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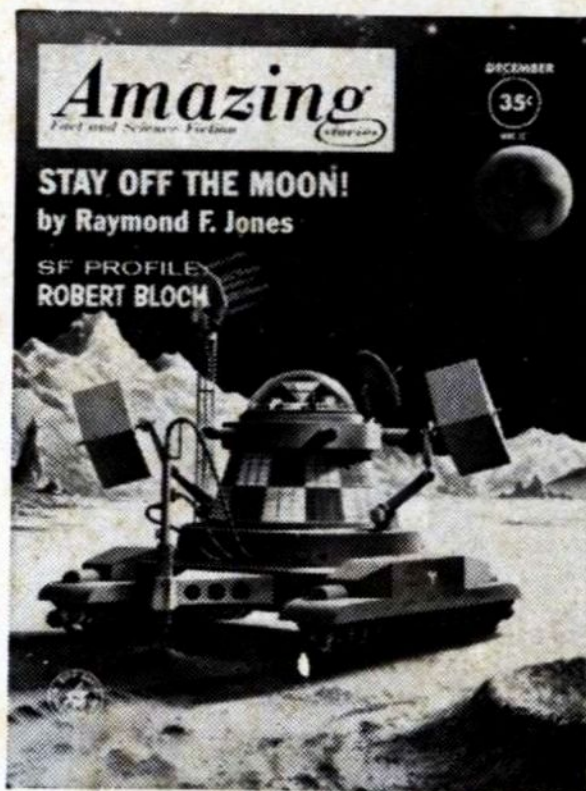


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FANTASTIC

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

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IN THE HOLIDAY

Once again that time draws near
When each man wishes Christmas cheer
To friend and foe, to foe and friend,
And so to our list, attend!

Greetings of the season speed
To all of you who write and read
The fantasies that charm us —
To, for instance, John Jakes
and the Philip Jose Farmers

Happy wassail bowls and hark'ee,
Neil Jones, Ray Jones, Jack Sharkey.
For Robert Bloch and Leiber, Fritz,
Our hopes that all those Xmas gifts fits.

A gala day we hope 'twill be
for Robert Young and Arthur C.
Clarke; and heap the platter high
for Ward Moore, Judy Merril,
Murray Leinster, Asimov, I.
Jim Schmitz and Ed Hamilton,
Keith Laumer and Poul Anderson.

SPIRIT

Under the mistletoe Cele stands ready
With a seasonal kiss for Emsch, Eddy,
Finlay, Birmingham, Schomburg, Kramer,
and all whose covers we like to frame-r.

We hope that Christmas will be liftin'
Off the launch pad for Mark Clifton,
Dan Galouye, Cliff Simak and
Frank Herbert,

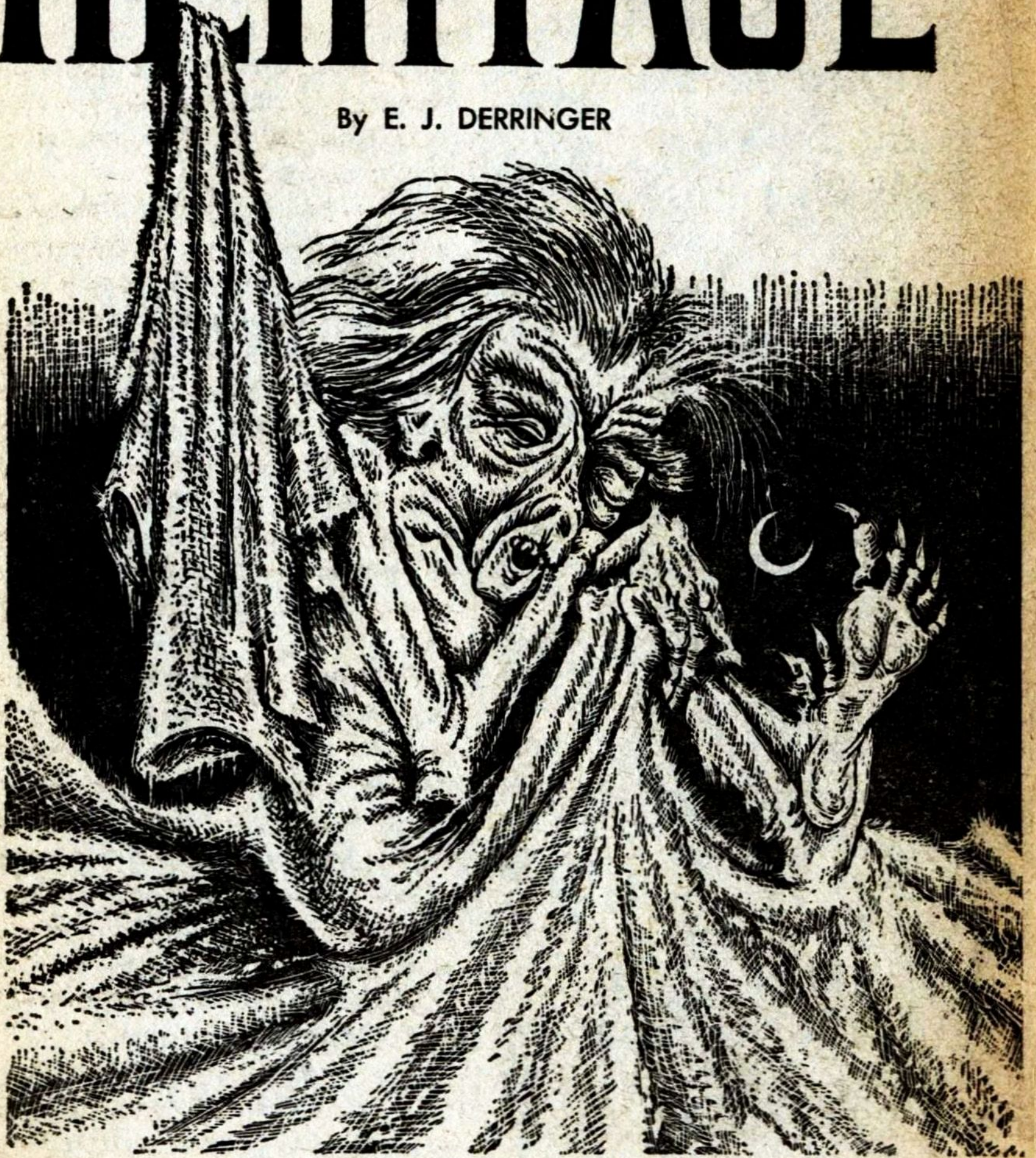
and that Porges and Dickson
will have plenty of sherbet.

And before we take it on the lam
A special wish for Moskowitz, Sam.

Good cheer, then, to all our fellow-editors,
Our loyal readers, our devoted creditors,
Our printers, salesmen and engravers,
All our weary fellow work-slavers,
And to the many, many names
We couldn't fit in rhyming frames
— To one and all, to all and one,
Merry Christmas, and have fun!

HERITAGE

By E. J. DERRINGER



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Introduction by Sam Moskowitz

LIFE is made up of little things that individually contribute their joys, sorrows or puzzlements. An insignificant childhood mystery can plague a man for a life time and for a very few people, this introduction may resolve a matter that may have baffled them for all of thirty years.

In 1934, F. Orlin Tremaine, piloted **ASTOUNDING STORIES** from the "cellar" to field leadership. He did it by somehow inspiring writers to produce highly original and thrilling science fiction which he created advance interest in by a series of provocative and tantalizing blurbs. Waiting for each new issue was an affair of electric excitement for Tremaine "delivered" what he promised.

Old timers will remember announcements like: "Controversy? Argument? "Colossus" Strides over all conceptions of Time and Space—goes Beyond the Beyond—pierces to the heart of the great mystery of the Cosmos! Set your wits against the vital new theories propounded in "Colossus" by Donald Wandrei." By God, was he ever right!

The next issue he'd titillate: "Coming Next Month: Rebirth by Thomas Calvery McClary. Super-scientists in the greatest test of all. The rebirth of the en-



Illustrator COYE

tire scheme of life in ten short years. You'll laugh—wonder—THINK." Sounded like a movie preview, but gad he didn't exaggerate one whit.

Or, "Next Month's Thought-variant will be: Sidewise in Time by Murray Leinster. It is a startlingly new line of reasoning on the subject of time." It turned out to be one of the few truly "new" ideas ever to appear in the pages of a science fiction magazine.

And so it had gone with stories like The Skylark of Valeron by Edward E. Smith, Ph. D., Before the Earth Came by John Russell Fearn and many others. Then, one issue, August, 1934, a blurb more than a quarter of a page in size announced: "In response to many requests for social-problem stories, we bring you next month a conception utterly new, utterly fascinating. You will remember Heritage by E. J. Derringer, one of the strangest stories ever told! In the September Astounding."

September came, an excellent issue with many fine names, but no Heritage. October, November, December rolled by and a new year began and slowly it dawned upon the readers who really cared that something terrible had happened. They would have to go through the rest of their life wondering what this "utterly new, utterly fascinating"

concept was; their chagrin made doubly bitter by the fact that Tremaine usually did not overstate his case.

No further word about this story ever appeared in ASTOUNDING, though the 100 or so subscribers to the science-fiction fan magazine, FANTASY MAGAZINE, read in its Dec. 1934-Jan., 1915 issue that Heritage by E. J. Derringer had appeared in TOP NOTCH, Jan., 1935, another Street & Smith magazine also edited by Tremaine.

Why this happened we will probably never know. Possibly there was a last minute hole in TOP NOTCH which Heritage just happened to fill and Tremaine switched it as an emergency measure. That it was initially scheduled for ASTOUNDING there can be no doubt, because it even carried an illustration by Elliot Dold an artist with a very unique style, drawing exclusively for ASTOUNDING at that time. Perhaps Tremaine had discovered that the story bore too close a resemblance to F. Scott Fitzgerald's Curious Case of Benjamin Button to be quite as "utterly new" as he imagined. Whatever the reason, those few veteran readers who still remember the incident may cross another mystery from your list. Here is Heritage at long last and in many respects you will find it was well worth reviving.

IT is seven years ago to-night since your wife disappeared, Mr. Wayne?" The half question, the half statement came from the lips of Atwill Hodges, the lawyer. Although his words were spoken calmly, he was at once aware of the tension that gripped the other members of Mrs. Frayne's dinner party and was communicated to himself, with the unhappy conviction that he had committed a blunder.

In the pause which followed his words he studied his companions; even in the dim glow of candlelight, the various reactions that his words had aroused were evident. Mrs. Frayne's face, in spite of her relaxed lips, betrayed malice. Hodges' son, Brett, the only youth in the company, was obviously waiting, sensing a tabooed subject, with perhaps drama to follow, his face alight with interest.

Mr. Wayne, upon whom attention was centered, seemed suddenly to have shrunk into himself. He was but forty, yet looked at the moment like an old man.

But aged Dr. Cressant evinced even greater disturbance; the part of his countenance not covered with his snowy beard had turned ghastly, and his eyes beneath bushy white brows looked out in anguish.

"She was so beautiful," said Mrs. Frayne carefully. "I'll never forget the last time I saw her.

She had been married three years, then, and looked even younger than when she was a bride. I remarked this fact, and she seemed to become agitated and left the room. Looking back on what I knew of her, it doesn't seem possible that she deliberately could have hurt you so." She looked to Wayne for appreciation of her sympathy.

"You know I don't believe she ran away," he replied sternly. "I have always thought she was kidnaped, although my investigations have brought no trace of her, or her abductors."

Hodges fiddled with his watch. "I realize that the mention of her name hurts you," he said to Wayne, "but it hurts us, too, to see you living like this. We've known you nearly all our lives; knew you when you were the gayest of us all. How happy you were with Nancy!

"But for seven years, since she disappeared, you've been living in the past. You've grown old. You've spent the energy and intelligence you should have used in doing something useful in the world in remembering your life with her. You've spent a fortune trying to find her. You've done everything a man could, in similar circumstances, and more than most.

"And now I beg of you to forget the past. Get a divorce—marry some one else. Base your

life upon something more substantial than a chimera——”

“I think you’re absolutely right,” broke in Mrs. Frayne.

Dr. Cressant added softly, but with deliberation: “I, as your physician, agree with Mr. Hodges. You’ve been living in a coma. Remember that I, too, loved Nancy.”

“You were her guardian, Laurie,” said Wayne anxiously. “Haven’t you ever heard from her? Can’t you tell me anything?”

Cressant’s eyes dropped to his plate. He shook his head.

Brett Hodges broke in: “I seem to remember the story vaguely—headlines and all—but I was so young I didn’t pay much attention to it. Tell me about it, and I’ll do some investigating. Maybe I can find her. Lord knows, trails don’t disappear like that.”

IN spite of the expressions of skepticism on the faces of his friends, Wayne gave young Hodges a brief outline. Ten years before, Wayne had married Nancy Hammond, granddaughter of old Elias Hammond, who had once been a notable figure in San Francisco. Her parents were dead. Dr. Cressant had introduced Nancy to Wayne. After three years of idyllic happiness with her, his young bride had vanished. She had suddenly made

up her mind to go to Los Angeles for a month to recuperate from a slight illness, had her trunk packed and shipped, and had taken a taxi to the station.

The following day a wire had been received by Wayne, saying that she had arrived safely and would write. Then silence. A later check-up revealed that, although a ticket had been purchased, she had not been a passenger on the train for which the ticket was issued. Taxi drivers were questioned, and at last one was found who admitted having taken a passenger who suited Nancy’s description to the station.

There the trail ended. Frantic messages to Los Angeles, to the hotel where she had made reservations, brought negative answers. Friends disclaimed all knowledge of her whereabouts. Investigations by police and private detectives brought no further disclosures. A canvass of hospitals and morgues brought no results. It was as if Nancy had gone to the railway station and then had suddenly vanished into thin air.

Brett Hodges crushed his napkin. “Tell me more about her—what did she look like?”

“She was beautiful,” replied Dr. Cressant. “Of medium height, and slender. She had brown hair with golden lights in it, and purplish-gray eyes, with

dark brows and lashes. Do you still carry her picture?" he asked Wayne, who produced a snapshot from his wallet.

Brett noticed that while the doctor's description seemed accurate, the pictured face was unusually intelligent; the look bothered him a little.

"How old was she when this was taken?" he inquired suddenly of Mr. Wayne.

"She was twenty-three," replied Wayne. "That picture was taken just before she disappeared."

The hostess, who had been neglected for some time, brought up another topic, and the guests, feeling that the other subject was exhausted, answered her with relief.

When the party broke up, Brett noticed that Dr. Cressant dismissed his chauffeur, who had come for him and declined all invitations for a lift. The bearded old man, enveloped in his handsome coat and leaning on his cane, walked slowly into the fog.

DR. CRESSANT walked aimlessly, with the slow gait of the aged. He could hear the faint honking of cars down on streets where traffic was heavy; they would be moving at a snail's pace, feeling their way through the fog. Occasionally came the clang of the absurd bell on the cable car. August nights such as

this were many in his life. He was eighty-two. Not a great while longer, he thought—

Not very successful, that dinner party, he decided. Mrs. Frayne had been hounding Wayne ever since Nancy disappeared; ever since her own husband died, in fact. Not a kind woman, not a woman like Nancy, but it would be a good thing if she married Wayne. Wasting his life, he was, waiting for a girl-wife who would not come back.

Cressant shivered a little. He stopped to get his bearings, deciding to call a cab and go home.

In the dimness he was aware of a row of squatting old houses, asleep now, and, at the end of the block, set a little apart from the others, a huge frame building, relic of the eighties, which had withstood earthquake and fire and time, and even the encroaching of the apartment houses on Edle Street. He started visibly, realizing that a subconscious impulse had carried him to this place.

He knew that old house well; he had known it for years, from the day when it was among the most fashionable places in the city. It was the old Hammond house.

As he stood there memories came thronging, and one memory was more vivid than the rest. Forgotten was the fog and the darkness of the night and the

heavy burden of his age. It was as if a curtain had lifted, revealing a stage upon which a scene played out seven years before was being enacted again.

Dr. Cressant saw himself standing in his private office talking to Nancy. She was seated in a chair facing his desk, a dainty figure in her furs. In her eyes there was an expression akin to fear.

"Nancy, dear! Is there anything the matter?" he inquired solicitously.

"Oh, Dr. Laurie, I don't know what I'm going to do!"

"But I don't understand. Everything was fine at the party last night. You were the most beautiful woman there and—"

"Woman! Oh, I'm upset, Dr. Laurie! It was that Mrs. Frayne; she's always horrid, and last night she said the most alarming thing."

"Yes, Nancy?" The quiet tone in which the doctor put the question seemed to soothe her. "What did she say?"

"She said: 'Nancy, you look even younger than the first time I saw you. How do you do it?'"

"A remark which would please most women, I should think," he answered. There was, however, no flippancy in his tone.

"Do you suppose she knows anything? She hates me, I know. She's always been in love with John. Things have gone well so

far, but I daren't keep on the way I have much longer. I was mad to marry in the first place. And now what makes it so terrible is that I love him, Dr. Laurie—I love John. Can't we do something?"

DR. CRESSANT paced the floor. "But the danger, Nancy—"

Tears welled in her eyes, but there was a bitter twist to her lips. "He even wants a child, Laurie. Oh, he hasn't insisted, nor would he; but I know— It seems our experiment is facing a tragic conclusion. I daren't tell him; you know how sensitive he is. Knowing would drive him insane, or make me repulsive to him, and I couldn't bear that. Oh, you must do something! Anything— I'm not afraid. You'll have to perform that operation—"

"But, Nancy, dear, the thing you fear may never happen at all. And as for operating, I've no precedent to follow. If yours was a usual case—if it had ever before been known in medical history—but it is unique. I'm afraid to take this thing upon myself alone and if I take any one into my confidence, your story will become known. You'll be publicized, notorious. It will ruin your personal life and that of your husband, to say nothing of my own. And I am so old, Nancy, to

perform a dangerous operation; I'm seventy-five. I haven't the steady nerves, nor the courage, nor the eyesight I once had. We should have attempted this long ago."

Nancy raised her head, and the eyes which met his had an almost hypnotic quality. "You must try," she said.

For a long time the doctor paced the floor. He was remembering and trying to look forward. Presently he stopped before her, nodded his head. "Very well," he replied.

"We shall have to make some arrangements," she suggested.

"Yes; I've thought of that, many times, dear child. Let me think—you might go home and tell John you've been to see me, and I wasn't satisfied with your physical condition. You could tell him you'd like to go to Los Angeles for a month or so. Say that you'll stay at some small hotel, as one reason for your going is to get away from social duties. Do you think that would be all right?"

She nodded.

"You could have your maid pack a small trunk and you could get John to buy your ticket and make your reservations on the train and at the hotel. See the few people you must, tell them you are going away, and leave in about a week. You'll have to arrange it so that John will be un-

able to take you to the train; I'll leave that to you. Also, discharge your maid if you have to; John may insist upon you taking her with you. Take a taxi, go to the station, put your grip in your compartment, and then slip away.

"You'll have to wear some kind of disguise, for there is always the chance of running into some one you know. So rig up something and put it into your hand bag. Can you think of something?"

"Let me see—I could perhaps get a black wig and some black mascara to darken my brows and lashes, and wear glasses—"

"That would do, I think. Get a cheap black coat, and wear that. Oh, and wear your furs; you could leave them in the compartment. Squeeze some sort of old hat into your bag, a matronly looking one. Go into a dressing room and change, then slip out, take several different street cars. Then come out to the old house on Edle Street. Here is a key. Go into my suite. I'll meet you there."

"What if I should run into any one I know?"

"In that case drop our whole scheme and go on to Los Angeles. We'll have to figure out something else. If this thing is to be done it will have to be carried out with the utmost secrecy. I'll have your old nurse, Bella, go

south, and she can send a wire to the effect that you arrived safely; here, you write exactly what you'd say in sending such a message, and I'll give it to her.

THE week slipped by, filled with hours of planning and anxiety. How Nancy discharged her maid, who adored her, Cressant never knew. Nor did he know what stratagem she used in having Wayne elsewhere than at her side when she left on her supposed trip.

But when Cressant arrived at the old house after nightfall in the thickening fog and let himself in through a side door, which looked as if it had been nailed up and stolen like a wraith up a dark stairway, he found her in his suite, lying before the huge fireplace, in which she had somehow contrived to build a fire.

There was no sound as he opened the heavy door, but Nancy felt his presence. She arose and took his hand gravely.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "How about you?"

"I managed all right."

"Are you sure no one will think of looking for me here?"

Dr. Cressant removed his top-coat and hat and placed them in a closet. He advanced soundlessly across the carpet and stood

before the fireplace rubbing his hands. "Don't you remember when I had this part of the house safeguarded against intruders?" he inquired. "One of the pleasant things about money is that it will buy silence, and although it is long ago since I had this apartment rebuilt, no one, to my knowledge, has ever learned of it. These walls are soundproof, and while the ventilation system is perfect, not a gleam of light is visible from outside. Of course, being windowless, it is dark in the daytime, but one doesn't mind using electricity for a few days."

"Why, actually, did you have this suite sound- and light-proofed?"

"One reason was you, of course. The other, well—I've always enjoyed working at odd hours and wanted to be free from noise or interruption. I've added things from time to time to my laboratory at the end of this suite, and it's complete now."

"You know," mused Nancy, "I'm getting rather a thrill out of this. We are all so strange—old Bella, acting the part of a wealthy eccentric, living here all alone. She is the kindest person. I miss her a lot right now. And you—And I, the strangest of us all!"

Suddenly she turned startled eyes toward Dr. Cressant. "The fireplace, the smoke!" she cried. "How will you account for it?"

He was not disturbed. "You forget there are three fireplaces on the lower floor, where Bella makes her headquarters. No one knows she has gone away."

Nancy sighed with relief. Presently she said: "Perhaps we'd better turn in. I'll go to my old bedroom, and you'll be comfortable here, won't you? And about tomorrow—"

"Nancy, listen. You'll have to understand all of it. I'm going to try an operation on you that has never been tried before. I have no way of knowing whether it will be successful. I've been experimenting for years; sometimes I feel I'm haunted by the souls of little guinea pigs. Everything may go wrong; you have but one chance in a hundred. Are you willing and anxious that I should go through with it?"

A HUSH fell upon the room, a hush filled with portent. There was no sound save for that from the fireplace. Fear crouched in the dim corners, crept from one to the other of the spindly, old chairs.

Nancy was aware of complete isolation; not a sound of traffic reached them; not a gleam of light or a streamer of fog from the night outside was visible. Her eyes traveled with deep intentness over the room, and suddenly she drew back, trembling, for the

doctor's shadow played upon the wall, a somber thing.

Regaining her composure, she met his scrutiny without flinching. In her eyes was the wisdom of years, and it was her eyes that answered him.

"If I should fail, Nancy—if you should die—your body—" Horror was creeping into his voice.

Nancy raised one hand and motioned. Following it, he saw a thing which would be forever limned in his memory—the huge, six-foot fireplace, with scarlet tongues of flame lashing savagely at the logs.

* * *

A shudder gripped the old man standing on the sidewalk. He came out of his revery harshly, with the queer sensation of one who has been watching himself as the leading actor in a play. Shivering, he tottered off into the night.

Not until Dr. Cressant was well on his way did Brett Hodge emerge from his vantage point in an alley. "Queer old bird to be standing here staring at a house all this time," he thought. "Must find out who lives here."

* * *

Brett found his father seated at the breakfast table next morning reading the Sunday newspaper.

"Do you know anything about Nancy Hammond at all, dad?"

"Let me see—I believe she was born in Paris. She always used the name of Hammond, which was odd, for Elias had no son. His wife died in childbirth, and that child was a daughter—that would be Nancy's mother. Laurie Cressant was just out of medical school when Mrs. Hammond died, and he and Elias were close friends. Cressant's quite a bit older than I, you know.

"It seems that when the infant was about three years old Hammond and a sort of cousin went to Europe, taking the child, and traveled about for a number of years. Cressant used to run over occasionally to spend a few months with them. Elias died, and this cousin at last came back. She lives in the old Hammond house—"

"The old Hammond house! Where is it, dad?"

"Why, it's over on Edle Street somewhere. I haven't been by there for years; hadn't thought of it, in fact. Why?"

Brett emitted a shrill whistle, then demanded to know what had become of the daughter of Elias Hammond.

"I believe she died in Europe somewhere. Anyway, Nancy Hammond was her daughter. Apparently, Nancy was educated in Europe. When her mother died, Laurie Cressant went to get Nancy to put her in some Eastern school. Cressant was her

guardian. When she'd finished her schooling he brought her out here, and she lived for about a year with this old eccentric—I think her name is Bella Hammond. After that Nancy married John Wayne. And the rest you know."

"Except for one thing, dad. You say that Nancy was the daughter of Elias Hammond's daughter. His wife died in childbirth, and there was no son. Why, then, should Nancy use the name of Hammond?"

"I've wondered about that. I suppose she was a natural child. I've sometimes wondered if Laurie didn't have something to do with her paternity. He was with the family a great deal and took more interest in Nancy than a guardian would."

"But if he was present at the birth of Nancy's mother he would have been rather old for the role of heavy lover. At that, I'll bet the old boy knows a lot he isn't telling. D'you know what finishing school she attended, by any chance?"

"Don't know a thing more than I've told you."

"Sa-ay, do you suppose Mrs. Frayne would know?"

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

THAT afternoon Brett called on Mrs. Frayne.

"Pleasant party last night."

"Glad you enjoyed it. It was really for John Wayne. He doesn't go out much, you know."

"Say, just what does he do with his time, anyway? He isn't in any business."

"Do? He does nothing, absolutely nothing, unless you call pottering around his books work. He has shut himself off from the world, poor soul. I've tried time and again to get him to take an interest in things—" She trailed off, a hint of bitterness in her voice.

"I'm sure you have, Mrs. Frayne," consoled Brett.

"Oh, not the way you think. Not the way the world thinks. We were such dear friends until that—er, he married the Hammond girl. You know, we all thought he was making a mistake in marrying a girl so much younger than himself. A young girl doesn't understand life. And Nancy Hammond was thoroughly incapable of understanding him; he is the most sensitive soul.

"I think her leaving him the way she did was the cruelest thing I've ever heard of. He ought to realize that any one who could treat him that way had never really cared. But one can't tell him that."

"I was quite interested in the story," Brett remarked.

"Were you serious when you said you were going to try to trace her?"

"Oh, rather! Gives me something to do until dad's partner retires, and I become a budding young lawyer. And I've been thinking—maybe Wayne would pep up and become more like himself if he knew she was actually dead. Thought I'd get your suggestion—a woman's intuition and all that. You knew her quite well, didn't you? Women talk over things that would never occur to men, I've heard. Wonder if you could tell me anything about her life prior to her marriage, or any intimate things she might have confided to you? Do you know where she went to school?"

Mrs. Frayne drew her carefully penciled brows. "We were never intimate friends. I can't recall, actually, anything she told me about herself. Except, or, yes, the school! It was in the East—the Stoddard Seminary for Young Ladies, in New York State."

Brett made a mental note of the school. It seemed Mrs. Frayne was unable to furnish any more useful information, so, requesting she consider their conversation confidential, he left.

BRETT went home and wrote a letter to the Stoddard Seminary asking for all available information concerning their former pupil, Nancy Hammond, mentioning her disappearance as his reason for inquiring.

A search of newspaper files brought no new clues, although it did bring to light several pictures of the missing girl, taken at about the time of her marriage to Wayne. One newspaper suggested that Kathie Crouthers knew more about the disappearance than she cared to divulge, although sustained questioning had brought nothing but negative answers from the old woman.

Brett whistled when he saw the Crouthers woman mentioned. Her name was a legend in San Francisco, synonymous with all the secrecy and intrigue of a past era in the city. Apparently, the files indicated, she had been associated in some way with the Hammond family. Her address was given, and Brett, wondering if she was still alive, betook himself to the street on which she lived.

He came upon a row of shabby dwellings, houses built before the fire, which now, bereft of the elements of paint, and with many broken windows and worn porches, sagged drunkenly side by side. On the shabbiest of all of these was a dirty sign reading: Fortune Telling. He glanced at the number and checked it with a notebook. It was the one he sought.

He rang. After a long moment the door was opened by an ancient hag, whose wrinkled face

was framed in straggly white hair.

"I'm looking for a woman by the name of Kathie Crouthers," said Brett.

Sharp, brown eyes peered at him. A toothless mouth was opened in a kind of ghastly grin, and a rusty old voice answered: "An' what do you want? I'm Kathie Crouthers."

"May I come in?"

At the woman's bidding, Brett sat down upon a chintz-covered chair.

"Do you want me to tell your fortune?" she asked.

"No; I came to talk about the disappearance of Nancy Hammond."

"I am an old woman. If I knew them once, I have forgotten. But I will tell your fortune, eh?"

Brett made a motion to rise.

"Ha!" she chuckled. "Once I could have made a fortune by telling what I know about the people in this town. Old Kathie knows the skeletons in the closets of all our best families. But now—times are hard. So if—groceries are high, and it is hard to get coal—maybe I could remember something if—" A gnarled hand twitched in her lap.

Brett took out a roll of bills and appeared to be counting them.

"I do not know very much," she mumbled, her head nodding. "Elias Hammond's wife used to

come and see me, to have her fortune told. Before her child was born she came often. There was something strange in the cards; even I could not read them rightly. But it had to do with the child.

"And then I began to notice that Mrs. Hammond was changing. She got older and sharp and thin. The last time I saw her she seemed to be out of her head. The doctors said it was worry over her first child. But I knew. Old Kathie knew. She was insane."

Brett gasped. He had a sudden idea. Obviously Dr. Cressant knew more than he was telling—perhaps the girl Nancy had lost her mind, and he, rather than lay the burden of his knowledge upon sensitive John Wayne, had had her incarcerated. Perhaps that was the reason for the old man's agitation at the dinner party.

"Do you know anything else?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Mrs. Hammond died when the child was born. Old Elias didn't last long after that. And I didn't know any one else in the family. And now—if you think I've helped—can I—"

Brett placed the money in her skinny hand and took his leave.

BRETT spent the rest of the morning in the courthouse, looking up records. He found

verification of the birth of Cordelia Nancy Hammond to Elias and Cordelia Hammond in 1884. He also found records of the deaths of her parents. He then remembered his father had told him that Nancy had been born in Paris. Undoubtedly, some mystery shrouded her birth. He wondered who her father was.

He went home and wrote a letter to the bureau of records in Paris, France, for substantiation of her birth in that city in 1903.

Later, he asked his father: "Dad, was Cressant abroad in 1903?"

"In 1903? Let me see—that was the year your mother and I were married. He was at the wedding. No, I'm sure Laurie was in San Francisco all that year. He didn't go abroad until after the fire of 1906; I remember he did a great deal of relief work here at that time."

"Would you know where the Hammonds were then, I wonder?"

"As far as I know they were in Paris."

Brett pondered. He had two theories: one, vague and lacking foundation, was that the mysterious father of Nancy had kidnaped her. He hoped, through information he had requested of the bureau of records in Paris, to establish the identity of her father.

The other theory was supplied

by Kathie Crouthers; he felt there was a possibility of Nancy's being in some asylum for the insane.

A few days later Brett received a letter from the Stoddard Seminary for Young Ladies which stated that Nancy Hammond had attended that school for four years, that she had been unusually intellectual, and that prior to her enrollment there she had been under the tutelage of one Monsieur L. Cressant, of Paris, France.

Cressant again, thought Brett. Somehow, the threads of his life were interwoven with those of Nancy's. Brett reasoned that the doctor must have some interest in the Hammond house, else why his lonely vigil before it on the night of the dinner party?

From what he had heard of the eccentric Bella, he sensed that questioning, which had elicited response from his father and Mrs. Frayne, would be useless; neither would she respond with frank avidity to an offer of money, as had the ancient Kathie Crouthers. He decided to become a mythical representative of a leading San Francisco real-estate concern and call upon the woman in that capacity, with the hope of gaining admittance to the house.

