

KEITH LAUMER'S NEW NOVEL: *Axe and Dragon*

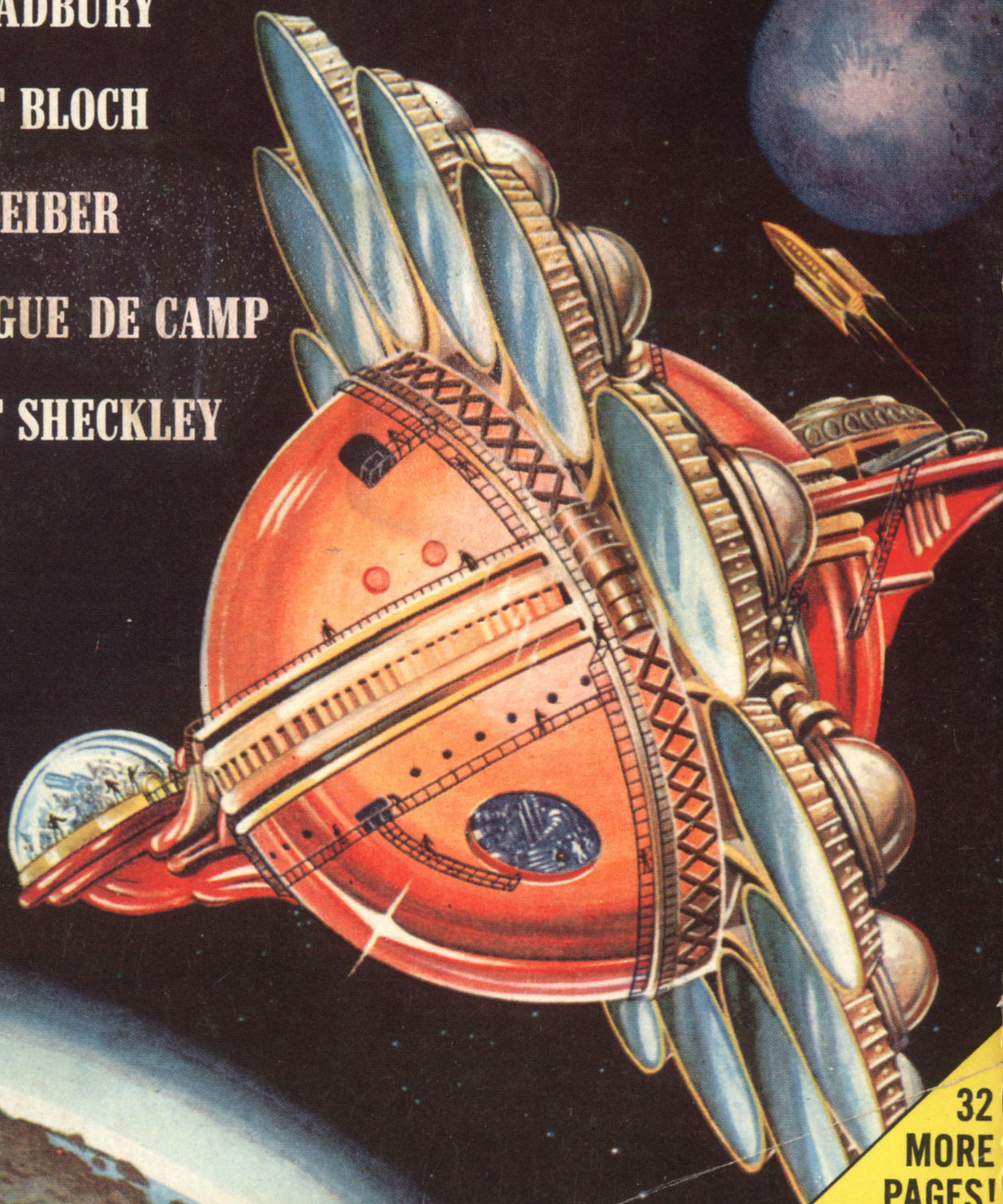
SCIENCE FICTION • FANTASY

FANTASTIC

NOVEMBER, 1965
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FANTASTIC

SCIENCE FICTION • FANTASY

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EDITORIAL

WHEN the contents of the September *Fantastic* were being chosen, frankly we were aiming for a "test" issue, a selection of stories varied enough to appeal to the wide range of readers we know is still out there, stories good enough to stack up against the quality science fiction and fantasy that drew you to the field in the first place. With so broad a base, naturally, we half-expected that some of you would like this, others carp at that, and a few maybe even pan the other. But the startling—and gratifying—fact is that shortly after the first issue of the new *Fantastic* reached the stands, we began receiving a flood of excited letters praising this, that *and* the other—from the Paul cover to the extra 32 pages to the stories themselves. Apparently you agree that quantity, variety and quality do make for a magazine that everyone can enjoy.

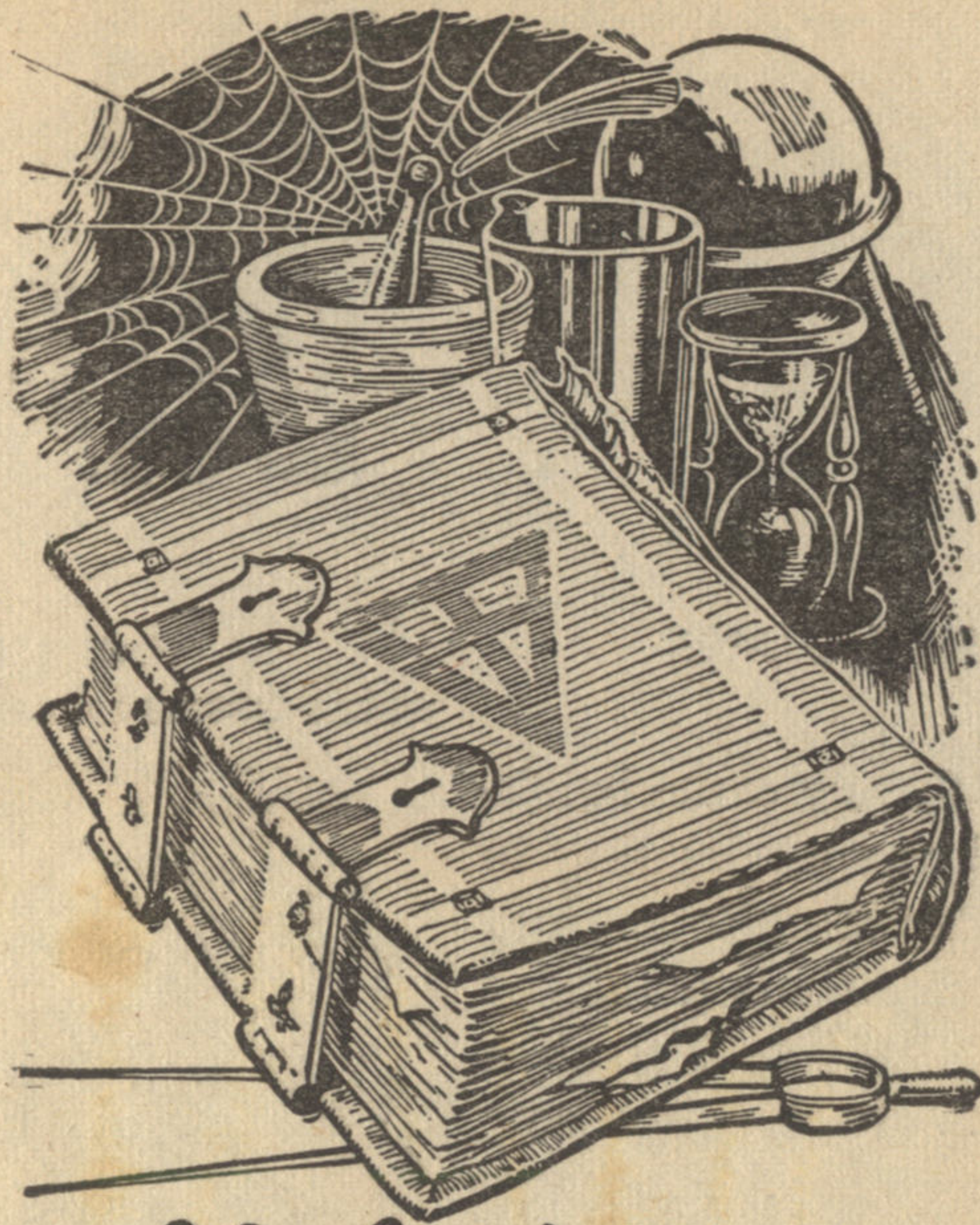
Probably your most typical reactions went something like this: "I've just finished reading the first issue of the new *Fantastic*, and it's a vast improvement . . . I actually enjoyed every story in it." (From Karl Wagner of Knoxville, Tenn.) And (from R. Benyo of Jim Thorpe, Pa.): "One thing wrong with this is-

