a storm, so we had better get back. Are you coming with us, Tim?”

“Why, surely—” began Chap, but she interrupted him.

“Tim said he had an engagement near and was leaving us here,” she said.

Tim had opened his mouth to deny having made any such statement, when a look from her silenced him. A little later, whilst

Chap was blundering through his half-baked theories on the subject of Mars—Chap had theories on everything under and above the sun—she managed to speak with Tim alone.

I'M quite sure Mr. Colson wants to speak to you," she said; "and if he does, you are not to worry about us: we can get back, it is down-stream all the way."

"But why on earth do you think that?"

"I don't know." She shook her head. "But I have that feeling. And I'm sure he did not want to see you until those two men came."

How miraculously right she was, was soon proved. As they walked into the garden towards the path leading to the riverside, Colson took the arm of his favorite pupil and, waiting until the others were ahead, he said:

"Would it be possible for you to come back and spend the night here, Lensman?"

"Why, yes, sir," said Tim in astonishment.

In his heart of hearts he wanted to explore the place, to see some of the wonders of that great instrument-house which, up to now Colson had made no offer to show them. What was in the room marked "Planetoid 127"? And the queer receiver on the square tower—that had some un-

usual significance, he was certain. And, most of all, he wanted to discover whether the science master had been indulging in a little joke at the expense of the party when he claimed to have heard voices that had come to him from one hundred and eighty-six million miles away.

"Return when you can," said Colson in a low voice; "and the sooner the better. There are one or two things that I want to talk over with you—I waited an opportunity to do so last term, but it never arose. Can you get rid of your friends?"

Tim nodded.

"Very good, then. I will say goodbye to them."

Tim saw his companions on their way until the punt had turned out of sight round the osiers at the end of the backwater, and then he retraced his steps up the hill. He found the professor waiting for him, pacing up and down the garden, his head on his breast, his hands clasped behind him.

"Come back into the library, Lensman," he said; and then, with a note of anxiety in his voice: "You did not see those precious scoundrels?"

"Which precious scoundrels? You mean Dawes and Hildreth?"

"Those are the gentlemen," said the other. "You wouldn't imagine, from my excited appearance when I returned to you,

that they had offered me no less than a million pounds?"

Tim stared in amazement at the master.

"A million pounds, sir?" he said incredulously, and for the first time began to doubt the other's reason.

"A million pounds," repeated Colson, quietly enjoying the sensation he had created. "You will be able to judge by your own ears whether I am insane, as I imagine you believe me to be, or whether this wretched relative of mine and his friend are similarly afflicted. And, by the way, you will be interested to learn that there have been three burglaries in this house during the last month."

Tim gaped. "But surely, sir, that is very serious?"

"It would have been very serious for the burglars if I had, on either occasion, the slightest suspicion that they were on the grounds," said Mr. Colson. "They would have been certainly electrified and possibly killed! But on every occasion when they arrived, it happened that I did not wish for a live electric current to surround the house: that would have been quite sufficient to have thrown out of gear the delicate instruments I was using at the time."

HE led the way into his library, and sank down with a weary

sigh into the depths of a large armchair.

"If I had only known what I know now," he said, "I doubt very much whether, even in the interests of science, I would have subjected myself to the ordeal through which I have been passing during the last four years."

Tim did not answer, and Mr. Colson went on:

"There are moments when I doubt my own sanity—when I believe that I shall awake from a dream, and find that all these amazing discoveries of mine are the figments of imagination due, in all probability, to an indiscreet supper at a very late hour of night!"

He chuckled softly at his own little joke.

"Lensman, I have a secret so profound that I have been obliged to follow the practice of the ancient astronomers."

He pointed through the window to a square stone that stood in the center of the garden, a stone which the boy had noticed before, though he had dismissed it at once as a piece of meaningless ornamentation.

"That stone?" he asked.

Colson nodded.

"Come, I will show it to you," he said, rising to his feet. He opened a door in what appeared to be the solid wall, and Tim followed him into the garden.

The stone stood upon an orna-

mental plinth and was carved with two columns of figures and letters:

| | |
|-----|-----|
| E 6 | O 1 |
| T 2 | D 4 |
| M 4 | L 1 |
| A 1 | N 3 |
| W 1 | U 1 |
| R 2 | B 1 |
| I 3 | S 2 |

"But what on earth does that mean?"

"It is a cryptogram," said Mr. Colson quietly. "When Heyghen made his discovery about Saturn's rings, he adopted this method to prevent himself from being forestalled in the discovery. I have done the same."

"But what does it mean?" asked the puzzled Tim.

"That you will one day learn," said the professor, as they walked back to the house.

His keen ears heard a sound and he pulled out his watch.

"Our friends are here already," he said in a lower voice.

The attitude of the two newcomers was in remarkable contrast. Mr. Hildreth was self-assured, a man of the world to his finger-tips, and greeted the professor as though he were his oldest friend and had come at his special invitation. Mr. Dawes, on the contrary, looked thoroughly uncomfortable.

Tim had a look at the great financier, and he was not im-

pressed. There was something about those hard eyes which was almost repellent.

After perfunctory greetings had passed, there was an awkward pause, and the financier looked at Tim.

"My friend, Mr. Lensman, will be present at this interview," said Colson, interpreting the meaning of that glance.

"He is rather young to dabble in high finance, isn't he?"

"Young or old, he's staying," said Colson, and the man shrugged his shoulders.

"I hope this discussion will be carried on in a calm atmosphere," he said. "As your young friend probably knows, I have made you an offer of a million pounds, on the understanding that you will turn over to me all the information which comes to you by—er—a—" his lip curled—"mysterious method, into which we will not probe too deeply."

"You might have saved yourself the journey," said Colson calmly. "Indeed, I could have my answer a little more final, if it were possible; but it was my wish that you should be refused in the presence of a trustworthy witness. I do not want your millions—I wish to have nothing whatever to do with you."

"Be reasonable," murmured Dawes, who took no important part in the conversation.

THE old man ignored him, and stood waiting for the financier's reply.

"I'll put it very plainly to you, Colson," said Hildreth, sitting easily on the edge of the table. "You've cost me a lot of money. I don't know where you get your market 'tips' from, but you're most infernally right. You undercut my market a month ago, and took the greater part of a hundred thousand pounds out of my pocket. I offer to pay you the sum to put me in touch with the source of your information. You have a wireless plant here, and somewhere else in the world you have a miracle-man who seems to be able to foretell the future—with disastrous consequences to myself. I may tell you—and this you will know—that, but for the fact that your correspondent speaks in a peculiar language, I should have had your secret long ago. Now, Mr. Colson, are you going to be sensible?"

Colson smiled slowly.

"I'm afraid I shall not oblige you. I know that you have been listening in—I know also that you have been baffled. I shall continue to operate in your or any other market, and I give you full liberty to go to the person who is my informant, and who will be just as glad to tell you as he is to tell me, everything he knows."

Hildreth took up his hat with an ugly smile.

"That is your last word?"

Colson nodded.

"My very last."

The two men walked to the door, and turned.

"It is not mine," said Hildreth, and there was no mistaking the ominous note in his tone.

They stood at the window watching the two men until they had gone out of sight, and then Tim turned to his host.

"What does he want really?" he asked.

Mr. Colson roused himself from his reverie with a start.

"What does he want? I will show you. The cause of all our burglaries, the cause of this visit. Come with me."

They turned into the passage, and as the professor stopped before the door labelled "Planetoid 127," Tim's heart began to beat a little faster. Colson opened the door with two keys and ushered him into the strangest room which Tim had ever seen.

A confused picture of instruments, of wires that spun across the room like the web of a spider, of strange little machines which seemed to be endowed with perpetual motion—for they worked all the time—these were his first impressions.

The room was lined with grey felt, except on one side, where there was a strip of fibrous paneling. The professor went towards this. Pushing aside a panel, he

disclosed the circular door of a safe and, reaching in his hand, took out a small red-covered book.

"This is what the burglars want!" he said exultantly. "The Code! The Code of the Stars!"

CHAPTER III

TIM LENS MAN could only stare at the professor.

"I don't understand you, Mr. Colson," he said, puzzled. "You mean that book is a code . . . an ordinary commercial code?"

Colson shook his head.

"No, my boy," he said quietly; "that is something more than a code, it is a vocabulary—a vocabulary of six thousand words, the simplest and the most comprehensive language that humanity has ever known! That is why they are so infinitely more clever than we," he mused. "I have not yet learned the process by which this language was evolved, but it is certain that it is their universal tongue."

He turned with a smile to the bewildered boy.

"You speak English, probably French; you may have a smattering of German and Spanish and Italian. And when you have named these languages, you probably imagine that you have exhausted all that matter, and that the highest expression of human speech is bound up in one or the other, or perhaps all,

of these tongues. Yet there is a tribe on the Upper Congo which has a vocabulary of four thousand words with which to voice its hopes, its sufferings and its joys. And in those four thousand words lies the sum of their poetry, history, and science! If we were as intelligent as we think we are, we should adopt the language of the Upper Congolese as the universal speech."

Tim's head was swimming: codes, languages, Upper Congolese and the mysterious "they." . . . Surely there must be something in Dawes' ominous hints, and this old man must be sick of overmuch learning. As though he realized what was passing through the boy's mind, Colson shook his head.

"No, I am not mad," he said, as he locked the book away in the safe and put the key in his pocket, "unless this is a symptom of my dementia."

He waved his hand to the wire-laden room, and presently Tim, as in a dream, heard his companion explaining the functions of the various instruments with which the room was littered. For the most part it was Greek to him, for the professor had reached that stage of mechanical knowledge where he outstripped his pupil's understanding. It was as though a professor of higher mathematics had strolled into the algebra class and lectured

upon ultimate factors. Now and again he recognized some formula, or caught a mental glimpse of the other's meaning, but for the main part the old man was talking a language he did not comprehend.

"I'm afraid you're going a little beyond me, sir," he said, with a smile, and the old man nodded.

"Yes, there is much for you to learn," he said; "and it must be learned!"

HE paused before a large glass case, which contained what looked to Tim to be a tiny model of a reciprocating engine, except that dozens of little pistons thrust out from unexpected cylinders, and all seemed to be working independent of the others, producing no central and general result.

"What is that, sir?"

Colson smoothed his chin thoughtfully.

"I'm trying to bring the description within the scope of your understanding," he said. "It would not be inexact to describe this as a 'strainer of sound.' Yet neither would it be exact."

He touched a switch and a dozen colored lights gleamed and died amidst the whirling machinery. The hum which Tim had heard was broken into staccato dots and dashes of sound. He turned the switch again and

the monotonous hum was resumed.

"Let us go back to the library," said the professor abruptly.

He came out of the room last, turned out the lights and double-locked the door, before he took his companion's arm and led him back to the library they had recently vacated.