* * *

As he approached the door, he saw a heavy old woman dressed

in black, leading a handsome police dog in a leash, going up the steps. The woman was fishing out a key as Brett reached her.

Removing his hat, he inquired: "I beg your pardon, but could you tell me if this is the Hammond property?"

In response to his inquiry, she merely nodded.

"Are you Miss Bella Hammond?"

Again she inclined her head. "I represent the Surety Real Estate Co. We understand—"

She cut him off. "This property is not for sale."

He continued: "We are prepared to make you a splendid offer. A client of our concern believes this would make an excellent site for an apartment house and—"

"This property is not for sale," repeated the woman, inserting a key in the lock.

Brett took a step forward, was warned by a growl. Bella Hammond opened the door, jerked the leash, and together woman and dog vanished into the house, the heavy door slamming behind them. Brett took out his handkerchief and mopped his brow.

He decided he would enter, somehow.

THAT night Brett, attired in a dark coat, blue corduroys, and sneakers, made his way once more to the old Hammond house.

It was after midnight when he arrived, and the shabby street lay huddled in foggy silence. Slouching in an alley, he studied the house across the street.

There were three stories. Two brick chimneys suggested several fireplaces. The front entrance, a heavy oaken door, was approached by three concrete steps—no means of entrance there, Brett decided.

He walked around to the back. A small garden, perhaps once gay with variegated California flowers, but now bare save for a few spears of scraggly grass, lay at the bottom of the back steps. This garden was walled in with a rickety board fence.

Carefully Brett vaulted the fence, ascended the steps cautiously, and, with the aid of a piece of bent wire, unfastened the hook on the screen door. He was met with a barricade similar to that at the front entrance.

After trying several skeleton keys, he managed to unlock the door, but still it did not budge. Probably it was bolted and chained from the inside, as his brief glimpse of the interior of the house had told him the front door was when the occupant was at home.

Brett slipped out of the garden silently. He realized he was leaving footprints, but as he was determined to enter the house that night it did not matter. He

walked around the house to the opposite side stealthily, keeping his eyes open for a possible encounter. The fog was thick, however, and he felt himself fairly secure as he edged cautiously along the wall.

His hands, fumbling along the wall, came in contact with a sill. His eyes, accustomed to darkness by now, distinguished a small side door. Apparently it led to a laundry room. It was boarded up.

"I'll try it anyway," he thought, and slipped a key into the lock.

To his surprise the lock clicked at the first attempt, and the door opened to the pressure of his gloved hand. He became conscious of a musty smell and of a long, narrow stairway. Leaving the door open, he started to ascend, fingering the revolver and electric torch he had in his pocket.

At the top of the stairway he came to a narrow landing and another door. This, too, was locked. He had to try all his keys this time before he was able to unlock it. He carefully opened the door and found himself in complete darkness, complete silence, save for the sound of his breathing, which seemed thunderous.

He appeared to be in a hallway, which ran the whole length of the house. Abandoning cau-

tion, he drew out his flashlight, pressed the button, and saw the beam of light fall upon a heavy steel door. At the same moment he heard the *thud* of padded feet and a deep, throaty growl. The dog!

He flung himself out of the door as the beast leaped. Down the dark steps he rushed, conscious of the angered thing behind him. He slammed the door shut and, dodging between houses to cover his departure, found himself at last on the quiet side street where he had parked his car.

One fact stood out clear in his mind: Although the steel door in the Hammond house was not new, he was sure it had not been included in the original plans of the house. Private dwellings were not built that way, even in the eighties, when Golden Gate Park was a stretch of dreary sand dunes and San Francisco had not yet dreamed of rivalry with the frontier town that was Los Angeles. Surely the door led into a suite that was not easy of access.

His theory that Nancy was insane grew vivid in his mind; he believed she was held a prisoner behind that knobbed steel door. And Dr. Cressant was involved somehow, he was sure. But why keep John Wayne in everlasting suspense? he asked himself. Surely it would have been kinder to tell him; surely Wayne's hy-

persensitive nature could have adjusted itself to that gruesome fact more easily than it could endure years of anxiety.

THE following morning brought Brett a letter from Paris. Hastily he tore it open and read with some perplexity that there was no record in that city of the birth of one Nancy Hammond in the year 1903 nor in the preceding or following years.

"Look here, dad," he exclaimed sitting up in bed and running a lean hand through his hair, "why all the mystery? The girl had to be born, didn't she? I simply can't get this! I'm going to see Wayne. He may not be of much help, but I think he ought to know the things I've found out."

"To-morrow's Sunday," said the lawyer. "I'm curious, son. You've been secretive so far. Why not wait until to-morrow, and I'll go with you?"

His father called the Wayne home and made arrangements for a visit on the following afternoon. When Wayne greeted them accompanied by Mrs. Frayne, Brett was surprised at the change in the two people, seeing them as they were in normal conditions. Wayne's face, so pallid the evening of the dinner party, bore a trace of color, and his eyes sparkled. Mrs. Frayne was another person, entirely dif-

ferent from the neurotic, jealous woman Brett had called on a week before.

"Been playing golf?" asked the lawyer.

"Yes; out at Lincoln. My game was dusty, of course, but still it was enjoyable." Wayne spoke enthusiastically.

Brett, covertly watching Mrs. Frayne, noted the flush that occasionally suffused her cheek.

"So that's the way of it," he thought. "What a day to bring my ghastly news!"

They were having a round of cocktails when Wayne turned to Brett and said anxiously: "I was inclined to think you were joking last Saturday, Hodges. Then Marcia told me of your call. Since then I've been going on hope. So if you can tell me anything, I'm anxious to hear it. We didn't mention any compensation, but I'll be glad to make—"

"Wait," interrupted Brett, "I've not found out anything exactly definite, but I think I've a pretty good theory."

He related his findings in detail winding up with his theory that Nancy had been a victim of hereditary insanity and suggesting that undoubtedly Dr. Cressant could fill in the spaces that he, Brett, must necessarily leave blank. His listeners found, in his words, the meaning of remembered half truths and evasions attributed to the vanished girl.

Wayne divulged a few facts Nancy had told him about her parentage; her mother and father had parted shortly after her birth because of incompatibility, and Nancy, from that time, had used the Hammond name. He did not possess her birth certificate, and the scanty background he built for her was made up, for the most part, of quotations from Dr. Cressant. During the interview Wayne had become more and more excited, and when Brett finished he rose and paced the floor nervously.

"After all," he said, "you have nothing but theories. All your statements could be accounted for. I've had trained investigators working on the case for years; it would be rather absurd to think that an egotistical schoolboy could solve a mystery that they have given up."

"I don't think the boy deserves your rebuke, John," said Atwill Hodges quietly. "There may have been some curiosity in his motive to solve this problem, but there was also the desire to help."

"And have me think Nancy has gone mad!" cried Wayne. "He has ruined the most beautiful thing in my life!"

"Perhaps Dr. Cressant was right. If I'd known you'd go all to pieces over a theory, Wayne, I'd have kept it to myself. But I was fool enough to imagine I was helping you."

Brett's words seemed to have a tonic effect on the older man. Wayne tried to compose himself.

"I'll call Cressant!" he cried at last. "I'll get him over here."

THE ragged peal of the doorbell broke the quiet, quickening congealed personalities. Cressant was shown in by the grinning house boy, and as he made his entrance Wayne jerked up from his chair as if he had been propelled by springs.

"What have you done with Nancy?" he demanded.

Without a word of greeting he plunged into a recital of Brett's findings, his own agony and loss, and his suspicions of the doctor. It was frenzied, almost incoherent.

Cressant had dignity. Expressionless of face, deliberate of manner, he watched Wayne's antics as he might have looked upon a hysterical child.

When Wayne had finished, Cressant walked to a table, picked up the cocktail shaker and poured out a drink. This he handed to him.

"You're right in thinking I've kept something to myself." Slowly, calmly, he spoke. "I did so because I thought it best. But for this meddling young fool the old ghosts would soon have been laid. Yet perhaps I'm wrong in calling him a fool; he's shown more initiative and courage than you ever

have, John. I know you for what you are—a sentimental ass—and I would have let you go on in your twilight sleep.

"But if you want the story, I think—yes, I'm glad to unburden myself.

"Brett, you were unable to verify Nancy Hammond's birth in Paris in 1903 for the reason that she was not born there, or then. But I will go back—through the years—

"I had just finished medical school when my father died, and I took over his practice in San Francisco. Among his patients was the wife of Elias Hammond; she was expecting a child. The case was unusually difficult, for, as pregnancy advanced, she seemed to lose possession of her mental faculties.

"Mrs. Hammond, who had been a brilliant social leader, underwent, as I have said, a drastic change. She even started going to a nefarious old woman by the name of Kathie Crouthers to have her fortune told. Whether this woman's predictions had anything to do with her decline I could not say at the time. Mrs. Hammond died in childbirth. The infant, a girl, was born at the old Hammond house. She was a very peculiar child."

DR. CRESSANT paused to wipe his brow with a handkerchief and to wet his lips.

"Instead of being red and plump, like normal babies, she was pale and wizened, like a mummy, perhaps. She had quite a bit of hair, but it was gray, like an old woman's. Her face was very wrinkled, and she was formed more like an aged woman than a child. It puzzled me. After a month or so had gone by I began to realize I had come upon a phenomenon. I understood, then, why her mother had gone insane. The child had reversed the usual manner of progression; she had been born old."

A gasp followed his words. Wayne's face expressed surprise, but not unmixed with incredulity. Mrs. Frayne seemed to be enjoying an ironic joke of her own. Atwill Hodges merely raised a sardonic eyebrow. Brett, unbiased, simply waited.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Wayne. "What you're saying is impossible!"

"You would not have thought so, in my place. This strange personality in my care had the intellect of a woman of sixty. It seemed as if all her mother's intelligence had been transferred to her child during pregnancy. It was interesting but terrible to watch that tiny, wizened body with its wrinkled face and gray hair lying in bed trying to talk to me.

"Naturally, I was anxious to discuss her with my colleagues,

but her father begged and pleaded with me to keep the whole thing secret. He feared his child was born abnormal because of some disease. Finally, he offered me a good income. I suppose you would call it a bribe, but the road a young doctor has to travel is not easy, and I was deeply interested in research.

"Realizing I had at hand a phenomenon of greater interest to me than any I should ever encounter, I accepted his offer, promising secrecy. When Elias died I was left sole guardian of the child and inherited the Hammond fortune with the stipulation I should provide the necessities of life for the 'monstrosity,' as he called his offspring.

"My protégé developed rapidly. She learned to read with almost no effort. Presently she was able to sit up in bed, and soon after that she began to walk, conducting herself in the manner of an elderly person convalescing from a severe illness.

"I retained a few patients and outwardly appeared to be a rising young physician. But I spent the major part of my time watching the development of my charge, with occasional detours into research. As the years passed it became evident to me that she was growing younger; her hair slowly turned brown, and the wrinkles of age disappeared from her face. Her emaciated body as-

sumed a matronly appearance. She was healthy and unusually intellectual and, becoming aware of the receptivity of her mind, I taught her many things."

BRETT began to grasp the trend of the doctor's story. He drank in the words. His father and Mrs. Frayne looked skeptical. Wayne seemed impatient, but did not speak. They waited for the doctor to resume his monologue. "Before Elias' death," went on Dr. Cressant, "he arranged to have a cousin of his come to San Francisco, for Nancy needed a nurse. She turned out to be a sane but antisocial woman, and had we searched the world over I am sure we could not have found a more suitable person for the work. Her name was Bella Hammond; she still lives in the old house on Edle Street, a quiet, brilliant woman called an eccentric by a world that does not understand her."

After a moment the doctor's voice rose again, like some strange magical machine which had the power to call back the past in quickly moving pictures. Every year Nancy grew younger. The confines of the old house began to constitute too narrow a horizon. Journeys were made to Europe, Cressant sometimes accompanying the two women, but when his duties kept him, his strange companions traveled

alone. They were never long in one place, fearing some one might learn of Nancy's strange heritage, but the very weirdness of their secret prevented suspicion.

"I tried to show her all sides of life," he continued. "I took her to orphanages, where she marveled at plump bits of existence that were babies. She accompanied me on tours of slums, factories, theaters; I took her from Paris to Spain, from England to Switzerland. She saw life in all its varying aspects.

"During the Great War she entered a hospital as a nurse, where my training proved invaluable to her. She was wonderful there, so calm, so wise.

"She realized wherein she differed from other people and had begun to perceive what must be her strange ending, unless a miracle intervened. Each year she grew younger—"

Through his words they saw Cressant greeting her after a long separation. By the strange reverse process of her growth she had become a young woman, charming and beautiful. As a lame person suddenly healed, so she had been released from the inertia of age, her former calm manner replaced by one of eagerness. She came toward him, eyes shining, hands outstretched. Cressant, seeing her thus, awakened from his usual regard of her

as a scientific phenomenon. He saw her as a beautiful woman, opening her arms to life.

HE took her, one evening, to a café where food and music were excellent and, watching her response to their surroundings, asked:

"Nancy, have you ever been in love?"

"Only through books," she answered. Watching her, he longed for a moment, to be like her, with youth awaiting instead of gone.

"For was her way of life not better than ours?" he asked of them. "She came to the earth knowing things that we strive all our lives to learn, and when we have become wise the grave takes us with all our hard-won knowledge. She came with the faded drabness of age, to have age slip away from her into golden youth. Perhaps her own philosophy of accepting life as it was would have availed her, but I taught her to listen to me—

"I plunged into my work when I came back and worked as I had never done before, trying to perfect a formula, or work out a surgical operation, which would make her like other people. My office, I found, was scarcely the place, with telephones ringing, appointments, people dropping in, noise, confusion. So I made use of the Hammond house, had carpenters do over the second

floor. I had it soundproofed, and all the windows were sealed up.

"An expensive heating and ventilating system was installed. I built a complete laboratory at one end of the suite and provided comfortable living quarters at the other end. The only thing I left intact was the huge fireplace built originally into the house. The one means of entrance to this apartment is a side door, which has the appearance of being nailed up. You, Brett, discovered this is a mere blind.

"Bella occupied the lower floor with Nancy on their infrequent trips home.

"Although it was necessary to build up a fictitious background and set her birth date as 1903, Nancy was really born in 1884. Counting backward then, when she returned from Europe for the last time in 1920, she was twenty-four. I felt she should have the association of girls around her own age, so I sent her to a fashionable Eastern seminary for four years. She seemed to enjoy this experience immensely; apparently no one noticed she looked younger when she left than when she entered; when one is constantly associated with a person he is not much aware of change."

WAYNE was about to voice his incredulity and unbelief, but Cressant continued: "When she

came back to me—ah, what a butterfly of a girl! So dainty, so delicate, so fine!

“But I noticed she was at war with herself. I realized somewhere in those four years she had lost her patience. She was wise still, at times, but I had reason to fear the effect of four years spent among young girls without the countereffect of the society of Bella or myself.

“Still, this change may have been only the natural process of her evolution. She was gay, always. She sang about the house all day. She studied dancing, became graceful as a flower bending in the wind. I can see her yet, her eyes glowing with anticipation, when she asked me to give a party for her, to introduce her to society.

“I tried to reason with her, but she seemed to have closed the part of her mind that was old, although this was not usually the case.

“At last, weary of her cajolings, I gave in. We arranged a ball for her. And there she met John Wayne.”

“I remember,” came in Wayne’s hollow voice.

“She loved him intensely. Even then I realized it was a maternal love; she was strong, and he was weak. But her desire for him was abetted by the fact that for most of her life she had enjoyed few companions but Bella and my-

self, and while she loved us, she had never had an outlet for her deep capacity for passion.

“I have seen gentlewomen marry drunkards and intellectuals marry fools and fine people marry gross characters, but I have never viewed a marriage with more trepidation than I did that one. In my mind was the vague hope that normal living might revert the processes of her growth—even the bitter hope that she might have a child and die.

“She came to me often after the wedding, and we discussed the situation from every angle. She tried to tell you, Wayne, many times, and then the fear you would not understand, that she might become repulsive to you, restrained her.

“But the years were going. After your third anniversary she came to me. She was seventeen. Her development had been in no way arrested, and she was desperate. We both looked into the future and saw her inevitable end, and fear goaded us to desperation. She begged me to operate, for the medicines I had concocted after long study had done no good.

“I had no one to whom I could turn. I was old then, and instead of being courageous I was beset by fear.

“But I loved her, as I had loved her all my life—and there was a slight chance of success.

"She made arrangements for a trip to Los Angeles and went to the station. From there, disguised, she made her way to the Hammond house—"

WAYNE leaped from his chair. "Your story is fantastic!" he cried. "You must be mad! How dared you— But can you prove any of your crazy story? I—"

"I can prove it well enough by Bella Hammond," replied Cressant, stroking his beard. "If you had been a little more of a man I shouldn't be telling this story now. Do you want to hear the rest of it?"

Wayne opened his lips.

But Brett forestalled him with: "Please go on."

Mrs. Frayne arose from her chair and sank down at Wayne's feet, as if to reassure him with her physical presence.

Cressant continued: "I realized the need for secrecy. The operation had little chance of success. I asked her what she wanted done with her body in case I failed. She indicated the fireplace."

"So you killed her!" cried Wayne. "And burned her body! I know now you are mad. You'll suffer for this, as surely as I have suffered. You've admitted you loved her, and because she wouldn't have you, you killed her! Do you think the police will believe

your fairy story about her being born old?"

Cressant walked across the room and lifted a photograph from a table. It was a good likeness of Nancy Hammond. He studied the finely cut features intently, then laid the photograph face down.

"It would be better if your conclusions were correct, John," he said wearily. "Unfortunately, Nancy Hammond is still alive."

"Alive? Then where? Take me to her at once!"

With Wayne, the rest of the company arose to their feet.

"Very well." The doctor led them to his automobile and gave an address to his chauffeur. They came to a stop before the old Hammond house.

Cressant rang the front bell, and Bella, in her somber garb, opened the door. She exchanged a few words with him, nodded, and vanished. He led them around to the side door, unlocked it, and, preceding his guests, walked up the narrow stairs in silence.

Brett faced again the steel door he had seen on his nocturnal visit and almost drew back. Mrs. Frayne hung on Wayne's arm, and Brett's father brought up the rear.

Old people, thought Brett; I must get away from their years and their sorrows—

His musing was interrupted by

the swinging back of the heavy steel door. They entered.

A huge fireplace, tapestries, deep carpets—these were Brett's impressions rather than his observations. Together, the group crossed the room; waited while Dr. Cressant opened a door, and then fell back as one with a cry of horror.

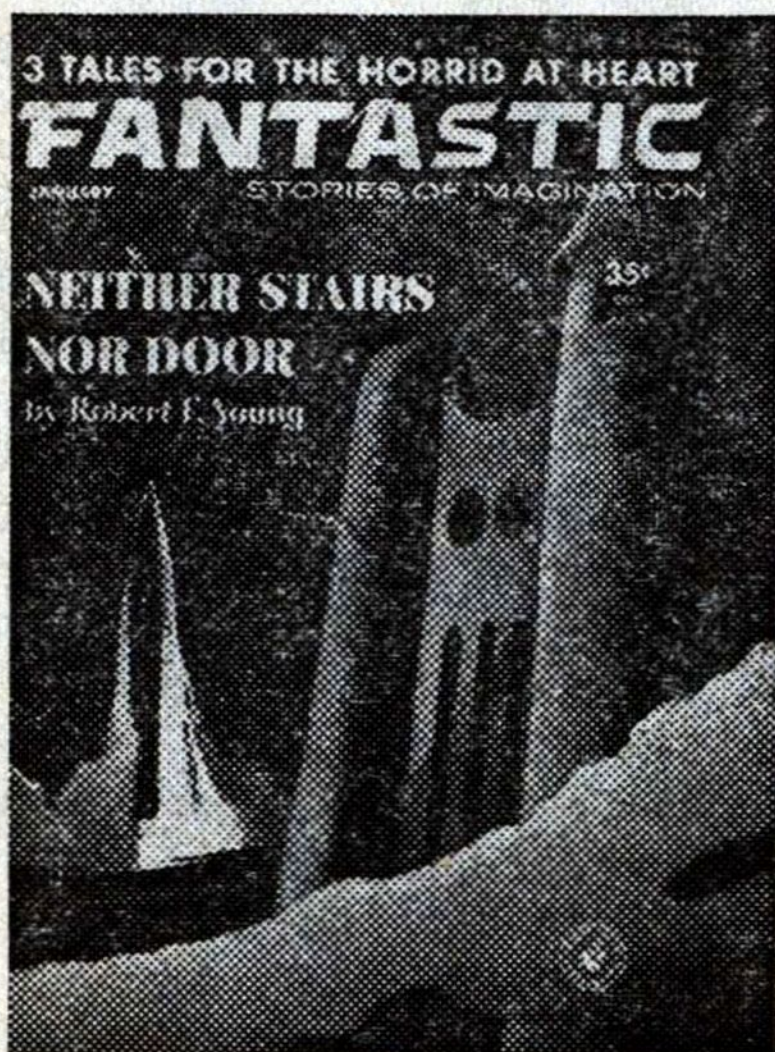
On the floor of a bare, white

room sat a tiny girl of ten, her plump hands toying with a doll. Her head, bowed in absorption, was covered with a fine dust of brownish hair. Aware of interruption, the child looked up, stared at them with eyes like wide gray gates which opened upon nothing. But those eyes, long-lashed, purple-gray, were the eyes of Nancy Hammond.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

For a group of off-trail fantasy tales, give yourself a New Year's present of the January, 1963 issue of FANTASTIC Magazine.



Among the contents:

The cover story (1.), "Neither Stairs Nor Door," by **Robert F. Young**;

"The Leech," an item of medical horror by **Jack Sharkey**.

"Three Tales for the Horrid at Heart" by a new weird writer.

John Jakes' mythical mystery, "In the Days of King Arsgat."

PLUS other stories, a Fantasy Reprint, all our regular departments. Don't miss the January, 1963, FANTASTIC, on sale December 20.

COCOON

By KEITH LAUMER

*Two billion years ago, a unit of life had the urge
to climb out of the sea. It died.
But that didn't count. The urge to climb out was
the thing—greater in its force than a million suns.
To keep that urge is the measure of a man.*

SID Throndyke overrode his respirator to heave a deep sigh.

"Wow!" he said, flipping to his wife's personal channel. "A tough day on the Office channel."

The contact screens attached to his eyeballs stayed blank: Cluster was out. Impatiently, Sid toed the console, checking the channels: Light, Medium, and Deep Sitcom; autho-hypno; Light and Deep Narco; four, six and eight-party Social; and finally, muttering to himself, Psychan. Cluster's identity symbol appeared on his screens.

"There you are," he grieved. "Psychan again. After a hard day, the least a man expects is



Illustrator
ADRAGNA



to find his wife tuned to his channel—”

“Oh, Sid; there’s this wonderful analyst. A new model. It’s doing so much for me, really wonderful . . .”

“I know,” Sid grumped. “That orgasm-association technique. That’s all I hear. I’d think you’d want to keep in touch with the Sitcoms, so you know what’s going on; but I suppose you’ve been tied into Psychan all day—while I burned my skull out on Office.”

“Now, Sid; didn’t I program your dinner and everything?”

“Um.” Mollified, Sid groped with his tongue for the dinner lever, eased the limp plastic tube into his mouth. He sucked a mouthful of the soft paste—

“Cluster! You know I hate Vege-pap. Looks like you could at least dial a nice Prote-sim or a Sucromash . . .”

“Sid, you ought to tune to Psychan. It would do you a world of good . . .” Her sub-vocalized voice trailed off in the earphones. Sid snorted, dialed a double Prote-sim AND a Sucromash, fuming at the delay. He gulped his dinner, not even noticing the rich gluey consistency, then in a somewhat better mood, flipped to the Light Sitcom.

It was good enough stuff, he conceded; the husband was a congenital psychopathic inferior who maintained his family in luxury by a series of fantastic

accidents. You had to chuckle when his suicide attempt failed at the last moment, after he’d lost all that blood. The look on his face when they dragged him back . . .

But somehow it wasn’t enough. Sid dialed the medium; it wasn’t much better. The deep, maybe.

SID viewed for a few minutes with growing impatience. Sure, you had to hand it to the Sitcom people; there was a lot of meat in the deep sitcom. It was pretty subtle stuff, the way the wife got the money the husband had been saving and spent it for a vacation trip for her chihuahua; had a real social content, too deep for most folks. But like the rest of the sitcoms, it was historical. Sure, using old-time settings gave a lot of scope for action. But how about something more pertinent to the contemporary situation? Nowadays, even though people led the kind of rich, full lives that Vital Programming supplied, there was still a certain lack. Maybe it was just a sort of atavistic need for gross muscular exertion. He’d viewed a discussion of the idea of a few nights earlier on the usual Wednesday night four-party hookup with the boys. Still, in his case, he had plenty of muscle tone. He’d spent plenty on a micro-spasm attachment for use with the narco channel . . .

That was a thought. Sid didn't usually like narco; too synthetic, as he'd explained to the boys. They hadn't liked the remark, he remembered. Probably they were all narco fans. But what the hell, a man had a right to a few maverick notions.

Sid tuned to the Narco channel. It was a traditional sex fantasy, in which the familiar colorless hero repeatedly fended off the advances of coitus-seeking girls. It was beautifully staged, with plenty of action, but like the sitcoms, laid in one of those never-never historical settings. Sid flipped past with a sub-vocal grunt. It wasn't much better than Cluster's orgasm-association treatments.

The stylized identity-symbol of the Pubinf announcer flashed on Sid's screens, vibrating in resonance with the impersonal voice of the Official announcer:

“. . . cause for concern. Cent-Prog states that control will have been re-established within the hour. Some discomfort may result from vibration in sectors north of Civic Center, but normalcy will be restored shortly. Now, a word on the food situation.”

A hearty, gelatinous voice took over: “Say, folks, have you considered switching to Vege-pap? Vege-pap now comes in a variety of rich flavors, all, of course, equally nourishing, ev-

ery big swallow loaded with the kind of molecule that keeps those metabolisms rocking along at the pace of today's more-fun-than-ever sitcoms—and today's stimulating narco and social channels, too!

“Starting with First Feeding tomorrow, you'll have that opportunity you've wanted to try Vege-pap. Old-fashioned foods, like Prote-sim and Sucromash, will continue to be available, of course, where exceptional situations warrant. Now—”

“What's that!” Sid sub-vocalized. He toed the replay key, listened again. Then he dug a toe viciously against the tuning key, flipping to the Psychan monitor.

C“CLUSTER!” he barked at his wife's identity pattern. “Have you heard about this nonsense? Some damn fool on Pubinf is blathering about Vege-pap for everybody! By God, this is a free country. I'd like to see anyone try—”

“Sid,” Cluster's voice came faintly, imploring. “P-P-Please, S-S-Sid . . .”

“Damn it, Cluster . . . !” Sid stopped talking, coughed, gulped. His throat was burning. In his excitement he'd been vocalizing. The realization steadied him. He'd have to calm down. He'd been behaving like an animal . . .

“Cluster, darling. Kindly in-

interrupt your treatment. I have to talk to you. Now. It's important." Confound it, if she didn't switch to his channel now—

"Yes, Sid." Cluster's voice had a ragged undertone. Sid half-suspected she was vocalizing then too . . .

"I was listening to Pubinf," he said, aware of a sense of dignity in the telling. No narco-addict he, but a mature-minded auditor of a serious channel like Pubinf. "They're raving about cutting off Prote-sim. Never heard of such nonsense. Have you heard anything about this?"

"No, Sid. You should know I never—"

"I know! But I thought maybe you'd heard something . . ."

"Sid, I've been under treatment all day—except the time I spent programming your dinner."

"You can get Prote-sim in exceptional situations, they said! I wonder what that's supposed to mean? Why, I've been a Prote-sim man for years . . ."

"Maybe it will do you good, Sid. Something different . . ."

"Different? What in the world do I want with something different? I have a comfortable routine, well-balanced, creative. I'm not interested in having any government fat-head telling me what to eat."

"But Vege-sim might be good; build you up or something."

"Build me up? What are you talking about? I view sports regularly; and aren't you forgetting my Micro-spasm accessory? Hah! I'm a very physically-minded man, when it comes to that."

"I know you are, Sid. I didn't mean . . . I only meant, maybe a little variety . . ."

Sid was silent, thinking. Variety. Hmmmm. Might be something in that. Maybe he WAS in a rut, a little.

"Cluster," he said suddenly. "You know, it's a funny thing; I've kind of gotten out of touch. Oh, I don't mean with important affairs. Heck, I hardly ever tune in Narco, or auto-hypno, for that matter. But I mean, after all, it's been quite a while now I guess, since we gave up well, you know, physical contact."

"Sid! If you're going to be awful, I'm switching right back to my Psychan—"

"I don't mean to be getting personal, Cluster. I was just thinking . . . By golly, how long has it been since that first contract with CentProg?"

"Why . . . I haven't any idea. That was so long ago. I can't see what difference it makes. Heavens, Sid, life today is so rich and full—"

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not talking about wanting to change, or anything idiotic. Just wondering. You know."

"Poor Sid. If you could spend

more time with wonderful channels like Psychan, and not have to bother with that boring old Office . . .”

SID chuckled sub-vocally. “A man needs the feeling of achievement he gets from doing a job, Cluster. I wouldn’t be happy, just relaxing with Sitcom all the time. And after all, Indexing is an important job. If we fellows in the game all quit, where’d CentProg be? Eh?”

“I hadn’t thought of it like that, Sid. I guess it is pretty important.”

“Darn right kid. They haven’t built the computer yet that can handle Indexing—or Value Judgment, or Criticism—. It’ll be a while yet before the machine replaces man.” Sid chuckled again. Cluster was such a kid in a lot of ways.

Still, it had been a long time. Funny, how you didn’t think much about time, under Vital Programming. After all, your program was so full, you didn’t have time to moon over the past. You popped out of Dream-stim, had a fast breakfast (Vege-pap; hah! He’d see about that!), then over to Office channel. That kept a fellow on his toes, right up till quitting time. Then dinner with Cluster, and right into the evening’s round of Sitcoms, Socials, Narcos—whatever you wanted.

But how long had it been? A

long time, no doubt. Measured in, say, years, the way folks used to be in the habit of thinking.

Years and years. Yes, by golly. Years and years.

Quite suddenly, Sid was uneasy. How long had it been? He had been about twenty-eight—the term came awkwardly to mind—twenty-eight when he and Cluster first met. Then there was that first anniversary—a wild time that had been, with friends over for TV. And then Vital Programming had come along. He and Cluster had been among the first to sign up.

God, what a long time it had been. TV. Imagine sitting. The thought of being propped up against coarse chairs, out in the open, made Sid wince. And other people around—faces right out in the open and everything. Staring at a little screen no more than five feet square. How in the world had people stood it? Still, it was all in what you were used to. People were adaptable. They had had to be to survive in those primitive conditions. You had to give the old-timers credit. He and Cluster were a pretty lucky couple to have lived in the era when Vital Programming was developed. They could see the contrast right in their own lives. The younger folks, now—

“Sid,” Cluster broke in plaintively. “May I finish my treatment now?”

Sid dialed off, annoyed. Cluster wasn't interested in his problems. She was so wrapped up in Psychan these days, she couldn't even discuss the sitcoms intelligently. Well, Sid Throndyke wasn't a man to be pushed around. He nudged the 'fone switch, gave a number. An operator answered.

"I want the Pubinf office."

THERE was a moment's silence. "That number is unavailable," the recorded voice said.

"Unavailable, hell! I want to talk to them down there! What's all this about cutting off Prote-sim?"

"That information is not available."

"Look," Sid said, calming himself with an effort. "I want to talk to someone at Pubinf—"

"The line is available now."

An unfamiliar identity pattern appeared on Sid's screens.

"I want to find out about this food business," Sid began—

"A temporary measure," a harassed voice said. "Due to the emergency."