sue: too many masters, thereby making it very hard to find anything to complain about."

In answer to that last comment, we all know that name writers don't always come up with superb stories. They do have their off days—less often than less talented writers—but when they do, you won't be seeing them in *Fantastic*—because what we're looking for is top writers in top form, stories so entertaining that all of us (including your editor, who after all is simply your first reader) will have nothing "to complain about."

As evidence of that, look at the varied line-up in this issue. It starts off with a rollicking *new* novel by Keith Laumer, who is rapidly becoming one of the most prolific and skillful writers in the field. Then there's Fritz Leiber, so versatile that he can go from the splendor of "Stardock" to the horror of "I'm Looking for Jeff." If you still thirst for more heroic fantasy, however, turn to L. Sprague de Camp's sprightly "Eye of Tandyla," which brilliantly demonstrates his mastery of the form. You'll also find Bradbury in fine form with "Tomorrow and Tomorrow"—so poignant it may surprise you

Continued on page 132



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entrusted
to a
few

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THERE are some things that cannot be generally told — *things you ought to know*. Great truths are dangerous to some — but factors for *personal power* and *accomplishment* in the hands of those who understand them. Behind the tales of the miracles and mysteries of the ancients, lie centuries of their secret probing into nature's laws — their amazing discoveries of *the hidden processes of man's mind*, and *the mastery of life's problems*. Once shrouded in mystery to avoid their destruction by mass fear and ignorance, these facts remain a useful heritage for the thousands of men and women who privately use them in their homes today.

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AXE AND DRAGON

By KEITH LAUMER

First of Three Parts

Lafayette O'Leary came briskly up the cracked walk leading to Mrs. MacGlint's Clean Rooms and Board, reflecting on his plans for the evening: First, he'd grab a quick bite, then check to see how his plastics experiment was coming along; after that, a look in on his *penicillium notatum* NRRL 1249.B21 culture, and then. . . . He hefted the weighty book under his arm. Professor Doktor Hans Joseph Schimmerkopf's book on Mesmerism ought to be good for at least a week of evenings.

As O'Leary put foot on the sagging verandah, the front screen popped wide. A square figure five feet eleven in height confronted him, arms like pale inner tubes propped on door-filling hips, a heavy-duty broom held like a weapon at port arms.

"Mr. O'Leary! What's that mess you've got percolating on my hot-plate back in my third best western exposure?"

Lafayette retreated a step.



"Did I leave my polymers cooking, Mrs. MacGlint? I thought I turned them off—"

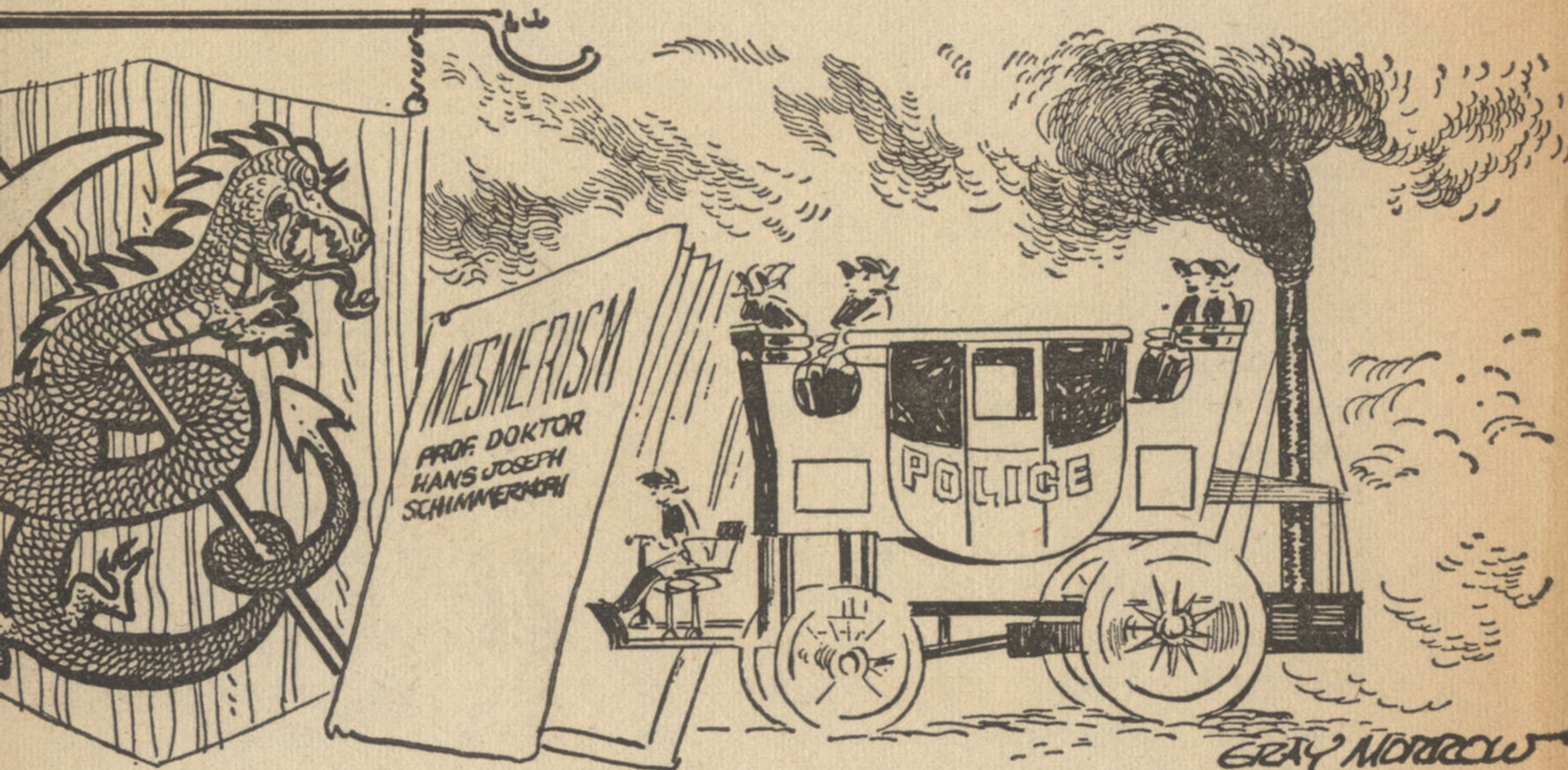
"Them fumes has faded the colors right out of the wallpaper! Not to say nothing about running up the electric bill! Last month it was \$4.62 higher than what it ought to of been! That'll be on your bill, Mr. O'Leary!"