"Do you realize, Lensman," he said as he closed the door, "that there are in this world sounds which never reach the human brain? The lower animals, more sensitive to vibratory waves, can hear noises which are never registered upon the human ear. The wireless expert listened in at the approach of Mars to the earth, hoping to secure a message of some kind. But what did he expect? A similar clatter to that which he could pick up from some passing steamer. And, suppose somebody was signalling—not from Mars, because there is no analogy to human life on that planet, but from some—some other world, big or little—is it not possible that the sound may be of such a character that not only the ear, even when assisted by the most powerful of microphones, cannot detect, but which no instrument man has devised can translate to an audible key?"

"Do you suggest, sir, that signals of that nature are coming through from outer space?"

asked Tim in surprise. And Mr. Colson inclined his head.

"Undoubtedly. There are at least three worlds signalling to us," said the science master. "Sometimes the operators make some mechanical blunder, and there is an accidental emission of sound which is picked up on this earth and credited to Mars. One of the most definite of the three comes from a system which is probably thousands of light-years away. In their words, from a planet that is part of a system beyond our ken. The most powerful telescope cannot even detect the sun around which this planet whirls! Another, and fainter, signal comes from an undetected planet beyond the orbit of Neptune."

"But life could not exist beyond the orbit of Neptune?" suggested Tim.

"Not life as we understand it," said the professor. "I admit that these signals are faint and unintelligible. But the third planet—"

"Is it your Planetoid 127?" asked Tim eagerly; and Colson nodded.

"I asked you to stay tonight," he said, "because I wanted to tell you something of vital interest to me, if not to science. I am an old man, Lensman, and it is unlikely that I shall live for many years longer. I wish somebody to share my secret—somebody who can carry on the work after I have

gone into nothingness. I have given the matter a great deal of thought, passing under review the great scientists of the age. But they are mainly old men: it is necessary that I should have an assistant who has many years before him, and I have chosen you."

For a second the horrible responsibility which the professor was putting upon him struck a chill to the boy's heart. And then the curiosity of youth, the adventurous spirit which is in every boy's heart, warmed him to enthusiasm.

"That will be topping, sir," he said. "Of course, I'm an awful duffer, but willing to learn anything you can teach me. It was about Planetoid 127 you wanted to speak?"

The professor nodded.

"Yes," he said, "it is about Planetoid 127. I have left nothing to chance. As I say, I am an old man and anything may happen. For the past few months I have been engaged in putting into writing the story of my extraordinary discovery: a discovery made possible by the years of unremitting thought and toil I have applied to perfecting the instruments which have placed me in contact with this strange and almost terrifying world."

[T seemed as though he were going to continue, and Tim

was listening with all ears, but in his definite way the old man changed the subject.

"You would like to see round the rest of the house?" he said; and the next hour was spent in strolling around the magnificent range of hothouses.

As Tim was shown from one point of interest to another, it began to dawn upon him that there was truth in Hildreth's accusation, that Mr. Colson was something of a speculator. The house and grounds must have cost thousands; the renovations which had been recently introduced, the erection of the telescope—when Colson mentioned the cost of this, the sum took his breath away—could only have been possible to a man of unlimited income. Yet it was the last thing in the world he would have imagined, for Colson was of the dreamy, unmaterial type, and it was difficult to associate him with a successful career in the Stock Exchange. When Mr. Colson opened the gates of the big garage the boy expected to see something magnificent in the way of cars; but the building was empty except for his old motor bicycle, which was so familiar to the boys of Mildram.

"No, I do not drive a car," said Colson, in answer to his question. "I have so little time, and I find that a motor-bicycle supplies all my needs."

They dined at eight. Neither during the meal nor the period which intervened before bedtime did Mr. Colson make any further reference to his discoveries. He disappeared about ten, after showing Tim to his room. The boy had undressed and was dozing off, when there came a tap at his door.

"Come in, sir," he said, and the professor entered. From his face Tim guessed that something had happened.

"Lensman," he said, and there was a sharp quality in his voice. "Do you remember somebody speaking . . . the wireless voice? I was not in the library when the call came through, so I did not hear it distinctly."

Tim recalled the mysterious voice that had spoken in the library from the aperture above the fireplace.

"Yes, sir; you told me it was Colson—"

"I know, I know," said the professor impatiently. "But tell me how he spoke?" His tone was almost querulous with anxiety. "I only heard the end. Was it a gruff voice, rather like mine?"

Tim shook his head.

"No, sir," he said in surprise; "it was a very thin voice, a sort of whine. . . ."

"A whine?" The professor almost shouted the question.

"Yes, sir."

Colson was fingering his chin.

"That is strange," he said, speaking half to himself. "I have been trying to get him all the evening, and usually it is simple. I received his carrier wave . . . why should his assistant speak . . . ? I have not heard him for three days. What did he say?"

TIM told him, as far as he could remember, the gist of the message which had come through, and for a long time the professor was silent.

"He does not speak English very well—the assistant, I mean—and he would find a difficulty in putting into words . . . you see, our language is very complicated." And then, with a smile: "I interrupted your sleep."

He walked slowly to the door. "If anything should happen, you will find my account in the most obvious place." He smiled faintly. "I'm afraid I am not a very good amateur mason—"

With these cryptic words he took his departure. Tim tossed from side to side and presently dropped into an uneasy doze.

Suddenly there was a sharp crash of sound, and Tim sat up in bed, the perspiration streaming from every pore. Something had wakened him. In an instant he had slipped out of bed and had raced out into the corridor. A deep silence reigned, broken only by the sound of an opening

door and the tremulous voice of the butler.

"Is anything wrong, sir?"

"What did you hear?" asked Tim quickly.

"I thought I heard a shot."

Tim ran down the stairs, stumbling in the darkness, and presently came to the passage from which opened the doors of the library and the room of Planetoid 127.

The library was empty: two lights burned, accentuating the gloom. A quick glance told him that it was not here the professor was to be sought. He had no doubt that in his sleep he had heard the cry of the old man. He turned on the light in the corridor, and, trying the door of the Planetoid room, to his consternation found it was open. The room was in darkness, but again memory served him. There were four light switches near the door, and these he found. Even as he had opened the door he could detect the acrid smell of cordite, and when the light switched on he was not unprepared for the sight which met his eyes. The little machine which Colson had described as the "sound strainer" was a mass of tangled wreckage. Another instrument had been overturned; ends of cut wires dangled from roof and wall. But his eyes were for the moment concentrated upon the figure that lay beneath the open safe. It

was Professor Colson, and Tim knew instinctively that the old man was dead.

CHAPTER IV

COLSON was dead!

He had been shot at close quarters, for the hair about the wound was black and singed. Tim looked over his shoulder to the shivering butler who stood in the doorway.

"Get on the telephone to the police," he said; and, when the man had gone, he made a brief examination of the apartment.

The destruction which the unknown murderer had wrought was hurried but thorough. Half a dozen delicate pieces of apparatus, the value and use of which Tim had no idea, had been smashed; two main wires leading from the room had been cut; but the safe had obviously been opened without violence, for the key was still in the lock. It was the shot which had wakened the boy, and he realized that the safe must have been opened subsequent to the murder.

One of the heavy shutters which covered the windows had been forced open, and the casement window was ajar. Without hesitation, Tim jumped through the window on to a garden bed. Which way had the murderer gone? Not to the high road, that was certain. There could only be one avenue to escape, and that

was the path which led down to the backwater.

He considered the situation rapidly: he was unarmed, and, even if the assassin was in no better shape (which he obviously was not) he would not be a match for a powerfully built man. He vaulted up to the window-sill as the shivering butler made his reappearance.

"I've telephoned the police: they're coming up at once," he said.

"Is there a gun in the house—any kind?" asked Lensman quickly.

"There's one in the hall cupboard, sir."

Tim flew along the corridor, wrenched open the door, found the shot-gun and, providentially, a box of cartridges. Stopping only to snatch an electric hand-lamp from the hall-stand, he sped into the grounds and made his way down the path to the river.

HE had switched on the light of the hand-lamp the moment he had left the house, and here he was at an advantage over the man he followed, who was working in the dark and dared not show a light for fear of detection.

As he approached the river he heard the sound of stumbling footsteps, and challenged his quarry.

"Halt, or I'll shoot!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a pencil of flame quivered ahead in the darkness, something "wanged" past his head and struck the bole of a tree with a thud. Instantly Tim extinguished his lamp. The muzzle of his gun advanced, his finger on the trigger, he moved very cautiously in pursuit.

The man must be somewhere near the river now: the ground was falling more steeply. There was no sound ahead until he heard a splash of water, the hollow sound of feet striking the bottom of a boat, and a faint "chug-chug" of engines. A motor-launch! Even as he reached the riverside he saw the dark shape slipping out towards the river under cover of the trees. Raising his gun, he fired. Instantly another shot came back at him. He fired again; he might not hit the assassin, but he would at any rate alarm the lock-keeper. Then, as the little launch reached the opening which brought it to the river, he saw it slow and come almost to a standstill. For a second he thought the man was returning, and then the explanation flashed upon him. The backwater was choked with weeds and the little propeller of the launch must have caught them. If he could only find a boat! He flashed his lamp vainly up and down the bank.

"Plop!"

The bullet just missed his head. Hastily extinguishing the light, he waited. Somebody was working frantically at the launch's propeller, and again raising his gun, he fired. This time his shot struck home, for he heard a howl of fury and pain. But in another few seconds the launch was moving again, and had disappeared into the open river. There was nothing for Tim to do now but to retrace his steps to the house. He came into the room of death, hot, dishevelled, his pajamas torn to ribbons by the brambles through which he had struggled, to find two police officers in the room. One was kneeling by the side of the dead man; the other was surveying the damaged apparatus.

AT his appearance, the officers turned their attention to Tim.

In a few words he described what he had seen, and while one of the policemen telephoned a warning to the lock-keepers, he gave an account of the other events of that night so far as he knew them.

"There have been several burglaries here," said the sergeant. "I shouldn't be surprised if this is the same fellow that tried to do the other jobs. Do you know anything about this?"

He held a sheet of paper to the boy, and Tim took it. It was

covered with Colson's fine writing.

"It looks almost as though it were a message he'd been writing down. He'd been listening-in—the receivers are still on his ears," said the officer. "But who could tell him stuff like that?"

Tim read the message:

"Colson was killed by robbers in the third part of the first division of the day. Nobody knows who did this, but the correctors are searching. Colson said there was a great earthquake in the island beyond the yellow sea. This happened in the sixth division of the day and many were killed. This place corresponds to Japan, but we call it the Island of the Yellow Sea. The great oil-fields of the Inland Sea have become very rich, and those who own the fields have made millions in the past few days. There will be—"
Here the writing ended.

"What does he mean by 'Colson was killed in the third division' or whatever it is?" said the dumbfounded policeman. "He must have known he was going to be killed . . . it beats me."