"What emergency?" Sid stared at the pattern belligerently. As he watched, it wavered, almost imperceptibly. A moment later, he felt a distinct tremor through the form-hugging plastic cocoon.

"What . . . !" he gasped, "what was that?!"

"There's no cause for alarm," the Pubinf voice said. "You'll be kept fully informed through regular—"

A second shock rumbled. Sid gasped. "What the devil's going on . . . ?"

The Pubinf pattern was gone. Sid blinked at the blank screens, then switched to his monitor channel. He had to talk to someone. Cluster would be furious at another interruption, but—

"Sid!" Cluster's voice rasped in Sid's hemispherical canals. She was vocalizing now for sure, he thought wildly.

"They broke right in!" Cluster cried. "Just as I was ready to climax—"

"Who?" Sid demanded. "What's going on here? What are you raving about?"

"Not an identity pattern, either," Cluster wailed. "Sid, it was a—a—face."

"Wha—" Sid blinked. He hadn't heard Cluster use obscenity before. This must be serious.

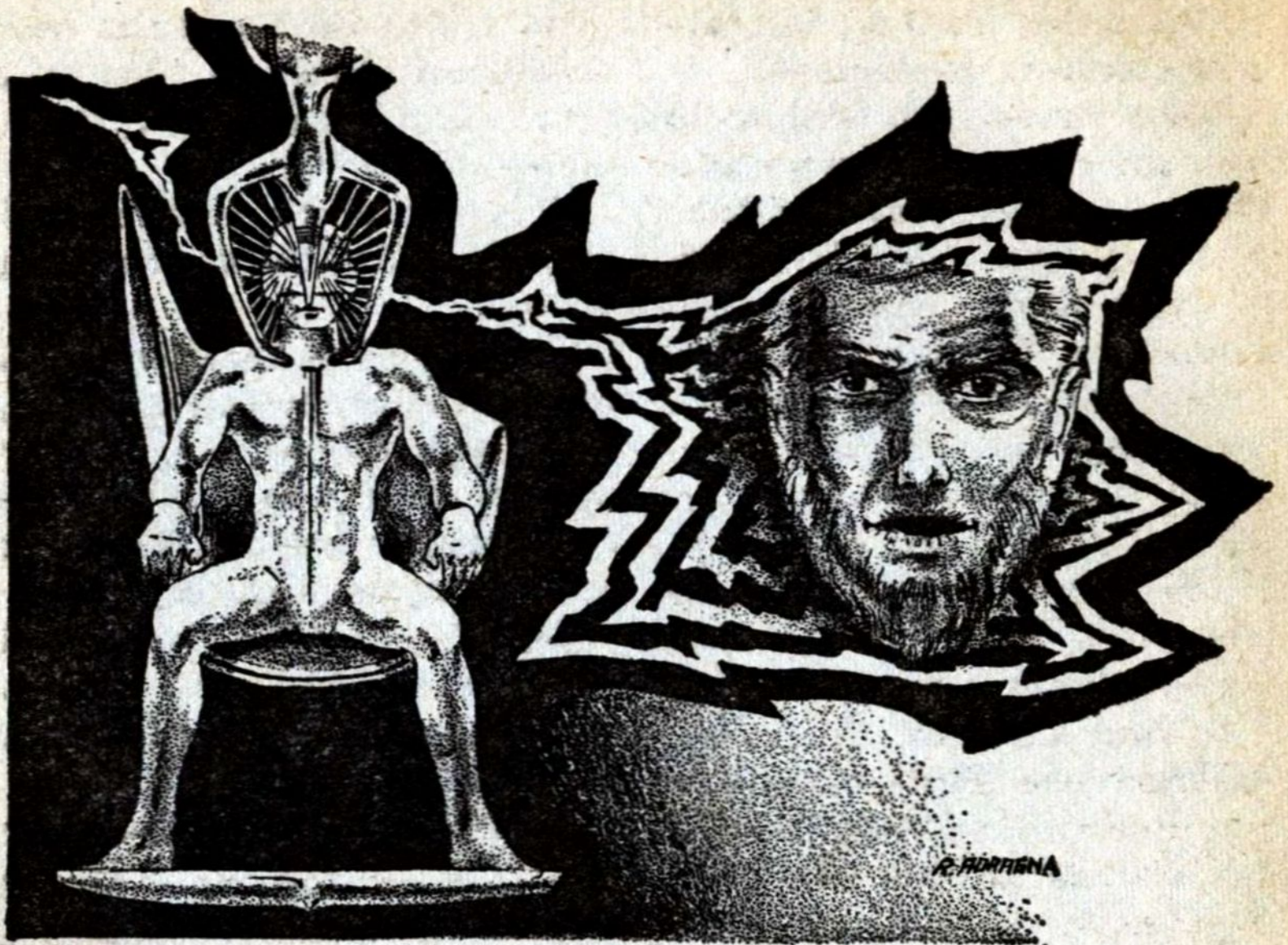
"Calm yourself," he said. "Now tell me exactly what happened."

"I told you: a—face. It was horrible, Sid. On the Psychan channel. And he was shouting—"

"Shouting what?"

"I don't know. Something about 'Get out'. Oh, Sid, I've never been so humiliated . . ."

"Listen, Cluster," Sid said. "You tune in to a nice narco



now, and get some rest. I'll deal with this."

"A face," Cluster sobbed. "A great, nasty, *hairy* face—"

"That's enough!" Sid snapped. He cut Cluster's identity pattern with an impatient gouge of his toe. Sometimes it seemed like women enjoyed obscenity . . .

NOW what? He was far from giving up on the Vege-pap issue, and now this: a respectable married woman insulted right in her own cocoon. Things were going to hell. But he'd soon see about that. With a decisive twist of the ankle, Sid flipped to the Police channel.

"I want to report an outrage."

The police identity pattern blanked abruptly. For a moment Sid's contact screens were blank. Then a face appeared.

Sid sucked in a breath out of phase with his respirator. THIS wasn't the police channel. The face stared at him, mouth working: a pale face, with whiskers sprouting from hollow cheeks, lips sunken over toothless gums. Then the audio came in, in mid-sentence:

". . . to warn you. You've got to listen, you fools! You'll all die here! It's already at the north edge of the city. The big barrier wall's holding, but—"

The screen blanked; the bland police pattern reappeared.

"The foregoing interruption was the result of circumstances beyond the control of CentProg," a taped voice said smoothly. "Normal service will now be resumed."

"Police!" Sid yelled. He was vocalizing now, and be damned to it! There was just so much a decent citizen would stand for—

The screen flickered again. The police pattern disappeared. Sid held his breath—

A face appeared. This was a different one, Sid was sure. It was hairier than the other one, but not as hollow-cheeked. He watched in dumb shock as the mouth opened—

"Listen," a hoarse voice said. "Everybody, listen. We're blanketing all the channels this time—I hope. This is our last try. There's only a few of us. It wasn't easy getting into here—and there's no time left. We've got to move fast."

The voice stopped as the man on the screen breathed hoarsely, swallowed. Then he went on:

"It's the ice; it's moving down on us, fast, a god-awful big glacier. The walls can't stand much longer. It'll either wipe the city off the map or bury it. Either way, anybody that stays is done for."

"Listen; it won't be easy, but you've got to try. Don't try to go

down. You can't get out below because of the drifts. Go up, onto the roofs. It's your only chance—you must go up."

THE image on Sil's contact screens trembled violently, then blanked. Moments later, Sid felt a tremor—worse, this time. His cocoon seemed to pull at him. For a moment he was aware of the drag of a hundred tiny contacts grafted to the skin, a hundred tiny conductors penetrating to nerve conduits—

An almost suffocating wave of claustrophobia swept over him. The universe seemed to be crushing in on him, immobile, helpless, a grub buried in an immense ant-hill—

The shock passed. Slowly, Sid regained a grip on himself. His respirator was cycling erratically, attempting to match to his ragged breathing impulses. His chest ached from the strain. He groped with a toe, keyed in Cluster's identity pattern.

"Cluster! Did you feel it? Everything was rocking . . ."

There was no reply. Sid called again. No answer. Was she ignoring him, or—

Maybe she was hurt, alone and helpless—

Sid fought for calm. No need for panic. Dial CentProg, report the malfunction. He felt with trembling toes, and punched the keys . . .

CentProg's channel was dark, lifeless. Sid stared, unbelieving. It wasn't possible. He switched wildly to the light sitcom—

Everything normal here. The husband fell down the stairs, smashing his new camera . . .

But this was no time to get involved. Sid flipped through the medium and deep Sitcoms: all normal. Maybe he could get through to the police now—

Mel Goldfarb's pattern blinked on the personal call code. Sid tuned him in.

"Mel! What's it all about? My God, that earthquake—"

"I don't like it, Sid. I felt it, over here in South Sector. The . . . uh . . . face . . . said the North Sector. You're over that side. What did you—"

"My God, I thought the roof was going to fall in, Mel. It was terrible! Look, I'm trying to get through to the police. Keep in touch, hey?"

"Wait, Sid; I'm worried—"

Sid cut the switch, flipped to the police channel. If that depraved son of a bitch showed his face again—

The police pattern appeared. Sid paused to gather his thoughts. First things first . . .

"That earthquake," he said. "What's happening? And the maniac who's been exposing his face. My wife—"

"The foregoing interruption was the result of circumstances

beyond the control of CentProg. Normal service will now be resumed."

"What are you talking about? NOTHING is beyond the control of CentProg—"

"The foregoing interruption was the result of circumstances beyond the control of CentProg. Normal service will now be resumed."

"That's enough of your damned nonsense! What about this crazy guy showing his bare face? How do I know that he won't—"

"The foregoing interruption was the result of circumstances beyond the control of CentProg. Normal service will now be resumed."

Sid stared, aghast. A taped voice! A brush-off! He was supposed to settle for that? Well, by God, he had a contract . . .

MEL's code flashed again. Sid tuned him in. "Mel, this is a damned outrage. I called police channel and do you know what I got? A canned announcement—"

"Sid," Mel cut in. "Do you suppose it meant anything? I mean the . . . uh . . . guy with the . . . uh . . . face. All that about getting out, and the glacier wiping out the city."

"What?" Sid stared at Mel's pattern, trying to make sense of what he was saying. "Glacier?" he said. "Wipe out what?"

"You saw him, didn't you? The crazy bird, cut in on all channels. He said the ice was going to wipe out the city . . ."

Sid thought back. The damned obscene face. He hadn't really listened to what it was raving about. But it was something about getting out . . .

"Tell me that again, Mel."

Mel repeated the bare-faced man's warning. "Do you suppose there's anything in it? I mean, the shocks, and everything. And you can't get police channel. And I tried to tune in to Pubinf just now and I got a canned voice, just like you did . . ."

"It's crazy, Mel. It can't . . ."

"I don't know. I've tried to reach a couple of the fellows; I can't get through . . ."

"Mel," Sid asked suddenly. "How long has it been? I mean, how long since CentProg has been handling things?"

"What? My God, Sid, what a question. I don't know."

"A long time, eh, Mel? A lot could have happened outside."

"My contract—"

"But how do we know? I was talking to Cluster just now; we couldn't remember. I mean, how can you gauge a thing like that? We have our routine, and everything goes along, and nobody thinks about anything like . . . outside. Then all of a sudden—"

"I'm trying Pubinf again," Mel said. "I don't like this—"

MEL was gone. Sid tried to think. Pubinf was handing out canned brush-offs, just like Police Channel. CentProg . . . maybe it was okay now . . .

CentProg was still dark. Sid was staring at the blank screens when a new shock sent heavy vibrations through his cocoon. Sid gasped, tried to keep cool. It would pass; it wasn't anything, it couldn't be . . .

The vibrations built, heavy, hard shocks that drove the air from Sid's lungs, yanked painfully at arms, legs, neck, and his groin . . .

It was a long time before the nausea passed. Sid lay, drawing breath painfully, fighting down the vertigo. The pain—it was a help, in a way. It helped to clear his head. Something was wrong, bad wrong. He had to think now, do the right thing. It wouldn't do to panic. If only there wouldn't be another earthquake . . .

Something wet splattered against Sid's half-open mouth. He recoiled, automatically spitting the mucky stuff, snorting—

It was Vege-pap, gushing down from the feeding tube. Sid averted his face, felt the cool semi-liquid pattering against the cocoon, spreading over it, sloshing down the sides. Something was broken . . .

Sid groped for the cut-off with his tongue, gagging at the viscous mess pouring over his face.

Of course, it hadn't actually touched his skin, except for his lips; the cocoon protected him. But he could feel the thick weight of it, awash in the fluid that supported the plastic cocoon. He could sense it quite clearly, flowing under him, forcing him up in the chamber as the hydrostatic balance was upset. With a shock of pain, Sid felt a set of neuro contacts along his spinal cord come taut. He gritted his teeth, felt searing agony as the contacts ripped loose.

Half the world went dark and cold. Sid was only dimly aware of the pressure against his face and chest as he pressed against the cell roof. All sensation was gone from his legs now, from his left arm, his back. His left contact screen was blank, unseeing. Groaning with the effort, Sid strained to reach out with a toe, key the emergency signal—

Hopeless. Without the boosters he could never make it. His legs were dead, paralyzed. He was helpless.

HE tried to scream, choked, fought silently in the swaddling cocoon, no longer a euphorically caressing second skin but a dead, clammy weight, binding him. He twisted, feeling unused muscles cramp at the effort, touched the lever that controlled the face-plate. It had been a long

time since Sid had opened the plate. He'd had a reputation as an open-air fiend once—but that had been—he didn't know how long. The lever was stiff. Sid lunged against it again. It gave. There was a sudden lessening of pressure as the burden of Vegepap slopped out through the opening. Sid sank away from the ceiling of the tiny cubicle, felt his cocoon ground on the bottom.

For a long time Sid lay, dazed by pain and shock, not even thinking, waiting for the agony to subside . . .

Then the itching began. It penetrated Sid's daze, set him twitching in a frenzy of discomfort. The tearing loose of the dorsal contacts had opened dozens of tiny rents in the cocoon; a sticky mixture of the supporting water bath and Vegepap seeped in, irritating the tender skin. Sid writhed, struggled to scratch—and discovered that, miraculously, the left arm responded now. The motor nerves which had been stunned by the electro-neural trickle-flow through the contacts were recovering control. Feebly, Sid's groping hand reached his inflamed hip—and scrabbled against the smooth sheath of plastic.

He had to get out. The cocoon was a confining nightmare, a dead husk that had to be shed. The face-plate was open. Sid felt upward, found the edge, tugged—

Slippery as an eel, he slithered from the cocoon, hung for an instant as the remaining contacts came taut, then slammed to the floor a foot below. Sid didn't feel the pain of the fall; as the contacts ripped free, he fainted.

WHEN Sid recovered consciousness, his first thought was that the narco channel was getting a little TOO graphic. He groped for a tuning switch—

Then he remembered. The earthquake, Mel, the canned announcement—

And he had opened his face-plate and fought to get out—and here he was. He blinked dully, then moved his left hand. It took a long time, but he managed to peel the contact screens from his eyes. He looked around. He was lying on the floor in a rectangular tunnel. A dim light came from a glowing green spot along the corridor. Sid remembered seeing it before, a long time ago. . . . the day he and Cluster had entered their cocoons.

Now that he was detached from the stimuli of the cocoon, it seemed to Sid, he was able to think a little more clearly. It had hurt to be torn free from the security of the cocoon, but it wasn't so bad now. A sort of numbness had set in. But he couldn't lie here and rest; he had to do something, fast. First, there was Cluster. She hadn't answered.

COCOON

Her cocoon was situated right next to his—

Sid tried to move; his leg twitched; his arm fumbled over the floor. It was smooth and wet, gummy with the Vege-pap that was still spilling down from the open face-plate. The smell of the stuff was sickening. Irrationally, Sid had a sudden mouth-watering hunger for Prote-sim.

Sid fixed his eyes on the green light, trying to remember. He and Cluster had been wheeled along the corridor, laughing and talking gaily. Somehow, out here, things took on a different perspective. That had been—God! YEARS ago. How long? Maybe—twenty years? Longer. Fifty, maybe. Maybe longer. How could you know? For a while they had tuned to Pubinf, followed the news, kept up with friends on the outside. But more and more of their friends had signed contracts with CentProg. The news sort of dried up. You lost interest.

But what mattered now wasn't how long, it was what he was going to do. Of course, an attendant would be along soon in any case to check up, but meanwhile, Cluster might be in trouble—

THE tremor was bad this time. Sid felt the floor rock, felt the hard paving under him ripple like the surface of a pond. Some-

where, a rumbling sound rolled, and somewhere something heavy fell. The green light flickered, then burned steadily again.

A shape moved in the gloom of the corridor; there was the wet slap of footsteps. Sid sub-vocalized a calm 'Hi, fellows'—The silence rang in his ears. My God, of course they couldn't hear him. He tried again, consciously vocalizing, a tremendous shout—

A feeble croak, and a fit of coughing. When he recovered his breath, a bare and hairy face, greenish white, was bending over him.

". . . this poor devil," the man was saying in a thin choked voice.

Another face appeared over the first face's shoulder. Sid recognized them both. They were the two that had been breaking into decent channels, with their wild talk about a glacier . . .

"Listen, fellow," one of the bare-faced men said. Sid stared with fascinated disgust at the clammy pale skin, the sprouting hairs, the loose toothless mouth, the darting pink tongue. God, people were horrible to look at!

". . . be along after awhile. Didn't mean to stir up anybody in your shape. You been in too long, fellow. You can't make it."

"I'm . . . good . . . shape . . ." Sid whispered indignantly.

"We can't do anything for you. You'll have to wait till the main-

tenance unit comes along. I'm pretty sure you'll be okay. The ice's piled itself up in a wall now, and split around the city walls. I think they'll hold. Course, the ice will cover the city, but that won't matter. CentProg will still handle everything. Plenty of energy from the pile and the solar cells, and the recycling will handle the food okay . . ."

". . . Cluster . . ." Sid gasped. The bare-faced man leaned closer. Sid explained about his wife. The man checked nearby face-plates. He came back and knelt by Sid. "Rest easy, fellow," he said. "They all look all right. Your wife's okay. Now, we're going to have to go on. But you'll be okay. Plenty of Vege-pap around, I see. Just eat a little now and then. The Maintenance machine will be along and get you tucked back in."

"Where . . .?" Sid managed.

"Us? We're heading south. Matt here knows where we can get clothes and supplies, maybe even a flier. We never were too set on this Vital Programming. We've only been in maybe a few years and we always did a lot of auto-gym work, keeping in shape. Didn't like the idea of wasting away . . . Matt's the one found out about the ice. He came for me . . ."

Sid was aware of the other man talking. It was hard to hear him.

A sudden thought struck Sid. ". . . how . . . long . . . ?" he asked.

IT took three tries, but the bare-faced man got the idea at last.

"I'll take a look, fellow," he said. He went to Sid's open face-plate, peered at it, called the other man over. Then he came back, his feet spattering in the puddled Vege-pap.

"Your record says . . . 2043," he said. He looked at Sid with wide eyes. They were red and irritated, Sid saw. It made his own eyes itch.

"If that's right, you been here since the beginning. My God, that's over . . . two hundred years . . ."

The second bare-faced man, Matt, was pulling the other away. He was saying something, but Sid wasn't listening. Two hundred years. It seemed impossible. But after all, why not? In a controlled environment, with no wear and tear, no disease, you could live as long as Cent-Prog kept everything running. But two hundred years . . .

Sid looked around. The two men were gone. He tried to remember just what had happened, but it was too hard. The ice, they had said, wouldn't crush the city. But it would flow around it, encase it in ice, and the snow would fall, and cover it, and the city would lie under the ice.

Ages might pass. In the cells, the cocoons would keep everyone snug and happy. There would be the traditional sitcoms, and Narco, and Psychan . . .

And up above, the ice.

Sid remembered the awful moments in the cocoon, when the shock waves had rocked him; the black wave of fear that had closed in; the paralyzing claustrophobia.

The ice would build up and build up. Ice, two miles thick . . .

Why hadn't they waited? Sid groped, pushed himself up, rolled over. He was stronger already. Why hadn't they waited? He'd used the micro-spasm unit regularly—every so often. He had good muscle tone. It was just that he was a little stiff. He scrabbled at the floor, moved his body a few inches. Nothing to it. He remembered the reason for the green light; it was the elevator. They had brought him and Cluster down in it. All he had to do was get to it, and—

WHAT about Cluster? He could try to bring her along. It would be lonely to be without her. But she wouldn't want to leave. She'd been here—two hundred years. Sid almost chuckled. Cluster wouldn't like the idea of being as old as that . . .

No, he'd go alone. He couldn't stay, of course. It would never

be the same again for him. He pulled himself along, an inch, another. He rested, sucked up some Vege-pap from where it spread near his mouth . . .

He went on. It was a long way to the green light, but if you took it an inch at a time, an inch at a time . . .

He reached the door. There hadn't been any more shocks. Along the corridor, the glass face-plates stood closed, peaceful, orderly. The mess on the floor was the only thing. But the maintenance units would be along. The bare-faced man had said so.

You opened the door to the elevator by breaking a beam of light; Sid remembered that. He raised his arm; it was getting strong, all right. It was hardly any effort to lift it right up—

The door opened with a whoosh of air. Sid worked his way inside. Half way in, the door tried to close on him; his weight must have triggered the door-closing mechanism. But it touched him and flew open again. It was working fine, Sid thought.

He pulled his legs in, then rested. He would have to get up to the switch, somehow, and that was going to be tricky. Still, he had gotten this far okay. Just a little farther, and he'd catch up with the bare-faced men, and they'd set out together.

It took Sid an hour of hard

work, but he managed to reach, first, the low stool, then the chrome-plated control button. With a lurch the car started up. Sid fell back to the floor and fought back wave on wave of vertigo. It was hectic, being outside. But he wouldn't go back now; not even to see Cluster's familiar identity pattern again. Never again. He had to get out.

The elevator came to a stop. The door slid open—and a blast of sub-arctic air struck Sid like a blow from a giant hammer. His naked body—mere flaccid skin over atrophied bones—curled like a grub in the flames. For a long moment all sensation was washed away in the shock of the cold. Then there was pain; pain that went on and on . . .

AND then the pain went, and it was almost like being back again, back in the cocoon, warm and comfortable, secure and protected and safe. But not quite the same. A thought stirred in Sid's mind. He pushed at the fog of cotton-wool, fought to grasp the thought that bobbed on the surface of the blissful warmth.

He opened his eyes. Out across the white expanse of roof-tops, beyond the last rim of the snow, the glittering jagged shape of the ice-face reared up, crystal-blue, gigantic; and in the high arched blue-black sky, a star burned with a brilliant fire.

This was what he wanted to tell Cluster, Sid thought. This, about the deep sky, and the star, so far away—and yet a man could see it.

But it was too late now to tell Cluster, too late to tell anyone. The bare-faced men were gone. Sid was alone; alone now under the sky.

LONG ago, Sid thought, on the shore of some warm and muddy sea, some yearning sea-thing had crawled out to blink at the open sky, gulp a few breaths of burning oxygen, and die.

But not in vain. The urge to climb out was the thing. That was the force that was bigger than all the laws of nature, greater than all the distant suns blazing in their meaningless lonely splendor.

The other ones, the ones below, the secure and comfortable ones in their snug cocoons under the snow, they had lost the great urge. The thing that made a man.

But he, Sid Throndyke—he had made it.

Sid lay with his eyes on the star and the silent snow drifted over him to form a still small mound; and then the mound was buried, and then the city.

And only the ice and the star remained.

THE END



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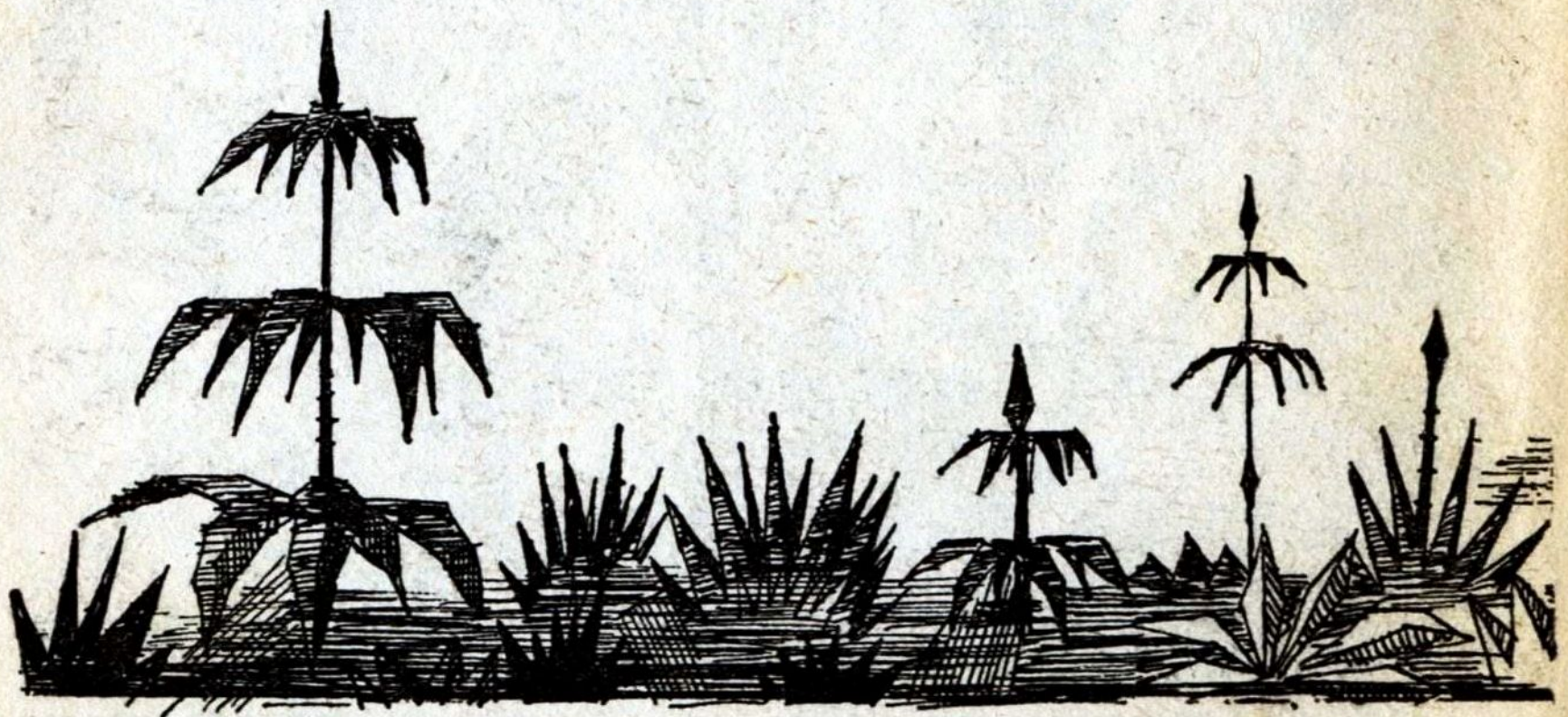
(Conclusion)

It's Magic, You Dope!

Synopsis of Part One

I, ALBERT HICKS, humble Chicago librarian, while visiting Susan Baker, to whom I was affianced, in her Oak Park home, grew suddenly tired of the insipid cookies-and-lemonade state of our romantic relationship, and—after having words—left the house to think things over. While in my own kitchen, which faced the rear of Susan's home, I noticed two men, whom I'd suspected had followed me home

from work that evening, messing around near Susan's. Returning to her house to investigate, I found that the house, Susan, her brother Timothy, and Maggie Baker, her mother, had all vanished without a trace, and that Porkle Park, which had ended at the house's boundary line, was now extended to fill the gap. A call to Susan's father, who should have been night watchman at the Oak Park Marshall Field's Store, evinced the fact that he, too, had





Birmingham

vanished. The family was no longer even listed in the phone book, and Susan's picture in my home had been replaced with that of my last girl friend, Annabel. I called Annabel, and found that she still thought she was my girl, having no memory of our break-up when I'd met Susan. Annabel, sensing something amiss, came over despite my protests, bringing along her niece, Elizabeth, who had operatic aspirations. At the moment when she was about to sing for me, Mr. Garson, my boss at the library, dropped by. Trapping him into unwilling spectatorship at the upcoming concert, I sneaked from the house, and went to the home of Geoffrey Porkle, after whom the park was named, figuring he was the only one who stood to gain from the Baker family's disappearance. My suspicions proved correct. He and a Mr. Courtland had sent the Bakers into another dimension, the forest of Drendon, which was tangent to Earth at the locale of the park. When they attempted to send me after the Bakers, I managed to turn the tables on them, and both Porkle and Courtland were sent to Drendon, instead.

Returning home, in despair of ever seeing the Bakers again, I found I was not alone in my darkened study where I had fled to spare myself Elizabeth's song-fest. A faun named Timtik and a

woodnymph named Loren were there, being people from Drendon who had popped through the dimensional barrier to view Earth people. While still absorbing this incredible state of affairs, it came home to me that Lorn and Timtik were none other than Susan and her brother Timothy, both in adapted Drendon-shapes, with no memory of their Earth-life. Discovered by keyhole-snooping Elizabeth with a beautiful half-clad redhead in my study, I tried to halt Lorn's subsequent flight, and suddenly found myself translated into the Drendon Wood with her and her goat-legged companion. There I learned of the dreadful Kwistians, parrot-beaked winged cannibals, who doted on roasted woodnymphs, and were held at bay only by the Thrake, a small blue tentacled creature kept alive by Maggot, a witch to whom Timtik was apprenticed. Maggot, I realized, was Maggie Baker, in her Drendon-form. By unfortunate accident, Lorn and I became trapped on a magic path across the purple mossfields which led to Sark, the castle of the Kwistians, ruled by Kwist and Cort, his vizier-wizard. Timtik poled out through the bog beneath the moss on a log to save us, while Maggot, back in her magic hut, tried to conjure up a rescue-spell. At the moment when two flying Kwistians were about to

carry Lorn back to the flame-pits at Sark, Timtik put a Scapegoat Spell on Lorn, leaving her in two existences, one real, one false, just before Maggot's spell magicked us back to the hut. Which Lorn was the real one? The one in the hut, or the one on her way to the flame-pits? We would know only when one was destroyed. If false, fine. But if the real one were burned alive, both would cease to exist. Maggot, unable to leave the Thrake, which had to be fed every fifteen minutes, gave me a bag of five spells: a bottle of Schlitz, a commuter's ticket on the Long Island Railroad, a spool of thread, a tube of depilatory cream, and a golden molar. With these in a

magically-sealed leathern pouch, and with a heavy lead cuirass strapped to my breast—in case, among other things, we met a radioactive dragon—I set off with Lorn and Timtik through the enchanted woods toward the distant castle of Sark, to rescue the other Lorn, lest she turn out to be the real one. I not only didn't know what the cuirass could do, I had no idea how to activate even one of the spells, nor which to use in an emergency. But Maggot assured me I would figure them out, one by one, when the correct moment came for their use, then went back to feed the Thrake again, and left the three of us to find our way through the perils of Drendon.

CHAPTER 8

THE forest of Drendon is a large one, spreading for a mile upon mile, toward where a horizon should be, but never is. It can match the actual antiquity of Earth, and easily surpass that planet's recorded history by many centuries. Forever new, forever old, always moving outward into the vast chaotic wastes that marked its perimeter, taming the unknown with infiltrating soil, burgeoning shrubbery, creeping trees, and a living population of beasts and horrors that moved with the woods.

Into this treacherous entity,

only slightly aware of the danger, I was marching, my only protection and hope of further life a childlike faun and lovely but not too bright woodnymph, plus a wallet full of spells none of us could be sure of employing correctly in the face of imminent disaster.

"But isn't the castle over that way, more toward the moss fields?" I asked, keeping carefully apace of Lorn.