"But—"

"And all this reading at night!"

The talented and prolific author of Worlds of the Imperium, A Trace of Memory, and The Other Side of Time now gives us a fast-paced, action-packed novel about the adventures of young Lafayette O'Leary— orphan, draftsman, dabbler—who unwisely decided to try the Schimmerkopf Method for releasing Psychic Energies and found himself transported a long way from quiet little Colby Corners to the incredible and wacky land of Artesia—where cars are driven by steam and where wine bottles never run dry—if your name happens to be O'Leary, that is.

ILLUSTRATED BY MORROW



Burning light bulbs up like they was free! My other boarders don't set up all hours, studying Lord knows what in them unchristian books you got such a taste for!" She eyed the volume under O'Leary's arm with unmistakable hostility.

"Say, Mrs. MacGlint." O'Leary edged back up on the porch. "A funny thing happened last night. I was running a little statistical

study, using ball bearings, and I happened to drop a couple of them—three-quarter-inchers—and they all rolled right to the northwest corner of the room—"

"Prob'ly marked up my linoleum, too! And—"

"I knew the floors slanted, but I hadn't noticed how much," Lafayette gained another foot. "So I made a few measurements. I'd say there's a two-inch discrepan-

cy from wall to wall. I knew you'd want to know, because Section Four, Article 19 of the Building Code—that's the part that covers Hazardous Conditions Due to Settlement of Foundations—is pretty clear on procedure. Now, the Inspector will have to check it, of course, and after the house is condemned and the roomers find other quarters, then maybe they can save the place by pumping in concrete; that's pretty expensive, but it's better than breaking the law, eh, Mrs. Mac-Glint?"

"Law?" the landlady's voice emerged as a squeak. "Building Code? Why, I never heard such nonsense. . . ."

"Do you want to report it, or shall I? I know you're awfully busy, keeping everybody's affairs in order, so. . . ."

"Now, Mr. O'Leary, don't go to no trouble. . . ." Mrs. Mac-Glint backed through the door; Lafayette followed into the gloom and cabbage-aroma of the hall. "I know you got your science work you want to get to, so I won't keep you. . . ." She turned and puffed off along the hall, ponderous as a switching engine. O'Leary let out a long breath and headed up the stairs.

The shelf behind the curtain in the former broom closet which served Lafayette as kitchen alcove supported a two-pound tin of salt-water taffy, a cardboard salt-

shaker, a ketchup bottle, a can of soup, and two tins of preserved fish. He didn't really like sardines, he confessed to himself, unwrapping a succulent taffy. Too bad they didn't can *consomme au beurre blanc Hermitage*, or *les huitres Whitstable*. Tend-R Nood-L Soup would have to do. He started a sauce pan warming, took a beer from the foot-square icebox, punched a triangular hole in the lid. Warm froth boiled out; a twenty-five pound block of ice didn't last long in August. He finished off the candy, then the beer, waiting for the pot to boil, then set out a bowl, poured the soup, put two sardines on a cracker. Munching, he picked up the book he had acquired at the library on the way home from the foundry. It was a thick, dusty volume, bound in faded dark blue leather, the cramped gilt letters on the spine almost illegible. He blew dust away, opened it with care; the old binding crackled. The title page announced:

Mesmerism. Its Proper Study and Practice; or The Secrets of the Ancients Unlocked.

By Herr Professor Doktor Hans Joseph Schimmerkopf, D.D., Ph.D., Litt. D., M. A., B. Sc., Associate Professor of Mental Sciences and Natural Philosophy, Homeopathic Institute of Vienna. 1888.

O'Leary riffled through the tissue-thin pages covered with fine

print; pretty dry stuff, really. Still, it was the only book on hypnotism in the library that he hadn't already read—and what else was there to do? O'Leary looked out the narrow window at the sad late-afternoon light, yellowing into evening. He could go out and buy a newspaper; he might take a stroll around the block if he felt like it. He could stop by the Elite Bar and Grill and have a cold beer, even. There were any number of ways a young, healthy, penniless draftsman in a town like Colby Corners could spend an evening in the sunshine of his happy youth. If he weren't trying to save enough to finance that last year at the local college, it might be different. . . .

There was a rattle of knuckles at the door; it opened and a narrow-faced man with thin hair and a toothbrush mustache slid into the room.

"Hi, Laff, howza boy?" The newcomer rubbed knuckly hands together. He wore a purple shirt and white suspenders supporting trousers cut high above bony hips.

"Hello, Spender," O'Leary greeted him without enthusiasm.

"Say, Laff, you couldn't slip me five until Tuesday?"

O'Leary shook his head.

"Two, maybe?"

"I'm busted, Spender. Besides which, you owe me five."

"Hey, what's the book?" Spender edged in beside him, poked at the pages. "When do you get time to read all this stuff? Pretty deep, huh? You're a funny guy: always like studying."

"This is a racy one," O'Leary said. "The press it was printed on was smashed with crowbars by a crowd of aroused peasants. Then they ran the author down and gave him the full werewolf treatment—silver bullet, stake through the heart—the works."

"Wow!" Spender recoiled. "You studying to be a werewolf, O'Leary?"

"No, I'm more interested in the vampire angle. That's the one where you turn into a bat—"

"Look, Laff, that ain't funny. You know I'm kind of like superstitious. You shouldn't ought to read them books."

O'Leary looked at the other speculatively. "What I need now is some practical experience—"

"Yeah, well, I'll see you, boy." Spender backed, eased through the door.

O'Leary finished up his repast, rinsed out the pan and soup bowl, then stretched out on the unevenly-sprung bed. The water stains on the ceiling hadn't changed since yesterday, he noted. The opalescent globe shielding the 60 watt bulb dangling on its kinked cord still contained the same number of dead

flies. The Oleander bush still scraped restlessly on the screen

.....