"It beats me, too," said Tim sadly.

AT eleven o'clock came simultaneously Inspector Bennett,

from Scotland Yard, and Mr. Colson's lawyer: a stout, middle-aged man, who had some information to give.

"Poor Colson always expected such a death. He had made an enemy, a powerful enemy, and he told me only two days ago that this man would stop at nothing."

"Did he give his name?" asked the detective.

Tim waited breathlessly, expecting to hear Hildreth's name mentioned, but the lawyer shook his head.

"Why did you see him two days ago? On any particular business?"

"Yes," said Mr. Stamford, the lawyer. "I came here to make a will, by which this young gentleman was named as sole heir!"

"I," said Tim incredulously. "Surely you're mistaken?"

"No, Mr. Lensman. I don't mind admitting that, when he told me how he wished to dispose of his property, I urged him against leaving his money to one who, I understand, is a comparative stranger. But Mr. Colson had great faith in you, and said that he had made a study of your character and was satisfied that you could carry on his work. That was the one thing which worried him, the possibility of his life's work being broken off with no successor to take it up. There is a clause in the will which makes it possible for you

to operate his property immediately."

Tim smiled sadly.

"I don't know what 'operating his property' means," he said. And then, as a thought struck him: "Unless he refers to his speculations. The Stock Exchange is an unknown country to me. Has any discovery been made about the man in the motor-launch?"

Inspector Bennett nodded.

"The launch was found abandoned in a local reach of the Thames," he said. "The murderer must have landed and made his way on foot. By the way, do you know he is wounded? We found traces of blood on the launch."

Tim nodded.

"I had an idea I winged him."

Late that afternoon there was a sensational discovery: the body of a man was found lying amidst the weeds three miles down the river. He had been shot with a revolver.

"He is our man undoubtedly," said the inspector who brought the news. "There is a shot wound in his shoulder."

"But I did not use a rifle or a revolver," said Tim, puzzled.

"Somebody else did," said the inspector grimly. "Dead men tell no tales."

"Where was he found?"

"Near Mr. Hildreth's private landing stage."

"Hildreth?" Tim stared at him open-mouthed. "Has Hildreth got a property near here?"

"Oh, yes; he has a big estate about three miles down the river." The detective was eyeing the boy keenly. "What do you know about Mr. Hildreth?"

IN a few words Tim told of the interview which he had witnessed, and the detective frowned.

"It can only be a coincidence that the man was found on his estate," he said. "Mr. Hildreth is a very rich man and a Justice of the Peace."

Nevertheless, he did not speak with any great conviction, and Tim had the impression that Bennett's view of Hildreth was not such an exalted one as he made out.

Borrowing the old motor-bicycle of the science master, he rode over to Bisham and broke the news to Chap West and his sister. The girl was horrified.

"But, Tim, it doesn't seem possible!" she said. "Why should they do it? The poor old man!"

When Chap had recovered from the shock of the news, he advanced a dozen theories in rapid succession, each more wildly improbable than the last; but all his theorizing was silenced when Tim told him of Colson's will.

"I'm only a kid, and absolutely unfitted for the task he has set

me," Tim said quietly; "but I am determined to go on with his work, and shall secure the best technical help I can to reconstitute the apparatus which has been destroyed."

"What do you think is behind it?" asked Chap.

Tim shook his head.

"Something beyond my understanding," he replied. "Mr. Colson made a discovery, but what that discovery was we have to learn. One of the last things he told me was that he had written out a full account of his investigations, and I am starting an immediate search for that manuscript. And then there is the stone in the grounds, with all those queer figures and letters which have to be deciphered."

"Have you any idea what the nature of the discovery was?" asked Chap.

Tim hesitated.

"Yes, I think I have," he said. "Mr. Colson was undoubtedly in communication with another planet!"

CHAPTER V

THEN it *was* Mars!" cried Chap triumphantly.

"Of course it was not Mars," interrupted his sister scornfully. "Mr. Colson told us distinctly that there was no life on Mars."

"Where is it, Tim?" he asked.

"I don't know." Tim shook his head. "I have been questioning

his assistants—there were two at the house—but he never took them into his confidence. The only hint they can give me is that when poor Mr. Colson was listening-in to these mysterious voices he invariably had the receiving gear directed towards the sun. You know, of course, that he did not use the ordinary aerial, but an apparatus shaped like a convex mirror."

"Towards the sun?" gasped Chap. "But there can't be any life on the sun! Dash it all, I don't profess to be a scientific expert but I know enough of physics to see that it's as impossible for life to exist on the sun as it would be to exist in a coke oven! Why, the temperature of the sun is umpteen thousand degrees centigrade . . . and anyway, nobody has ever seen the sun: you only see the telescope. . . ."

"I know all this," said Tim, listening patiently, "but there is the fact: the receiving mirror was not only directed towards the sun, but it moved by clockwork so that it was directed to the sun at all hours of the day, even when the sky was overcast and the sun was invisible. I admit that the whole thing sounds incredible, but Colson was not mad. That voice we heard was very distinct."

"But from what planet could it be?" insisted Chap. "Go over

'em all: eliminate Mars and the Sun, of course, and where is this world? Venus, Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune—phew! You're not suggesting that it is one of the minor planets, are you? Ceres, Pallas, Juno, Vesta. . . ?"

Tim shook his head.

"I am as much puzzled as you, but I am going to spend my life looking for that world."

HE went back to the house. The body of the old man had been moved to a near-by hospital, and the place was alive with detectives. Mr. Stamford was there when he returned, and gave him a number of names and addresses which he thought might be useful to the young man.

"I don't know that I want to know any stockbrokers," said Tim, looking at the list with a wry face.

"You never know," said Mr. Stamford. "After all, Mr. Colson expected you to carry on his work, and probably it will be part of your duties to continue his operations. I happen to know that he paid minute attention to the markets."

He indicated a number of financial newspapers that lay unopened on the table, and Tim took up one, opened it and glanced down the columns. In the main the items of news were meaningless to him. All he saw

were columns of intricate figures which were so much Greek; but presently his eye caught a headline:

"BLACK SEA OIL SYNDICATE.
CHARLES HILDRETH'S GLOOMY
REPORT TO THE
SHAREHOLDERS.

"A meeting of the Black Sea Oil Syndicate was held at the Cannon Street Hotel yesterday afternoon, and Mr. Hildreth, Chairman of the Company, presiding, said that he had very little news for the shareholders that was pleasant. A number of the wells had run dry, but borings were being made on a new part of the concession, though there was scarcely any hope that they would be successful."

TIM frowned. Black Sea Oil Syndicate. . . ? Hildreth? He put a question to the lawyer.

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Stamford. "Hildreth is deep in the oil market. There's some talk of his rigging Black Seas."

"What do you mean by 'rigging'?" asked Tim.

"In this case the suggestion, which was made to me by a knowledgeable authority," said Mr. Stamford, "is that Hildreth was depressing the shares issuing unpromising reports which would induce shareholders to put their shares on the market at a

low figure. Of course, there may be nothing in it: Black Sea Oils are not a very prosperous concern. On the other hand, he may have secret information from his engineers."

"Such as—?" suggested Tim.

"They may have struck oil in large quantities on another part of the property and may be keeping this fact dark, in which case they could buy up shares cheaply, and when the news was made known the scrip would go sky-high and they would make a fortune."

Tim read the report again.

"Do you think there is any chance of oil being found on this property,"

Stamford smiled.

"I am a lawyer, not a magician," he said good-humouredly.

After he had gone, Tim found himself reading the paper: the paragraph fascinated him. Black Sea Oil . . .

Suddenly he leapt to his feet with a cry. That was the message which Mr. Colson had written on the paper—the Oilfields of the Inland Sea!

He ran out of the room and went in search of Stamford.

"I am going to buy Black Sea Oils," he said breathlessly. "Will you tell me what I must do?"

In a few moments the telephone wire was busy.

Mr. Hildreth had not been to his office that day, and when he

strolled in to dinner, and the footman handed him his paper, he opened the page mechanically to the Stock Exchange column and ran his eyes down the list of quotations. That morning Black Sea Oils had stood in the market at 3s. 3d., and almost the first note that reached his eye was in the stop-press column.

"Boom in Black Sea Oils.

There have been heavy buyings in Black Sea Oil shares, which stood this morning in the neighborhood of 3s., but which closed firm at 42s. 6d."

Hildreth's face went livid. His great coup had failed!

IN the weeks which followed the death and funeral of Professor Colson, Tim found every waking minute occupied. He had enlisted the services of the cleverest of scientists, and from the shattered apparatus one of the most brilliant of mechanical minds of the country was rebuilding the broken instruments. Sir Charles Layman, one of the foremost scientific minds in England, had been called into consultation by the lawyer, and to him Tim had related as much as he knew of Professor Colson's secret.

"I knew Colson," said Sir Charles; "he was undoubtedly a genius. But this story you tell me takes us into the realm of

fantasy. It isn't possible that life can exist on the sun; and really, young man, I can't help feeling that you have been deceived over these mysterious voices."

"Then three people were deceived," said Tim firmly. "My friend Chap West and his sister both heard the speaker. And Mr. Colson was not the kind of man who would descend to trickery."

Sir Charles pursed his lips and shook his head.

"It does seem most extraordinary. And frankly, I cannot understand the functions of these instruments. It is quite possible, as Colson said, that there are sounds come to this earth so fine, and pitched in such a key, that the human ear cannot catch them. And I am pretty sure that what he called a 'sound strainer' was an amplifier on normal lines. But the mysterious world—where is it? Life in some form may exist on a planetoid, but it is almost certain that these small masses which whirl through space in the zone between Mars and Jupiter are barren globules of rock as dead as the moon and innocent of atmosphere. There are a thousand-and-one reasons why life could not exist on these planetoids; and of course the suggestion that there can be life on the sun is preposterous."

HE walked up and down the library, smoothing his

bushy white beard, his brows corrugated in a grimace of baffled wonder.

"Most scientists," he said at last, "work to the observations of some pet observer—did the Professor ever mention an astronomer whose calculations he was endeavoring to verify?"

Tim thought for a moment.

"Yes, sir, I remember he spoke once or twice of Professor Watson, an American. I remember once he was lecturing to our school on Kepler's Law, and he mentioned the discoveries of Mr. Watson."

"Watson?" said Sir Charles slowly. "Surely he was the fellow who thought he found Vulcan, a planet supposed by some people to revolve about the sun within the orbit of Mercury. As a matter of fact, what he saw, during an eclipse of the sun, was the two stars, Theta and Zeta Cankri, or, more likely, the star 20 Cankri, which must have been somewhere in the position that Watson described on the day he made his discovery."

Then he asked, with sudden interest:

"Did Professor Colson believe in the existence of Vulcan?"

Tim shook his head.