Timtik, ahead of us in the sun-spattered underbrush, shook his head. "It is, but if we are to make it to Sark before those two Kwistians get there with that other Lorn, we have to take the

long way around. They have a start of nearly a half an hour on us, and it will take them another half hour to finally arrive at the castle."

"I don't get it," I protested. "If they're flying, in a straight line, and we're walking, on a long curve through this tanglewood, they'll be there hours before we will!"

"No," said Lorn. "You see, Albert, according to Maggot's calculations, we should arrive there at the same time they do, if not shortly before. Time is a little different in our dimension."

"How so?" I said, dubiously.

"Well," said Timtik, skirting a green mound of a rough basketball-shape in his path, "you live on a curved surface, where the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. So, conversely, we live on a plane surface, where the shortest distance is a curve."

"Don't think of Drendon as a simple plane; think of it as a mercator projection of a globe of the world—remember what Lorn told you about the orange-peel—and you'll see at once that certain apparent distances are actually much shorter than some longer-looking ones. Remember that the entire top edge of a mercator map represents a single point, the pole; so that whole edge has no length at all in actuality, see?"

"I—I think so—" I said, trying to equate the comparison with my limited knowledge of Drendon. "But—" I started, as my forward foot stepped squarely onto that rotund green mound. Instantly, off in the depths of the forest, a whistle blew two sharp hoots, a gong reverberated brazenly, and a chorus of blood-thirsty shrieks began to sound, louder by the moment.

LORN muttered a ladylike-curse at me, and Timtik whirled, his face blank with surprise. "Albert—!" he croaked in his tinny voice, "Did you step on the *Snitch*?"

"That little green thing?" I said, having hastily withdrawn my foot.

"Odds bodkins!" muttered the faun. "The whole Thrang nation will be alerted. Come on, we'll have to run for it!"

I felt quite frustrated. "I thought you were going to be my guide!" I complained as Lorn and I ran up abreast of the faun, who was impeding his fleet pace to accommodate us.

"Albert," said Lorn, trotting easily beside me, "Timtik can't think of everything! He simply forgot you'd never seen a *Snitch* before."

"Shut up, you two, and run!" grumbled the faun, diving headlong over a wide stretch of vinous growths which a moment la-

ter caught me on the instep and sent me sprawling into Lorn and knocking her down with me.

In another moment, the forest seemed to fall in on us. I could hear Timtik's shriek of dismay as he, too, was swept up in the disaster I'd triggered. A heavy jungle of writhing vines and twigs was interlacing rapidly in all directions, sewing the three of us up like dressing inside a turkey.

"What happened?" I gasped.

Timtik's voice in the leafy tangle was low with disgust. "You kicked a Snatch!"

DRUMS were beating frenziedly as the bearers toted the ball of tight foliage into the center of the compound. Through the thick leaves and stalks of the Snatch, I had been unable to see our captors clearly, but from the noise they were making, I wasn't sure I wanted to. Timtik, whom I could make out only dimly beside me in the tangled green fronded interior, wasn't even speaking to me.

"But Timtik," I pled, "how could I have known? I thought you were diving over the Snatch to make better time. How was I to know *it* was in cahoots with the Thrangs, too? You know I didn't mean to drop the wallet; that Snatch kind of shook me up, and I just naturally got uncoordinated for the moment . . ."

"Oh . . . Damn it all," Timtik

muttered wearily. "I guess you're right. If I only had some genie powder, I could magick it back to us. *If* I knew the spell-chant."

As I nodded sympathetically, the Snatch suddenly fell to the ground and snapped open flat, as swiftly as a popping corn kernel, giving me my first view of our captors. One look was a lifetime's worth. I gave a terrified moan and kicked down hard on the surface of the flattened Snatch with my heel. It re-snapped shut instantly, and there was a concerted howl of annoyance from the Thrangs outside.

"Nice thinking, Albert!" said Timtik, openly admiring.

"Are we safe now?" Lorn hoped brightly.

"Till it opens again," I muttered. "Get your hooves ready, Timtik!"

There came a muttering thunder of voices outside, as though the Thrangs were discussing the novelty of the situation. And inside, a sudden groan escaped Timtik, and he smacked his palm to his forehead.

"Lorn, you crazy creature—!" he said. "You're a woodnymph, and this thing is vinous. *Tell* it to stay shut!"

"Oh," said Lorn. "That's right!" She lifted a tendril of ferny frond to her lips and whispered polite instructions, like an

empress giving dinner directions to the palace chef. "All set," she said brightly.

Outside, the mumbling ceased at that moment, and I figured the Thrangs were going to give it the old college try, because they hefted us up again. I tensed, awaiting the fall. To be sure, they could keep dropping the thing till they brained us, but it seemed a nicer fate than being brained by them in person.

I REALIZED something was up when the Snatch remained aloft, swaying gently. We were taken someplace else.

"We're lucky they didn't think of poking a spear into this basket to get us," I said. "We'd never be able to dodge."

"Oh, they don't want us *dead*, Albert," said Lorn. "That's what's so horrible about capture by the Thrangs."

"They want us as *pets!*" explained the faun.

"Pets?" I moaned. "But the Thrangs— It looked to me like they were built on the order of mushrooms with frayed tops. Every tentacle on that topside is ridged with spiky things like ten-penny nails! Why, if one of them fondled a pet, it'd either be crushed to death in their grasp, or impaled on one of those horny growths . . ."

"That's what makes it ghastly," sighed Timtik. "They are so

damned friendly that they treat pets with the utmost gentleness. Sometimes the pets linger on for weeks."

"Killed with kindness!" I remarked ruefully, then broke off with a gasp as I caught the glint of sunlight on something ripply beneath the Snatch— "Lorn!" I yelped, with what turned out to be damned lucky intuition, "*Reverse* your orders to this thing, and quick!"

Even as she bent to the front and did so, Timtik—who hadn't seen what I had—gave a cry of fright as the Snatch was released again. . . . And did *not* hit the ground. It must have been a fifty-foot drop into that lake. An instant after the Snatch opened to Lorn's remanded order, we were all up to our eyebrows in icy water, gurgling our way back to breathing level.

The lake was small, about ten feet deep, ringed by a solid escarpment of sheer cliffs. Cheering Thrangs ringed the surrounding brink. I trod water valiantly with my companions, wondering what came next.

Then a heavy vine, with plenty of shoots to grasp, came uncoiling down the cliffside. Timtik was having a difficult time treading with his skimpy hooves.

Lorn and I grasped his hair and heaved his face above the surface again. Liquid spouted from Timtik's nose in a frothy

gush, and his eyes were glassy. "Thanks," he gurgled.

Then something tightened under my armpits, and I realized the Thrang's insidious scheme. The end of that tossed vine had swum, eel-like, about us in the water, and was now a firm noose, the other end in the tentacles of strong Thrangs. With numb shock, I found we were being lifted from the water, then bumping and banging our way up the face of the cliff toward the yowling Thrang nation.

"Albert," gasped Timtik, still spouting water, "I have a plan. Lorn and I will delay the Thrangs, and your job is to run back into the woods and find the wallet of spells!"

Before I could ask how, we were on the rim of the cliff. There wasn't a moment to spare. The Thrangs had grown even fonder during their brief frustration, and were at that moment dropping the end of the vine and surging forward as we tugged ourselves free of the now-limp looped end.

"Run, Albert!" yelled Timtik. "This won't hold them long!"

"What won't?" I squeaked, looking in vain for an open spot between those converging ranks of tentacled affection. Then I saw that Lorn, with crossed legs, was holding Timtik's hand, as he howled mystic words at the sky. It was his thunderstorm

spell, and he was giving it his thaumaturgic all.

THE lumbering, spiky, seven-foot-tall Thrangs were only a yard short of tentacle-grab. I backed from them, figuring that at worst we three could leap from the cliff and take our chances in the lake again . . .

Thunder bammed! Lightning crashed and showered hissing sparks! A torrent of drenching rain poured to the ground.

The Thrangs reacted instantly. With delight.

With a happy cheer, they swung their tentacles till the spikes meshed overhead like a zipper's teeth, and their tubular bodies stiffened and stretched upward, the downpour now starting to fill their tulip-shaped tops formed by the meshed tentacles. They were having the Thrang equivalent of a binge.

While Timtik's magic held the field, I did a quick slalom-run between the towering bodies of the Thrangs.

Then the rain ceased. I looked back to see Timtik keel over wearily. I stopped dead, and turned back, instantly. I grabbed him up in my arms and with Lorn beside me, I raced back through those tall slurping ranks toward the forest rim. "How long will it take them to drink that water?" I panted.

"Not long . . ." the faun

gasped weakly. "Hurry . . ."

Luckily, the Snatch had occupied an area about ten feet square. Not yet overgrown, the wallet was easy to spot in the semi-barren center. I set Timtik back upon his own two hooves again and grabbed it up. At the same instant, the Thrangs started to howl once more, in the distance. The binge was over. I turned the wallet upside-down and shook it.

Out fluttered the commuters' ticket. Nothing else.

"Where's the rest of the things?" wailed Lorn. "I don't even see the sealing-flap!"

"It must be a sign!" urged Timtik. "Use it!"

"How!?" I gibbered, waving the ticket.

The crash of Thrang bodies entering heavy shrubbery sent an icy ramrod up my spine.

I've got to *think!*" I snarled, my hands trembling. "Ticket . . . railroad . . . ride . . . commute . . . poker game . . . smoking car . . . conductor . . . punch . . ." My heart contracted sharply. "PUNCH!" I yelled.

The Thrangs crashed into the clearing behind us.

"Albert!" squealed Lorn, flinging her arms about my neck.

Then my eyes lighted on Timtik's forehead, and the twin horns thereon. "To ride, you got to get the ticket punched!" I hollered, ramming the piece of

pasteboard upon the tiny point of his left horn. A neat disc of paper popped out like a conservative's confetti, then—while Lorn still clung to me, I grabbed Timtik up into my arms, and yelled, "Hang on!"

Steel tracks whizzed across the clearing—Metal screamed and squealed—A hot, sulphurous blast of gases flashed into our faces as something chugged past, its tall metal sides a dynamic blue of hurtling tonnage—

Then the world jerked wildly and turned upside down as a tugging wrench shot along my frame, a numbing yank that I felt from head to foot . . .

The last thing I saw of the Thrangs was a row of stupefied faces as the three of us whizzed swiftly away, the train's mail-pickup hook neatly snagged in the collar strap of my lead cuirass, beside a long car painted with the legend "Long Island Railroad". And as we went, the tracks vanished neatly behind us.

CHAPTER 9

THE little grey-haired man cowered miserably at the far corner of the lurching car, his ears deaf to the clatter of metal wheels beneath him, his eyes blind to all but the sight of his unexpected visitors. There was an adenoidal gape to his jaw,

and his breathing was perfunctory at best, coming in short, fast gasps.

"Are you taking your little boy to the city for some treatments?" he finally managed. The mailcar attendant appeared, with his greenish pallor, quite genuinely ill.

Timtik said, obligingly, "I'm a faun, not a boy. That's why I have goat legs and horns."

The man clamped his eyes tightly shut.

And a pretty sight we were to the man, I imagine. Lorn looking like a gorgeous hussy in a green negligee. Timtik with his weird endowments and me looking like an escapee from a Norse saga, with my metal breastplate, leather wallet slung by its strap across shoulder and chest, face sunburnt where it wasn't covered with coarse stubble, and legs bare and still slightly raw in spots from that brief sojourn beneath the moss.

"I don't understand," the man moaned piteously, all at once. "We were just about to pull in at Valley Stream, Long Island. I've never seen this woods before on my route . . ."

I felt a twinge of pity for the man. Perhaps if I could explain—Or would he believe me? While I tugged at this tough mental knot, Timtik suddenly tensed and tugged at my fingers.

"Albert! The spell's ending!"

he shouted, pointing to the wall against which the attendant crouched. As Lorn gasped in delight, I saw that it was indeed ending. The wall slowly grew translucent, then smokily transparent, like a sheet of ice amid a blast of steam. At that moment, the engineer applied the brakes.

The three of us, caught unprepared for the sudden stop, staggered forward and then plunged toward the floor of the car simultaneous with a loudspeaker over the door blaring, "Valley Stream!"

FOR a fleeting moment I saw the high concrete-and-steel platform, and row upon row of cottages, then the floor rushed up at my face with a rapidity that caused me to release myself from Timtik's grip on my fingers, and to throw my arms protectively before my eyes . . .

The faun and I thumped heavily into hot, sandy earth, and rolled from the brunt of the impact. I sat up and dusted sand from my eyes and stubbly whiskers and mouth, looking stupidly about me. There was an echo of squealing brakes hovering upon the warm, still air then it faded to silence. The train was gone. We were once more in the forest of Drendon.

We walked for about a mile, finding this stretch of woods less densely overgrown than the part

where we'd begun our journey. Going was relatively easy, what with wider lanes between the trees, and less briary shrubbery to dodge, close on Lorn's bush-controlling heels.

The average distance between the trees began to stay at pretty much of a constant, but I suddenly realized that the *character* of the trees was changing. Boughs no longer nodded politely as Lorn went by, and the terrain, too, was undergoing a topographical metamorphosis.

I halted suddenly. Lorn and Timtik did so at the same moment. Timtik moved nearer to me, his tiny hand finding its way into mine. Lorn edged to my other side, gripped my arm, and the three of us stood quite still, downright unsettled inside . . .

Where the forest we'd started in had been choked with thick vegetation and sodded with rich loam, this section had neither fern nor bush upon the earth. The ground was of hard-baked clay and slate-like rock. I noticed that the trees, which in the prior woods had been rich chocolate-color on bole and branch, were grey-black and starkly barren of even the tiniest trace of foliage. I pressed an exploratory finger against the trunk of a dull black elm. The surface was cold, hard, and slippery-smooth. "I think they're petrified," I said.

Then, in the distance, lost in

outlying clumps of gnarled dead trees, a mournful howl sounded, rising, then chopping off in a short series of angry barks.

Timtik embraced my rightleg. "So am I!"

THE sun still shone, but its light was no longer warm yellow; a chilly blue-white, almost like moonlight, bathed us. And the sky had sickly grey clouds lying long and emaciated against its paler grey skein. The howl sounded again. It sounded closer.

I clutched at the wallet of spells where it hung athwart my hip. I was going to be *sure* I didn't drop it this time.

A grey gauzy cloud slithered deftly in front of the sun, and the cold grew bitter as the atmosphere darkened to sudden frosty twilight. A swift darting form bounded from behind a tree not ten paces from where we stood, and vanished behind a thick black boulder. "*What was that!?*" we said in unison, taking simultaneous backward steps like a soft-shoe trio. The howl repeated.

"He's trying to scare us," faltered Lorn.

"He's doing a fine job," quavered Timtik.

I found myself frantically shaking the upended wallet, trying to jar loose a new spell. Nothing came out. The wallet wouldn't even open to my fingers.

A flicker of movement outside the direct line of my vision caused me to jerk my head up sharply, my eyes alert, my breathing raspy.

"He moved again!" said Lorn. "He's closer, behind that big oak. It looks like a man—Sort of . . ."

"He's got a furry face, and funny teeth," appended the faun.

The truth dawned upon me, icily. "I think I know what it is," I said, pointing at the sun, which shone a bleak silver-white through the grey finger-like clouds. "That's supposed to look like a full moon, because during the full moon, the—" I swallowed, and my dry throat received the saliva like a load of dust. "The werewolves," I finished, unsuccessfully trying to keep blind terror out of my voice. "Men by day, beasts by night. I saw it once in a movie."

"Are they vulnerable to anything?"

"To anything silver—" I said plumbing my memory.

"Do you have anything silver on you?" asked Lorn.

"Only the fillings in my teeth."

Timtik, considering this, said sincerely, "Well, you better take the first bite!"

"Look," I said, in my cowardly way, "as long as we know which way it's coming from, why don't we run the *other* way?"

"Run?" said Timtik, as the loudest howl yet arose from be-

hind the oak. "I can't even move!"

WITH a lithe spring, the beast appeared. Landing in a menacing crouch before us, beady eyes glittering hungrily, sharp yellow fangs slavering and dripping froth, its thick deadly claws flexing on humanoid hands matted with lustreless grey fur. It looked decidedly unfriendly. But the item that drew my attention was its vest. Across the lower part of it arced a short gold watchchain. I knew that vest and chain.

I was staring at the Drendon-form of Garvey Baker, Susan's father. This, then, was the enchanted version of a night watchman. I'd never been able to reason with Garvey Baker in his Earth-form; in his Drendon-form, I wasn't even going to *try*.

"Guh-raaaaah!" said the beast, snarling deep in its thick furry throat. It took a shuffling step forward. We took a shuffling step backward. "Guh-rowww!" it said, taking a scuttling step to the left. We instantly took a step to the right.

Two gambits made, no men lost on either side. Werewolf and trembling trio eyed each other warily. I shook the wallet once more, but still nothing came forth. The sudden motion made the werewolf cringe back for an instant. I noted the motion with

sudden hope. Perhaps this was a timid werewolf, a craven? I pried Timtik from my leg, shoved Lorn gently away from my side, and took a careful step toward it, then waved my arms suddenly, and yelled "Boo!"

The werewolf sprang upright from its menacing crouch, threw back its head, and gave vent to a barking howl of hate that made the ground tremble. That did it.

As one person, Lorn, Timtik and I leapt past the momentarily preoccupied monster and ran hell-for-leather toward the thicker woods ahead. I ventured a glance backward as we fled, and was horrified to see that the thing had dropped to all fours and was bounding after us, ten feet at a jump.

"Run, run!" shrilled Lorn. We were barely into the clump of dead trees when the werewolf was at its edge, and capture and death seemed momentary. I shoved Lorn to my left and Timtik to my right, and then grabbed at a low-hanging petrified branch and swung my feet high.

My timing had been lucky. The pouncing greyish form met only empty air in its dive, and then the furry head met the stone bole of a thick oak with a pleasant smack. The beast-man sat on the ground, shaking its head and growling. We had a brief respite of danger.

"Up here, quick!" I cried, clambering further into my tree-haven. Timtik sprang for my extended hand and I swung him onto a fork in the limb. Lorn shinnied up near the trunk and joined Timtik and myself. The werewolf, regaining its feet, looked around for us, its heavy-jawed head snapping left and right in a terrible manner. Overhead, I shivered in silent anticipation of the chill moment when it would espy us in our arboreal sanctuary. It did so, finally, with a sudden backward step and satisfied yelp.

It roared, leaped to the base of the tree, and clutched recklessly at the branches.

"Climb!" I urged my companions, hopelessly. We were in a petrified crabapple tree and these don't grow too tall. They tend to burgeon more outward than upward, and this one was no exception. And below us, the monster was placing first one foot, then the other, beginning his ascent.

THERE was not, however, much farther we could travel. Soon, the three of us were perched helpless on the highest branch that would bear our combined weights, watching the relentless approach of the ghastly creature. Would he kill us? Maybe eat us? Or just chew on us till we screamed for mercy?

Anything was better than sit-

ting dully and waiting for those fangs. I decided to say something. Anything.

"Look here," I extemporized, "you're making a terrible mistake."

The hideous face hesitated, scant feet below my bare toes. The beast-man smiled toothily. "I don't think so."

"Oh, yes you are," I said, thinking up objections as I talked, anything to forestall his arrival. "You are—um—an ordinary run-of-the-forest man by day, right?"

"So they tell me," said the creature, not halting its upward climb.

"Well," I said, trying to sound authoritative, "you're going to look pretty silly when I tell you, but it's *daytime!*"

For the first time, a quirk of doubt appeared above the monster's shaggy eyebrows. "But the full moon up there—"

"Ha ha," I said, a forced laugh that didn't quite come off as planned.

"What's so funny, huh?" snarled the thing, champing its wicked fangs, blue-white froth running from the wide savage mouth. I manfully repressed an urge to scream.

"That's not the moon," I said in a calm little croak. "It's the sun. The day's just a bit overcast with clouds."

"Just a minute," said the

beast-man. "If that wasn't the moon, I wouldn't look like a wolf. Who you trying to kid?"

I stared into that grizzled face, my brain whirling—and had the answer. I knew at last why the bag of spells hadn't opened before: The werewolf's thinking hadn't been conditioned. The flap opened to my touch, this time. I dipped a hand inside and withdrew the proper item, holding it in my clenched fist.

"Enough of this foolishness!" cried the monster, springing upward, jaws wide for that first horrendous bite—

There was no time to twist off the cap. I just gave a hearty squeeze. Then an even heartier one.

With a soggy pop, the soft metal was riven asunder, and the contents spewed full in the face of the werewolf.

The effect was—well—magical. Though, by its outer dimensions, the tube could not have held more than a few ounces of caustic paste, under the influence of the spell the volume was greater than could have been contained in a milk truck.

The werewolf, clotted with tons of waxy white depilatory cream, crashed soggily back to the ground, and lay there kicking and screaming for the five minutes it took the goo to do its work. Lorn clutched my shoulder and whispered tremulously in

my ear, "What did you do to him?"

"Gave him the full beauty-treatment," I said. "He'll be bald as a peeled onion in a moment."

"But," said Lorn, "can't he eat us, furry or not?"

"We'll soon find out."

In a moment we had our answer. The spell hadn't stopped with fur. With the sundering of the tube, the grey clouds went souging away, the breeze sighed with springtime fragrances, the sun turned golden yellow and bright, and even the rocky ground took on a cheerful reflected glow.

I glanced at the spiky twigs of our tree, half-expecting them to be suddenly laden with gay pink blossoms. However, there's a limit even to magic. The trees remained as stark and lifeless as before.

AS we entered the next green section of woods to which the werewolf had guided us, he remained behind on a squat boulder, waving us a fond farewell. We waved back at our deluded "normal man", then hurried out of his sight into the shrubbery. "Now," I said, "let's make tracks."

Timtik shuddered. "That was definitely a close call."

"And we lost some time, too," I said, "up in that tree. We have miles of forest ahead of us, and

only three spells left in the wallet!"

"How do *you* know how much forest there is?" asked Lorn.

"Just guessing," I lied. I already knew something my companions didn't. If that spot where we'd seen the hotsy represented the Earth-locale of my house, and this petrified place the Drendon-site of Oak Park's Marshall Field's store, where Garvey Baker had night-watched, then I had a pretty good idea where we'd meet up with Emperor Kwist and his wizard-scientist-vizier Cort. Right in the relative spot where I'd managed to translate Geoffrey Porkle, his crony Courtland, and his house, into Drendon.

In a sort of haunted, nightmarish way, things were making very good sense.

CHAPTER 10

WE were moving across a waist-deep field of green and straw-colored ferns, when a puzzling memory came back to me.

"Um . . . I've been wondering about something," I said. "How come this lead breastplate I'm wearing didn't hold me down at the bottom of that lake, back in Thrang country?"

Lorn shrugged lightly and continued her graceful progress through the ferns. "It probably

floated and helped hold you up," she theorized, "instead of weighting you down."

"Lead doesn't float," I protested. "It sinks like—like lead!"

"It's magic, you dope!" snapped Timtik, up ahead of us. I decided to drop the matter. None of my queries seemed to get beyond that all-purpose explanation of the faun's.

The land broke free of the ferns, abruptly, and we found ourselves on a wide, greenish-grey plain, the ground soft, moist, and springy to the step. Timtik, however, instead of picking up his pace, cut his speed in half, as did Lorn. Each of them watched the ground for a split second before treading upon it. Having grown considerably wiser in the ways of Drendon, after the incidents with the hotsy, the Snitch, and the Snatch, I was instantly alerted.

"What now?" I said, afraid to step until I knew what it was I had to avoid stepping on.

"Cheesers," said Timtik, pointing to slightly darker green patches on the ground. "They always live on soil like this. Makes them hard to see."

"Cheesers?" I said. "Those wettish-looking blobs?"

Timtik nodded his curly horned head. "Right. Make sure you don't step on one. They're really fierce."

"What do they do?" I asked.

"They grow," Lorn explained. "You step on one, and it cleaves to your skin, and starts to get bigger and bigger until you're covered completely. They get at your bloodstream; take out all the sugar."

I looked solemnly at a pulsating blob. It seemed to be not so much one thing as a horde of smaller things, banded together for a common purpose. "They act like a mess of ants without a village," I observed.

"The Centaurs use them for their orgies," said Timtik.

"They're a surly bunch," he explained, looking right and left, uneasily, pricking up his pointed ears. "They live around here, and if they catch anyone passing through, they—Well, they fatten up the Cheesers on them, then stick the remains into a vat, add some kind of wet grain, and—"

"I've got it!" I said suddenly. "These things are molds; yeast plants I should've recognized that sickly-sharp smell. And the Centaurs use them to make moonshine!"

"Hey!" said the faun, freezing.

I didn't hear anything for a second, then my legs felt the shuddering of the earth, a steady ratchet of dull vibration. Somewhere off across the field, I could hear shouts. The Centaurs.

"Run, Albert!" cautioned Timtik, spurting forward.

"Hurry," pled Lorn, doing the same.

"Right," I yelled, dashing after them, but keeping one cautious eye groundward lest I turn into some lurking yeast plant's blueplate special.

"Yuh-hoo! Yip-pee!" came from the edge of the plain.

I GLANCED that way, and was momentarily stopped with surprise. A broad stampede of creatures was galloping my way, at an angle that would soon intersect my line of flight if I didn't start up again and make for the woods. Once there, Lorn's tree-talk could impede pursuers. But out in the open—I shuddered and ran. Lorn and Timtik were already at the first fringe of trees, not even looking back for me.

The thundering hooves were deafening. I ran in panicky flight toward the woods. One look at the Centaurs convinced me they meant trouble. From the chest of the equine body upwards they had the semblance of a man's upper torso. But there was no sharp line of demarcation.

Their arms alone spoiled the illusion of simple malformed horses. They had hands, and the hands had rough hempen lariats, carried at the ready.

"Hurry!" came Timtik's voice, far off ahead of me. I pounded

the soft turf with my bare feet in a frantic dash away from those quadrupedal horrors. The hedges of the woods loomed greenly before me. Thirty yards away, twenty-five, twenty—

Then, with a whirring swish, the lariat dropped whiplike about my throat and yanked me to a sprawling, choking halt. The line tugged, taut, brutally tight, and I felt my eyes start from their sockets. I saw Timtik burst from the woods, coming back to me. He'd be massacred. There was only one chance open to me. Even as I toppled, I grabbed the wallet of spells from my shoulder, gave them a quick spin by the strap, and let them fly in a swift arc toward the faun.

"Scram!" I yelled, as the rope grew tourniquet-tight, and the world turned dull crimson before my eyes, then flowed into icy blackness . . .

CONSCIOUSNESS returned slowly, painfully. I tried to recall where I was, what had happened. My neck was raw, but the noose, my swimming mind knew gratefully, had been removed.

I was still prone upon the earth—not, praise God, in the clammy clutch of any Cheesers—but an experimental try at moving showed me that I was bound tightly at wrists and ankles. I opened my eyes cautious-

ly, and saw the huge sweaty flanks of the Centaurs a few yards from where I lay.

They were busy about a vat, a huge vat, of stained wood, onto which one of them—the chief brewer, I expect—was constantly climbing via a sort of rough-hewn ramp. The yeast-smell was sickeningly strong, and I noticed that other of the Centaurs were carrying quivering Cheesers, safely upon some sort of fiber mats, up to the lip of the enormous vat, and dropping them in with a soggy thump.

The vat creaked and groaned at the seams, as from heavy movement within. The Cheesers were hungry. I eased my head from the earth, careful not to attract any attention, and tried to increase the range of my vision, ignoring the aching clamor of my neck muscles.

I was still well clear of the green forest rim, I saw with regret. Even could I have slipped my bonds, I'd never have been able to get within the comparative safety of the underbrush ahead of those swift monsters. There was nothing to do but lie back and await what might come. I hoped Timtik would think of something . . .

Then I was struck by an unfamiliar feeling.

I'd sensed upon awakening that something had changed, but hadn't until that moment been

able to isolate the sensation. It was the cool-feeling freedom of my upper torso that brought the truth home to me.

The lead cuirass had been removed.

How, I had no idea. The best I'd been able to do with it was shift it for scratching when I itched, which was often; it seemed months since my last bath. I'd thought that removing the spell-attached breastplate was impossible. But here it was, off.

Curious, I tried to recall Maggot's exact information about the cuirass, and why it would not leave my body by my own efforts. "This," she'd said, "you must not take off till it's time. You will know when the time comes."

So the removal of the cuirass was definitely something to take into my consideration. I thought the thing out, step by step. If it were not to be removed until "the time", and it *had* been removed, spell or no spell, then *this* must be the time. Mustn't it?

I RAISED my head to see if it were within sight. It lay almost beside me on the soft earth, the straps hanging limply, the buckles undone. "There it is," I thought. "Now what?"

A short whispered colloquy between two of the nearer Cen-

taurs drew me back from my meditations. But they were not discussing me. One of them was pointing with a tilt of his head at the forest rim, and I didn't like the cruel smile on the face of the other when he glanced that way. As the two of them surreptitiously slipped up to their companions and passed the word along, I finally got to see the object of their amused discussion, which had been blocked to me by their bodies.

A tree was coming toward us, stealthily, easing along on its thick splayed roots, and pausing every so often in its motion, as a cat pauses while sneaking up on a bird.

"Lorn!" I groaned to myself, shutting my eyes. Lorn, with her influential tree-talk! Her entrance was about as subtle as a tidal wave. I re-opened my eyes and looked hopelessly up into the foliage, and soon espied the greener-than-green shimmer of her "diaphanous drapery", and a flicker of sunlight on coral tresses. The nut! The wonderful, lovable nut! To come to my rescue in a tree, of all things. But I wished she'd chosen a sturdy oak, instead of her present vehicle. It was a silvery aspen, not much thicker across the trunk than a man's arm. The Centaurs could—

Even as I thought it, the Centaurs *did*.

A phalanx of them suddenly sprang into a gallop and surrounded the tree, cutting off its retreat. Then, with flailing forelegs, they reared up and kicked mercilessly at the slender growth, their hands grappling for its roots and yanking them upward to knock it off balance— And then Lorn came sprawling out through the leaves, the branches trying in vain to ease her fall as she plummeted to the ground, and lay still, face downward.

As the Centaurs surrounded her there, I struggled in vain to sit up, to break free of my hempen bonds. And then I heard light hoofbeats behind me, and Timtik came dashing up carrying the bag of spells. He dropped the bag to the ground, and said urgently, "Roll on your face, quick!"

"But Lorn—!" I choked out.

"A deceptive maneuver!" he growled, trying to push me over on my face when I didn't move. "She's only doing it so I can get the spells to you!"

"But can't you and she—" I said, rolling over.

"No, damn it!" he interpolated. "The spells won't come out of the wallet for us. That's the way Maggot set the wallet up. It's a one-man bag of tricks."

I felt his fingers struggling with the tough knots, and felt the first thrill of hope since my

capture—Then heavy hoofbeats sounded, and I yelled, “*Run!*” about ten seconds too late. I felt him snatched off the ground behind me, and, as I rolled over, his squirming body was being borne back to the cluster about Lorn, in the muscular arms of a raven-black Centaur, who was laughing gustily over his prize. And the bag of spells was still with Timtik.

WE’RE done for . . .” I realized dully. “Nothing can help us now . . .” Then my eye was again caught by the bulky cuirass. Its color seemed changed. Instead of the leaden grey surface, it was light-colored, almost shiny. And squarely in the center of the breastplate, where there’d been no such thing before, scintillated a blinding diamond, the size of a postage stamp, set into a tight steel ring.

At an earlier period of my life, pre-Drendon, I’d have simply stared. Or admired and then forgotten it. But I knew better, after meeting this unearthly dimension. As if possessed by a cognoscentic power, one look at that diamond stud *told* me what it was for.

Activation, of course.

The Centaurs had forgotten about me for a time. They were too busy dragging Lorn from her tree and bringing her and Timtik toward that hulking

wooden vat full of Cheesers. I didn’t have time to think, only to act.