He picked up Schimmerkopf's book from the bedside table, flipped it open at random, skimmed the print-packed pages. The sections on Mesmerism were routine stuff, O'Leary noted; but a passage on autohypnosis caught his eye:

... this state may readily be induced by the adept practitioner of the art of Mesmeric influence, or of hypnotism, as it is latterly termed, requiring only a schooled effort of Will, supported by a concentration of Psychical Energies. Mastery of this Force not only offers instantaneous relief from sleeplessness, night sweats, poor memory, sour bile, high chest, salivation, inner conflict, and other ills both of the flesh and of the spirit, but offers as well a veritable treasure-house of rich sensation; for it is a commonplace of the auto-mesmerist's art that such scenes of remembered or imagined Delight as must be most highly esteemed by persons sensible of the lamentable drabness of Modern Life can in this fashion be evoked most freely for the delectation and adornment of the idle hour.

This phenomenon may be likened to the hypnogogic state, that condition of semi-awareness sometimes achieved by a sleeping person who, partially awakened, is capable of perceiving dream-state images, whilst at the same time enjoying consciousness of their illusory nature. Thus, he is rendered capable of examining the surface texture

and detail of an imagined object as acutely as one might study the page of an actual book, throughout maintaining knowledge of the distinction between hallucinatory experience and real experience. . . .

That part made sense, O'Leary nodded. It had happened to him just a few nights ago. It was almost as though his awareness had been attuned to a different channel of existence; as though he had emerged from half-sleep at the wrong floor, so to speak; had stepped off the elevator into a strange world, not totally different, but subtly re-arranged—until the shock of realization had jarred him back to the old familiar level of stained wallpaper and the lingering memory of brussel sprouts boiled long ago. And if you could produce the effect at will. . . .

O'Leary read on, looking for precise instructions. The professor, he found, was vague on this portion of his treatise. But three pages further on he found a line or two of specifics:

... use of a bright object, such as a highly polished gem, as an aid to the Powers of Concentration, may, with profitable results, be employed by the earnest student of these pages. . . .

Lafayette considered. He owned no gems—not even glass ones. Perhaps a spoon would work. But no—his ring; just the thing. He tugged at the heavy silver ornament on the middle finger of

his left hand. No use; the knuckle was too big. After all, he'd been wearing it for years now. But he didn't need to remove the ring; he could stare at it just as well where it was, on his hand.

Lying on his back in the twilight room, he looked up at ancient floral-patterned paper, faded now to a discolored off-white. This would be a good place to start. Now, suppose the ceiling were high, spacious, painted a pale gold color. . . .

O'Leary persevered, whispering persuasively to himself. It was easy, the professor had said; just a matter of focussing the *Psychical Energies* and attuning the *Will*. . . .

It was almost full dark now. Lafayette sighed, blinked through the gloom at the blotched non-golden ceiling; he rose, went to the ice-box for another warm beer. The bed squeaked as he sat on its edge. He might have known it wouldn't work. Old Professor Schimmerkopf was a quack, after all. Nothing as delightful as what the old boy described could have gone unnoticed all these years. Probably the heavenly music he had claimed to have heard was nothing but the bats winging around his belfry. . . .

He lay back against the pillows at the head of the bed. It would have been nice if it *had* worked. He could have redecorated his shabby quarters, told

himself the room was twice as large, with a view out over a skyline of towers and distant mountains. Music, too; with total recall, he could play back every piece of music he'd ever heard

Not that any of it really mattered. He slept all right on the sagging bed—and taffy and sardines might get boring, but they went right on nourishing you. The room was dreary, but it kept off the rain and snow; and when the weather got cold, the radiator, with many thumps and wheezes, kept the temperature within the bearable range. The furniture wasn't fancy, but it was adequate. There was the bed, of course, and the table built from an orange crate and painted white, and the dresser, and the oval rag rug Miss Flinders at the library had given him. . . .

And, oh yes, the tall locked cabinet in the corner. Funny he hadn't gotten around to opening it yet. It had been there ever since he had moved in, and he hadn't even wondered about it. Strange. But he could open it now. There was something wonderful in it, he remembered that much; but somehow he couldn't quite recall what.

He was standing in front of the cabinet, looking at the black-varnished door. A rich-grained wood showed faintly through the cracked glaze; the keyhole was

brass-lined, and there were little scratches around it. Now, where was the key? Oh, yes. . . .

Lafayette crossed the room to the closet, stepped inside. The light was dim here. He pulled a large box into position, stepped up on it, lifted the trap-door in the ceiling, climbed up, emerged in an attic. Late afternoon sun gleamed through a dusty window. There was a faded rug on the floor, and large, brass-bound trunks were stacked everywhere. Lafayette tried the lids; all locked.

He remembered the keys. That was what he had come for. They were hanging on a nail, behind the door. He plucked them down, started for the trap-door—

But why not take the stairs? Out in the hall, a white-painted bannister gleamed. He went down, walked along a hall, found his room, stepped inside. The French windows were open, and a fresh breeze blew in. The curtains, billowy white, gleamed in the sun. Outside, a wide lawn, noble trees, a path leading somewhere—

But he had to open the cabinet, to see what was inside. He selected a key—a large, brassy one—tried it in the keyhole. Too large. He tried another; also too big. There was only one more key, a long, thin one of black iron. It didn't fit. Then he noticed more keys, hidden under

the last one, somehow. He tried them, one by one. None fitted. He eyed the keyhole, bright brass against the dark wood, scarred by near-misses. He had to get the cabinet open. Inside there were treasures, marvelous things, stacked on shelves, waiting for him. He tried another key. It fit. He turned it carefully, heard a soft click!—

A violent pounding shattered the stillness. The cabinet door glimmered, fading; only the keyhole was still visible. He tried to hold it—

“Mr. O’Leary, you open up this door this minute!” Mrs. MacGlint’s voice cut through the dream like an axe. Lafayette sat up, hearing a buzzing in his head, still groping after something almost grasped, but lost forever now. . . .

The door rattled in its frame. “You open this, you hear me?” Lafayette could hear enquiring voices, the scrape of feet from the neighboring rooms. He reached, pulled the string that switched on the ceiling light, went across to the door, jerked it open. The vengeful bulk of Mrs. MacGlint quivered before him.

“I heard voices whispering and I wondered,” she shrilled. “In there in the dark. Then them bed-springs creaked and everything got quiet!” She thrust her head past Lafayette, scanning the room’s interior.

"All right, where's she hid?" Behind her, Spender, from next door, and Mrs. Potts, in wrapper and curlers, hovered, trying for a glimpse of the source of the excitement.

"Where is who hid?" O'Leary oofed as the landlady's massive elbow took him in the short ribs. She bellied past him, stooped to stare under the spindle-legged bed, whirled, jerked the alcove curtain aside. She shot an accusing look at O'Leary, bustled to the window, dug at the hook holding the screen shut.

"Must of got her out the window," she puffed, whirling to confront Lafayette. "Fast on your feet, ain't you?"

"What are you looking for? That screen hasn't been opened for years—"

"You know well as I do, young Mr. O'Leary—that I give house space to for nigh to a year—"

"Laff, you got a *gal* in here?" Spender inquired, sidling into the room.

"A girl?" Lafayette shook his head. "No, there's no girl here, and not much of anything else."