"No, sir, he derided the idea."

"He was right," nodded Sir Charles. "Vulcan is a myth. There may be intra-Mercurial bodies revolving about the sun

but it is extremely unlikely. You have found no data, no photographs?"

The word "photograph" reminded Tim.

"Yes, there is a book full of big enlargements, but mostly of a solar eclipse," he said. "They were taken on Friday Island last year."

"Would you get them for me?"

Tim went out and returned with a portfolio, which he opened on the table. Sir Charles turned picture after picture without speaking a word, then he laid half a dozen apparently similar photographs side by side and pored over them with the aid of a magnifying-glass. They were the conventional type of astronomical photo: the black disc of the moon, the bubbling white edges of the corona; but evidently Sir Charles had seen something else, for presently he indicated a speck with a stylo.

"These photographs were taken by different cameras," he said. "And yet they all have this."

He pointed to the pin-point of white which had escaped Tim's observation. It was so much part of the flame of the corona that it seemed as though it were a spark thrown out by one of those gigantic eruptions of ignited gas that flame up from the sun's surface.

"Surely that is a speck of dust on the negative?" said Tim.

"But it is on all the negatives," said Sir Charles emphatically. "No, I cannot be sure for the moment, but if that is not Zeta or Theta Cankris—it is too large for the star 20 Cankris—then we may be on the way to rediscovering Professor Colson's world!"

At his request, Tim left him, while, with the aid of charts and almanacs, he plunged into intricate calculations.

WHEN Tim closed the door and came into the corridor he saw the old butler waiting.

"Mr. Hildreth is here, sir. I've put him in the blue drawing-room: will you see him, sir?"

Tim nodded and followed the servant.

Hildreth was standing by a window, looking out upon the lawn, his hands behind him, and he turned, with a quick, bird-like motion as he heard the sound of the turning handle.

"Mr. Lensman," he said, "I want a few words with you alone."

The young man dismissed the butler.

"Well, sir?" he asked quietly.

"I understand that you have engaged in a little speculation. You are rather young to dabble in high finance," drawled Hildreth.

"Do you mean Black Sea Oils?" asked Tim bluntly.

"I had that stock in mind. What made you buy, Mr. Lensman—or rather, what made your trustee buy, for I suppose that, as you're under age, you would hardly carry out the transaction yourself."

"I bought because I am satisfied that Black Sea Oils will rise."

A slow smile dawned on Hildreth's hawklike face.

"If you had come to me," he said coolly, "I could have saved you a great deal of money. Black Sea Oils to-day stand at fifty shillings: they are worth less than fivepence! You are little more than a boy," he went on suavely, "and I can well understand how the temptation to gamble may have overcome you. But I was a friend of Colson's, and I do not like the thought of your money being wasted. I will take all the stock off your hands, paying you at the price you paid for it."

"That is very generous of you," said Tim drily, "but I am not selling. And as for Mr. Colson being a friend of yours—"

"A very good friend," interrupted the other quickly, "and if you tell people that he and I were enemies it may cost you more than you bargain for!"

There was no mistaking the threat in his tone.

"Mr. Hildreth," Tim said quietly, "nobody knows better than you that you were on ill terms

with Mr. Colson. He was constantly spoiling your market—you said as much. You believed that he was possessed of information which enabled him to operate to your detriment, and you knew this information came by wireless, because you had listened-in, without, however, understanding the language in which the messages came. You guessed there was a code, and I believe that you made one or two efforts to secure that code. Your last effort ended in the death of my friend!"

CHAPTER VI

HILDRETH'S face went white. "Do you suggest that I am responsible for Colson's death?"

"You were responsible directly and indirectly," said Tim. "You sent a man here to steal the code-book—a man who has been identified this afternoon as a notorious criminal. Whether you told him to shoot, or whether he shot to save his skin, we shall never know. The burglar was killed so that he could not talk."

"By whom?" asked Hildreth steadily.

"You know best," was the curt reply.

Tim opened the door and stood waiting. The man had regained some of his composure, and, with an easy laugh, walked into the corridor.

"You will hear from me again," he said.

"Thank you for the warning," was Tim's rejoinder.

After he had seen his unwelcome visitor off the premises, Tim went in search of Stamford, who, with his two assistants, was working in a little study getting out particulars of the old man's investments. The lawyer listened in silence while Tim narrated what had passed.

"He is a very dangerous man," said Mr. Stamford at last; "and, so far from being rich, I happen to know that he is on the verge of ruin. There are some queer stories about Hildreth. I have had a hint that he was once in an Australian prison, but, of course, there is no evidence to connect him with this crime. What are your immediate plans?"

"The voice amplifier has been reconstituted," said Tim. "The experts are making a test to-day, though I very much doubt whether they will succeed in establishing communication."

A smile fluttered at the corner of the lawyer's mouth.

"Do you still believe that Mr. Colson was in communication with another planet?"

"I'm certain," said Jim emphatically.

He went back to the blue drawing-room, and had hardly entered before Sir Charles came in.

"It is as I thought," said the scientist: "neither Zeta nor Theta! It is, in fact, a distinct body of some kind, and, in my judgment, well outside the orbit of the hypothetical Vulcan. If you look at the back of the photograph—"

He turned it over, and Tim saw that, written in pencil in the microscopic caligraphy of the Professor, were a dozen lines of writing.

"I knew, of course, that this was a dead world, without atmosphere or even water. There can be no life there. I made an enlargement by my new process, and this revealed a series of flat, rocky valleys."

WHAT the deuce his new process was, heaven only knows!" said Sir Charles in despair. "Poor Colson must have been the most versatile genius the world has known. At any rate, that disposes of the suggestion that this planetary body is that whence come the signals—if they come at all."

Sir Charles waited until the experts had finished the work of reassembling two of the more complicated machines; but, though experimenting until midnight, they could not establish communication, and at last, with a sense of despair, Tim ordered the work to cease for the night.

The whole thing was becoming a nightmare to him: he could not sleep at nights. Chap and his sister came over in the morning to assist him in a search, which had gone on ever since the death of Professor Colson.

"We can do no more," said Tim helplessly, "until we have seen the Professor's manuscript. Until then we do not know for what we are searching."

"What about that stone in the garden? Won't that tell you anything?" asked Chap. "I'd like to see it."

They went out into the courtyard together and stood before the stone in silence.

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| T 2 | D 4 |
| H 4 | L 1 |
| A 1 | N 3 |
| W 1 | U 1 |
| R 2 | B 1 |
| I 3 | S 2 |

"Of course, that isn't as difficult as it appears," said Chap, to whom cryptograms were a passion. "There is a sentence written there, containing so many 'e's', so many 'h's', etcetera, and perhaps, when we find the sentence, the mystery will be half solved."

HE jotted the inscription down in a notebook, and throughout the day was puzzling over a

solution. Night came, and the two were on the point of departure, when Chap said suddenly:

"Do you think you were wise, Tim, to tell that reporter all you did?"

(Tim had given an interview to a local newspaper, which had described more fully than he had intended—more fully, indeed, than his evidence at the inquest—what had happened immediately preceding Colson's death.)

"Because, y' know, it struck me," said Chap, "that the poor old Professor's manuscript would be very valuable to a certain person. Does it occur to you that our friend might also be searching for this narrative?"

This was a new idea to Tim.

"Why, yes," he said slowly; "I never thought of that. No; that didn't strike me. But I don't know where he would find it. We've taken out every likely stone in the building; I've had the cellars searched—"

"What makes you think it's behind a stone?" asked Chap.

"His reference to a mason. My guess—and I may not be far wide of the mark—is that Mr. Colson, having written his manuscript, hid it in one of the walls. But so far I have not been able to discover the hiding-place."

He walked to the end of the drive to see his friends off, and

then returned to the study. He was alone in the house now, save for the servants. Sir Charles had gone back to town by the last train, and Stamford had accompanied him.

HE had taken up his quarters in a spare room immediately above the library, and for an hour after his visitors had departed he sat on the broad window-seat, looking down into the courtyard, now bathed in the faint radiance of the crescent moon. The light shone whitely upon the cryptogram stone, and absently, he fixed his eyes upon this, the least of the old man's mysteries. And then—was his eye playing tricks with him? He could have sworn he saw a dark figure melt out of the darkness and move along the shadow of the box hedge.

He pushed open the casement window, but could see nothing.

"I'm getting jumpy," he said to himself, and rising with a yawn, took off his coat preparatory to undressing. As he did so, he glanced out of the window again and started. Now he was sure: he could see the shapeless black shadow, and it was moving towards the cryptogram stone.

His pulse beat a little quicker as he watched. There was no doubt about it now. In the moonlight the figure in the long black coat and the broad sombrero

which shaded his face, stood clearly revealed. It was touching the stone, and even as Tim looked the little obelisk fell with a crash.

In a second Tim was out of the room and speeding along the corridor. As he came into view of the figure, it stooped and picked something from the ground.

The manuscript! What a fool he had been! That was where the old man had concealed the story of his discovery! But there was no time for regret: the mysterious visitant had already disappeared into the shadows. Was he making for the river? Tim was uncertain. He was halfway down the slope before he realized that he had made a mistake. Behind him he heard the soft purr of a motor-car, and, racing up the slope, he came into view of a red tail-light as it disappeared down the broad drive towards the road. The great iron gates were closed, and that would give him a momentary advantage, though he knew he could not reach the car before they were open.

THEN he remembered Colson's motor-bicycle: he had left it leaning against the wall and had forgotten to bring it in after the trip he had made to Bisham that morning. Yes, there it was! He had hardly started the machine going when he heard a crash.

The unknown had driven his car through the frail iron gates and was flying along the road to Maidenhead.

Tim came out in pursuit and put his machine all out. The car ahead gained until it came to the foot of a long and tiring hill, and then the gap between them closed. Once the driver looked back, and a minute later something dropped in the road. Tim only just avoided the spare tire which had been thrown overboard to trip him.

The car reached the crest of the hill as Tim came up to its rear, and, heedless of danger, stretched out his hand, and, catching hold of the hood, let the motor-bicycle slip from between his knees.

For a second he held on desperately, his feet swinging in the air, and then, with an effort, he threw his leg over the edge of the hood and dropped breathlessly on to the seat behind the driver. At first the man at the wheel did not realize what had happened, and then, with a yell of rage, he turned and struck blindly at the unauthorized passenger.

The blow missed him by a fraction of an inch, and in another second his arm was around the driver's neck. The car swayed and slowed, and then an involuntary movement of the man revealed the whereabouts of the manuscript. Tim thrust into the

inside-pocket and his fingers touched a heavy roll of paper. In a flash the packet was in his hand, and then he saw the moonlight gleam on something which the man held.