I arched my back and flipped myself sideways toward the armor, which was glowing whiter and more brilliant by the second. My coordination was luckily perfect; I landed with my back squarely atop the front of the breastplate, the cut surface of the diamond directly under my questing fingers.

“Hey,” cried a voice, “What’s *he* doing?!”

The leader of the Centaurs, a thick-bodied roan, had turned his long, bucktoothed face toward me, and was coming my way at a quick canter.

I pressed the jewel, hard.

ALL at once, my wrists and ankles were free, and I fell back to the ground with a thump. I’d felt something growing out of the base of the cuirass as I’d jabbed the diamond, something that had changed the entire shape of the cuirass into a slim, elongated shape that had severed my bonds with one smooth slice as it came into being. There was something cylindrical forcing itself into my right hand, and I gripped it tightly as I sprang to my feet to face the oncoming monster. The Centaur started to increase his speed, then braked to an abrupt halt as I brought my hand from behind my back.

Set snugly in my fist, the squarish diamond coruscating madly where the crosspiece traversed the handle and blade, was a four-foot silver sword.

The Centaur looked at me, warily. Beside the vat, the others, too had stopped moving. All stared wide-eyed at the wicked glinting of my magical weapon. The leader hesitated, still shaken, then his face hardened, and he grinned. "It's only a close-range weapon!" he thundered. "Get him from where you are!"

The others, glad somebody had thought of *something*, began whirling their dangerous lariats, and hurling the looped hemp toward me. For an instant, my vista was made up of nothing but whizzing, spinning rope.

One sweeping stroke of the blade fixed that. Its flashing edge met the tough hemp like an acetylene torch a strand of cobweb. In frayed, useless clumps, the severed loops fell away.

None of the Centaurs wanted to meet a weapon like that at close quarters. Nor were any foolhardy enough to bother casting another loop. On the other hand, while I could defend myself, now, I lacked the speed and agility I'd need to get Lorn and Timtik before they could be tossed into the vat of hungry yeast-plants. It looked like an impasse. One which was abruptly resolved in a terrified yell.

"*Wumbls!*" shrieked a Centaur, pointing.

From the perimeter of the plain, as we all held our breaths, came a bone-chilling sloshing sound. I looked toward the source. Something was moving over the ground toward us, something that could not be seen due to near-transparency, but off whose taut-skinned surface the sun glinted in yellow warning. The herd of hungry protoplasm was converging on the fat, slithering over the ground swifter than water from a ruptured dam. There was a scared, frozen, timeless moment. Then—

Timtik, jerking free from his momentarily numb captor, raced over the ground toward me, waving the bag of spells. I grabbed it from him, slung the strap across my shoulder, and dipped a hand past the dodging flap to come up with the next spell. The label read, "*Schlitz Brewing Company, Milwaukee.*"

"Come on!" I snapped at Timtik, and grabbed Lorn with my free arm. The *Wumbls* were nearly upon us. The Centaurs were breaking into sporadic gallops, fitfully stopping, turning, terrified as the half-seen glistening enemy slid swiftly inward from all sides.

AN opener!" I shouted to Timtik, over the tumult of hooves and cries of hoarse fear.

The leader of the Centaurs reared up nearby, his face strained and terrified. I shot the sword-blade out before him, and he struck the flat of the blade like he'd run into a cement wall. And as he staggered, dazed, I jammed the stem of the bottle into his tooth-happy mouth, and twisted the edge of the cap against those protruding incisors. It popped off better than with a standard opener.

Then I yelled to Timtik, and he leapt obediently up into Lorn's arms, as I flung the opened bottle into the heart of the onrushing Wumbl herd. As Lorn grabbed Timtik, I grabbed her. My back to the vat, I held her one-armed, and extended the magic blade for what good it might do against that army of ambulant slosh.

But there was no need for swordplay.

Like warm champagne from a shaken flask, golden sparkles of foam and liquid were gushing from the mouth of the bottle. Gushing like a Niagara over the slithering bodies. Rolling like an ocean over the plain, like a monstrous carbonated tidal wave. A surge of frothy lager rose beneath us, up to my armpits before it lifted me clear of the ground with Lorn and Timtik snugly beside me, and carried us on a wave-crest at dizzy speed toward the swaying green

boughs of the thick woods ahead.

The comber broke, scattering us onto a springy clump of bushes and high grass, then receded, leaving us high and anything but dry, and smelling like Saturday night in skid row.

When we looked back, nothing could be seen save a sea of heaving, foaming, frothing, seething golden lager. The vat, the Centaurs, the Cheesers and the Wumbls had all long since been swirled beneath the thundering amber waves of Schlitz.

CHAPTER 11

ABOUT ten acres of lush forest later, moving faster than was comfortable to make up for the lost time, my ears detected the familiar "ching-ching" of a bicycle bell. We stopped, looking about us, and the cheery little "ching-ching" sounded again. Then from a small copse of tree, a strange figure appeared, pedaling energetically along on a small Schwinn; a mannish creature, two feet tall, with a white beard that came dangerously close to tangling in his wheel spokes. He wore a bright orange doublet, belted with a wide strip of black leather, and joined sturdily in front with a silver buckle four inches on a side. But, most intriguing was his regulation Western Union cap.

"Telegram for Albert Hicks!" he declared, braking.

"I'm Albert Hicks," I said.

"Whoosh," said the dwarf, clutching the cap between thumb and forefinger by the visor while he wiped at his dripping brow with the same hand. "Thought I'd never find you. I've been pedaling through the bushes for half an hour!"

"Sorry," I said lamely. "May I have the telegram?"

"What? Oh. Sure. Here 'tis!" He poked around inside his cap and withdrew a slightly damp yellow envelope, which he presented with a flourish. Tearing the envelope open, I noticed he was still loitering before me, whistling tunelessly between his teeth.

"Oh," I said, embarrassed.

I fumbled in my pants pocket and came up with a dime, which I handed to the dwarf. He bit down on the edge of it, snorted at me, and pedaled off huffily into the green shadows of the forest. Timtik was by now dancing up and down in impatience.

"Who's it *from*, for corn's sake!" he exclaimed.

The telegram was a thick one, and I had to flip to the final page to check the signature. "Maggot," I said.

"Hurry up," wailed the faun, "and *read* it!"

I cleared my throat and began:

Dear Albert,

I'm sorry to interrupt your itinerary, but there are a few things you should know before going onward. Too bad about your delay with those damn Centaurs, but at least you've got the silver sword, now (isn't it a honey!?), so the interval wasn't a total loss. But unfortunately, the time-lag during your captivity was long enough for the Kwistians to arrive at Sark with the other Lorn.

But don't give up hope. Things could be worse—Don't ask me how; I'm busy making hell-brew. The thing I wanted to warn you about is Cort. He's already questioned the two Kwistians who brought the other Lorn back, and found out about you being here in Drendon.

Cort is upset because he feels you might be bringing the Thrake to the castle, with some sort of magical safeguard for it against his boobytraps, so he's posted a special guard near the main entrance to watch for you when you arrive. This means that you and Timtik and Lorn (if it is Lorn) will have to detour slightly, and come at the castle from the side. Sorry for the inconvenience. Hurry, keep cool, and do your best. I'm sure everything will turn out splendidly. (Well—Fairly sure.)

Give my best to Timtik and Lorn (if that is Lorn with you),

and whatever you do—and this is *most* important!—don't let the Tinklins get under your skin!

Sincerely,

Maggot

P.S. Try and get back before mealtime. I'm baking a cake.

THAT's it," I said, folding the message and tucking it into my shirt pocket. "What did she mean by 'Tinklins'?"

"Search me," said Timtik. "Must be some danger that's indigenous to the Sark area. But no one ever comes here unless they have to. Especially wood-nymphs."

"Don't remind me!" said Lorn, shuddering. She bounded bravely from her leafy bower, however, and strode off into the shrubbery. Timtik and I raced to keep up. As I watched her relentless progress ahead of us, a rather bothersome thought came to me, and I expressed it to Timtik.

"I've been noticing something," I said, so Lorn wouldn't hear me. His pointed ears perked forward, curiously. "Your thundershower spell doesn't last long. And that train-ride was only five minutes before it wore out. And that werewolf was re-fuzzing before we got out of sight. And I'm willing to bet that those drowned Centaurs are lying on a dry field right now, with

shriveled Wumbls and an empty bottle. Look at ourselves: Not so much as a whiff of the hops left, and ten minutes ago we were reeking."

Timtik, skipping nimbly through the grass, grinned. "Your sword can't wear out, if that's what's worrying you. Those alternate copper and ivory bands around the handle represent the balance of positive and negative power. The edge of the blade is *outgoing* power, the flat is *incoming*. One exerts force, one absorbs it. It can't wear out. Use of the edge drains the flat, and makes it more absorbent; use of the flat sucks power to strengthen the edge."

"Damn it," I said, "You can't have it *both* ways!"

Timtik's nostrils flared, and it seemed momentarily that he was about to blow up with a loud bang. Then he controlled himself, and muttered, "It's magic, you dope!"

"Why didn't you say that in the *first* place!" I snapped. Then added, "*However—!*" so fiercely that the faun skidded to a halt and stood staring at me.

"Now what?" he said.

"The possibly short-lived sword was not my point," I said.

His face twisted into an expression of martyred patience. "Which spell bugs you, then?"

"The Scapegoat Spell, that's

which!" I growled. "How long before *that* wears off, and one of the two Lorns vanishes?"

The mockery left Timtik's face and he went a little pale. "Jeepers, Albert—I don't know! In actual time, an *hour*, but—"

"I know. We've been short-circuiting time by taking the long way around, so you have no idea how much real time's gone."

"If we have the real Lorn with us," he said, hopefully, "Maggot'd send word as soon as the Scapegoat Image vanished from the castle, and we could turn around and go right home." He looked suddenly uncomfortable. "But, if *our* Lorn vanishes, we'd know the real one was on the brink of the flame—*Urk!*"

A SWATCH of thornbush had sung through the air and smacked loudly against his bare chest. "Tangle, Albert," he muttered, stepping back and brushing at himself. I stepped up beside him, slashing the silver blade through the barbed jumble. It fell into a heap of loose fibers.

"This is the handiest thing!" I enthused, staring in admiration at the blade, its shining surface unsullied by its contact with the thick, moist growths. "With a gadget like this, we hardly need—" My eyes met Timtik's. ". . . *Lorn!*"

The back-snapping bush's sig-

nificance hit us. Our foliage-control was gone as though she'd never existed.

"Lorn?" Timtik called out frantically. "Lorn!"

I joined in yelling her name, but my heart wasn't in it, and neither was his. We knew the truth. The real Lorn was in the castle, prisoner of the Kwistians. And we had yet to reach the side wall.

"Come on, faun!" I said, racing forward through the forest, my silver blade flashing.

* * *

The mist seeped up from nowhere.

We'd come hurrying out of a thicket, and about halfway across an open stretch of smooth ground, we'd waded into a blanket of billowing vapor at ankle depth. As we moved onward, the air became woven with greyish windings of fog, and soon I couldn't see even the top of Timtik's head, although the faun walked right beside me, his hand in mine lest we become separated.

"Keep your eyes turned upward just a little," Timtik said softly; something about dense fog makes people whisper. "The fog's thinnest at the top."

"Okay," I said, "but what am I watching for?"

"The winged towers of Sark. The towers spread out into great stone wings in a position of

flight. Kwist had them gilded, or something. They look pretty fancy in the sunlight."

As suddenly as it had begun, the mist dispersed, dwindling into white clumps which melted into the air with careless rapidity. The sunlight was blinding as it reflected from the great gold-and-stone winged towers of the castle of Sark, just outside the copse in which we stood. A mere two hundred yards across a stretch of purple moss.

"Odds bodkins," murmured the faun. "That open stretch by the moss is the place we just crossed! The mist must have been Maggot's doing! Otherwise, we'd be full of tridents right now!"

"How do we cross the moss?" I said, uneasily.

"We'll face that problem when we come to it," said Timtik. "Come on, now, follow me quickly. And Albert, for corn's sake lower that sword! The way it gleams, you'd be less conspicuous carrying carillon bells!"

"Sorry," I said. "Which way from here?"

"To the side. And tiptoe till we're away from the main wall. Kwistians have sharp ears."

ACCIDENTS will happen. The closest scrutiny can be kept on the most important thing by the most careful guard of the highest integrity, and still

things can go wrong. So with Maggot.

As she later informed me, when relating the harrowing details, it was just one of those unavoidable things that make a mockery of care and caution, and the last thing she'd have wanted to see occur.

Dandelions, as plentiful as they may be in any spot where no control is put upon growing things, like to take their own sweet time about seeding. And, as you may recall, the fluff from a dandelion ready to burst into a white spray of tasseled seeds was a necessary ingredient for the hell-brew. Maggot, as can any cook who forgets to check her stores, ran out of this vital ingredient.

Just outside her hut dandelions grew a-plenty. But there was not one that was not bright, moist and yellow. Useless for hell-brew.

But Maggot had a simple spell for aging things, a by-product of the spell she used to keep her haggard looks down-to-par.

And so, laden with an armload of yellow dandelions, she entered her hut, went to her work table, and began chanting the spell that would age the yellow into fluffy white. Her plump back was turned to the cluttered shelf over the steaming cauldron of hell-brew, on which squirmed

the always-ravenous Thrake.
The all-necessary Thrake.

And that tiny blue animal grew abruptly tired of waiting for Maggot to cater to it, and tried—by the insufficient power of its puny tentacles—to flip itself from the rim of the shelf to the rim of the cauldron which held its bubbling, gluey food.

It missed the rim by an inch, certainly no more. Maggot heard its shrill, hapless squeal as it dropped directly into the scorching tendrils of fire beneath the cauldron. But by this time its cry of discomfort had been long over-used, so—

“Patience, patience,” crooned the witch, cackling softly. She turned her head toward the shelf. “Just another few moments, my pretty. As soon as I add these to the brew, I’ll—”

Her rheumy red eyes rested upon the unwontedly still clutter of ort and cobwebs. It seemed terribly motionless. Suddenly afraid, the old witch flung the fluff into the cauldron, more to free her hands than anything else, and began to claw through the mess on the shelf, her voice rising in panic. “Thrake? Where are you? Don’t play hide-and-seek with poor old Maggot! Where are you hiding? Come out now. I’ve put your fluff in the hell-brew, and—”

Her eyes, flicking searchingly over the shelf and its vicinity,

noted a dangling bit of old hell-brew pendant on the lip of the shelf. With a cry of clairvoyant horror, she crouched and pawed the flame-baked earth directly beneath.

The remains of the Thrake were barely identifiable. . . .

“Hell’s bells!” she gasped. “There goes a life of single-minded devotion, up in smoke!” But instead of sitting down and mourning the deceased, her always-practical mind considered the bright side. “Well, I’m no longer tied down,” she mused, pulling at her limp nether lip with a gnarled finger. “So I may as well see what I can do to help Albert—in person!” Gleefully, she grabbed a black faggot-broom from a dusty corner. “I could use a change of scenery!”

With the grating howl that is the trademark of the traveling witch, she whipped a long black cloak from a peg on the rough wooden wall, tossed it across her shoulders, sat upon the broomstick and went roaring out through a gap in the obediently dodging wall.

WHAT’s that tinkling sound?”
I said to Timtik.

His ears pricked up. “I dunno. It’s up ahead of us, I think, right on our way to the side wall of the castle. Do you think it’s what Maggot warned us about?”

“Wouldn’t be a bit surprised,”

I said, pulling the telegram from my shirt and consulting it. "She said that we shouldn't let the Tinklings get under our skin . . . You think the sound's hypnotic, or what?"

"One way to find out," said the faun.

We hurried forward, and suddenly the forest began to change. A strange dappling of light fell over us, unlike the normal green-gold pied effect of sunlight through leaves. Bits and pieces of geometric glows danced in rainbow profusion on the tree-trunks, on our bodies and faces.

"You don't think it was a misspelling?" I said. "What if she meant 'Twinklings'?!"

"Couldn't have," said the faun. "Listen . . ."

I stopped crunching through the underbrush, and heard the sounds, much louder, in an erratic tempo almost in harmonic counterpoint to the coruscations of colored light. "You're right," I said.

Then we were in an open space, and for the first time saw what lay ahead. Acre upon acre of trees, short shrubs, and twisting vines, ranging in tones from palest pink to bloodiest crimson, from luminous turquoise to lambent purple, from metallic orange to crystalline yellow to sparkling emerald. A small portion of the woods, done up in splendid Easter Parade tones,

and every twig, every tendril, every leaf, constructed in the most delicate symmetry and fragile filagree—of glass.

I had to shut my eyes and shake my head a moment before proceeding into that chromatic tangle. Then, sword in hand, I followed Timtik in a swift dash toward the glass forest . . .

. . . Wind was worming through the leaves. They flicked out of its path with a sound like muted bells, exquisitely toned. The sound was eerily charming, and atonically harmonious, and I rather enjoyed it for the first few paces.

Then my flesh began to prickle. A muscle started jumping under my left eye. The insistent noise of the leaves grew in intensity, and as we drew near the center of the region, a raw discomfort began abrading my flesh. The music of the tinkling leaves was musical no longer. It was as maddening as being locked in an echo chamber with a million Good Humor trucks, each in a different key.

"Timtik—!" I said. I stopped walking. My voice was hoarse with tension. I screwed up my face and pulled my elbows tightly up against my ribs.

AS if encouraged by my words, the wind became livelier, and the clangor arose in shrill gaiety. My body shook, went into

a nervous shiver, horrible little thrills rushed down my spine, through my limbs. My ears rang, and felt like they were drawing away from the noise into my skull. I opened my clenched eyelids to try and see the path out of the flashing chaos, the pandemonic noise, and saw nothing but sparkle and glint and flash. In all directions. Blinding, confusing. Then the babble of glass began to sound like conversation, like the multiphonic sound you hear at a crowded cocktail party.

"*Tink?*" sang a leaf.

"*Kinkink-kang!*" came the response.

"*Jang-jing, jing-clang!*" interrupted a third.

Other voices joined them.

"*Stop!*" I called, my voice ripping brutally from my lungs, my eyes rammed shut, heels of my hands clamped futilely against my ears. Something was growing inside me. It burned in my veins, plucked at muscle and bone, ate at my brain . . .

Directly before me, a fabulous pink-and-green glass rosebush waited hungrily. I started toward it, dazed, my arms going wide to embrace the jagged daggers of leaf and blossom and thorn . . . An end to the racking torture, to the dizzying lights, to the shrieking sound, to—

And then I saw Timtik, who'd never heard my voice amid the symphony of the deadly forest,

who was even now moving blank-eyed toward the knife-edged forest plants, to spill the total libation of his blood onto the thirsty soil.

"Timtik!" I cried out reflexively, knowing my voice would go unheard. Timtik's face was glazed with a somnambulist's stare as he tottered toward the notched teeth of the beautiful, voracious blossoms.

When the woods had taken enchanted hold upon me, sword and wallet had fallen unnoticed to my feet. I bent swiftly for them now, in my moment of respite, knowing I'd be too late, that Timtik would be impaled on the thousand teeth before I could slash the thing to flinders and spicules—

Inches from the sword-hilt, my fingers halted, and grabbed instead at one of the remaining two spells which had rolled somehow through the flap of the wallet right to my waiting hand. The spool of thread.

In one desperate movement, I scooped it up, straightened my body and flung it beyond Timtik toward the waiting horror.

There came a whirring, a whirring that grew until it was like wind-driven rain hissing through the air. A cloud of twisting, whirling grey-blue spun upward, outward, downward, soaring, arcing, twining, swelling, growing, knotting, tan-

gling, even as I launched myself in a sprawling tackle that brought Timtik to the earth, inches from certain death.

The spool, empty, fell to the ground and bounced, once.

I heard its fall distinctly, even on soft earth. For, other than that solitary, tiny sound, the stillness of the forest was deafening. Not even a breeze was heard. Silence, absolute and complete. Blinding sparkle was abruptly drab, dull, shadowy.

I got to my feet and lifted Timtik to his. His face was kind of greenish.

"Let's get a move on," I said. "We daren't lose any more time!" I picked up the silver sword, Timtik scurried for the wallet and its sole remaining spell, and we raced nimbly toward the far edge of the forest of hungry glass.

Razor-edge, raucous glass. Each separate leaf and branch frozen into helpless silence by countless windings of blue-grey, taut, slender strands of cotton thread, entangling the glass forest in a skein that could barely have been duplicated in scope by the day-long labor of a hundred billion web-spinning spiders . . .

CHAPTER 12

WELL, here we are," I murmured despondently, standing on the twitching purple

IT'S MAGIC, YOU DOPE!

brink. A thirty-yard stretch of moss lay between us and the castle. Even could we have vaulted the gap, there was not so much as a fingerhold on that wall; it rose featureless and blank from moss to winged towers, stolid grey granite three hundred feet high.

Timtik flicked a disdainful glance at the looming edifice. "We still have some magic left."

I peeked into the wallet, which opened readily. "Nothing but the tooth," I said. "It must be the right spell, because otherwise, the wallet wouldn't open, right?"

"That seems reasonable," said the faun, doing his impatient hoof-dance on the shore of the moss field. "If you'd just stop pondering and *act*—"

"Oh . . . Okay," I said, lifting out the bright gold molar. "I kind of wanted to save our *last* spell for emergencies."

"If getting to Lorn before she's incinerated doesn't constitute an emergency, what *does*, for corn's sake!"

Without giving either of us a chance for further argument, I tossed the golden molar out into the moss. At the same instant, the leather wallet vanished with a soft pop. "Why'd you do that?" asked Timtik.

"I didn't," I said. "Maggot must have a Finders-Weepers spell on it."

"I mean that *toss*, Albert! Are

you sure it's the right activation?"

"The odds are in favor of it," I hedged, watching anxiously the spot in the moss wherein the tooth had vanished. "I mean—Although I punched the ticket, and squeezed the tube, the beer and the spool were both *throw-items*. So, I guessed this might be the same."

"Well," said the faun, watching the same spot as uneasily as I was, "there's a certain logic to magic; like with the beer."

"What about the beer—?"

"It was the perfect all-purpose destroyer. In the high waves, the Centaurs drowned; in alcohol, the Wumbls pickled through osmosis; and the Cheesers—" Timtik blushed a little. "Alcohol is their primary *waste* product, so they died not unlike being buried under—"

"I get it, I get it," I said. "But the tooth?"

"Well, it's a false tooth, and we need a *bridge* . . ." he said slowly. Before my groan got too loud, he went hastily on, "And the *shape* is right, Albert. Long roots to reach solidity under the muck, and a flat crown for us to walk on . . ."

I nodded thoughtfully. "And the beer, the cream, the thread, all grew larger, so the odds are fine—" I scanned the moss, futilely. "So where the hell is it!?" I asked, impatiently.

TIMTIK started to shake his head in woeful ignorance, then a little frown puckered his brow. He squatted down on his furry haunches and flicked at a tuft of moss with one sharp claw. The tuft pulled away, and there beneath it, gleaming in dreamy confidence, was the top of our golden bridge to the castle.

"It's been there all the time!" he wailed. "But the spell won't last forever. Can we cross before it vanishes?"

"The quicker, the likelier!" I said, sprinting for the wall, each bare footfall on the soft springy moss feeling as though it were at any moment about to plunge into that weird muck, with its slithering occupants and their caustic drool.

"Hurry," said Timtik, as if I weren't trying to.

"You'd think Maggot'd have made the tooth visible!" I said, nearly to the wall. "Why she left it under the moss—!"

"It's Cort's doing, you dope!" said the faun, catching up to me at the base of the sheer granite scarp. "He has this region loaded with anti-magic. If he can't stop a spell, he can disorganize it a little."

"Timtik—!" I said, wavering. "Will this sword cut through a wall controlled by such a wizard?"

"Like an axe through wax,"

he said impatiently. "He can't overcome Maggot's spells. All he can do is make us start doubting them. Be confident, and for corn's sake, start *cutting!*"

The silver blade flashed in my hand, described an effortless arc.

And a circle of granite slid ponderously out of the wall, rolled and rumbled across the moss-hidden tooth-top, then plunged sluggishly out of sight beneath the muck-based moss beyond the hidden bridge.

"Come to think of it," I said, as Timtik and I sprang through the gap into the castle of Sark, "Cort went and loused *himself* up! With the tooth moss-covered, there was nothing to alert a sentry up on the walls!"

"I told you not to doubt Maggot," said Timtik. We hurried forward into the dim twilight interior, with Timtik third, myself second, and that all-powerful silver sword in the position of honor.

There was light ahead.

We'd inched along darkened corridors in gloom relieved only by a pale moonlight glow that spilled softly from the diamond on the sword. The light ahead told us we were nearing an inhabited part of the castle. We rushed noiselessly forward, our silence an unspoken consent between us. The light broke around us as we dashed into a great empty chamber.

"Look, Albert!" said Timtik, pointing to four odd-shaped marble things on a rocky shelf. "They're for Lorn!" he said excitedly, as I realized that they were a pair of gauntlets and sabots, with hinges and clasps. "Maggot told me about them. When the Kwistians roast a nymph in the flame-pit, they don't like the smaller body-parts charring while the larger parts cook through, so they bind the hands and feet into these things to keep the juices intact—!"

"Stop!" I groaned. "Does it mean that we're early or late?"

"Let's hope early," said the faun. Then, from high overhead, through a wide orifice in the ceiling, a piteous cry sounded, begging for mercy. Timtik's face went chalky, and I felt sick inside. "That was Lorn," said the faun.

A SHADOW moved across the floor, and we dodged back against the wall. The next instant, two winged men descended almost vertically through the ceiling-hole, and landed lightly on the floor before us, their great pinions folding into place. One had his back to us, but the other, after a startled blink, said, "*Hey!*" pointing at me. "The Earthman! Here!"

As the first one whirled, shaken, the other took a backward step, and his wings began to un-

fold. Which was stupid of him, because a fifteen-foot wingspread isn't the stealthiest thing in the world to erect unnoticed. I flipped the point of my sword against throat of the nearer man.

"Hold it! If you make a move, your buddy gets it!"

"Ha!" was his only reply as he sprang gracefully into the air.

I shifted the hilt in my hand, drew back the silver blade like a spear, and hurled it.

It caught the ascending Kwistian squarely between the shoulder-blades wherein his wings were rooted, sank in to the hilt, then slithered out and dropped—on a suspiciously erratic curve—directly back into my waiting hand, even before the gasping victim's wings folded about him and let him drop to the floor with a resulting thud.

The other Kwistian stood frozen, not moving a feather. "Take us to Lorn, the woodnymph!" I demanded.

The man gulped, then choked out feebly, "At once, sir!"

Timtik frowned. "It sounds too easy."

I glanced upward through the ceiling-hole, then realized that it was superseded by another in the next ceiling, and that a final orifice lay even beyond that, in the floor of the castle's highest room. "Well," I shrugged at the faun, "it's a pretty long jump, Timtik . . ."

The faun sighed. "Okay, Albert. You're the boss."

"If you'll let me hold each of you by an arm," said our captive, too anxious to please, "I can—"

"Correction," I said. "*We'll* hold *you* by either arm. You might get tired and let go." I clamped the man's right wrist in my left hand, keeping the sword in readiness in my right. Timtik clutched his other wrist with both hands, his face looking as though he dreaded heights more than I did.

"Let's go," I said, then reconsidered. "Wait—! You came here for those marble things. . . . So if you don't return with them, someone else will come and find this corpse—" I looked at Timtik. "We'd better move them."

He ran and got the four marble items, and handed them to the Kwistian, who took them with poor grace.

"*Now* we go!" I said, re-establishing my grip. Then the floor fell away beneath us as the great white pinions labored gustily to raise the additional load.

The next level up was deserted, but the center of the room was a thick column, radiating a lot of heat. Perhaps twenty feet in diameter, it reached from floor to ceiling.

"What's that?" I asked, swaying from the wrist of the rising Kwistian, unwilling to look directly downward.

"It's the base of the flame pit," said the Kwistian. His voice was too smug for a captive, somehow. I suddenly realized that if the room we were approaching held the open mouth of the pit, it might very likely hold the rest of the cannibals, rattling their silverware in anthropophagous impatience.

I FORCED myself to look at the awful distance below my sunburnt toes. My grip, as I dangled, was weakening. This parrot-beaked vehicle of ours was being too cooperative.

"Hold it," I said, touching the point of the sword onto the soft flesh between the base of his beak and his throat. The wings continued to beat the air. "Stop or—!"

"Or what?" mocked the creature. "You won't kill me. Not with a drop like that below you."

I forced myself not to listen to Timtik's panicky moan at those words. "I'm warning you," I said, pressing the needle-pointed blade gently. Pale red blood suddenly started to trickle down the Kwistian's chest, and the great wings faltered.

"Ukkk!" he gagged, his thick tongue lolling through the gaping beak. Only a quarter-inch of point was in his neck, but it was enough. Eyes glazed in fear, he fluttered feebly to the floor of the room. I waited till Timtik was

standing free, then kept the sword-point in its niche as I said, trying to keep reaction-quaver out of my voice, "Where is Lorn right now? The room above?"

"No-no," he gurgled, afraid to move with that thing imbedded razor-keen in his throat. "She's in the room next to it, awaiting the donning of the marble slippers and gloves."

"How do we get *there*?" I demanded, with tight desperation.

"The only entrance is through the throne room, the room above here. The preparation room has no vertical entrance. He pointed to the ceiling near the rear wall. "It's up there."

As I looked up, the Kwistian suddenly sprang upward with a flip of mighty wings, soaring directly toward the orifice above. He didn't even come close.

The blade, which had left his throat as he rose, just fell lazily through his chest region like a sunbeam through fog. Face grey and dead, he sagged in mid-air, then thumped to the floor beside us.

I shook my head over my latest corpse, then took the bits of marble from his hands and left them beside the lip of the hole through which we'd entered this level. Then I dumped the winged man all the way over it to lie with his companion, below. "We'll cut our way up," I said, heading for

the rear wall. "It'll take time, but they won't throw Lorn into the pit till they get those gloves and slippers, and there may be a time-lag till they send a new group to get them."

"You think they won't spot the corpses down below if they find the marble stuff on this level?" asked Timtik.

"I hope they won't," I said, slicing a foothold in the wall.

AT the ceiling, short minutes later, clinging with my left hand while I sliced the granite above with my right, I took care to make the cutout part wider on top than below, like a bathtub plug, so we could push it up quietly. It proved to weigh more than I could budge, but Timtik reminded me about the brunt-bearing propensities of the flat of the blade, and I found I could lift the granite slab with a light wrist-movement. I held it there while Timtik crawled up over me and through, then balanced it dexterously while I squeezed up after him. I let the segment ease back into place, then stood listening.

A chamber adjoined the sort of closet we seemed to be in, and I could hear murmuring voices and soft feminine sobs.

Lorn, weeping her heart out. We peeped out of the arched doorway together. Lorn was sitting between two tall Kwistian

guards. My hand tightened on the hilt of the silver sword. Now, if they would just turn their backs . . .

"Here they are!"

A third Kwistian had rushed into the room, bearing those marble gadgets we'd left one level below. "I don't know what happened to Teek and Twelrik," he added. "The Extremikilns were on the floor at the next level down—"

"The emperor's getting impatient," snapped one of the two guards. "Get the things on her, quick."

"Right," said the Kwistian, stooping to insert one of Lorn's feet into the proper marble slipper. He received her right big toe in his eye for his trouble. "Hold the nymph!" he cursed, rubbing his injured orb. The others grasped her legs and arms, and he finally got the glossy manual and pedal binders on her.

Not ten feet away, around the corner, we waited, hoping they'd turn their backs. Timtik was shaking with excitement, clutching tightly at my free hand.

"Hurry!" said a fourth Kwistian, joining the group. "Old Cort and the emperor are ready to split their beaks!"

Before we could think out a plan, the men were out of the room with Lorn. Time had been short before. It was all run out, now.