"Well!" Mrs. MacGlint stared around the room. Her expression twitched to blankness. Then she tucked in her chins. "Anybody would've thought the same thing," she declared. "There's not a soul'd blame me. . . ."

Mrs. Potts sniffed and withdrew. Spender snickered and

sauntered out. Mrs. MacGlint moved past O'Leary, not quite looking at him.

"Respectable house," she muttered. "Setting in here in the dark, talking to hisself, *alone*"

Lafayette closed the door behind her, feeling empty, cheated. He had almost gotten that cabinet door open, discovered what was inside that had promised such excitement. Ruefully he eyed the blank place beside the door where he had dreamed the mysterious locker. He hadn't had much luck with the professor's recipes for self-hypnosis, but his dreaming abilities were still impressive. If Mrs. MacGlint hadn't chosen that moment to burst in

But the trunks upstairs! Lafayette thought with sudden excitement. He half-rose—

And sank back, with a weak smile. He had dreamed those, too; there was nothing upstairs but old Mr. Dinder's shabby room. But it had all seemed so real! As real as anything in the wide-awake world—realer, maybe.

But it was only a dream—a typical escape-wish. Crawl through a trap door into another world. Too bad it wasn't really that easy. And the cabinet; obvious symbolism. The locked door represented all the excitement in life that he'd never been able to find.

And all that fumbling with keys—that was a reflection of life's frustrations. . . .

And yet that other world—the dim attic crowded with relics, the locked cabinet—had held a promise of things rich and strange. If only this humdrum world could be that way, with the feel of adventure in the air. . . .

But it couldn't. Real life wasn't like that. Real life was getting up in the morning, working all day on the board, then the evening's chores, and sleep. Now it was time for the latter.

Lafayette lay in bed, aware of the gleam of light under the door, tiny night sounds, the distant stutter of an engine. It must be after midnight, and here he was, lying awake. He had to be up in six hours, hurrying off to the foundry in the grey morning light. Better get to sleep. And no more time wasted on dreams

Lafayette opened his eyes, looked at a brick wall a yard or two away, warm and red in the late orange sunlight. The bricks were tarnished and chipped, and there was moss growing along one edge of each, and between them the mortar was crumbling and porous. At the base of the wall there was grass, vivid green, and little yellow flowers, hardly bigger than forget-me-nots. A

small grey insect appeared over the curve of a petal, feelers waving, hurried away on important business. O'Leary had never seen a bug quite like it—or flowers like those, either. Or for that matter, a brick wall like this one. . . .

Where was he anyway? He groped for recollection, remembering Mrs. MacGlint's, the book he'd been reading, the landlady's invasion, then going to bed, lying awake. . . . But how did he get *here*—and where was *here*. . . ?

Quite suddenly, O'Leary was aware of what was happening: he was asleep—or half-asleep—and he was dreaming the wall, each separate brick with its pattern of moss—a perfect example of hypnogogic illusion!

With an effort of will, Lafayette blanked out other thoughts; excitement thumped in his chest. *Concentrate*, the professor had said. *Focus the Psychic Energies*. . . .

The bricks became clearer, gaining in solidity. Lafayette brushed aside vagrant wisps of distracting thought, giving his full attention to the image of the wall, holding it, building it. *believing* it. He had known dreams were vivid; they always seemed real as they happened. But this was perfect!

Carefully, he worked on extending the range of the scene. He could see a flagstone path lying between him and the wall.

The flat stones were greyish tan, flaking in flat strata, almost buried in the soil, with tiny green blades sprouting between them. He followed the path with his eyes; it led away along the wall into the shadow of giant trees. Amazing how the mind supplied details; the trees were flawless conceptualizations, every branch and twig and leaf, every shaggy curl of bark as true as life. Somewhere, back in his memory, he had noted and recorded these details. If he had a canvas now, he could paint them, with the accuracy of photography—if he could paint, that is.

But suppose, instead of letting his subconscious supply the details, he filled them in himself? Suppose, for example, there were a rosebush, growing there beside the tree. . . . He concentrated, trying to picture the blossoms.

The scene remained unchanged—and then abruptly began to fade, like water soaking into a blotter; the trees blurred and all around dim walls seemed to close in—

Dismayed, Lafayette grabbed for the illusion, fighting to hold the fading image intact. He switched his gaze back to the brick wall directly before him; it had shrunk to a patch of masonry a yard in diameter, thin and unconvincing. He fought, gradually, rebuilding the solidity of the wall. These hypnogogic phenome-

na were fragile, it seemed; they couldn't stand much manipulation.

The wall was solidly back in place now, but, strangely, the flowers were gone. In their place was a cobbled pavement. There was a window set in the wall now, shuttered by warped, unpainted boards; above it, an expanse of whitewashed plaster crisscrossed by heavy timbers extended up to an uneven eave-line silhouetted against an evening sky of deep electric blue in which an early moon gleamed. It was a realistic enough scene, Lafayette approved, but a bit drab—It needed something to brighten it up; a drugstore, say, its windows cheery with neon and hearty laxative ads; something to lend a note of gaiety.

But he wasn't going to make the mistake of tampering, this time. He'd let well enough alone, and see what there was to see. Cautiously, Lafayette extended his field of vision. The narrow street—almost an alley—wound off into darkness, closed in by tall, overhanging houses. He noted the glisten of wet cobbles, a puddle of oily water, a scattering of rubbish. His subconscious, it appeared lacked an instinct for neatness—

There was a sudden jar—a sense of an instant's discontinuity, like a bad splice in a movie film. O'Leary looked around for

the source, saw nothing. And yet somehow, everything seemed subtly changed—more *convincing*, in some subtle way.

He shook off the faint feeling of uneasiness. It was a swell hallucination and he'd better enjoy it to the fullest, while it lasted.

The house across the way, he saw, was a squeezed-in, half-timbered structure like the one before which he was standing, with two windows at ground floor level made from the round bottoms of bottles set in lead strips, glowing amber and green and gold from a light within. There was a low, wide door, iron-bound, with massive hinges; over it a wooden sign hung from an iron rod. It bore a crudely-painted representation of the prow of a Viking ship and a two-handed battleaxe. Lafayette smiled; his subconscious had seized on the device from his ring: the axe and dragon. Probably everything in the scene went back to something he had seen, or heard of, or read about. It was a fine illusion, no doubt about that: but what was it that was changed. . . ?

Odors, that was it. Lafayette sniffed, caught a scent of mould, spilled wine, garbage—a rich, moist aroma, with undertones of passing horses. Well, it wasn't fragrant, but it had verisimilitude; he could give it that. Now, what about sound? There should be the honking of horns, the

clashing of gears—motor scooter gears, probably; the street was too narrow for any except midget cars. And there ought to be a few voices hallooing somewhere, and, judging from the smell, the clash of garbage can lids. But all was silent. Except—Lafayette cupped a hand to his ear. . . .

Somewhere, hooves clattered on pavement, retreating into distance. A bell tolled far away, nine times. A door slammed. Faintly, Lafayette heard whistling, the clump of heavy footsteps. People! Lafayette thought with surprise. Well, why not? They should be as easy to imagine as anything else. It might be interesting to confront his creations face-to-face, engage them in conversation, discover all sorts of hidden aspects of his personality. Would they think they were real? Would they remember a yesterday?