The car was now almost at a standstill, and, leaping over the side, Tim plunged into the hedge by the side of the road. As he did so, he heard the "zip!" of a bullet and the patter of leaves. He ran on wildly, his breath coming in short gasps. To his ears came the blundering feet of his pursuer. He was out of breath and in no condition to meet the murderous onrush of his enemy.

And then, as he felt he could not go a step farther, the ground opened underneath his feet and he went down, down, down. For a second he lost consciousness. All that remained of his breath was knocked from his body, and he could only lie and gape at the starlit sky.

CHAPTER VII

LOOKING up, he saw a head and shoulders come over the edge of the quarry into which he had fallen. Apparently the man was not prepared to take the risk of following, for presently the sound of his footsteps died away and there was silence.

He lay for half an hour motionless, recovering his breath. Although his arm was bruised, he could move it and no bones

were broken. He rose cautiously to his knees and explored the position so far as it was revealed by the moonlight.

He had fallen twenty or thirty feet down a steep, chalky slope; but he was by no means at the bottom of the quarry face, and he had to move with the greatest care and circumspection. Presently, however, he found a rough path, which seemed to run interminably upwards. It was nearly half-an-hour later when he came to the road. The car was gone, and he walked back the way he had come, hoping that he would be able to retrieve his motor-bicycle intact, though he had his doubts whether it would be usable. To his delight, when he came upon the machine, he discovered it had suffered little damage other than twisted handlebars. His run home was without event.

Apparently his hasty exit had been heard, for the house was aroused and two manservants were searching the grounds when he came in.

"I heard the crash at the gate, sir," said the butler. "Lord! I'm glad to see you back. Somebody's thrown over that stone in the courtyard. . . ."

He babbled on, and Tim was so glad to hear the sound of a human voice that he did not interrupt him.

There was no sleep for him that night. With successive cups

of strong coffee, brought at intervals, he sat poring over the manuscript, page by page, almost incredulous of his own eyes and senses. The sunlight poured in through the windows of the little study and found him still sitting, his chin on his palms, the manuscript before him. He had read it again and again until he knew almost every word. Then, locking the papers away in the safe, he walked slowly to the instrument room, and gazed in awe at this evidence of the dead man's genius.

SOMETHING within him told him that never in the future would human speech pulsate through this network of wires; never again would that queer little amplifier bring within human hearing the thin sounds of space. Even the code was gone: that vocabulary, reduced with such labor to a dictionary of six thousand words.

He turned the switch and set the little machine working; saw the multi-colored lights gleam and glow. This much the mechanics had succeeded in doing. But the words that filtered through light and charcoal would, he thought, be dead for everlasting. He turned another switch and set something working which Sir Charles had described as a miniature air pump, and stood watching absent-mind-

edly as the piston thrust in and out. If he only had one tenth of Colson's genius!

His hand had gone out to turn the switch that stopped the machine, when:

"Oh, Colson, why do you not speak to me?"

The voice came from the very center of the machine. There was no visible microphone. It was as though the lights and the whirling wheels had become endowed with a voice. Tim's heart nearly stopped beating.

"Oh, Colson," wailed the voice, "they are breaking the machines. I have come to tell you this before they arrive. He is dead—he, the master, the wizard, the wonderful man . . ."

The servant! Mr. Colson had told him that it was the servant who had spoken. The astral Colson was dead. How should he reply?

"Where are you?" he asked hoarsely, but there was no answer, and soon he understood why.

Presently:

"I will wait for you to speak. When I hear you I will answer. Speak to me, Colson! In a thousand seconds. . . ."

A thousand seconds! Colson had told him once that wireless waves travel at the same speed as light. Then he was a hundred and eighty million miles away, and a thousand seconds must

pass—nearly seventeen minutes—before his voice could reach through space to the man who was listening.

How had he made the machine work? Perhaps the mechanism had succeeded before, but there had been nobody at the other end—wherever the other end might be. And then:

"Oh, Colson, they are here . . . goodbye!"

There came to him the sound of a queer *tap-tap-tap* and then a crackle as though of splintered glass, and then a scream, so shrill, so full of pain and horror, that involuntarily he stepped back. Then came a crash, and silence. He waited, hardly daring to breathe, but no sound came. At the end of an hour he turned off the switch and went slowly up to his room.

HE awoke to find a youth sitting on the edge of his bed. He was so weary and dulled that he did not recognize Chap, even after he spoke.

"Wake up: I've got some news for you, dear old bird," said Chap, staring owlishly through his thick, heavy glasses. "There's a Nemesis in this business—you may have heard of the lady—Miss Nemesis of Nowhere. First the burglar man is killed and then his boss is smashed to smithereens."

Tim struggled up.

"Who?" he asked. "Not Hildreth?"

Chap nodded.

"He was found just outside Maidenhead, his car broken to bits—they think his steering-wheel went wrong when he was doing sixty an hour. At any rate, he smashed into a tree, and all that's left of his machine is hot iron!"

"Hildreth! Was he killed?"

Chap nodded.

"Com-pletely," he said callously. "And perhaps it's as well for him, for Bennett was waiting at his house to arrest him. They've got proof that he hired that burglar. Do you know what time it is? It's two o'clock, you lazy devil, and Sir Charles and Stamford are waiting to see you. Sir Charles has a theory—"

Tim swung out of bed and walked to the window, blinking into the sunlit garden.

"All the theories in the world are going to evaporate before the facts," he said. Putting his hand under his pillow, he took out the Professor's manuscript. "I'll read something to you this afternoon. Is Elsie here?"

Chap nodded.

"I'll be down in half an hour," he said.

His breakfast was also his luncheon, but it was not until after the meal was over, and they had adjourned to the library, that he told them what had hap-

pened in the night. Bennett, who arrived soon after, was able to fill in some of the gaps of the story.

HILDRETH," he said, "in spite of his wealth and security, was a crook of crooks. It is perfectly true that he was tried in Australia and sent to penal servitude. He had installed a big wireless plant in his house, and there is no doubt that for many years he had made large sums of money by picking up commercial messages that have been sent by radio and decoding and using them to his own purpose. In this way he must have learnt something about Mr. Colson's correspondent—he was under the impression that Colson received messages in code and was anxious to get the code-book. By the way, we found the charred remnants of that book in the car. It was burnt out, as you probably know. That alone would have been sufficient to convict Hildreth of complicity in the murder. Fortunately, we have been saved the trouble of a trial."

"None of the code remains?" asked Tim anxiously.

The detective shook his head.

"No, sir, none. There are one or two words—for instance, 'Zelith' means 'the Parliamentary system of the third decade,' whatever that may mean. It seems a queer sort of code."

"That is very unfortunate," said Tim. "I had hoped to devote my time to telling the history of this strange people, and the book would have been invaluable."

"Which people is this?" asked Sir Charles puzzled. "Did our friend get into communication with one of the lost tribes?"

Tim laughed, in spite of himself.

"No, sir. I think the best explanation I can offer you is to read Mr. Colson's manuscript, which I discovered last night. It is one of the most remarkable stories that has ever been told, and I'll be glad to have you here, Sir Charles, so that you may supply explanations which do not occur to me."

"Is it about the planet?" asked Sir Charles quickly, and Tim nodded.

"Then you have discovered it! It is a planetoid—"

Tim shook his head.

"No, sir," he said quietly. "It is a world as big as ours."

The scientist looked at him open-mouthed.

"A world as big as ours, and never been discovered by our astronomers? How far away?"

"At its nearest, a hundred and eighty million miles," said Tim.

"Impossible!" cried Sir Charles scornfully. "It would have been detected years ago. It is absolutely impossible!"

"It has never been detected

because it is invisible," said Tim.

"Invisible? How can a planet be invisible? Neptune is much farther distant from the sun—"

"Nevertheless, it is invisible," said Tim. "And now," he said, as he took the manuscript from his pocket, "if you will give me your attention, I will tell you the story of Neo. Incidentally, the cryptogram on the stone reads: 'Behind the sun is another world!'"

CHAPTER VIII

TIM turned the flyleaf of the manuscript and began reading in an even tone.

"THE STORY OF NEO."

"My name" (the manuscript began) "is Charles Royton Colson. I am a Master of Arts of the University of Cambridge, science lecturer to Mildram School, and I have for many years been engaged in the study of the Hertzian waves, and that branch of science commonly known as radiology. I claim in all modesty to have applied the principles which Marconi brought nearer to perfection, when wireless telegraphy was unknown. And I was amongst the pioneers of wireless telephony. As is also generally known, I am a mathematician and have written several textbooks upon astronomy. I am also the author of a well-known monograph on the subject of the In-

clinations of the Planetary Orbits; and my treatise on the star Oyonis is familiar to most astronomers.

"For many years I engaged myself in studying the alterations of ellipses following the calculations and reasonings of Lagrange, who to my mind was considerably less of a genius than Professor Adams, to whom the credit for the discovery of Neptune should be given. . . ."

[Here followed a long and learned examination of the incidence of Neptune's orbit, as influenced by Uranus.]

". . . My astronomical and radiological studies were practically carried on at the same time. In June, 1914, my attention was called to a statement made by the Superintendent of the great wireless telegraph station outside Berlin, that he had on three separate occasions taken what he described as 'slurred receptions' from an unknown station. He gave excellent technical reasons why these receptions could not have come from any known station and he expressed the opinion, which was generally scoffed at, that the messages he had taken came from some extra-terrestrial source. There immediately followed a suggestion that these mysterious dashes and dots had come from Mars. The matter was lost sight of owing to the outbreak of the

European War, and when, in 1915, the same German engineer stated that he had received a distinct message of a similar character, the world, and particularly the Allied world, rejected the story, for the credibility of the Germans at that period did not stand very high.

A YEAR later, the wireless station at Cape Cod also reported signals, as did a private station in Connecticut; whilst the Government station at Rio de Janeiro reported that it had heard a sound like 'a flattened voice.' It was obvious that these stories were not inventions, and I set to work on an experimental station which I had been allowed to set up at the school, and after about six months of hard toil I succeeded in fashioning an instrument which enabled me to test my theories. My main theory was that, if the sound came from another world, it would in all probability be pitched in a key that would be inaudible to human ears. For example, there is a dog-whistle which makes no sound that we can detect, but which is audible to every dog. My rough amplifier had not been operating for a week when I began to pick up scraps of signals and scraps of words—unintelligible to me, but obviously human speech. Not only was I able to hear, but I was able to make my-

self heard; and the first startling discovery I made was that it took my voice a thousand and seven seconds to reach the person who was speaking to me.

"I was satisfied now that I was talking to the inhabitants of another world, though, for my reputation's sake, I dared not make my discovery known. After hard experimental work, I succeeded in clarifying the voices, and evidently the person at the other end was as anxious as I to make himself understood and to understand the nature of his unknown correspondent's speech.