AS the chamber cleared of occupants, we dashed to the next archway and looked into the throne room. As we looked in, Cort and the emperor had not yet seen Lorn. I knew who they were the moment I fastened eyes on them. There was no mistaking—even with those razor-edged parrot beaks—the Drendon-transmuted faces of Courtland and Geoffrey Porkle.

Porkle-Kwist was speaking to Courtland-Cort.

"Relax, they'll be here shortly."

"Here they are—!" Cort drooled, as the two guards came swooping with Lorn between them to a spot just before the throne.

"Imperial majesty, the nymph is ready," spoke the first of the two guards. They released her arms. A mistake.

Lorn, her hands bound with cold marble, her feet shod with the same substance, showed him just how ready she was. A vicious swing of her right hand smashed into the half-opened beak of the speaker, sending him sprawling out across the stone floor, yelping with pain.

Immediately, half the Kwistians standing in the throne room leaped toward her with brass tridents ready to strike her down.

"STOP!" said Cort, with a strange motion of his arms. It

wasn't a command, I realized, as my limbs congealed like swift-drying cement; it was a spell. And all persons present, save Cort and Kwist, froze helplessly, even Timtik, right beside me.

The wizard glowered, then pointed a finger at Lorn and growled, "You shall remain—All others: Released!" He said this last with a sharp fingersnap, and my body relaxed, as did everyone else's but Lorn's.

"You fools," said Cort to the shame-faced Kwistians lowering their tridents. "Can't you see that's what she *hoped* you'd do? She doesn't wish to be cooked alive. Take her to the pit, now; I've waited long enough."

"She must be cooked to a turn," said the emperor, suddenly.

Cort flashed a frosty eye at the monarch. "You know I like my nymphs rare!" he said. Something in his tone told me that the sharing of rule with Kwist was a thorn in his side. His face was a dull red with rage. Apparently, though, his power held no sway over Kwist. At least, the emperor had not been paralyzed with the rest of us.

"Pah!" said Kwist. "Ridiculous. Anyone who knows good woodnymph will tell you that well-done is best."

The frost in Cort's eye became a white-hot flame.

"If you hadn't sneaked a look at my Black Art books, majes-

ty," he said, clicking the edge of his knife ominously upon the rim of his plate, "I'd have you so tied up in spells—"

The emperor yawned. "Precisely. *If*. However, a man grows tired of being paralyzed every time his *second-in-command* gets annoyed with him. And that's not the only counterspell I've mastered, either, remember!"

Kwist gestured airily toward Lorn. The guards had the nymph, paralyzed into enchanted rigidity, at the brink of the pit. They themselves had to avert their faces from the pulsating red glow emanating from within the bowels of the scorched, blackened hole in the floor.

"At least," he said, "we should free her of her spell, that she may enjoy the fire fully."

Kwist smiled nastily, and snapped his fingers sharply. Lorn was resurrected from her magical imprisonment, and her voice rose instantly in a terrible cry of anguish in the blast-furnace updraft that wafted her garment about her in undulating waves of green.

The emperor waved a hand. "Throw the nymph to the fires!"

"*Hold it!*" I yelled at the top of my lungs. I didn't know if Maggot's powers could stand much more drainage, but I was determined to make a last-ditch stand.

The men holding Lorn turned,

startled at the interruption. She staggered from the mouth of the glaring pit, away from the grip of her captors. Kwist spun about and saw me.

"The Earthman!" he cried. "Destroy him!"

AT least half the Kwistians hurled their tridents, with deadly accuracy, at me, an easy target standing stock still in the doorway. And each and every trident was drawn right into the four-foot sword I bore, to glance off harmlessly and clang to the stone floor. An uneasy murmur arose.

Cort stared appraisingly at me. His narrow eyes flickered with malevolence as he pointed a taloned finger at me, and shouted, voice ringing through the great room, "I, Cort, command you to *stop!*" His hands made that strange gesture again, and I stood numbly awaiting that cementine bondage to flow into my body again. But nothing happened. To me, at any rate.

Cort the wizard, however, rammed back into the air as though struck by a pile-driver in the solar plexus. He spun along the floor for a dozen feet, then scrambled, pained and shocked, to his feet.

"What happened?" whimpered Kwist, who had sat in dull dazedness on his throne from the moment of my entrance

"My spell—" mouthed Cort, blankly. "It backfired!"

"Of course it did," said Maggot, gliding in the great window with her faggot-broom hissing through the air, and great black cloak streaming silkily in her wake.

"The witch!" gasped the emperor.

But Cort gave an exultant howl. "Then the Thraké is dead! She'd never leave it while it was alive!"

Lorn, who in the confusion had struggled out of her marble encumbrances, rushed up to me and flung herself into my arms. "Please, honey," I protested, albeit I held her pressed tightly to me with my free hand, "I may have to kill a few people. . . ."

"No," boomed the wizard. "You are all trapped, doomed!"

"Ha!" said Maggot, cackling shrilly. "What makes you think the Thrake is dead? I could very easily have taught it to feed itself. In fact, how do you know I haven't hooked it up to a high-frequency spell-transmitter that I can control from here, and render you all helpless, ha?!" She certainly sounded convincing.

So convincing that Kwist, who was wildly impressionable, screamed shrilly, "Help I can't fly anymore!"

Maggot was momentarily distracted. And her power, which had been full on Cort since her

arrival at Sark, wavered in intensity. Wavered just as the wizard made a frantic effort to employ his sorcery.

"Maggot the witch—STOP!" he roared, his arms doing that weirdly fluid motion toward her.

And Maggot froze helpless, like a plump, black-garbed statue clutching a broom. At the very instant of her going rigid, my sword vanished from my hand, and I found myself strapped in the heavy lead cuirass once more.

The Kwistians advanced upon us, snarling.

"Albert!" cried Lorn, miserably.

"Odds bodkins!" moaned Timtik.

CHAPTER 13

WITHIN forty seconds, I had four Kwistians holding me, Lorn had two, and Timtik looked chagrined to find it took but one man to hold him.

Cort, despite that nasty spill he'd taken, was looking very pleased. In front of all the Kwistians, the emperor had cracked up in a crisis, leaving all the prestige to the winged wizard.

"Cort—" said Kwist, just about recovered from his fright, or at least feigning that appearance.

"Yess . . . Majesty?" Cort's unmistakable mockery elicited a few snickers from the clustered

Kwistians. Kwist turned a pinkish hue, but managed to continue.

"Cort, what does an Earthman taste like?"

Cort's feathery eyebrows rose in shrewd consideration, but not half so high as my pulse rate and hackles. I could see that the idea, while new to the wizard, was not at all displeasing to him. "I really don't know," he mused, staring at me curiously, his yellowish eyes raking over my body from bare feet to tangled hair. "He might be quite delicious . . ."

"Why," said the monarch to his wizard, "don't we have us the nymph for a main course, and then the man as a soft, succulent dessert?"

"For now, that should be excellent—" said the wizard.

"For now?" echoed Kwist, sensing the glint of sharp speculation in the other's eye.

"Majesty, I was simply thinking. . . . Here in Drendon, we must struggle to stay fed upon a relative handful of these delicious but scarce woodnymphs. But earth people exist by the billions!"

"What a thought!" enthused Kwist, his beak wet with saliva.

"Why," continued the wizard, "with my magic to aid us we can capture dozens every day. If things turn out well, we may just move out of Drendon entirely, and live on Earth, with an in-

finity of plump, juicy people to feed upon!"

"But—" said the monarch, uneasily, "what of the Edict of Banishment, Cort? I know it's possible for a *few* Drendonites to slip through on occasion, but if we *all* went through, wouldn't there be dreadful repercussions?"

Cort shook his head. "Even Merlin was not that all-fired powerful. As with any spell, the effect wears thin in time. Many centuries have passed since his was woven. A thousand years ago, no Drendonite could return to Earth; a hundred years ago, dozens were sneaking out for short forays every day. And today— It wouldn't surprise me if any of us could return without impunity, to remain so long as we desired."

"Can it have worn so thin, then?" said Kwist, hopefully.

"So thin, and so delicately poised," said Cort, "that the right shock, the right circumstances, could foreseeably collapse the Edict entirely, and return Earth to its primal state, save for the cheering fact that present-day Earth people would have no idea how to cope with the sudden onslaught of fabulous beasts re-returning to ravage the land!"

"Wonderful!" The monarch's joy was manifesting itself in a nervous dance step. "When can we get started?"

"As soon as it is determined whether or not the Earthman is as delicious as he looks!"

I FELT myself turning pink, and avoided Lorn's eyes. I tried desperately to think of something to offset our fates. Then I had it. I thought.

"Aren't you forgetting the Thrake?" I said, and was pleased to see the Kwistians stiffen, monarch and wizard included. "If Maggot can, as she says, turn it on from here, you'll all be in a fine fix, won't you!"

"He's right, Cort!" said the emperor. "We must destroy the Thrake, first, before we plan any further. Its power is the one thing that can ruin us all."

"Am I to assume," mused the wizard, "that you are finally giving me your permission to try the Roton Beam?"

"Never!" gasped Kwist, his face grey with horror. "I tell you, Cort, that so-called long-distance Thrake-destroyer is too incalculable! The heat at the focal point of the beam could ignite the moss fields and destroy all of Sark!"

"But majesty," Cort said, almost whining, "how do we know the Thrake is anywhere near the moss fields?"

"How," countered the monarch, "do we know it isn't wriggling across the moss tufts this minute?"

"All right, all right," Cort said

petulantly. "No Roton Beam. We'll have to get at the Thrake indirectly."

"How?" asked Kwist. "Through Maggot?"

"That's our only course," said the wizard. "Without her, the Thrake will die of starvation. And even should it linger a while, Maggot's death can still prevent any long-distance activation of the Thrake's power, such as she claimed to be able to bring about."

"Good!" said Kwist. "You men there, stick your tridents—!"

"Kwist—!" Cort interposed wearily.

"—straight into her heart!" finished the monarch.

As I watched in horror, half a dozen gleaming brass tridents sped toward the rigid form of the plump little witch. And all six, their points blunted, clanged onto the floor, leaving her unscathed. Kwist turned a puzzled face to Cort.

"A counterspell of hers?"

"No, majesty. *My* spell. The difficulty with the paralysis spell is that the very forces that seal up the person serve also to seal out the world. She cannot, in her present state, be harmed in any way—"

"But that's ghastly!" blurted the emperor. "Spells don't last forever, and when this one wears off—"

"If you'll let me finish?" Kwist

shut his beak, and Cort went on, "I was saying that she cannot be harmed at all except for one force, the jaws of the Serpoliths."

The emperor's face went greenish, and not a few of the Kwistians shuddered. "Please Cort," said Kwist, "it's *dinner* time!"

WHEN I stood looking bewildered, Timtik turned his head my way and said, "Those are the mothers of the Kwistians, Albert. Maggot told me all about them. Cort keeps them locked in a black cavern beneath Sark, and only goes in there once a year to bring out their eggs for the hatchery. The eggs hatch into Kwistians, and—"

"Silence, goat-boy!" snarled Cort.

"But how can the Serpoliths—" said the monarch.

Cort shrugged. "I don't know. I never have. Something in them defies most of my magic. Perhaps due to their being the primal ancestors of the Kwistians?"

"Your magic door holds them," Kwist pointed out.

"No," said Cort. "It merely blocks the light, and they detest anything but absolute darkness. To pass through the door is to enter into glaring pain and death for them. And the far end of the cavern is sealed by natural means. So there they stay."

I was at sea about most of their

conversation, but had no chance then to figure any of it out. Cort, deciding the dinner hour had been long enough delayed, ordered the guards to take Timtik and Maggot away, Lorn to be re-prepared for the flame pit, and myself sent under guard into the room beyond the preparation chamber, to await my return. As dessert.

There wasn't much I could do but let the two tall Kwistians drag me bodily from the throne room. I was taken into the room where Timtik and I had first achieved this level of the castle, and could only sit and try not to listen to Lorn's piteous cries as she was sturdily re-strapped into those marble encumbrances.

The only hope was, of course, Maggot. And Maggot was magicked into evanescent ossification that probably wouldn't wear off until long after the Serpoliths—the sound of that word made my skin crawl—had rendered her pretty nigh useless as an ally. I wished listlessly that I'd paid better attention to Timtik's thunderstorm spell. If I could whomp up a shower every ten minutes or so, I could hold the flame pit at bay for quite a while. . . .

And then it came to me—Timtik could do magic. Not like Maggot could, of course, but he wasn't what you could call powerless, either. . . . If he could be en-

couraged into trying, he might just be able to louse things up good for the Kwistians. If I could only get to him.

I THOUGHT hard. Something about the Serpoliths was frightening to the Kwistians. With luck, I might maybe turn this loathing to my own advantage. I cleared my throat, said a short prayer, then spoke to the guards. "How's chances of my saying farewell to Maggot and Timtik?"

One of them snickered. "Rotten. You've seen the last of them, Earthman."

I forced myself to look nonchalant, and went on, "I figured as much. You Kwistians only attack unsuspecting people from the air, with those tridents ready to stab in the back. And you fight me, two women, and what amounts to a small boy at odds astronomically in your favor. And now, tough as you look, you're scared silly at the thought of going anywhere near the Serpoliths."

I fell silent and waited. This was the crucial moment. If only they had a spark of pride, a tiny spark of pride—

"Who's scared!" said the first guard. He glanced at the other one. "Come on, Twork! Let's give this guy a quick look at his friends before they're no longer available."

"Gee, Idlisk," said the other, "I dunno—Cort might be mad."

"At what?" said Idlisk. "We take him down, show him his buddies, then bring him back. Where's the harm?"

"Oh—Okay, but let's make it fast. They'll cook up the wood-nymph any minute, and we don't want to be skipped!"

With that, they took me by the arms, sprang into the air and out the tall stone casement in the sunlight, high over the moss. My stomach shrank sickeningly as they plunged down two levels and soared into a huge chamber there. We were two levels below the throne room, near the very corridor wherein Timtik and I had made our entrance. And whether these guys knew it or not, there was a large hole in the stone wall at the end of that corridor, right on the brink of the moss.

I kept that fact in mind as the two guards half-led, half-carried me down that dark corridor. One of them took a wooden flambeau from a wall sconce and ignited its tarry tip, and by this sputtering light we made our way deeper into the corridor, but suddenly turned off at an angle to the path on which I'd first entered Sark.

Shadows from the flaming torch danced wildly on walls barely wide enough apart for a Kwistian to move with his pinions folded, and this narrowness

necessitated my being first in the procession. The corridor was damp and had a strangely familiar odor to it, a sick-sweet odor that tugged at my memory as it grew stronger, but I couldn't place it.

Then ahead of me I saw the circular opening leading into a dark muck-floored cavern, and standing a mere ten paces within the cavern were Maggot and Timtik, Maggot still inflexibly rigid, and Timtik sobbing hopelessly into the thick fabric of her voluminous skirt.

TIMTIK!" I called, and he turned his tear-streaked face toward me, looking more small-boyish than ever in the flickering orange light of the torch.

"Albert!" he wailed. "Do something! The spells are meshing in the doorway, and the light's going fast!"

"What?" I said, baffled by his words. Then I saw that there was, indeed, something strange occurring in the circular plane that was the entrance to the cavern. A greyish cast to the air there seemed to resist any illumination thrown by the torch. "What kind of spell?"

"Two of them," sniffled the faun. "Polarized spells. One turns slowly to right angles to the other, and once it's there, no light can get in here; then the—the S-serpoliths'll come out!"

"That's enough, Earthman!" snapped Idlisk, grabbing my shoulder. "You've seen them. Now come along."

"And," I said, turning to face him, "if I *don't*?"

"You have no choice," he said, reaching for me.

"Make me come," I said, and stepped backward through the polarizing spells into the cavern.

"Hey—!" he said uneasily. "Come out of there!"

I noticed he made no move to advance toward me, through the circle of grey which grew gradually darker even as I stood watching him. His torch had developed a fuzzy crimson nimbus, as its light was distorted by the meshing spells.

"Two steps, and I'm yours," I said, tauntingly. Idlisk jerked his head around to Twork.

"We better get Cort!" he said nervously.

"He'll *molt* if you tell him what you did!" said the other. "We shouldn't have brought the Earthman here!"

"Better to get him upset over a slight dereliction of duty than a big one. He'll have *us* flung in the flame-pit if we let the Earthman get away with this!"

"Well . . ." said Twork. "Okay. You go tell him what's happened, and I'll stay here and make sure he doesn't try and sneak out."

As Idlisk hurried off, leaving

the torch with Twork, I turned back to Timtik and Maggot. I knew the reason for Maggot's remaining where she was; then I saw the thick iron gyves on a short chain binding Timtik's hooves to the floor.

"You better scram, Albert," he said wistfully. "Is Lorn—?"

"Not yet," I said. "But look, Timtik, I came down here on purpose—" I glanced back over my shoulder, but Twork was standing well back from the cavern entrance, a dim red-lit figure as the polarized spells neared their locale of total blackout. In an impenetrably black grotto off across the cavern, something slithered ominously. I forced my mind away from that darker darkness, and said, "Timtik, I think you can save us all . . ."

"You'll be sorry, Earthman," called Twork's voice, as the darkness thickened. "When the Serpoliths come forth, angry with you interlopers, and all that acid dripping from their forked tongues, your death will not come quickly! You'll be begging for the flame pit after one second in the grip of those jaws!" In the tunnel, his voice was a hollow echo. Purplish-grey twilight hid him almost completely.

"Timtik," I said, "you must know some magic that'll get Lorn and all of us safely out of here."

"I know a little—" he said dubiously. "I can— Wait." In the

gloom, I saw him frown deeply, then brighten as his memory came across with an answer. "Got it!" he said, then chanted:

"Bonds of metal, hemp or
thong,
Loosen as I sing my song,
Set me free, as I belong,
Ere my witching does you
wrong!"

THE chains wriggled like galvanized worms, and the tyves sprang open from his hooves and clunked into the muck on the floor. "Come on, Albert," he said. "We'll have to *carry* Maggot out of here, first, and try to save Lorn next."

"We can't," I said. "Twork's just beyond those magic blackout curtains."

"Odds bodkins!" he muttered furiously. "We've got to do something, Albert, and fast!" My nose, which had been twitching with disgust from the moment I'd entered the cavern area, gave a particularly violent wriggle, and called my attention back to the smell. "Pee-yew!" I said, sniffing the air. "This place smells like—" Then I remembered the odor, and identified it. "Like *hell-brew!*" I finished, startled.

Timtik squatted in the dimness to a clot of smelly stuff upon the floor and took a good whiff. "It is *hell-brew,*" he gasped, astonished.

The blackness was abruptly

complete, an almost palpable blackness, heavy and stygian to the senses. I could hear the slithering Serpoliths bestirring themselves in the grotto.

"You must free Maggot!" I said.

"But how?" he quavered, grabbing my hand in the darkness, as the slithering sounds began converging upon us. "Maggot never taught me the spell for freeing someone from magical paralysis."

"Must you rely on *regulations*?" I demanded. "Someone has to coin these spells; why not you?"

"We sure have nothing to lose—" he temporized, as the crawly noises with their contrapuntal sizzlings came horribly nearer. "Here goes nothing, Albert—" he said, then intoned swiftly, frantically:

"Now weave I a countermand,

That the wizard's curse be banned!

Move I now my warlock's hand—

Spell, leave Maggot, I command!"

I FELT him move, as his arms did some gesture in the blackness which only sorcerors know, then . . .

"*Tikky!*" sang out Maggot's voice, through a noise oddly like a distant shattering of glass, as

her enchanted bonds were broken asunder.

"I *did* it!" the faun crowed in delight.

"The Serpoliths—!" I yelled, as a terrible scratching of scaly bodies crackled on the slimy stone of the cavern.

"Oh, of course!" said Maggot. "Lights, lights!"

There was a sputter, and two gleaming fluorescent tubes shone bright as elongated moons just beneath the cavern's domed ceiling. I barely got a glimpse of the Serpoliths, as—rasping out discordant screams of ocular agony—they sped back into the black recesses of the grotto.

"Swell!" I said. "Now, quick, let's save Lorn!"

"Wait a second, Albert!" said the faun. "Maggot, look at the stuff on the floor of this place. It's hell-brew, or I'm not the warlock I thought I was. Tell me, Maggot, is there some kind of connection between the Thrake and the Serpoliths and the Kwis-tians? And where *is* the Thrake?"

"Dead," said Maggot. "Fell into the cauldron fire. But as to the connection—I guess it doesn't matter if I tell you now, now that the poor little thing's gone . . ."

"Lorn," I urged, "they'll be tossing Lorn in the—!"

"You see," Maggot said to Tim-tik, ignoring me, "I was by the

edge of the moss one day, gathering herbs, when a thing I took for a beautiful white stone came bobbing up from the muck. I thought I'd found a Serpolith egg, and—entertaining thoughts of raising me a *friendly* Kwistian for reconnaissance and such—I took it home with me, and kept it warm by the fireside, and one day it hatched. But it hatched into the Thrake. I was quite disappointed until I discovered its wing-stopping power over Kwistians, but—”

“Then I'm right!” interrupted the faun. “Maggot, you wonderful old darling witch! You were right, but you didn't know it. That *was* a Serpolith egg you had, but it didn't turn into a Kwistian because you hatched it out of the *darkness* it craved, kept it in Drendon where it only gets dark once in a lifetime!”

Maggot caught the fever of his deductions. “And the racial memory of the hatred all Serpoliths have for the Kwistians brought out this strange power it had over their flying ability?”

“Right!” said Timtik. “So the Thrake's death doesn't matter!”

“It doesn't?” I asked, fascinated despite myself.

“No,” he laughed giddily. “Maggot, you told me that Cort controls the yearly crop of new winged men by coming down here where the baby Serpoliths are, and taking them into the

castle to change, in the daylight, into—not adult Serpoliths, but—Kwistians! But *you* took an *un*-hatched egg into the light. Can't you see it, feeling the sunlight through its shell, knowing it must alter its development before the shell broke away? So it became the smooth-bodied, tentacled Thrake, but still needed the food its own kind ate, the recipe which you discovered by trial-and-error, and which you named hell-brew. And, in its puny form, it couldn't threaten Kwistians as the fully grown Serpoliths do, with fang and acid and venom. So it developed this wing-paralyzing power, and—”

“Tikky!” Maggot's jaw dropped. “What you're trying to say is that, if we expose the eggs in this cavern to heat and to light—”

“We'll have more Thrakes than the Kwistians have feathers!” he chortled, jumping up and down.

MAGGOT whispered a magic word, and she, Timtik and I were suddenly equipped with flashlights, with which we hurried into the dark grotto, bright yellow beams flaring ahead of us. Agonized hissing met our ears.

“We've got to get rid of the Serpoliths, first,” said Timtik.

“Easy as pie,” said Maggot, with a mystic gesture. A black tube of darkness appeared on the

ground, extending from the grotto toward the rear wall of the cavern, where for the first time I noted a rusted metal door set into the stone. As the tube appeared along the ground, the rusted bolt burst, and the heavy metal door creaked open, exposing—Oozy black muck, the underside of the morass beneath the moss fields, where the acid-tongued Serpoliths lived. I knew, then, what had happened to my legs in that brief dip into the moss field.

"Flee!" commanded Maggot, and every single Serpolith trapped at the end of the grotto by our flashlight beams slipped frantically into the tube of darkness and out into their muddy ancestral home. As the last scaly tail slithered into the glutinous black ooze, the door slammed itself and the tube of darkness vanished.

We played our lights on the rear wall of the grotto, and without counting, I realized that at least a thousand Serpolith eggs lay there, waiting to hatch.

"Odds bodkins," said Timtik, wide-eyed with delight, "If we hatch *these* out, the Kwistians not only won't be able to fly—They won't be able to *move!*"

"Don't just stand there with your face hanging out, Albert," said Maggot. "Have you forgotten that Lorn is about to be roasted alive?"

"Of course not!" I said. "But what can I—?"

"Delay things!" she commanded. "You can do it!"

"How?" I choked.

Do a tap-dance, or card tricks! Just hold them off for another ten minutes, perhaps." Then, forgetting me completely, she returned her attention to the faun and the stacks of eggs. "Come on, Tikky! Let's get a fire started!"

I turned and grimly hurried back to the disc of blackness masking the cavern mouth. I took a breath, said another prayer, and then stepped through.

"There he is!" said Twork, to Idlisk and Cort, who were just approaching him down the tunnel. I worried for a fractional moment that Cort would spoil everything when he saw the Maggot-evoked fluorescents in the cavern, then realized that the only light in the tunnel was torchlight. Cort's magic door worked both ways, thank heaven.

"Chickened out, huh?" smirked the wizard. "Couldn't stick it out with your friends when the going got tough!"

"No," I said, making my voice panicky, which wasn't hard. "Those fangs, that acid! I couldn't take it!"

"Now who's a coward," chuckled Twork, grabbing my arm and leading me away from the cavern mouth.

"Is Lorn—?" I said to the wizard.

"For the next thirty seconds, she lives," he said, as the two guards lifted me in sudden soaring flight behind him. We reached throne room level just as Lorn was brought out of the preparation chamber.

IN the center of the floor, the flame pit was almost hidden by a leaping column of yellow-orange fires; the stokers had done a horribly good job.

"Now," said Kwist, from the throne, "toss that nymph in there, and let's get dinner going!"

Now or never.

I threw back my head and laughed. The occupants of the room, Lorn especially, looked at me in consternation.

"Hysteria?" asked the emperor of Cort.

The wizard eyed me coldly. "Something amuses you?"

"In an ironic sort of way," I said. "Here you all are, about to glut yourselves on this nymph, and spoil your appetites and taste judgment!"

"Spoil them for what?" said Cort. "Surely not for *you*?!"

"Who else?" I said, trying not to think too deeply on the topic. "Unless you were planning on cooking Kwist next?"

"Cort—!" said the emperor, uneasily.

"He's only goading you, majesty," said the wizard. "Or trying to change the subject. Which is: Just how good is an Earthman for dinner . . .?"

"Let's cook him and see," said Kwist, matter-of-factly.

"No," said Cort, "we should *taste* him first."

"T-taste?" I murmured.

"To immerse you totally into the flame might spoil your flavor, burn you to a crisp," said Cort, smiling gently. "We must experiment, find what sort of cooking suits you best. We will do it in parts. Fry a foot, broil a leg, bake a hand—"

"You mean cut me up and experiment?"

"Oh, *not* cut you *up*," soothed the wizard, cruelly. "We're not barbarians. We'll leave you fully alive, of course."

"No," Lorn cried. "No, have mercy on him!"

"Will someone *cook* that nymph?" roared the emperor.

"Please, *please*!!" squealed Lorn, as the muscular guards bore her backward toward the hungry fires of the pit.

I'd lost. I averted my eyes. And saw the square-cut diamond in the center of the lead breastplate, coruscating blindingly, waiting to be pressed, as I should have had the sense to press it the moment Maggot's powers were restored. But Twork and Idlisk had my arms held tight.

There was only one chance. Their irritability-level.

"Careful, birdface!" I snapped at Twork, twisting in his grasp. "You almost bumped my diamond stud!"

The parrot-beaked guard snarled, "I'll bump it if I feel like it!" His hand whipped up, and the heel of it smacked hard against the twinkling diamond. Then his beak opened in a silent scream, as the silver sword flashed into magical existence in my hand, the tip of the blade appearing as snugly in Twork's chest.

HE'S loose!" blubbered Kwist, as I wrenched away from a terrified Idlisk. Then, as Twork crumpled to the floor, Idlisk leaped for me again, claws flexed to tear through my flesh. I swatted him behind the ear with the mountainstopping flat of the blade. He went spinning across the floor with a shattered skull, to vanish suddenly in the gaping maw of the open flame-pit, with a noxious odor of burning feathers.

The men holding Lorn pulled back from the grey clouds that marked their companion's line of departure, and she yanked free and ran toward me. Cort raised his arms impressively over his head and shouted "Stop!" at me in his loudest wizardly roar.

Some swift reflex brought up

the flat of the sword between myself and the wizard even as he spoke, and the spell that rushed upon me was deflected into a group of quaking Kwistians, all of whom stiffened horribly and went down like ninepins at the feet of their associates.

Then Lorn was clasped to me in one arm, her marble-clad hands nearly braining me as she flung them wildly about my neck, and I held her tight, ready to stay there fighting for her life until I dropped in my tracks of exhaustion.

"Can power fend power forever?" sneered Cort, still spoiling for revenge. His fist came up at the length of his arm, and a pale blue stone in his ring suddenly arrowed a blinding white needle of force at me. The sword-blade caught it, but could not deflect it, and the hilt jerked in my hand, then held steady. Cort's mocking laughter crashed about the room as I stood there with legs braced, fighting the awful surge of raw power that threatened to destroy me if the sword gave out.

Beneath my fingers on the hilt, I could feel the copper and the ivory bands switching from first place to last, as those balance-of-power storage tanks or whatever strove to cope with this merciless overload.

"The edge!" Lorn yelled into my ear. "Use the *edge!*" she demanded again, as two flanking

bodies of Kwistians started rushing in upon me while I was powerless to do aught but fight Cort's ring-power, using the blade as a shield instead of weapon.

I didn't get it, but I'd have a trident in either kidney if I waited to ask stupid questions, so I twisted the hilt, and caught the sizzling white beam with the razor-edged silver blade. White power cracked asunder in mid-air, as all the brunt that had poured into the flat of the blade released instantaneously from the edge. Cort's grin faded into grey-faced horror as the raw force splattered outward like so much shattered glass, and—as the hurtling shards of white light blasted the incoming Kwistians into hunks of bloody flesh and charred bone—his ring contained nothing but a scorched hole where the blue gem had rested.

"Quickly," he yelled to Kwist, as I advanced upon him. "The laboratory! We'll stop them yet!"

Pinions whacking the air, they soared smoothly upward through the final orifice of the castle levels, into the tower room housing Cort's laboratory. The other Kwistians were already soaring out windows into the relatively safe-from-me area above the moss fields, or downward into other rooms of the castle. It was a wonderful rout.

"Wait here, honey," I said to Lorn, as I strode grimly toward

the nearest wall, and began smilingly hacking out a series of handholds in the stone like I'd been doing it all my life. . . .

CHAPTER 14

AS I reached the ceiling, cut out a circle of stone, and stealthily raised it with the flat of the force-absorbent blade, I heard the wizard and the emperor in agitated discussion.

"Cort, what'll we do?" the emperor was whining.

"The casement's right here, Kwist," growled the wizard. "If he comes here, we'll simply fly somewhere else!"

Below me, as I awkwardly tried to ease through the gap without dropping the hellishly heavy slab on myself, one of the winged men looked downward through the entrance orifice and his eyebrow feathers stood straight up on end.

"The witch!" he choked, and sprang into the air, headed—I assumed—for another level of Sark, to warn his companions. Only, he didn't rise any farther than that initial spring had taken him. The great white pinions remained stubbornly shut, and with a gurgle of fear, the man's fingers clawed futilely at the air before his ill-advised leap dropped him neatly through the opening in the floor.

But I could have guessed that

outcome. If Maggot was truly down below, on her way up, it meant that the eggs in the Serpolith grotto were already hatching like popcorn popping, each into a wing-numbing Thrake.

I finally got both legs through the gap after me, and dropped the slab back into place. My entrance had been behind a long lab table, where neither man could see me; nor was the crash of the stone noticed amid the growing shouts of frightened Kwistians below.

"We can't fly somewhere else," Kwist was replying in panic, "if the Thrake becomes activated, Cort—"

"How can it?" grated the wizard. "Maggot was the one who might have activated it, and Maggot is dead! By now, she's a mess of bone and acid-eaten flesh!"

"*I resent that!*" came a familiar voice, from the room below the lab.

Emperor and wizard rushed to the brink of the orifice and peered down. "She's alive!" gasped Cort.

Kwist clutched Cort's arm. "Do something!" he whimpered.