An insect was chirring insistently now; wood creaked. Across the alley, the sign swung, clanking. The air was cold on his face, nipping at his ears. His breath made a frosty cloud.

Quite abruptly, O'Leary was aware of his bare feet against the cold paving stones. He looked down, saw that he was wearing nothing but his purple pajamas with the yellow spots—the ones he had won in the office lottery last Christmas. Hardly suited for meeting people; he'd better equip

himself with an outfit a little more appropriate to a city street. He closed his eyes, picturing a nifty navy-blue trench-coat with raglan shoulders, a conservative dark grey suit of expensive cut, a black homburg—might as well go first class—and a cane—an ebony one with a silver head, for that man-about-town touch. . . .

Something clanked against his leg. He looked down. He was wearing a coat of claret velvet, breeches of brown doe-skin, gleaming, soft-leather boots that came up to his thigh, a pair of jeweled pistols, and an elaborate rapier with a worn hilt. Wonderingly, he gripped it, drew it halfway from the sheath; the sleek steel glittered in the light from the windows across the way.

Not quite what he'd ordered; he looked as though he were on his way to a fancy-dress ball. He still had a lot to learn about this business of self-hypnosis.

There was a startled yell from the dark street to O'Leary's right then a string of curses. A man darted into view, clad in dingy-white tights with a flap seat, no shoes. He shied as he saw O'Leary, turned and dashed off in the opposite direction. O'Leary gaped. A man! Rather an eccentric specimen, but still. . . .

Other steps were approaching now. It was a boy, in wooden shoes and leather apron, a wool cap on his head. He wore tattered

knee-pants, and carried a basket from which the neck of a plucked goose dangled, and he was whistling *Alexander's Ragtime Band*.

Without a glance at O'Leary, the lad hurried by; the sound of the shoes and the whistling receded. O'Leary grinned. It seemed to be a sort of medieval scene he had cooked up, except for the anachronistic popular tune; somehow it was comforting to know that his subconscious wasn't above making a slip now and then.

From behind the tavern windows, he heard voices raised in song, a slash of crockery; he sniffed, caught the odors of wood-smoke, candle wax, ale, roast fowl. He was hungry, he realized with a pang. Taffy and sardines weren't enough. . . .

There was a new noise now: a snorting, huffing sound, accompanied by a grumbling, like a boulder rolling slowly over a pebbled beach. A bell dinged. A dark shape trundled into view, lanterns slung from its prow casting long shadows that fled along the street. A tall stack belched smoke; steam puffed from a massive piston at the side of the cumbersome vehicle. It moved past, its iron-bound wooden wheels thudding on the uneven stones. Lafayette caught a glimpse of a red-faced man in a tricorne hat, perched high up above the riveted boiler. The

steam-car rumbled on its way, a red lantern bobbing at its tail gate. O'Leary shook his head; he hadn't gotten *that* out of a history book. Grinning, he hitched up his belt—

The door of the Axe and Dragon swung open, spilling light on the cobbles. A fat man tottered out, waved an arm, staggered off up the narrow street, warbling tunelessly. Before the entry shut, Lafayette caught a glimpse of a warm interior, a glowing fire, low beams, the gleam of polished copper and brass, heard the clamor of voices, the thump of beer-mugs banged on plank tables.

He was cold, and he was hungry. Over there was warmth and food—to say nothing of beer

In four steps he was across the street. He paused for a moment to settle his French cocked hat on his forehead, adjust the bunch of lace at his chin; then he hauled open the door and stepped into the smoky interior of the Axe and Dragon.

CHAPTER II

In the sudden warmth and rich odors of the room, O'Leary paused, blinking against the light shed by the lanterns pegged to the wooden posts supporting the sagging ceiling. Heads turned to stare; voices trailed off into silence as Lafayette looked around

the room. There were wine and ale barrels ranked along one side; to their right was a vast fireplace in which a whole hog, a goose, and half a dozen chickens turned on a spit over a bed of red coals, cranked by a spider-lean teenager with an open mouth and crossed eyes. Lafayette sniffed; the odors were delightful! The texture and solidity of the scene were absolutely convincing—even better than Professor Schimmerkopf had described—full tactile, auditory, visual and olfactory stimulation. And coming inside hadn't disturbed things in the least; after all, why should it? He often dreamed of wandering through buildings; the only difference was that this time he *knew* he was dreaming, while a small part of his mind stayed awake, watching the show.

There was a vacant seat at the rear of the long room; O'Leary started toward it, nodding pleasantly at staring faces. A thin man in a patched tabard scrambled from his path; a fat woman with red cheeks muttered and drew a circle in the air. Those seated at the table toward which he was moving edged away, giving him plenty of space. He sat down, put his hat beside him, looked around, smiled encouragingly at his creations.

“Uh, please, go right ahead with what you were doing,” he said in the silence. “Oh, barten-

der. . . ." He signalled to a short thick-necked man hovering behind a trestle between the beer kegs. "A bottle of the best in the house, please."

The man looked at him blankly.

"Ale or wine, it doesn't matter," O'Leary added.

The bartender said something; O'Leary cupped his ear.

"Eh? Speak up, I didn't get that."

"I says all we got is small beer and *vin ordinaire*," the man muttered. There was something odd about the way he spoke. . . . Still, O'Leary reminded himself, he couldn't expect to get everything perfect the first time out.

"That'll do," he said, automatically making an effort to match the other's speech pattern. Brooklynese with overtones of third-rate historical fiction, O'Leary classified it.

The man gaped, closed his mouth with an audible gulp, stooped and plucked a dusty flagon from a stack on the floor, which, Lafayette noted idly, seemed to be of hard-packed dirt. A nice detail, he approved. Practical too: it would soak up spilled booze.

Someone was muttering at the far end of the room. A barrel-shaped ruffian rose slowly, stepped out into the clear, flexed massive shoulders, then sauntered forward. He had a wild

mop of unkempt red hair, a flattened nose, one cauliflowered ear, and huge, hairy fists, the thumbs of which were hooked in the rope tied around his waist. O'Leary noted the striped stockings below the patched knee-breeches, the clumsy shoes, like loafers with large iron buckles. The man's shirt was a soiled white, open at the neck, with floppy sleeves. There was a foot-long sheath-knife strapped to his hip. He came up to Lafayette's table, planted himself and stared down at him.

"He don't look so tough," he announced to the silent room in a growl like that of a Kodiak bear.

Lafayette stared into the man's face, studying the mean, red-rimmed eyes, the white scar-tissue marking the cheek bones, the massive jaw, the thick lips, lumpy from past batterings, the sprouting stubble. He smiled.

"Marvelous," he said. His eyes went to the barman. "Hubba hubba with that wine." he called cheerily. "And I'll have a chicken sandwich on rye. I'm hungry. All I had for dinner was a couple of sardines." He smiled encouragingly at his table-mates, who crouched back, eyeing him fearfully. The redhead was still standing before him.

"Sit down," he invited. "How about a sandwich?"

The lout's small eyes narrowed. "I say he's some kind of a

Nance," the rumbling voice stated.