"You may imagine what a heart-breaking business it was, with no common vocabulary, invisible to one another, and living possibly in conditions widely different, to make our meaning clear to one another. We made a start with the cardinal numbers, and after a week's interchange we had mastered these. I was then struck with the idea of pouring a glass of water from a tumbler near to my microphone, and using the word 'water.' In half-an-hour I heard the sound of falling water from the other end and the equivalent word, which will be found in the vocabulary. I then clapped my hands together, and used the word 'hand.' With these little illustrations, which took a great deal of time, began the formation of the dictionary. In the Neo language

there are practically no verbs and few adjectives. Very much is indicated by a certain inflexion of voice; even the tenses are similarly expressed; and yet, in spite of this, the Neothians to whom I spoke had no very great difficulty, once I had learnt the art of the inflexion, in supplying the English equivalent.

ALL the time I was searching the heavens in the vain endeavour to discover the exact location of this world, which was, from the description I had, exactly the same size as ours, and therefore should have been visible. I had maps of the southern hemispheres, reports from the astronomers of Capetown and Brisbane, but they could offer me no assistance. It was certain that there was in the heavens no visible planetary body as big as Neo.

"The chief difficulty I had lay in the fact that the voices invariably came from the direction of the sun; and it was as certain as anything could be that life could not exist on that great golden mass. Notwithstanding this, unless my mirror was turned to the sun, I received no message whatever; and even in the middle of the night, when I was communicating with Neo, it was necessary that I should follow the sun's course.

"Then came the great eclipse, and, as you know, I went to the

South Sea Islands to make observations. It was our good fortune to have fine weather, and at the moment of total eclipse I took several particularly excellent photographs, some of which you will find in the portfolio marked 'L.' In these and photographs taken by other astronomers, you will see, if you make a careful observation, close to the corona, a tiny speck of light, which at first I thought was my world, but which afterwards I discovered was a dead mass of material upon which it was impossible for life to exist.

"One night, when I was turning over the matter in my mind, and examining each photograph in the study of my house on the Thames, the solution flashed on me. This tiny speck, which was not a star, and was certainly not Vulcan, was the satellite of another world, and that world was moving on the same orbit as our own earth, following exactly the same course, but being, as it was, immediately opposite to us behind the sun, was never visible! On whatever part of the ellipse we might be, the sun hid our sister world from us, and that was why the voice apparently came from the sun, for it was through the solar center that the waves must pass. Two earths chasing one another along the same path, never overtaking, never being overtaken, balancing one another

perfectly! It was a stupendous thought!

I CONVEYED to my unknown friend, who called himself Colson, though I am under the impression that that was due to a misconception on his part as to what Colson meant—he probably thought that 'Colson' was the English word for 'scientist'—and I asked him to make observations. These he sent to me after a few days, confirming my theory. It was after we had begun to talk a little more freely, and my acquaintance with the language had increased so that I could express myself clearly, that it occurred to me there was an extraordinary similarity both in our lives and our environment. And this is the part in my narrative which you will find difficult to believe—I discovered that these two worlds were not only geographically exact, but that the incidents of life ran along on parallel lines. There were great wars in Neo, great disasters, which were invariably duplicated on our earth, generally from two to three days before or after they had happened in this new world. Nor was it only the convulsions of nature that were so faithfully reproduced. Men and women were doing in that world exactly as we were doing in ours. There were Stock Exchanges and street cars, rail-

ways, airplanes, as though twin worlds had produced twin identities; twin inspirations.

"I learnt this first when my friend told me that he had been seeking me for some time. He said that he had had a broken knee some five years ago, and during his enforced leisure he had pointed out the possibility of his having another identity. He said he was frequently feeling that the person he met for the first time was one in reality whom he had seen before; and he was conscious that the thing he did to-day, he had done a week before. That is a sensation which I also have had, and which every human being has experienced.

BUT to go back to the story of his having been laid up with a broken knee. He had no sooner told me this than I realized that I also had had a broken knee—I had a spill on my motor-bicycle—and that I had spent the hours of my leisure pondering the possibility of there being another inhabited planet! There is a vulgar expression, frequently met with amongst neurotic people, that they have twin souls. In very truth this man was my twin soul: was me, had lived my life, thought my thoughts, performed every action which I performed. The discovery staggered me, and I began to fear for my reason; so I went to London and

consulted an eminent Harley Street specialist. He assured me that I was perfectly normal and sane, and offered me the conventional advice that I should go away for a holiday.

"Then one day my astral friend, Colson, incidentally mentioned that there was great excitement in his town because a man had bought some steel stock which had since risen considerably in price—he mentioned the name—and, glancing through a newspaper, I saw the name of a stock which sounded very similar to that of which he had told me. Moreover, the price was very much as he had mentioned it; and the wild idea occurred to me that if happenings were actually duplicated, I might possibly benefit by my knowledge. With great trepidation I invested the whole of my savings, which were not very considerable, in these shares, and a few days later had the gratification of selling out at a colossal profit. I explained to my friend at the next opportunity what I had done, and he was considerably amused, and afterwards took an almost childish delight in advising me as to the violent fluctuations in various stocks. For years I have bought and sold with considerable benefit to myself. Not only that, but I have been able to warn Governments of impending disasters. I informed the

Turkish Government of the great Armenian earthquake, and warned the Lamborn Shipping Company of the terrible disaster which overtook one of their largest liners—though I was not thanked for my pains.

“After this had been going on for some years, I was prepared to learn that my friend had incurred the enmity of a rich man, whom he called Frez on his side, and that this had been brought about unwittingly through me. For this is a curious fact: not everything on this new world is three days in advance of ours. Often it happened that the earth was in advance, and I was able, in our exchanges, to tell him things that were happening here which had not yet occurred in Neo, with the result that he followed my example, and in the space of a year had become a very rich man.

COLSON, as I called him, had a servant, whose name I have never learnt; he was called the equivalent to ‘helper,’ and I guess, rather than know, that he is a much younger man than my double, for he said that he had been to school as a pupil of Colson’s. He too learnt quickly; and if there is any difference in the two worlds, it is a keener intelligence: they are more receptive, quicker to grasp essentials.

“There are necessarily certain

differences in their methods of government, but these differences are not vital. In Neo men are taught the use of arms, and receive their guerdon of citizenship (which I presume is the vote) only on production of a certificate of proficiency. But in the main their lives run parallel with ours. The very character of their streets, their systems of transportation, even their prison system, are replicas of those on this earth. The main difference, of course, is that their one language is universal. I intend at a later date writing at greater length on the institutions of Neo, but for the moment it is most necessary that I should get down particulars of the machines and apparatus employed by me in communicating with our neighbors. . . .”

Here followed twenty closely-written pages of technical description. Tim folded the manuscript and looked around at the astonished faces. Stamford was the first to break the silence.

“Preposterous!” he spluttered. “Impossible! Absurd! . . . It’s a nightmare! Another world—good God!”

“I believe every word of it.” It was Sir Charles’ quiet voice that stilled the agitated lawyer. “Of course, that is the speck by the side of the corona! Not the world which poor Colson found, but the moon of that world.”

"But couldn't it be visible at some time?"

Sir Charles shook his head.

"Not if it followed the exact orbit of the earth and was placed directly opposite—that is to say, immediately on the other side of the sun. It might overlap at periods, but in the glare of the sun it would be impossible to see so tiny an object. No, there is every possibility that Colson's story is stark truth."

HE took the manuscript from Tim's hand and read rapidly through the technical description.

"With this," he said, touching the paper, "we shall be able to get into communication with these people. If we only had the vocabulary!" he groaned.

"I am afraid you will never hear from Neo again, sir," said Tim quietly, and told of that brief but poignant minute of con-

versation he had had before the cry of the dying servant, and the crash of broken instruments, had brought the voice to an abrupt end.

After the lawyer and the scientist had departed, he went with Elsie into the instrument room, and they gazed in silence upon the motionless apparatus.

"The link is broken," he said at last; "it can never be forged again, unless a new Colson arrives on both earths."

She slipped her arm in his.

"Aren't you glad?" she asked softly. "Do you want to know what will happen to-morrow or the next day?"

He shivered.

"No, I don't think so. But I should like to know what will happen in a few years' time, when I'm a little older and you're a little older?"

"Perhaps we'll find a new world of our own," said Elsie.

THE END

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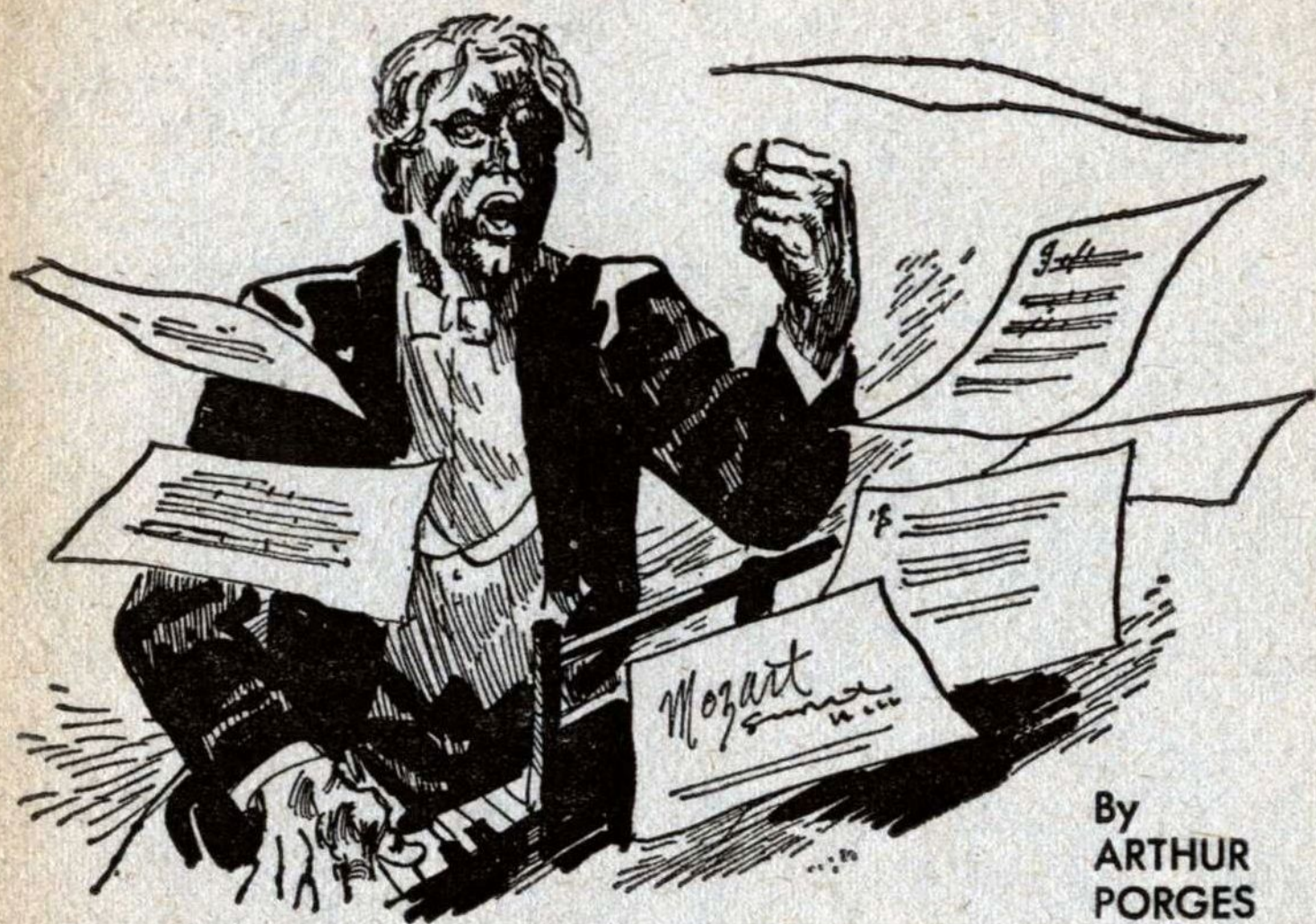
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By
ARTHUR
PORGES