"Let go of me so I *can!*" yelled Cort, pulling free. He reached down a long crystal spear from a rack on the wall, a spear whose faceted surfaces glinted with a hundred rainbow sparkles. Just as he stepped back to the brink of the floor-entrance, I stood up si-

lently behind the lab table, silver sword ready in my hand. Kwist gave a shriek of fright and ran to the casement.

"Fly, Cort, *fly!* It's our only— My wings! They won't open! It's the Thrake! Maggot's done it!"

I saw Cort's own white pinions tremble a bit, and the perspiration spring out on his brow as nothing more happened. "She wasn't kidding!" he mumbled, low and scared. "She *did* activate it from here!"

"Cort—!" screamed the terrified, sobbing emperor, "Don't put it off any longer. Use the Roton Beam."

"You mean it?" rasped Cort, still keeping a wary eye on me, his crystal spear poised for defense.

"*Yes!*" the emperor screamed desperately. "The hell with the risk. I'd rather lose Sark and the moss fields than stand here with paralyzed wings while this Englishman hacks me to pieces!"

I STARTED around the lab table, my sword ready, to stop the wizard. The trouble was, I had no idea where he was about to move, which made interception difficult.

Then, just to one side of him on the floor, I saw an object I recognized. Its metal-and-glass top was supported from below by a tripod. It was the spit-and-image of one of those gadgets

Courtland had used to start sending people and houses to Drendon in the first place. Some vestigial memory of his Earth-self had stuck with Cort-Courtland, enough to let him construct another of those dimension-warping machines. Of course it would destroy the Thrake; it would destroy anything in Drendon by the simple expedient of warping it out the dimensional doorway to Earth-normal.

"Hold it!" I said, striving to put myself between Cort and the gadget. "That's more dangerous than you know—!" I don't know why I blurted that. Some subconscious reasoning must have told me that events were coming a full circle, if this thing were used, this thing that had started all our troubles.

"Try and stop me!" said the wizard, slamming home a switch. That shimmering haze I'd seen once before, long ages ago on Earth, began to form on one side of the tripod. Then I saw the danger. It had no second tripod-gadget to regulate its focal range. Amid the eye-blurring shimmer there appeared a bright blue helix of light, a helix which twirled like a motor-driven corkscrew and went spiraling swiftly out the open casement, seeking out the Thrake.

Except—*The Thrake* was no more. But a minor army of Thrakes lay wriggling their

puny tentacles down in the Serpolith cavern in the base of the building itself. Kwist saw at once that something was wrong.

"The beam, Cort! Look at the beam!" he cried, much too late. Even as the wizard turned and stared, stunned, the accelerating corkscrew beam was bending in flight like a hawk that has overshoot its prey, and snaking right down at the base of the castle. As wizard and emperor sprang fearfully back from the open casement, the beam—now an audible blue bolt of destruction—lurched into the hole I'd cut in the base of the castle—

I braced myself, giving that zooming helix about one second to find its way down the corridor, off down the tunnel to the polarized spell-door, and then strike with all its fury at the wriggling blue heap against the grotto wall.

It took two floor-shaking tremors of concussion before the whole granite base of the castle burst into flame, and the moss fields of Sark ignited.

"Fire!" yelled the emperor, as myriad waves of lacy blue flames shot skyward from every surface outside the casements. Cort had already dashed like a madman to the tripod and half-torn the switch from its contacts the instant of the helix's down-dip, but—*The shimmering halted, the hungry fires did not.*

A MOMENT later I heard a shout, as Kwist whipped open his fifteen-foot pinions. "My wings work! The beam did it!" He stepped toward the casement and stopped, aghast. Wings or not, there would be no flying out into that sky-high ocean of leaping blue flames. "Cort—" he squeaked. "We can't—!"

Cort, already foreseeing the difficulty, had leaped on beating wings to the ceiling. And there, his crystal spear whisked out a hole as if the granite were wet cardboard.

"Look out below!" I had the presence of mind to shout as the slab dropped unerringly through the open floor. A second later, Maggot, with Timtik riding tandem on her broom, bobbed up through the gap and deposited her passenger beside me.

"Thanks for the warning, Albert," she said, flashing her fangs in comradeship. "Excuse me," she added politely, as she broomed through the hole again. "Got to get Lorn. My broom only carries one extra rider."

Then she was swooping down out of sight, even as Kwist went soaring smoothly up through the ceiling-hole through which Cort had already made a hasty exit.

"Timtik—!" I said, as a horrible notion came to me. "If the broom carries only one extra— Who goes with her? You, me, or Lorn? And worse, who gets *left*?"

Smoke and licking heat were staggering me by now. I could barely see straight as Maggot and Lorn came swiftly up into the room. The castle walls were cracking in the blaze, and here and there a smoking shard was splintering from the rocky walls, which were themselves turning hot pink.

"All aboard, Tikky!" sang out the witch, as Lorn hopped from her perch and rushed to fling her arms about my neck.

Down below, toppling walls increased in thunder, and the lab floor was starting to grow horribly hot against my bare feet. "Maggot," I said, as Timtik hopped onto the broomstick behind her, flinging his arms far as they'd go about her plump waist. "What're you going to do, make three trips?"

"Don't be silly," she said, turning her wrinkled face to me. "The castle will sink into flaming muck in less than thirty seconds. Why'd I even come back a *second* time?"

"But Lorn and I—! What about *us*?"

"Aren't you coming with us?" she said, blinking.

"With you! *How*?" I yelped, dancing from one burning foot to the other, a clumsy polka in which I was accompanied by a likewise barefoot Lorn.

"The silver sword, silly!" she alliterated hissingly. "Hold the



IT'S MAGIC, YOU DOPE!

crosspiece like handlebars and point the blade where you want to go. The flat edge also absorbs the force of gravity!"

WITH a ripple of voluminous black skirt, she and the faun rocketed up through the ceiling into the clouds of smoke boiling there, and were gone.

"Honey," you'll have to hold me," I yipped, still dancing. "I need both hands for the sword."

Once again those slim beautiful arms encircled my neck, and the woodnymph pressed up close against me.

Shifting the hilt slightly, I took hold of the left crosspiece with my left hand, then the right one with my right, and then—after a quick prayer that the thing would work—I pointed the tip of the silver blade at the center of the hole in the ceiling, and poked it slightly in that direction . . .

My next sensation was not unlike that of a man whose cufflinks have gotten hooked to an ascending express rocket. A jolt that sent yelps of pain through my deltoids managed to lift me and my woodnymph before my arms tore from their sockets, and then we were arrowing through smoke—then icy air that burned along my face and wrists like sandpaper, so sickeningly swift was our movement.

A glance downward showed

me a tiny flicker of blue flame that was the entire mossfield of Sark, and I gave a frantic twist to the crosspiece that dropped us like a plummet to a—relatively—safer height.

Lorn still clung gamely to my neck, though my horizontal flight above the rising heatwaves billowing from the nigh-endless blue flames left her dangling like the vertical part of a capital *T* with me and the sword forming the crossbar. Ahead of us, I barely had time to recognize Maggot and Timtik swooping along before I was beside them, then past them.

"How do you *slow* this damned thing!" I shrieked as we blurred by them.

"You don't!" came Maggot's voice from far at our rear. "You either go fast or not at all . . ." came the fading amendment to her statement.

In the stinging curtains of haze and heat before me, I saw two sets of flipfopping wings, and suddenly I was almost right on top of Cort and Kwist, the sole survivors of the carnage at the castle, their pinions whacking mightily upon the air as they hurried to get beyond the flaming fields.

"Look out, Albert!" said Lorn, even as I saw Cort twist in his flight, and bring up that crystal spear in an attempt to impale me by my own motion. I wrenched

the crosspiece, and Lorn and I skewed off sideways and upward past that glittering shaft, then looped wildly end over end before I could undo the torque I'd put upon the blade. I looked up. Damn. We were re-approaching the rear of the wizard again.

"I'm not *chasing* you—!" I screamed futilely, as Cort swung about to a "standing" stance in mid-air, his wingtips a feathery white blur of motion, and lunged with the spear again.

THIS time I tried twisting the blade the other way, and almost lost hold of it as an even tighter loop swung us down so near the blue fires that my toenails turned brown. I yiped and wrenched and we rose again, beneath our foes.

"Cort—!" yelled the emperor, but Cort was already folding his wings neatly and dropping out of my ascending vector, to snap them open like twin parachutes as I roared past, and once again jabbed at me with that crystal spear.

The tip of the spear caught the trailing end of Lorn's "diaphanous draperies", and there came a loud shredding sound all at once.

"I thought that thing was indestructible" I said.

"It is, given the proper care," said the woodnymph, burrowing her face into the side of my neck,

her arms strained keeping hold of me. "But I've been through an awful lot today, Albert, and— Oh, look!"

I saw, through the dizzy spinning sphere of sky and flame which had temporarily become my loopy environment, that the trailing tail of her garment had fluttered onto Cort's head, and that he and the emperor were struggling to get it off him, the two flapping gamely to stay aloft, high aloft.

"Albert—" said Lorn, her voice as green as her gown. "Can't you stop this l-looping?"

"I'm trying, I'm trying!" But if I pull out at the wrong time—" I gasped, breathless with vertigo, "we might end up in either the fire or the stratosphere! I'm trying to . . . pull us out in a . . . horizontal direction . . ."

"Well, do it! Quickly!" she wailed.

I shut my eyes and gave a wild yank on the bar, and then groaned in despair as the flexible tip of the blade started to vibrate. Our flight instantly changed from a closed loop to the more involved pattern of an aerial rollercoaster.

And again our flight path, still roughly circular, despite its added pogostick itinerary, came back toward Cort and Kwist. They were just getting the last bits of trailing veil free from the wizard. I saw with horror that

we were due to smash right into them if I didn't do something, fast.

SO, moving faster than was safe I tried another yank on the bar—And my perspiring hand slipped, skidded from the grip, and struck the diamond stud.

There is nothing I can think of, offhand, that is less fun than finding oneself suddenly in mid-air above a flaming mossfield, a terrified and nauseated woman clinging to your neck, and nothing to help you remain aloft except a solid lead cuirass strapped to your chest. Magic or not, lead don't fly. Lorn and I flipped end over end and started down—

Approximately ten feet we dropped, and landed with a soft tugging plop in the center of her veil-remnant, which was at that moment being held almost net-wise by emperor and wizard.

With an ounce of thought, Cort would've just let go his end, and let us drop into the blue fires below. But I guess he'd been trying spear-practice so long that his mind didn't grasp the simpler method of getting us dead. So he lunged at us with the spear in his right hand, but—I guess to keep his target handy—kept hold of the veil with his left.

This release of the righthand grip on the veil, however, turned

the "net" from a supporting square to a sagging triangle, off which Lorn and I slid backwards, shrieking in two-part terror.

The crystal spear whizzed over the veiltop where we'd just lain, and almost skewered Kwist in mid-air, and just as my groping fingers caught hold frantically of the veil-edge, Kwist—dodging the spear—let go his end. And there we were, me and Lorn, dangling down at the lower end of a trailing bit of gauzy green drapery beneath the heels of the flying wizard, whose pinions tripled their stroke to take up the extra load.

And still *again* he didn't think of just dropping us! With his left hand gripping its claws into the veil, he poked at us with the spear in his right, just as I got my non-clinging hand onto the diamond stud and shoved, hard.

The silver sword leaped into existence once more. We were off, flying madly, wildly—At a never-varying ten-foot radius from Cort.

Seems the veil was partially snagged on the sword handle, letting us fly solely in a circle about the wizard, like a stone at the end of a string.

Cort—counterforced into an involuntary mid-air pirouette—drew back that spear for *another* thrust at us as we whirled in a helpless circle about him, a sit-

ting target insofar as his relative motion was concerned.

"Do something, Albert!" begged Lorn, the furthest out in our living centrifuge.

"Such as!?" I shrieked as we whipped around the turn for what was probably our nineteenth lap in five seconds.

THEN I saw the spearpoint coming at me and tried to duck. Which, oddly enough, was the perfect move to have made. My attempted move lifted my arms up, with the sword in them—The sword, by virtue of the snag, lifted the veil—And the spear, by virtue of its magical cutting power, sheared away the fragment of cloth snarling us, and let us fly into the blue on a violent tangent, which, stomach-turning or not, meant momentary safety.

I braked our slanting skyward motion more carefully this time, and had the sword under the grim control of more-or-less sane thinking as we zoomed back in the direction we'd originally been headed, this time trying to stay high over the winged duo.

By now, though, the delay in spear-poking and merry-go-rounding-in-the-sky had let Maggot and Timtik close the gap toward the Kwistians.

Cort was just steadying to a halt from his spin, amid a down-flutter of downy feathers that

had been dislodged during his travail, when Maggot and Timtik sailed smoothly past, and a small white object was tossed from Maggot's hand to the wizard.

"You forgot something, dearie," she crooned sweetly, her ugly old face flashing its best witchy smile.

Cort, reacting like anyone to whom an unexpected missile is lobbed, caught the thing and stared at it, along with a baffled Kwist.

"That," said the emperor, "looks like a Serpolith egg—?"

"It is . . . ?" said Cort. "I don't underst—"

At that moment, the blistering heat that had been rising everywhere took its toll of the unhatched beast's willpower, and the shell began to crackle and crisp away under the brunt of its imprisoned thrusts.

"But Cort—" said Kwist, as a tiny blue tentacle appeared in the side of the shell, "that's no Serpolith . . ."

"No," the wizard agreed, "it looks more like a—" His long eyebrows shot up. "A *Thrake!*" he squealed, just as the small blue creature made its short crowing sound, the sound of joy Thrakes always make when their wing-dampering power caught a victim. Or two victims. And the last I saw of Cort and Kwist, they were suddenly wrapped

neatly in their folded pinions, and dropping down, the egg and its half-hatched Thrake with them—into the hot, flaming field that was the final ruined chattel of the winged men of Sark.

CHAPTER 15

THE mossfield fires still raged when the four of us, flushed with windburn and reeking of smoke, sailed down from the skies to the hut of the witch. I had just a little trouble landing, until I figured that a sudden up-tilt of the sword would allow us to drop to the ground before our new up-swerve began. It worked nicely, with Lorn and I taking an easy fall into high, soft grass, and the sword, released, stopping its aerial shenanigans and plopping hilt-first into my waiting hand.

"Whooie!" I signed, leaning my head on the sword and shutting my eyes. "That's all the flying I want to do for the rest of my *life!*"

A pair of warm lips touched down upon mine, then Lorn snuggled her forehead beside my neck, and curled up on the cool grass beside me. Well, not *too* cool; a lot of heat from the flaming fields was radiating into the forest itself.

Maggot's hut, which she'd left on "automatic", had altered its amorphous form to suit its ca-

loric environs, and was now a Grecian-type statue, with a spray of water spouting like an umbrella from the stone maiden's head, and running in an icy cascade over the exquisite form, finally splashing gaily into a circular cement trough that kept the water from running away over the grass.

"Hmmm," said Maggot, "that's the first time I've ever seen it in *that* shape—Of course, we never had such a peachy fire before . . . But I don't intend to get drenched on my way indoors!" With a witchy wave of her arms at the pseudo-statue, she chanted:

"From this graceful vision
rest us;

Be a hut, of neat asbestos."

In a twinkling, a cheery little rough-thatched hut swelled out of the stone statue's components, looking—with each haphazard shingle a different color—like a cubical patchwork quilt. "Much better," said Maggot.

"One thing—" I said from the comfortably lazy sprawl beside Lorn on the thick grass, "even if that hut won't burn, we can still get warm inside, with that fire out there."

"What fire?" said Maggot, distractedly.

"The one which is busily spreading from moss into shrubbery and pretty soon will turn the whole enchanted forest into

a sort of bosky hell," I replied.

"You know," she nodded, "you're right." She turned to Timtik and said casually, "Tikky, douse that blaze for old Maggot, like a dear boy."

"Me?" The faun was astounded. "Me put out *that*?"

Maggot looked surprised. "Have you forgotten everything I ever taught you, Tikky? What of your thunderstorm spell?"

"Gosh—" he faltered. "On such a big scale—" He looked at Maggot, then shrugged, flexed his fingers, and turned to Lorn. "Give me a hand?" he said.

The witch's eyebrows rose a half-inch. "What's this? Help? That's a solo spell, Tikky."

Timtik looked abashed. "I know, Maggot, but—I can't assume the primary position. When I cross my fetlocks, my hooves give way."

"Oh, is *that* all!?" chuckled the witch. She shuffled into her hut, and a moment later returned with a soiled silken cloak in one hand. Probably once black velvet, it was faded now, and rank with mildew. "Under you go!" she said, whipping the cloak over the faun, completely obscuring him from view.

"Abracadabra-presto-chango!"

SHE whisked it away, and Timtik stood there on a pair of normal boy's legs, his horns and goat-parts vanished.

IT'S MAGIC, YOU DOPE!

"Odds bodkins!" he yelped. "Maggot—! You changed me to a—!" he blurted in a rush.

"Save the eulogy!" interrupted the witch. "This is no time for compliments. It's getting a mite warmish." She fanned herself busily with one hand. "I'd whomp up a rain myself if I thought the old sacroiliac could take it."

Timtik, assuming the primary position with ease, waved his arms, his hips did the around-the-island motion, a howling chant rang triumphantly from his throat—

A fork of lightning stabbed across the sky, thunder cracked and rolled, and the blue-flaming fields and the smoldering fringe of trees were suddenly smothered in a wet torrent of icy waters that turned them into steaming mulch. Rain fell everywhere from the swift-moving black clouds, everywhere in Drendon save an area about fifteen feet square in which the four of us were.

The storm raged one minute, then the skies went clear blue and sunny once more. Timtik, who had been clapping his hands in glee, suddenly sobered. "Maggot—I know I don't *need* the new feet, and all, now the spell's done, but—Could I keep 'em awhile longer? I never had any before, and—"

"Oh, shush!" said the witch.

"I was just jumping the gun, Tikky. The only reason I never made you normal before was the Edict of Banishment. But now, with the Kwistians done for, Merlin's spell is cancelled out—them being the reason for it—and you and I can go back with Albert and Lorn, and join in all the wedding festivities, and—"

"Hey!" I hollered, sitting bolt upright. "I like Lorn a lot, but I never asked—I mean, we've never discussed—"

A glittering witch-eye banked with fires of red lightning suddenly locked upon mine. "You *intend* proposing, don't you, Albert?" Maggot's fingers flexed impatiently.

"Uh—" I said. "I would l-love to marry Lorn."

"Good," said Maggot, all charm and bustle again. "Now't *that's* settled, we'd best hurry off to the proper sector for the Great Reversal. I can feel Merlin's spell weakening by the minute! Let us away, so we'll be in the right Drendon-spot to pop back Earthside. Wouldn't want to wind up with Genghis Khan's time. Ugh!"

"You don't mean Drendon's coming to Earth-normal?"

Maggot shrugged. "Depends. Remember, Albert, so-called 'normal' on Earth *isn't*; Drendon-normal is the way Earth *should* have been if Merlin hadn't messed things up."

"Then that allegorical orange-peel—"

"—about to fit right back on the orange, yes," said Maggot.

"But that means centaurs all over Greece, and dragons all over England," I gasped.

"Ah yes!" the witch crooned dreamily, knobby knuckles clasped to her hoary breast. "And werewolves in the Carpathians, vampires in the Balkans, sea serpents in the fjords, mermaids in the Pacific, sirens and sorceresses in the Mediterranean, kobolds in every cave—"

"But what'll it do to our present civilization!?" I said weakly.

"It'll *preserve* it!" snapped Maggot. "How can one country concentrate on building ICBMs to blast another with, when all the citizenry is busy with things like keeping gnomes from swiping the silverware, or kelpies from dropping bricks on their heads?"

"You know—" I said thoughtfully, "You've *got* something!"

Maggot snapped her fingers. "Almost forgot about Lorn. Can't have her going back to Earth looking like that. Stand aside, Albert."

UP came the cloak, out came the words, and as the grey-spotted black garment whisked away, Lorn stood in a royal blue dress with a lemon-colored belt, long black lashes lying against

a pale rose cheek, lovely and very blonde hair a golden aurora about her head, and her figure a pulse-maddening conformation set neatly atop legs smoothly encased in silk stockings and feet in silly little French-heeled shoes.

"My goodness," said Lorn-Susan, blinking. "This is comfy. And not half so drafty as my diaphanous draperies."

Maggot lead the way into the woods. Lorn-Susan and Timtik and I followed, hurrying. Maggot had the key to my part of Earth-normal ready in her hand, and as we got to the proper place—that former hotsy-blasted clearing—she paused before inserting the twig-like thing into the ground.

"I think," she said thoughtfully, "that 'Lorn' and 'Timtik' are unlikely Earth-names. So, for that matter, is 'Maggot'. We'd best call ourselves the—um—'Baker' family, if only because I like to cook. I'll be Maggie, you'll be Timothy, you'll be Susan . . ."

I looked at her, frowning deeply. Her matter-of-fact choosing of those very names almost made me think she'd been aware of her dual existence all along, but before I could ask her about it, Timtik-Timothy tugged my hand.

"You know," he whispered, grinning impishly, "You're kind

of lucky, Albert. How many guys can call their mother-in-law an old witch and get away with it?"

While I was trying to think of an answer, Maggot turned the key.

* * *

I WAS standing in my study staring at a can of beer that had popped into existence in my hand and I knew, then, that I was back at the time before Anabel's arrival, back at that moment I'd entered my home to get a beer and a sandwich. I rushed into the kitchen, and a swishing feel along my legs made me glance downward. My trousers were whole again, and neatly pressed, and I was once again in shoes and socks after that long barefoot itinerary.

"Damn," I said, setting the beer on the sink and looking out the rear window toward Susan's house. Except that no mysterious man was adjusting a tripod-thing in the back yard, the scene was exactly as it had been, so many ages ago . . .

I dropped the beer onto the sink, and was out the back door and halfway over that fence before the can could bounce twice. A lurched dash through their yard brought me to the front of the house, and I sprang to the porch and thumbed the bell, hard. In the living room, a weepy-eyed Susan jumped up from the couch, dabbed at the

corners of her eyes with a kerchief, then came to let me in.

"Albert!" she said, her face coming alive with joy at the sight of me on the doorstep. "Have you thought it over—Made up your mind?"

"Well . . ." I said, uncertainly.

She glanced behind me, and tugged at my coat.

"Hurry," she said. "The unicorn looks mean."

I went rigid up my back and across my scalp, but I did manage to turn my head and see the splendid white beast with its shaggy mane and long white spiral spike on its forehead standing out under the lamppost at the corner, its eyes like two red coals of anger. Then Susan shut the door and led me into the parlor, where the cookies and lemonade awaited us, as they always had.

"You shouldn't come out without your cloak of darkness," she said. "You know how edgy the unicorn gets in the fall; he might have skewered you." She said it with no more concern than she'd have mentioned my dashing a bit carelessly through traffic.

"Susan—" I said stupidly.

Then Maggie Baker and her son Timothy came out of the kitchen, she wiping plump hands on her pink apron, he munching a sandwich.

"Hi, Albert," he said in his froggy little voice.

"I'm so glad you came back, Albert," said Maggie, with a warm smile at me. An odd smile. "So many young men think true love is dull. Do you still think that cookies and lemonade and sitting sedately on the sofa are too lacking in adventure?"

"I think just sitting down quietly safe inside a house is one of the loveliest occupations invented by mankind."

"You always were a good boy, Albert," she said, with a satisfied sigh. She patted the top of my head, then she and Timothy wandered off upstairs.

"You know," I said, after a little thought, "some women will stop at *nothing* to get their daughters married!"

"Why, Albert!" came a sedate gasp from Susan. "Whatever in the world do you mean?"

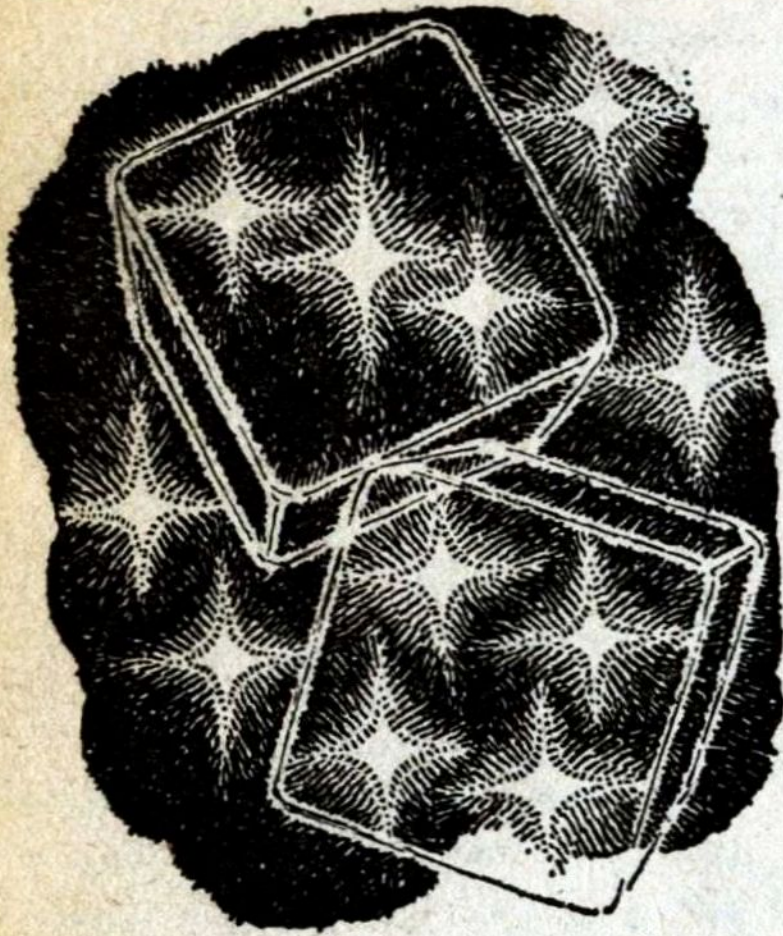
I turned my head to tell her, just in time to catch the slightest of twinkles in her eyes.

All at once, I decided the hell with protocol and pleasantries and polite behavior, and I vaulted from the number one cushion right onto the end of the number two cushion, and grabbed the girl very fiercely in my arms.

"You mustn't!" said Susan, her eyes wide and alarmed.

"So scream for help!" I growled, and kissed her.

THE END



If you are thinking of going to Las Vegas for a bit of sport, take some advice: at least wait until an arrow doesn't fall, or two and two make five. Then you may have a fighting chance to win.

IMBALANCE

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Illustrator FINLAY

THOSE peculiar happenings of last August are pretty well explained now. Among other places, they happened in that valley in the Himalayas, and up in the Amazon Basin, and in Sydney, Australia, and Perth Amboy, New Jersey, and most noticeably in Tres Aguas, Nevada. These were not all the spots where oddities turned up, but they make a representative selection. We know now that the balance of nature had gotten temporarily upset, and that the

cosmos reacted dynamically to the situation, in order to restore things to normal. It's a great relief to know that it happens, that things do return to normal. It used to be believed that if the balance of nature were disturbed, that deplorable things would happen until the world went to hell in a hand-basket. But now we know it isn't so.

We're lucky.

The picture is fairly complete. Some phenomena were typical. In a remote valley of the Himalayas,

for example, two rocks rolled downhill and came to rest near two other rocks. And then there were five. There'd been this slight disturbance of the balance of nature, and the natural law that two and two make four had slipped a cog at that particular place. Up in the Amazon Basin a Jivaro Indian shot an arrow at a bird in a tree. He missed. The arrow kept on going. Up. It went clean out of sight with no signs of slowing up. Nature being slightly off the beam, the law that says what goes up must come down wasn't working just there just then. In Sydney, Australia, a tea-shop proprietor noticed that two tea-cakes which were equal to a third teacake weren't equal to each other. And in a machine shop in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, for the duration of a coffee-break, the natural law that says every action must have a reaction of equal moment and opposite sign took a coffee-break too. There were such other events. Some people noticed them, and some didn't. But they happened.

The balance of nature was disturbed. The cosmos reacted to restore a proper relationship of forces and events. The laws of chance describe such relationships. So the cosmos tended to arrive at a new balance, in which past improbabilities of one kind were effectively balanced

off by present improbabilities of equal moment and opposite sign. Of course the cosmos also tended to operate on the principle of least action. Therefore . . .

MR. George Bedford Gaines, Insurance in All Branches, walked down the street in Tres Aguas, Nevada. The sun shone brightly on paved streets and shade-trees, on distant mountains, on the signs of divorce lawyers and gas stations and slot-machine arcades. It also shone on the Formosa and on Oswald's Club, and the court-house where divorces came off a disassembly line, and on other places where people sought happiness.

George was at once drunk with happiness and sunk in gloom. The trouble, of course, was money. True, he'd recently landed the insurance package on Tres Aguas' newest and lushest hotel, but his commission wouldn't come for weeks. The hotel was owned by a syndicate headed by one Joe the Greek, who rode around town in a large shiny car with four bodyguards. Joe the Greek could change his mind. In George's present state of mind, it seemed likely that he would.

George's bliss and concomitant gloom was due to Janet Dabney. George adored her. He'd had a rival, whom he'd been trying to flush down the drain by keeping Janet too busy to notice him.

He'd done pretty well. But keeping her busy cost money. Cash money. She'd no idea that he was being extravagant, for him, but last night he'd bared his heart and his financial status, and she'd accepted the one and dismissed the other. But George was now suffering from the knowledge that a man ought to have some money to get married on. And he didn't. He'd just come from the bank and learned that the only thing to his credit was an overdraft notice. Things looked dim. In his enthusiasm for taking Janet places he'd neglected a few trivial things like adding up his check-stubs, and contacting prospective insurers, and selling comprehensive coverage on law-suits, fires, storm-damage and other ills to which businesses are heir.

Now his neglect had caught up with him. He wasn't really a good business man. He was in love; inebriated with emotion. And that goes badly with being broke. Sooner or later he would return to solvency, but right now he'd just discovered that the small silver in his pockets was all his available wealth.

He was engaged, which was bliss, and he was broke, which was not. He gazed morbidly about him. He was then in front of the Rodeo Arcade, whose sign promised thirty-five slot-machines, no waiting. Tres Aguas

went in heavily for slot-machines, divorces, expensive nightclub acts, craps, and roulette. All were legal and George usually eschewed them all. People who live in Tres Aguas do. They know better than to indulge. But with under a dollar in silver for capital, George could hardly practice prudence. Until more cash came in he couldn't even take Janet out to a drive-in show, with a hamburger to follow.

HE flipped a quarter. It came heads. He turned into the Rodeo Arcade, where thirty-five metal contraptions posed alluringly. The point was that what he had was not enough to hoard. He could only try to run it up to—say—a frugal lunch. He wouldn't, but he could try. He regarded the slot-machines cynically, but he put a nickel in a five-cent slot, and pulled down the handle. The machine gulped the coin, rumbled in its inwards, and then was ungratefully silent.

There came a familiar, disliked voiced in his ear.

"George! What are you doing here? Let me congratulate you on getting the Joe the Greek business!"

George did not turn his head. The voice could only be that of Howard Sattlethwait, who was a competitor, a would-be rival, and the only man whose obituary he believed he'd read with genuine

pleasure. He ignored the greeting and put in a second nickel. The machine again made digestive noises. But no pay-off.

"I called Janet for a date last night," said Howard with the insensitivity of his kind. "I had a pass to the open-air concert. But her mother said she was out with you celebrating the Joe the Greek policy. That's how I heard the news. Splendid! You took Janet to the Formosa, didn't you?"

George did not nod, but it was true. The Formosa was the most expensive dining-place in Tres Aguas, with the highest-priced floor show. But he was a man in love, and even now he regretted nothing. It had been a wonderful evening!

He put a nickel in another machine, which might be more generous than the first. It gobbled the coin and rumbled within. There was no other result. Howard feigned to be struck by a dreadful suspicion.

"Look here, George," he said hypocritically over George's shoulder, "You playing a nickel slot-machine? You're not broke, are you? The Formosa." When George did not answer he said hopefully; "If you are, I can let you have some money."