Lafayette chuckled, shaking his head. This was as good as a psychoanalysis! This oaf, a personification of a subconscious virility symbol, had stated an opinion doubtless heretofore suppressed somewhere deep in the Id or Superego, where it had probably been causing all sorts of neuroses. Now, by getting it out in the open, he could face it, observe for himself the ludicrousness of it, and thereafter dismiss it.

"Come on, sit down," he ordered. "Tell me just what you meant by that remark."

"Nuts to youse," the heavy-weight grated, looking around for approval. "Yer mudduh wears ankle-socks."

"Tsk, tsk," Lafayette looked at the fellow reproachfully. "Better do as I say, or I'll turn you into a fat lady."

"Huh?" Big Red's rusty eyebrows crawled like caterpillars on his low forehead. His mouth opened, revealing a row of chipped teeth.

The landlord sidled nervously around the redhead, placed a dusty bottle on the table, a roast fowl beside it *sans* plate.

"That'll be a buck fifty," he muttered. Lafayette patted his hip pocket, took out his familiar wallet, remembering belatedly that there was only a dollar in it.

Hmmm. But why couldn't it have fifty dollars in it, instead? He pictured the impressive bill, crisp and green and reassuring. And why just one? Why not a whole stack of fifties? And maybe a few hundreds thrown in for good measure. He might as well dream big. He squinted, concentrating.

There was silent pop! as though a vast soap-bubble had burst. O'Leary frowned. Funny sensation; still, they might be normal in hallucinations; it seemed to happen every so often. He opened the wallet, revealed a stack of crisp bills, withdrew one with a grand gesture; it was a fifty, just as specified. . . .

But the lettering. . . . The hen-tracks across the top of the bill looked incomplete, almost-legible—like the label on Brand B in one of those ads squeezed into the comic page. The first letter was like an *O* with a small *x* superimposed, followed by an upside-down *u*, a squiggle, some dots. . . .

Then suddenly the strangeness faded. The letters seemed to come into focus, like a perspective diagram shifting orientation. The words were perfectly readable, O'Leary saw. But that first letter: it *did* look like an *O* with an *x* on top of it. He frowned at it thoughtfully. There wasn't any such letter—was there? But there must be: he was reading it—

He smiled at himself as the explanation dawned. His dreaming mechanism, always consistent, had cooked up a foreign language to go with the foreign setting. Naturally, since he'd invented it himself, he could read it. The same probably applied to the spoken tongue. If he could wake up and hear his conversation here, it would all probably come out as gibberish, like the poems people dreamed and wrote down to look at in the morning. They never made sense. But the words on the bill were clear enough: the legend 'Royal Treasury of Artesia' was lettered above the familiar picture of Grant—or was it Grant? Lafayette saw with some surprise that he was wearing a tiny peruke and a lacy ruff. Play money, after all. . . .

But what did it matter? He smiled at himself. He couldn't take it with him when he woke up. He handed the bill over to the barman who gaped, scratched his head.

"Geez, I can't break no fifty, yer lordship," he muttered. As the man spoke, O'Leary listened carefully. Yes, it was a strange language—but his mind was interpreting it as modified Brooklynes.

"Keep it," Lafayette said grandly. "Just keep the wine flowing—and how about bringing over a couple of glasses, and possibly a knife and fork?"

The barman hurried off. The redhead was still standing, glowing.

"Down in front," Lafayette said, indicating the seat opposite him. "You're blocking the view."

The big man shot a glance at the customers watching him, threw out his chest.

"Duh Red Bull don't drink wit' no ribbon-counter Fancy-Dan," he announced.

"Better change your mind," O'Leary said, blowing dust from the lopsided green bottle the waiter had brought. It bore no label, he saw; a seal of dark red wax covered the cork. He glanced up at the Red Bull. "Or I may just have to shrink you down to where I can see over you."

The redhead blinked at him; his mouth puckered uncertainly. The barman was back, with two heavy glass mugs. He darted a look at the Red Bull, quickly removed the cork from the bottle, slopped an inch or two of wine in one cup, shoved it toward Lafayette. He picked it up, sniffed. It smelled like vinegar. He tasted it. It was thin and sour. He pushed the glass away.

"Don't you have something better—" he paused. Just suppose, he mused, there was a bottle of a rare vintage—*Chateau Lafitte-Rothschilde*, '29, say—over there under that heap of dusty bottles. . . . He narrowed his eyes, picturing the color of the

glass, the label, willing it to be there—

His eyes popped open at the abrupt flicker in the smooth flow of—of whatever it was that flowed when time passed. That strange little blink in the sequence of the seconds. It had happened before, just as he was providing the reserves in his wallet, and before that, out in the street. Each time he made a modification in things, he had felt the jar! A trifling flaw in his technique, no doubt. Nothing to worry about.

“—the best in the place, yer Lordship,” the barman was protesting.

“Look under the other bottles,” O’Leary said. “See if there isn’t a big bottle there, shaped like this. . . .” He indicated the contours of a Burgundy bottle.

“We ain’t got—”

“Ah—ah! Take a look first.” Lafayette leaned back, smiling around at the others. My, what an inventive subconscious he had! Long faces, round ones, old men, young women, fat, thin, weathered, pink-and-white, bearded, clean-shaven, blondes, brunettes, baldies—

The barman was back, gaping at the bottle in his hand. He put it on the table, stepped back. “Is this here what yer lordship meant?”

O’Leary nodded complacently. The barman pulled the cork. This

time a delicate aroma floated from the glass. O’Leary sampled it. The flavor was musty, rich, a symphony of summer sun and ancient cellars. He sighed contentedly. It might be imaginary wine, but the flavor was real enough. The redhead, watching open-mouthed, leaned forward slightly, sniffed. A thick tongue appeared, ran over the scarred lips. Lafayette poured the second glass half full.

“Sit down and drink up, Red,” he said.

The big man hesitated, picked up the glass, sniffed, then gulped the contents. An amazed smile spread over the rugged features. He threw a leg over the bench and sat, shoved the mug toward Lafayette.

“Bo, that’s good stuff you got there! I’ll go fer another shot o’that!” He looked around belligerently. Lafayette refilled both glasses. A turkey-necked gaffer down the table edged closer, eyeing the bottle.

“*Garçon,*” Lafayette called, “bring more glasses!” The man complied. Lafayette filled one for the oldster, passed it along. The old man sipped, gaped, gulped, licked toothless gums, grinned.

“Hey!” he cackled. “We ain’t seen wine like that since the old king died—”

A round-faced woman in a starched simple with a broken corner shushed him with a look,

thrust out a pewter mug. Lafayette filled it.

"Everybody drink up!" he invited. Clay cups, topless bottles, copper mugs came at him. He poured, pausing now and then to take a healing draft from his own glass. This was more like it! People were loosening up now, getting back in the swing of things.

"Let's sing!" he suggested. Merry voices chimed in, got together on *Old MacDonald*. The words were a little different from the ones O'Leary was accustomed to, but he managed, adding a fair baritone to the din. A hand touched the back of his neck; a buxom wench in a tight-laced blouse and peasant skirt slid into his lap, nibbled at his ear, bringing with her, O'Leary noted, a disconcerting odor of goat. He snorted, twisted to get a better look at the girl. She was cute enough, with red cheeks, a saucily turned-up nose, corn-yellow hair and pouty lips—but it seemed nobody had told her about soap. Still, there might be a remedy for that. Lafayette narrowed his eyes, trying to remember the odor of the perfume he had smelled once when a bottle broke at the drugstore when he was sweeping up just before closing time. . . .