Illustrator SUMMERS

THE MOZART ANNUITY

*Cross a palm with silver, and you never
know what the result will be.*

THE greatest interpreter of Mozart who ever lived was undoubtedly Ernst von Karman. Beginning, somewhat like his own idol, as a music prodigy at the age of six, he soon became not only a virtuoso pianist, but a highly gifted conductor as well. At twenty, he had captivated Europe; at thirty, his fame was world-wide. And now, still under forty, he was the Toscanini of

his day, isolated in lonely eminence. He was also quite wealthy, not only from his fees as a concert artist, and the sales of his stereo-tapes, but from his voluminous writings on eighteenth century music in general, and Mozart in particular.

Above all, he acted as a public relations man for his idol, now dead almost two hundred years. To those who saw nothing but a

simple-minded serenity in the composer, he pointed out the stormy episodes in the great D Minor Piano Concerto; the sweep and power of the G Minor Symphony. If anybody referred to Mozart as "uncomplicated," he was lucky to escape with minor injuries, since Von Karman was a husky giant, with long arms and a short temper.

"There is more subtlety, depth, and compassion in the slow movement of nearly any Mozart concerto than in the whole mass of dissonant rubbish churned out since 1900," Von Karman had informed more than one dolt, usually with a saddle-sized hand at the victim's collar.

It was his unalterable conviction that the composer had died too young to realize the full potentialities of his genius. Von Karman, reading about Mozart's struggle against poverty and the thick teutonic skulls of petty princes, was not ashamed to weep.

FOR a few pitiful coins," he would snarl, "this incomparable genius—the man who wrote the world's only perfect opera, 'Don Giovanni,'—might have lived to be as old as Verdi, and done far better work than that erratic organ-grinder. Why, his last compositions are superior to much of Beethoven's output. In my opinion, Mozart at sixty,

would have topped them all: Bach, Beethoven, Brahms."

One morning, as he sat at his magnificent Bechstein, practising Sonata Number 15, in C, his fury reached new heights, and slamming those huge, sinewy hands on the keys, Von Karman roared: "I'd sell my soul to the devil for a chance to help Mozart! I was born too late, damn the luck."

There was a faint cough behind him.

"That won't be necessary, Ernst," a mild voice said. "Even if the devil dared meddle with a soul like yours."

Von Karman whirled on the stool.

"Oh, it's you, Karl. What—out of the laboratory so early?"

His younger brother, a talented if unorthodox inventor, shared the ten-room house with him—expense free, being penniless like most of his class—and experimented in the basement. So far he had taken out eight patents, all for gadgets so complicated nobody could use them. None of them, consequently, had earned a dime.

"I may have solved your problem," Karl said shyly, giving his brother a warm smile. He was completely devoid of envy, and loved Ernst.

"Nobody can do that," Von Karman said moodily. "The past is gone; Mozart is dead—killed

by poverty and stupidity!" he added in a near yell of rage.

"Ah, but you see," Karl said, "the machine is done. My machine—you remember, Ernst. I finally solved that last equation that was blocking me. An infinite matrix—" He broke off the explanation, as his brother's face reddened. Ernst hated mathematics as much as he loved music.

"Sorry," Karl mumbled. He should have remembered that any technical term from his own field was a dirty word to Ernst. "But, don't you see," he said, "with this time machine, it may actually be possible, for the first time, to *help* Mozart."

Ernst was off the stool in a flash, his eyes shining.

"You mean I could go back—back to 1760? See him; talk to him; God, to hear him play—even touch him! I can't believe it."

"You'd better not," Karl replied. "Slow down, Ernst. I said nothing about sending *you* back. The machine is far too small; besides, I have no idea whatsoever about its effect on living matter. It might be dangerous; even fatal. Do you think I'd risk your life—you, my brother? No, Ernst, what I think is this: Why not send Mozart some money? That, I know my machine can do."

"Money!" his brother exclaimed, striding up and down

the large, sunny room in his agitation. "But, of course. Karl, you are a genius! I shall go to the bank at once, and—" Here he saw Karl's head shaking a firm negative, and stopped.

"Our money—American money in 1760?" his brother jibed. "Come, Ernst, you should know better. You, the eighteenth century expert."

The older man flushed.

I'M a fool—too excited. You are right. But what then?" He was silent a moment. "Wunderlich!" he cried. "We'll just get some old money—from a dealer; say, that coin man; what's his name? Larkin. On Hollywood Boulevard. Thalers—that's it."

"Maybe." Karl was dubious. "I don't think you could ever find enough eighteenth century thalers for a life annuity, not in 1965."

"Well, then?" his brother said impatiently.

"You could send some gold. Gold is always good, and doesn't tell where it comes from, or what year."

"Now you are wrong," Ernst said in triumph. "One cannot buy gold at all in this country."

Karl was unperturbed.

"Silver, then," he said calmly. "That, anybody can still buy. You could send Mozart a hundred, two hundred pounds of pure silver. From that, many

thousands of thalers could be minted, I imagine."

Ernst was thinking hard.

"But this needs careful thought," he said slowly. "It would not do to send so much money to a child, or even a youth; yet Mozart should get help while still young and plastic."

"We'll send it to Leopold, then. His father."

"Maybe. But again, that might not be good. Leopold was honest, but very ambitious—a man of great drive. He might try to improve the money by investment. Perhaps it should be out of both their hands. Yes, that would be safest."

"Then I have it!" Karl cried. "A bank! Just as today. Put the money in trust—so much a month to the Mozarts, but they can't meddle with the capital."

"A bank," Ernst repeated. "That makes sense."

"The Hartmanns," his brother said. "We'll send the silver direct to them—with a note; you could write it. The stuff will appear right in their office in—where will it be, Ernst?"

"I don't know yet. Vienna, probably."

"We can trust the Hartmann Bank, isn't that so?"

"It is certainly so," Ernst said. "They built their financial empire on trust. They were honest. And you are right; that is the only way to handle the affair.

But," he added gravely, "we must be extremely careful about the best time to help Mozart. It shouldn't be too early or too late in his career. Have you any idea of the effect?" he demanded. "What will happen at this end, so to speak?"

"I don't know," was the frank reply. "Nobody could say. You can't change the past without affecting the future. I would guess from the mathematics"—here Ernst winced—"that you will suddenly become aware, with no surprise, as if you had always known them, of many more Mozart works—symphonies, concertos, chamber music. At the same time, probably, all the reference works will have new and different biographies and catalogs of the man and his compositions. No doubt certain minor things about his contemporaries will also change. But I can't be too positive; there might be some kind of a time-lag, just after the money reaches them. After all, the effects of financial security are not felt immediately. But, again, those years are long gone." He shrugged. "I just don't know, Ernst; it will have to be your gamble."

"All right," his brother said. "We have to risk it. The main problem is still *when*. Go away for a while, and let me figure it out. I'll call you when I've settled on the time."

TWO hours later, they consulted each other again.

"I have decided," Ernst told his brother crisply. "Mozart and his father were in trouble even in 1765. Right after their concert tour earlier in that year, Mozart became seriously ill. He almost died, in fact. Maybe without those financial problems, the boy might not have sickened. And, in that case, it's possible his life-long health could have improved. So therefore, instead of waiting, as some considerations would suggest, I shall endow both of them, through Hartmann in Vienna, as of January 1, 1765. Eh, Karl, what do you think?"

His brother smiled.

"You are the expert here," he said. "Who am I to question the time. I answer only for my machine."

"Then it's settled. I'll buy enough silver for a good annuity—say one hundred thousand thalers—and you'll send it to the Hartmann Bank. I have plenty of manuscripts from the eighteenth century in my collection: I'll write the note on some scrap from it. That will tell the banker just how to set up the trust."

"It might be best to destroy all the records at this end immediately," Karl said. "In case there's any trouble. What we're doing could be illegal in some way."

"If your machine really works, what else could go wrong? Still, just in case something develops, or if I should be criticized for helping Mozart instead of Schubert or Chopin, I'll burn all records of the silver transaction."

So three days later, huddled over the machine in the basement, the two Von Karman brothers watched the stack of gleaming silver slugs vanish, along with a carefully worded note to the Hartmann Bank of Vienna.

"It's done," Karl said, his voice ringing with triumph.

"This is the high point of my life," Ernst said, his own voice strangely quiet.

* * *

The greatest interpreter of Haydn who ever lived was undoubtedly Ernst von Karman. In addition, he was the foremost expert on eighteenth century music, generally. Right now, he was revising the article on that period in the new edition of Groves' famous Dictionary. At the entry, *Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus*, he frowned. It was a distressing reminder. What a pity that after such a brilliant beginning—the clavier pieces; the early symphonies—the prodigy should fold up like a collapsed tent. It was probably the fault of that infernal meddler, name still unknown to history,

who left the Mozarts an annuity. Tradition held that the money had appeared in the form of silver metal. But whatever its form or donor, the result had been total disaster. Leopold, so strong and full of integrity, had been completely demoralized by wealth, and had ruined his son. Instead of fulfilling the golden promise of his childhood, Wolfgang had become a playboy of the eighteenth century, famous for his pursuit of pleasure, mostly feminine. During his long career—he lived to be ninety-four—Mozart had turned out some of the worst, and most famous, potboilers in the history of music.

Von Karman studied the long list of compositions again, and shuddered. To think that Mozart had lived almost a century writing such trash, while the magnificent Schubert had died so young. Nature had surely blundered there.