George looked at him with quiet loathing. He fumbled in his pocket for his remaining capital.

"Howard," he said mildly, "if I wanted to borrow money I

could make better terms with slot-machines. They have more human feelings. More compassion. Go to hell, will you?"

Howard was not a sensitive type. He said reproachfully;

"I'm trying to be a friend to you, George! If you need money, I'll let you have it! Your note's good with me! Or if you don't want to borrow,—why—I'll buy the Joe the Greek business from you! Considering that he might change his mind, I can't offer more than twenty per cent of the commission you've got coming to you from it, but that's fair, isn't it? Nothing could be fairer, eh?"

"I can think of things," said George coldly. "My friends the slot-machines, for example. They're much more generous. Much less mercenary."

He moved away. He had no more nickels. He brought out the two quarters he had left. Howard moved quickly and put his hand over the coin-slot by which the next machine would be fed.

"You're joking," said Howard reproachfully. "No gambling device can be your friend! I'll prove it to you! I'll show you what you'd get for those quarters! If it turns out you'd lose, you'll sell me the Joe the Greek business. It's a bargain!"

BEFORE George could deny it, Howard dropped a quarter in each of two machines and pulled

down the handles. George stiffened angrily. He began to count to ten. The machines clicked and clattered. They made much more noise than the nickel machines. Howard rubbed his hands together.

"Now you'll see!" he said brightly. "You'd have lost your money and have nothing for it! Which you've agreed means you'll sell me the Joe the Greek account."

George hadn't agreed. But Howard had a gift for persistent argument and in time would probably wear him down.

The first machine stopped. Murmurings came from its chrome-plated abdomen. It rumbled. Then it belched.

Quarters cascaded into the win-cup. There was a second prolonged hiccup. More quarters descended loudly from the second machine. George gazed, stunned. Then he began to smoulder. He'd have played these machines this winning time but for Howard Sattlethwait! Howard had the jackpots he'd have acquired! His interference, as usual, was profitable to him but disastrous for George, who bitterly realized that he couldn't even punch Howard in the nose because he couldn't pay a fine and would have to wait out a week in jail.

Howard swallowed. Almost numbly, he began to gather up the coins from the machines.

"If they'd been my quarters," said George icily, "I'd own those jackpots. I wish you'd taken my advice to go to hell!"

He turned away, Howard said hastily;

"Wait a minute, George! Wait a minute! That was just an accident! It was wholly an accident! The odds were all against it! L-look! Give me those quarters of yours!" With one hand he scooped up the slot-machine loot, putting it in his pockets. He held out the other hand urgently. "Give me your quarters!"

"You've got plenty of quarters," said George coldly.

Howard felt carefully inside the win-cup for a possible stray coin. But he said agitatedly;

"We'll try the thing fairly, now! Two quarters of yours and two of mine. If you lose, the deal on the Joe the Greek business goes through. I want to help you, George!" He stuffed his pockets and said pleadingly, "I'm trying to prove to you that serious business is more sensible than gambling. Give me your quarters!"

He reached out and took George's last two coins from his hand. He popped the quarters into four fresh machines, saying quickly;

"This - is - my - quarter - and this - is - yours. This - is - my - quarter - and - this - one - is - yours—."

He pulled down the levers. The

machines rumbled and clicked. One stopped. The others ran on. Another stopped. Two ran on. The first ground out a loud noise and poured quarters down into the win-cup.

The second poured down quarters.

The third and fourth disgorged their jackpots.

GEORGE laughed with real pleasure. A part of it, of course, was getting a double pocketful of quarters. But it was even more pleasing to see the shocked and haunted expression on Howard's face. George said almost genially;

"Howard, you have genius! You should plod at your art. You will go far!"

But he fenced off two win-cups and took their contents for his own. Howard said painfully;

"It was—an accident."

"But a happy one," said George amiably. "There are such things as streaks of luck, Howard. How about a continued joint investment in it? This brief commercial association has been pleasant."

Howard did not even consider it. He said anxiously, "I don't gamble. It's mathematically impossible to win. But if you'll sell me the Joe the Greek account I'll give you thirty per cent of your commission. In cash. Now."

"Through your talent," said

George kindly, "I am no longer in straightened circumstances. I might even turn entrepreneur! How about shooting a few quarters for me, then? I'll put up the capital and give you thirty per cent of the wins."

Howard automatically shook his head. But then he realized that it was a mistake. He'd risk nothing, and George might be seized with the gambling fever and go broke again, when the Joe the Greek matter could be brought up once more on a twenty per cent basis.

"I don't believe in that sort of thing," Howard protested. "But as an accommodation to you. . . . You said thirty per cent?"

George handed him a quarter and pointed to the machine just beyond the ones that had lately paid off. Howard put in the coin. He pulled the lever. In moments his ears were stunned by the crash of coins.

"My thirty per cent," he said hurriedly.

"To be sure," said George, nodding. "Carry on!"

Howard played four more of George's quarters in four fresh machines, farther back in the arcade. Four jackpots. George's expression grew interested. He handed over more quarters still. Howard mopped sweat off his forehead. He moved unwillingly to more machines. They paid off. Howard computed his thirty per

cent. But he suffered. He was no gambler.

Presently only the half-dollar machines had not yielded their visible jackpots. George said gently; "Wait here, Howard." He visited the change-booth and came back with suitable coins. On the first half-dollar machine, Howard did not win the jackpot. He collected only fifteen silver half-dollars for one.

"Howard!" said George reproachfully. "You're getting careless!"

But the next machine paid in full. And the next and next and next. George politely borrowed a basket from the change-booth. He needed it. By the time the half-dollar machines were finished, he leaned heavily to starboard from the weight of the coins the reluctant Howard had won. The basket was nearly full.

The dollar machines filled it.

Looking back, it was evident that some great principle of nature was at work, but people are unobservant. Few make a conscious distinction between things that are philosophically necessary and those that are merely likely to happen. When George led Howard Sattlethwait gently by the arm out of the Rodeo Arcade, a trail of awed persons followed. There hadn't been many people in that first emporium of chance, but they all wanted to see what happened next.

GEORGE led Howard to a second arcade. Howard put money into slot-machines. He hit jackpots. Each time his expression grew more unhappy. He was actually pale. He was experiencing the complete negation of every rule of cause and effect, of common sense and conservative business practice, on which his life had heretofore been based. He couldn't believe it. But there was a perfectly simple explanation, if he'd only realized it.

The balance of nature had gotten slightly off-center, so it was necessary for things to get back to normal. It was not only reasonable for events and forces to return to a state of proper, dynamic equilibrium; it was necessary. There was a philosophical necessity for improbabilities of one kind to be cancelled by improbabilities of another. And there is nothing much less likely than that slot-machines will pay off through a run of bets. But it had to happen for the cosmos to become normal again.

They went into a third slot-machine arcade. And a fourth and fifth. An eighth and ninth. An eleventh. These were all the arcades within easy walking distance of the Rodeo, where this special series of events had begun. George whistled cheerily as he helped Howard out of the last of them.

"Look at all these people!"

protested Howard. He shuddered. "I think I'm going crazy! I want my thirty per cent! You promised thirty per cent! I've won a lot for you! I want my thirty per cent!"

"And you shall have it, Howard," George told him soothingly. "More than that, I'm going to buy you a nourishing lunch. Don't strain your mind with arithmetic just now. Don't disturb its delicate unbalance. I called up Janet, by the way, and she'll be joining us at lunch."

"Thirty—per cent!" whimpered Howard. "It's mine! I want it!"

He was practically a broken man. His collar was wilted and his eyeglasses misted. He stumbled as he walked. It was simply impossible for him to gamble. He was of that sturdy, conservative group of people who play only sure things, and purchase only gilt-edged securities, and find happiness in the clipping of coupons and the foreclosing of mortgages.

SOME twelve hundred interested citizens followed George and Howard to where the Formosa awed tourists in Tres Aguas by charging more for a sandwich than the average luxury hotel did for a five-course dinner. The police cleared a way for them so they could enter.

There was a vestibule inside

the Formosa's door. This being Tres Aguas, there was naturally a slot-machine in it. Howard looked at it, hypnotized. George gave him a large coin and said tenderly, "All right, Howard. If you must."

Howard played it, fumbling. It was a dollar machine. It had a jackpot. Dollar machines always make a loud noise when they pay off a jackpot. This one made a louder noise than most.

George practically had to support Howard to a table. Howard moved like a sleepwalker. His hands were clammy and cold. His eyes were wild behind their spectacles. He sat down, seeing nothing, but saying insistently;

"My thirty per cent—"

There was a movement opposite him. Janet sat there, beaming. She'd been waiting for them.

"Howard!" she said enthusiastically. "George called me and told me what you're doing! It's wonderful! How do you do it?"

Howard looked at her through partly glazed eyes.

"It's—impossible," he said numbly. "Impossible! I don't believe it! But I'm getting thirty per cent."

"Here's the morning's take, Janet," said George cheerfully. "All due to Howard's brilliant efforts. Cut it up, will you? Then maybe Howard won't need to count it all for himself."

Janet zestfully counted the



Virgil
Finlay

folding money. Howard watched anxiously. At the end she gave him his thirty per cent.

"But there was the slot-machine in the vestibule," he wailed.

"To be sure!" said George, abashed. "Sorry, Howard."

He stacked up the silver dollars. He gave George thirty per cent. The waiter came. George ordered exuberantly. This lunch was in a way a celebration of his sudden and unexpected return to solvency. But Howard suffered. He'd seen the menu. He'd have liked to suggest a ham sandwich for himself and the rest in cash. But Janet regarded him with excited, even fond eyes.

"It's wonderful, Howard! You're going to go on, aren't you? Keep on after lunch? May I come along and watch?"

Howard shivered a little. But he struggled back toward sanity. He'd seen the thick mass of folding money Janet had put in her handbag. The sight of so much money going away from him was sobering. Stabilizing. Shocking. He realized that he had made unnecessary concessions to George.

"I do not gamble," he said with dignity. I have not gambled. I will not gamble. As a favor to George I was willing to act as his agent in a certain matter—on commission. But I will not violate my business principles by gambling. And I have other affairs to attend to. If I am

to postpone them, from now on I will want the Joe the Greek account and forty percent."

George did not look surprised, but he raised his eyebrows. Janet tapped his arm, "Darling, let me haggle!"

She smiled warmly and persuasively upon Howard.

NATURE, of course, continued to move to restore itself to normal. The dynamic equilibrium of events and forces cannot be permanently destroyed, as was formerly believed. The events in the Himalayas and the Amazon basin and Sydney, Australia, and Perth Amboy—and other places—which were indications of disturbance had all taken place within hours on the same morning. There were undoubtedly other events of the same general character which did not happen to be observed. But the events in Tres Aguas, Nevada, relieved much of the strain. When a person like George Gaines made more money than Howard out of a joint enterprise, little things like two and two visibly making five and things going up and not coming down were practically commonplace. Anyhow a great deal of the stress caused by a disturbance of the balance of nature was already relieved.

There were other, lesser events at divers locations to help in the

adjustment. In Smolensk a married man told his wife that she cooked better than his mother had ever done. In Tucson a woman found a blonde hair on her husband's coat—she being a brunette—and immediately remembered that he'd met his sister at the airport and his sister was a blonde. In Philadelphia a sixteen-year-old boy listened to his father's explanation of why he shouldn't drive the family car, and realized that his father was right. In Punta Arenas and on Maioa in the Caroline Islands and other spots here and there on this earth, other impossible things took place. The stress was definitely being relieved.

But in the Formosa, over a dessert that Howard knew stood George four dollars and fifty cents per portion, Janet wrote in a note-book the stipulations of a new agreement with George. George signed it. Howard signed it. Howard considered that he'd driven a hard bargain. He didn't realize that he'd bargained with a woman. Janet closed the note-book.

"I've always wanted to play roulette." She said brightly.

"Let's let Howard do it," said George. "And to give him an unhindered opportunity, let's go to Oswald's."

Oswald's Club is, of course, the most famous of the conservative business establishments in Tres

Aguas. The drinks are generous and the bets range from a quarter up and there are some girl dealers and some very well-dressed shills. It is, naturally, completely respectable. Oswald contributes to public charities and has never been caught by the Internal Revenue Service. He is a great man. Oswald's Club is more than a business. It is an institution.

WHEN they reached Oswald's club, it was soon after midday and attendance was low. Most of those who'd been gambling during the forenoon were down at the telegraph office waiting for the money they'd telegraphed home for. There were roulette tables and crap-tables and black-jack setups. But business was dull. George led Howard to a roulette table where a single shill talked boredly to the croupier. Howard sat down uneasily. He looked pleadingly up at George. He had something close to stagefright. He wasn't used to gambling.

"Use your own judgment, Howard," said George kindly. "Such as it is."

He handed Howard a dollar. Howard put it down, numbly. The shill bet a dollar on the first dozen. The croupier spun the wheel.

He paid Howard, indifferently, thirty-five dollars for a bet on

number eighteen. Janet took the money and made a memo. George passed down a ten-dollar bill. Howard numbly placed it on a number. The croupier spun the wheel.

He paid Howard thirty-five to one. Janet took the money and made a memorandum. She was inclined to cheer.

When George placed another bill in his fingers, Howard put it down—it was a twenty—with the fumbling motions of someone partly anaesthetized. He did not make a conscious choice. He merely happened to put it down on zero.

The croupier paid him thirty-five to one.

Oswald's Club, as noted, was nearly empty. It was a large place, so even when sparsely occupied it could and did contain people from East Orange and Denver and Amarillo and Puget Sound. There was a honeymoon couple from Chicago and a fugitive bank-clerk from Fort Lauderdale, and a lovely old couple celebrating fifty years of married life. The atmosphere had been humdrum. Most of those present were hoping to see somebody gamble.

They realized their wish. When Howard won a limit bet on a single number, he had admirers. By some strange telepathy it seemed that the crowd hanging around outside the Formosa

scented the activity in Oswald's. They began to stream in. When Howard made his fifth straight win at the limit, he began to have imitators. The odds against a win on a single number at roulette with double zeros are thirty-six to one. The bank paid thirty-five. The odds against two successive wins are 1296 to one. Against three successive wins they are 46,656 to one. Beyond this point they get interesting.

When Howard, quite glassy-eyed, planked down a limit bet on number 27, things had gone a long way. A plumber from Amarillo and a druggist from East Orange and a bride from Chicago and an old lady from Natchez fought with each other to put down their money on the same number, and the third dozen, and on odd, and on the color matching George's choice.

The croupier paid.

The tumult and the shouting rose. As if by magic, Oswald's Club had filled to the gunwales and excess customers were forming double lines outside the door. The fugitive bank-clerk from Fort Lauderdale discovered that he could be an honest man again and burst into tears. Howard moved like a zombie, because each win cut him to the heart. If he'd had the nerve to gamble for himself, he'd be getting all this money. But he didn't. Dry-throated, he didn't notice when the golden-

wedding bridegroom began a fist-fight with a prominent club-woman of Teaneck over who had bet what on which square of the roulette layout.

Then the croupier said with an appalled air, "I'm sorry, but I'll have to get more cash."

TRADITIONALLY but not technically this was the breaking of the bank. It was a feat of which gamblers day-dream. But it was nothing close to Howard's heart. He trembled. He was on the thin edge of hysteria from the complex anguish of being unable to stop betting—because he was getting money out of it—while even more money was going from his wins to George. Yet he couldn't gamble otherwise. He was congenitally unable to take a chance. While they waited for more money to be brought—

"Come, Howard," said George sympathetically. "You're overwrought. I'll buy you a drink while they get some more money for us!"

"Howard!" said Janet beatifically.

Howard blubbered. An enthusiastic populace regarded him as George supported him to a bar and threw a double Scotch into him. But Howard looked very strange. George was concerned.

"Do you want to stop now, Howard?" he asked. "It must be quite a strain!"

They were the center of many eyes. Howard said thickly, "How much money have I got now!"

Janet computed and told him. Howard licked his lips. His frustration boiled over. George had gained much, much more. From his achievements!

"I want a bigger commission!" he protested bitterly. "I've got to have a better percentage! I won't work without a better deal!"

There was an intrusion. A short, plump man wearing a two-hundred-dollar suit said in a suave voice;

"What's this? Who's talking percentages?"

George looked down into the craggy features of the gentleman known as Joe the Greek. His four bodyguards, wearing professionally impassive expressions, crowded old ladies and honeymoon couples out of the way to stand protectively about their employer. George knew Joe the Greek. He'd negotiated a comprehensive coverage insurance policy on his syndicate's hotel, undertaking to reimburse the syndicate for just about anything that could happen to a hostelry, including athlete's foot in the swimming-pool.

"Ah!" said George. "How do you do?" Then he said pleasantly to Howard. "Howard, this is my friend Joe the Greek. He wants to congratulate you on your run of luck."

Howard tensed, like a war-horse scenting battle from afar. He was a business man in a sense George would never accomplish. In the presence of a present or past prospective customer for insurance, he was a new man. He gave Joe the Greek a sincere smile and a warm handclasp, somewhat marred by wildly disheveled hair and a wilted collar and spectacles that were on crooked. He beamed. Then he explained volubly that he'd hoped to write the fire, theft, public liability, storm, lightning, and disaster insurance on Joe the Greek's syndicate's new hotel, but that he'd never been able to arrange an interview. He hoped some day—

"Yeah?" said Joe the Greek. "But what's this about percentages? You've been having quite a run of luck, they tell me."

George babbled. He wiped his glasses. A customer always had charms to sooth his savage breast though sometimes it was the customer's breast which was savage when all was over. Howard somehow stridently explained his deal with George. He wished to enlist Joe the Greek's sympathy, because Joe the Greek was a rich man and could throw insurance business his way. Joe the Greek blinked rapidly.

"You mean," he demanded, "you can't gamble for yourself and you got to have a backer?"

"I don't gamble," said Howard desperately. "I—I can't! It's against my principles! But I ought to get a better percentage!"

Joe the Greek let out a quick breath. Then he said suavely, "You got a written contract with anybody?" At Howard's expression he looked at George and said without moving his lips; "Give, guy! That contract!" Janet looked at George's face. He looked only mildly concerned. She plucked a memo from her handbag. She gave it to George. He handed it to Joe the Greek. Joe the Greek tore it up without reading it. George said regretfully;

"I've been urging Howard to stop. He's getting upset."

"I'll take care of that," said Joe the Greek. "Boys—" This was to his bodyguards, "look after my friend here. Help him back to the table. I'll look after his percentage!"

Howard said urgently, "—And I'd like to show you how you can save money on that comprehensive coverage if you cancel and deal through me . . ."

JOE the Greek made a gesture. Howard moved toward the roulette table, only apparently on his own legs.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk!" said George. Then he said, "We've got some money belonging to him, but I

think we'd better settle up privately and later on."

Janet said firmly, "He insisted on a written agreement, remember? I've still got it. Joe the Greek tore up a list of people to be invited to a wedding. And Howard agreed, in writing, to work only for you or forfeit all claims on you. And I've got the money! You try to take it away from me!"

George pushed through the mob and got Janet out of Oswald's. When they were in a taxi he said, "How am I going to get my hands on that money? Guess I'll have to marry you for it."

"You will, darling," said Janet happily. "You will!"

And George immediately became unable to think clearly or observe with precision or to see the cosmos as it actually was. In strict accuracy, there was nothing in the least abnormal about the cosmos now. Within the past few minutes it had settled down with the balance of nature neatly and it is to be hoped permanently restored. But George didn't notice. He was inebriated with emotion. He even forgot Howard.

Which was as well. Howard won one limit bet to be divided between himself and Joe the Greek as Joe the Greek should decide. Then he proceeded to run up the longest sequence of unbroken losses in the history of Oswald's Club, the Rodeo Arcade,

or any other temple of chance in Tres Agua. He beat all the records. All of them. Joe the Greek staked him for a long time, because he didn't believe that anybody's luck could change so suddenly and so much. Howard couldn't believe it either. When Joe the Greek and his bodyguard wrathfully withdrew, Howard went on. Even with his own money—at least the money which was thirty per cent of what he'd won before lunch at the Formosa. He suffered intensely. But he proved even to himself that it was foolish to gamble. At the end, he burst into tears.

But Howard was only part of the proof that all was adjusted again. In a remote valley of the Andes, two rocks rolled downhill and came to rest near two other rocks. And then there were four. The old rule that two and two make four was working again. A small boy in Muscogee, Oklahoma, drew a careful bead on a sparrow with his sling-shot. He let go. He missed. The pebble sped on by, rose in a graceful parabolic curve, and moved onward and downward together. It smashed a window in a public-school building. The natural law that what goes up must come down was again in force. In the complex mechanism which is this world, everything was working normally.

We're lucky.

THE END

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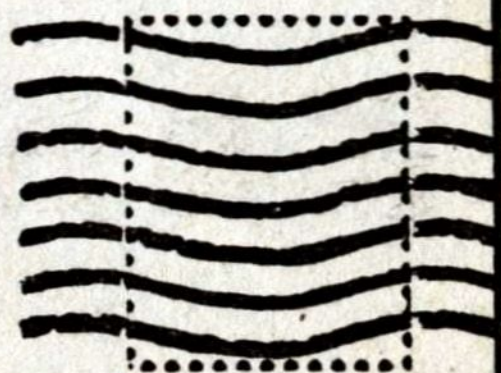
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According to you...

Dear Editor:

Congratulations on another good issue of a good magazine.

Two newcomers, Correll and LeGuin, came through very well. Get more by both. Ron Goulart did a very good story on voodooism. Glad to see him in your pages.

Robert Young has been in your pages for four straight issues and I see that October will be number five. His novelets outdo his shorts especially the one in this issue. "Plane Jane" was a really good story. I always liked parallel world stories and dimensional stories and this satisfied my tastes.

Classic Reprints: The FANTASTIC ones are better than the AMAZING ones, always classics.

Your answer to Bob Adolfsen's letter doesn't really answer his question about Bunch. Why couldn't Bretnor's full name be D some thing Reginald Bretnor? That's D.R.B. also.

I wish you would print more stories like "Point" and "Planet of Dread." Not all the time but one every few issues. It livens up the magazine.

Your two serials this year were both good. Have more good ones more frequently.

Dick Hinman

177 Shawsheen Road
Andover, Mass.

● *Once and for all, Bunch is not Bretnor, nor is Bretnor Bunch. Now can we all knock off for lunch?*

Dear Ed:

The August issue of FANTASTIC is the best you have published so far this year. It has been some time since I have written a letter to Z-D, but with the coming of this issue I feel that I must.

The cover was really splendid. Kramer has a three-dimensional quality to his work which is reminiscent of Bok. George Barr's

cover, on the April issue also reminds me of Bok. Which is, coming from me, not only high praise for these two artists, but a rather unsubtle way of saying—how about something from Bok? (Who is not only one of the greatest of all Fantastic illustrators, but also a top-notch Fantasy Author.)

But then, all of your covers from the April issue on have been remarkably good.

"Sword of Flowers" is, to start with, the only story by Larry M. Harris which I have found worth reading—his other works have mainly been ridiculous trash. This story, however, was excellent fantasy, one of the better stories published in FANTASTIC recently.

"Behind the Door" by Jack Sharkey, was splendid weird-horror Fantasy. By all means let's have more like it.

"The Minah Matter"—typical humorous fantasy, good of its kind. "And A Tooth" was good, but could have been a great deal better. "A Devil of A Day" was top-notch Porges. His work is of a consistently high quality. Keep it up.

Albert Teichner is an author of whom I am becoming very fond. The first story of his that I read, "This Is Your Death," impressed me with its brilliance and

originality, as well as its superb writing and characterization. It was easily—*very* easily—the best story in the Janish. "The Thinking Disease" was slightly more commonplace, but was still considerably above the average. "Continuity" is the least of his works so far. However, this story has the same vividness of presentation and brilliantly real delineation of character that marked "This Is Your Death." I hope to see more of this author.

"Horseman" was a minor piece of rhetoric, written mainly to confuse. It looks to be the kind of allegory that superliterate teen-agers write as an attention-getting device.

Robert F. Young's "Victim Of the Year," coming so soon on the heels of his "A Drink Of Darkness" is really astonishing. Following up one of the finest serious Fantasies I have ever read with an excellent humorous Fantasy in the UNKNOWN tradition—well, don't ever let him get away. Let's have more Fantasy from this fine writer—serious style preferred.

Paul Zimmer

R.D. #1

East Greenbush, N.Y.

● *You'll be glad to know we have more Kramer covers, Young stories, Sharkey stories and Teichner stories coming up.*



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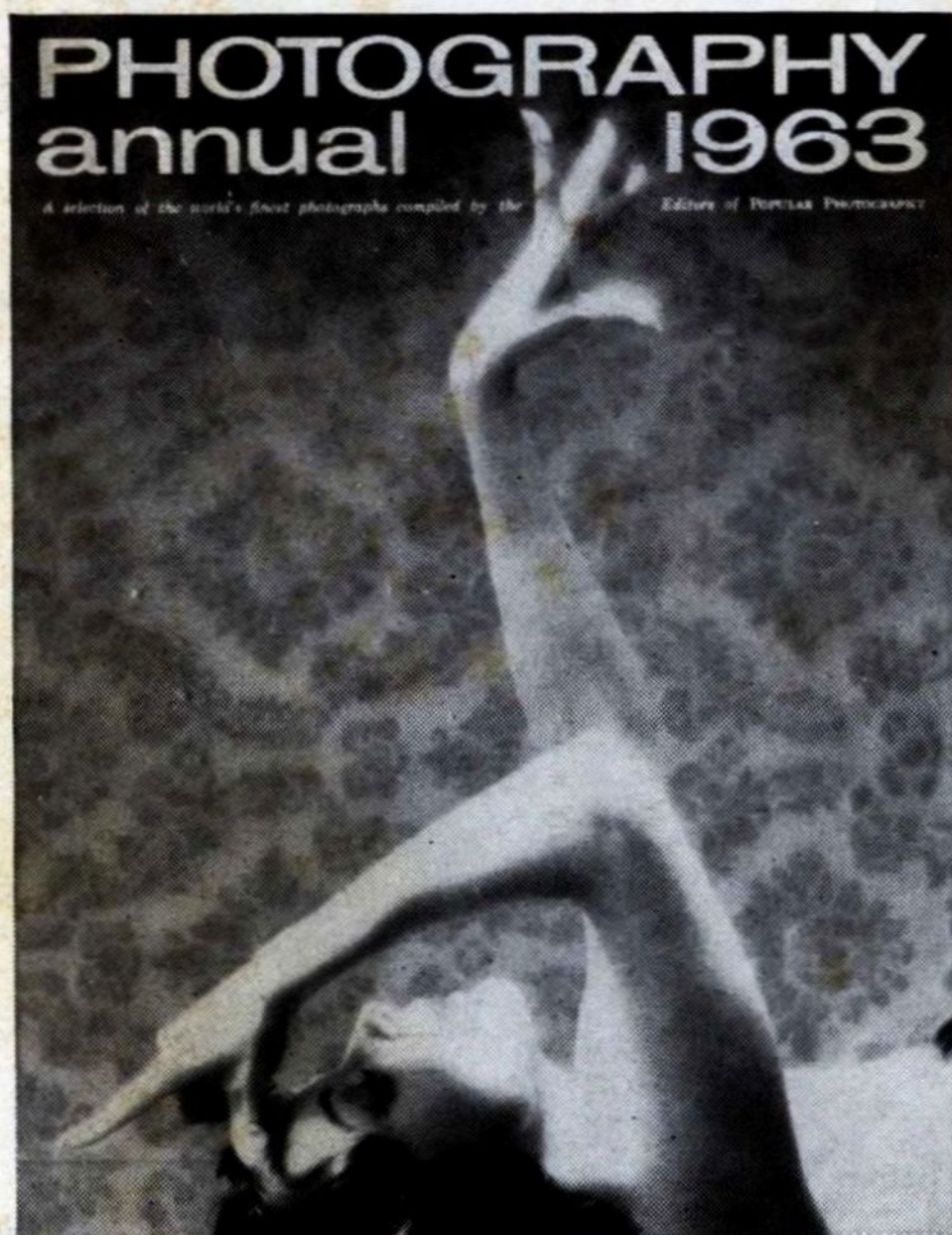
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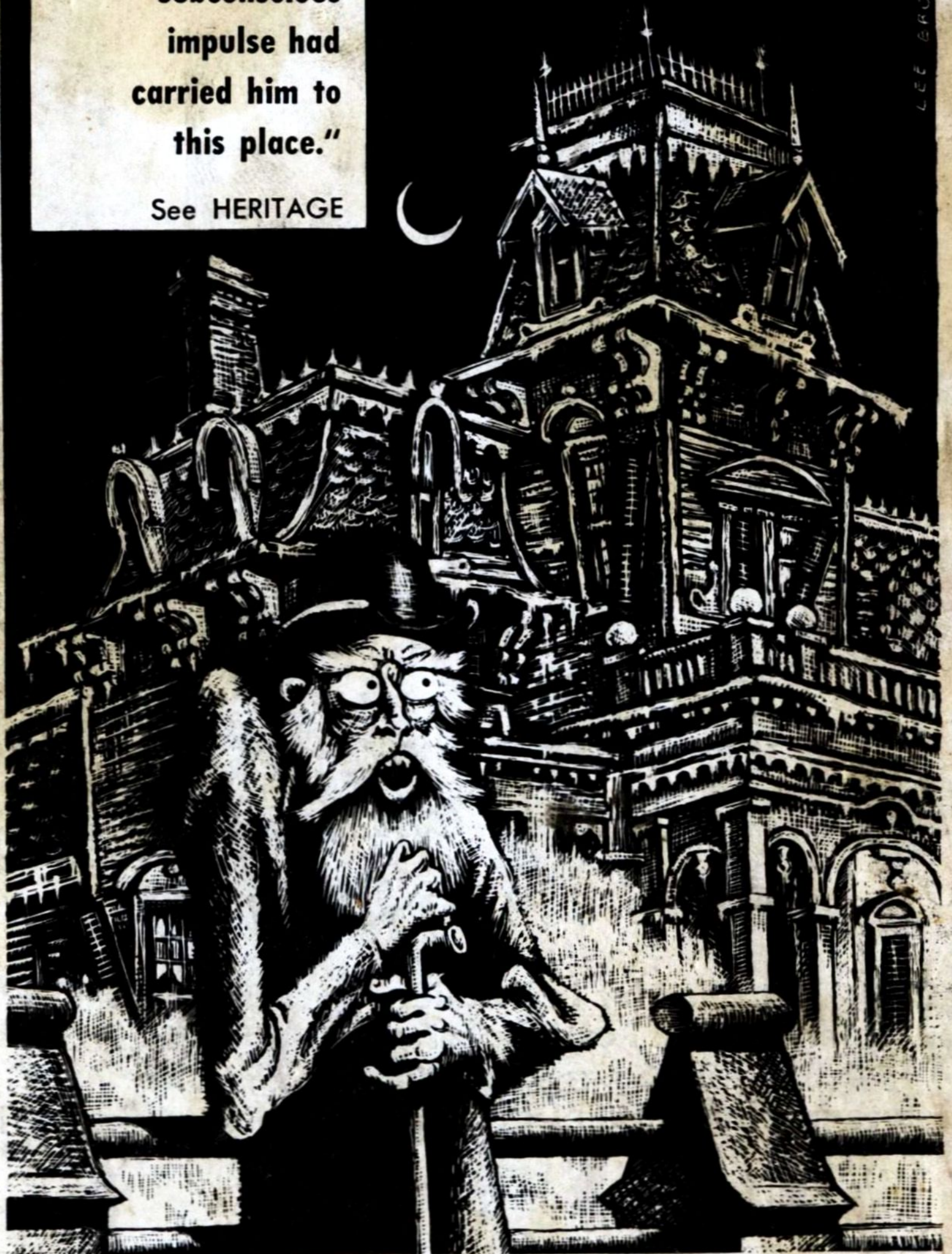
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