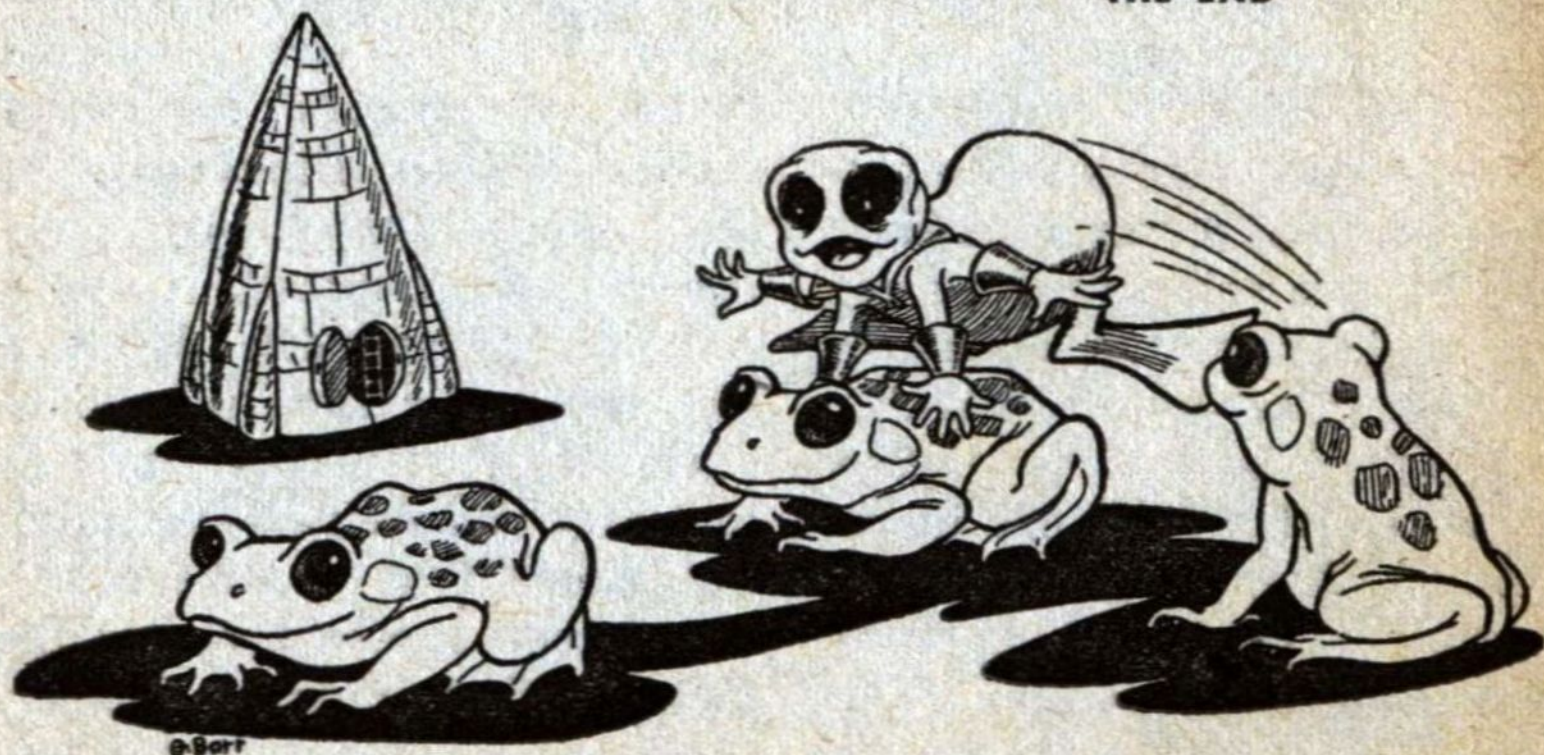
Grimacing with distaste, he began to list the later operas of Mozart, most of them still frequently murdered by novice pianists and pop concert conductors. In his sprawling hand he wrote:

The Burning of Rome
Poet and Peasant
Invitation to the Dance
In a Chinese Temple Garden
Le Beau Danube
Melody in F

A Hunt in the Black Forest
The roll-call of garbage seemed endless.

Then for one fleeting moment of *déjà vue* Ernst von Karman heard a burst of glorious music, and found himself beginning to write, "Piano Concerto in C Minor." Then he snapped the pen away in annoyance. He must have been thinking of Rachmaninoff or something. How stupid—a C Minor for Mozart, of all people.

THE END



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(Continued from page 7)

Machina" ending and is most reminiscent of the way Poe saves his protagonist in his "Pit and the Pendulum." In the future I hope Mr. Young stays away from this type of ending.

Regarding Mr. Patten's comments on who should do the covers and interior illustrations, I begin to wonder if Mr. Patten reads any of the stories or does he just look at the art work and criticize. If he is so interested in the cover artistry and illustrations for the stories, I suggest he go back to reading comic books which I'm sure will satiate his desire for "ideal illustrations." A good cover may attract and possibly even persuade a person to buy a magazine, but after reading it, I'm sure any further purchases of the magazine will be based on its printed contents and the quality of those contents and not on the "pretty" pictures inside the magazine or its "pretty" cover which apparently motivates Mr. Patten's purchase of a magazine.

Al Andriuskevicius
2730 Burnside Street
Detroit 12, Michigan

● *You can't catch us in the middle of a fight over the relative worth of artists and writers. Our aim is to get the best of both worlds.*

Dear Editor:

I am a keen fan of science fiction novels and have just read your last FANTASTIC and AMAZING of May 1962. Kindly permit me to extend my congratulations to Jesse Roarke and George Whitley on "Ripeness Is All" and "Change of Heart" respectively.

I would like to correspond with your sf readers who are willing to hear from me. Due to currency regulations it is practically not possible to obtain the "Cross World books and periodicals" publications of the Russian sf books. If any of your readers are willing to exchange them for any other articles from here they are more than welcome.

I am also interested in obtaining back copies of FANTASTIC, AMAZING and the other old science fiction magazines that are now not available here—Planet Comics included.

I would like to advise all of your readers that if they have these magazines lying about in their attics, here is a person who would treasure them more and would make an attempt to meet in some way the postage involved in sending them.

T. Retnaraja
40, Talan Mastid,
Kuala Trengganu,
Trengganu, Malaya

● *We hope some of you will correspond with this far away fan.*

Dear Miss Goldsmith:

It being apparent to a correspondent in your September issue that I am almost a plagiarist, I feel called upon to offer some defense, even though it means admitting something else that does me little credit: that is, I have *not* read "Rasselas." I thank Mr. Bodkin for his perceptive thrust, which makes it incumbent upon me to fill this gap, and am anticipating the discovery of just how closely Dr. Johnson's romance parallels "Ripeness Is All."

I wrote my story, incidentally, with no models at all consciously in mind, though I think I was perhaps helped somewhat by transmuted memories of "Pilgrim's Progress" and the revisiting of "Erewhon," not to speak of matters even more obscure.

I wish to record my admiration for the apparent, which philosophers seem never to tire of distinguishing from the real.

Jesse Roarke

Dear Editor:

I just finished the September FANTASTIC and I liked it very much, except for "New Worlds" which I thought was not worth printing.

It seems that Bunch is gaining a following at last. I'm glad to find I'm not alone.

Arnold Katz
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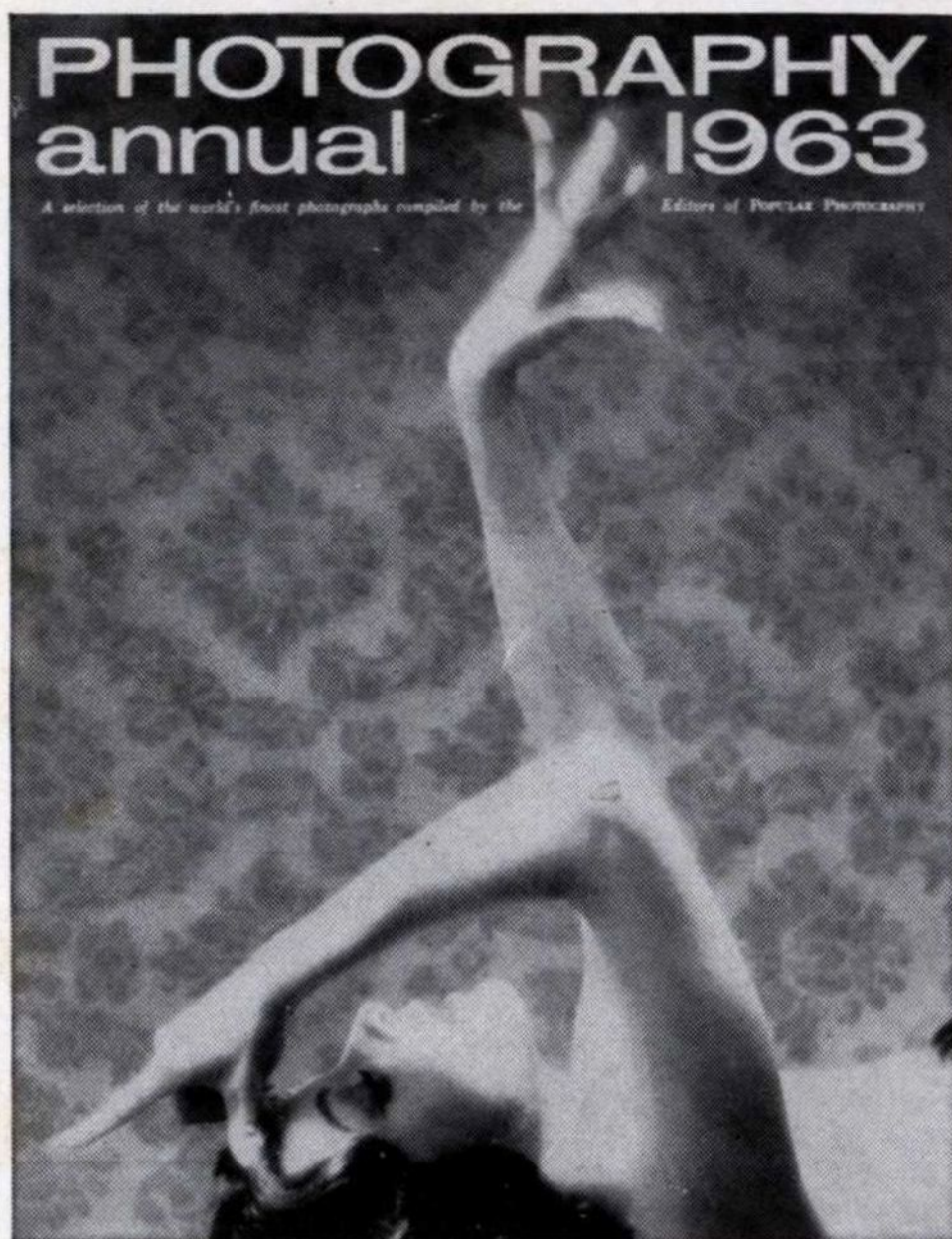
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