There was the now-familiar jog in the machinery. He sniffed cautiously. Nothing. Again—and

caught a whiff of Ivory Soap; a third time, and the scent of Chanel No. 22 wafted to his nostrils. He smiled at the girl. She smiled back, apparently noticing nothing unusual. More glasses were thrust out. Lafayette disengaged himself from the soft and eager lips, poured, paused to swallow, refilled the girl's glass, then Red's pint mug, and another, and another. . . .

The old man sitting next to the big redhead was frowning thoughtfully at the bottle in O'Leary's hand. He said something to the skinny grandma beside him. More frowns were appearing now. The singing was faltering, fading off into silence. The merry drinkers at the next table fell silent. People began crossing themselves—or rather, Lafayette corrected the impression, describing circles over their chests.

"What's the matter?" he inquired genially, lifting the bottle invitingly. Everyone jumped. Those nearest were rising hastily moving back. A babble was growing—not the gay chatter of a moment before, but a fearful muttering.

Lafayette shrugged, poured his glass full. As he moved to place the bottle on the table, a thought struck him. He hefted the flask. It seemed as heavy as ever. He reached, poured the Red Bull's glass full. The big man

hiccupped, made a wobbly circle before him with a finger like a Polish sausage, lifted the glass and drank. Lafayette tilted the bottle, peered inside the neck; a dark surface of deep red liquid gleamed an inch from the top. No wonder they were spooked, he thought disgustedly. He had carelessly decanted several gallons of wine from a one-litre bottle.

"Ah . . . look," he started. "That was just a trick, sort of. . . ."

"Sorcerer!" someone yelled. "Warlock!" another charged. There was a general movement toward the door.

"Wait!" O'Leary called, rising. At that, there was a stampede. In thirty seconds the tavern was deserted—with the sole exception of the Red Bull. The big man—sweating heavily, but still game, Lafayette observed approvingly—held his ground. He licked his lips, cleared his throat.

"Dem other slobs," he growled. "Pantywaists."

"Sorry about the bottle," O'Leary said apologetically. "Just a slip on my part." Outside in the street, he could hear the voices of a gathering mob. The word *sorcerer* seemed to ring out with distressing frequency.

"A little magic, that ain't nuttin'," Red said. "But they got a idear dat on account of you're a like phantom ya might stick a

you know, geas, on 'em. Er maybe split open duh ground and drag 'em down into duh Pit. Er—"

"That's enough," Lafayette cut in, noticing the increasing nervousness on the battered features as the man enumerated the possible fates of those who trafficked with spooks. "All I did was pour out a few drinks. Does that make me a ghost?"

Big Red smiled craftily, eyeing Lafayette's clothes. "Don't rib me, mister," he grated. "I know duh Phantom Highwayman when I see him."

O'Leary smiled. "You don't really believe in phantoms, do you?"

The Red Bull nodded vigorously. Lafayette noticed that he smelled of Chanel Number 22; apparently he'd overdone the perfume a trifle.

"On nights when duh moon is like a ghostly galleon," Red stated. "Dat's when yuh ride."

"Nonsense," Lafayette said briskly. "My name is Lafayette O'Leary, and—"

"Now, what I got in mind, Bo, you and me, we could make a great team," Red bored on. "Wit' dem neat tricks you can do, like riding t'rough duh sky an all, and wit my brains—"

"I'm afraid you're on the wrong track, Red," O'Leary refilled his glass, for the fourth—or was it the fifth time? Lovely

wine—and the glow was just as nice as though he hadn't dreamed up the whole thing. Would he have a hangover, he wondered, when he woke up in the morning? He hiccupped, refilled Red's glass.

“. . . cased a coupla joints dat I figger dey'll be a cinch to knock over," the rumbling voice was saying. "Duh way I got duh caper doped out, I keep duh eyeball peeled for duh City Guardsmen. Dem guys is all over like fleas in a four-bit flop dese days. If youse ast me, duh country ain't no better'n a police state; it ain't like de old days when I was a nipper; it was parties every night and plenty easy dough around. Anyways, youse can pull duh job, an' pass duh swag to me, and while duh johns is busy tailing youse, I'll—"

"You're talking nonsense, Red," O'Leary interrupted. "Crime doesn't pay. I'm sure you're really an honest fellow at heart, but you've been influenced by evil companions. Why don't you get yourself a job—at a service station, maybe—"

The Red Bull's forehead furrowed ominously. "Youse try'na tell me I look like a grease monkey?"

Lafayette peered at his companion's rugged features through a light fog which seemed to have arisen. "Nooo," he said thoughtfully. "More of an ape, I think.

An oil-ape." He beamed, raising his glass. "Tha's pretty clever, don't ye aggroo? I mean don't you agree?"

The Red Bull growled. "I gotta good mind tuh rip youse apart, spook er no spook—"

"Ah—ah!" Lafayette wagged a finger at the other. "No threats, please—"

The redhead was on his feet, swaying slightly. "I can bust a oak plank in two wit' one punch," he stated, displaying a fist like a flint axe.

"Sit down, Red," O'Leary ordered. "I want to talk to you. As a figment of my imagination, you should be able to tell me lots of interesting things about my psyche. Now, I've been wondering, what rôle has sibling rivalry played—"

"I can bend a iron bar into a pretzel wit' one hand tied behind me," the Red Bull stated. "I can—"

"Red, if you don't sit down, I'll be forced to take steps," Lafayette warned. "Now tell me, how does it feel to start existing all of a sudden, just because I dreamed you—"

"I can tear duh head off a alligator," Red declaimed. "I can rip duh hind leg off a elephant. . . ." As the redhead rambled on, Lafayette concentrated. Red's voice rose higher, from bass to baritone, through tenor to a high contralto. ". . . handle any ten

guys at oncet," he shrilled, "wit' bot' hands tied behind me. . . ."

Lafayette made a final effort, listened for the result:

". . . I'm thimply a brute, when arouthed," Red squeaked. "Thometimeth I jutht get tho mad I could thpit!" He broke off, an amazed look settling over his meaty features. "Thpit?" he chirped.

"Now, Red, drink your wine and pay attention," Lafayette said severely. "You're port of an impartent experiment. I mean you're pent of an apartment—you're portable part of—apart of port—an appointment of pit—ah, the hell with it!" He picked up his wine mug—

The door burst open. A tall man slammed into view, gorgeously arrayed in a floppy hat with feathers, long curls, a purple and blue striped jacket, a wide sash, baggy pants above sloppily rolled boots. He whipped out a slender épée, advanced on the lone occupied table. Another ornately outfitted swordsman crowded in behind him, and a third, and a fourth. They spread out, ringed the table, blades at the ready.

"Hi, fellas," Lafayette waved his heavy glass. "How about a little snort—"

"In the King's name," the leading dandy roared. "You're under arrest! Will you come along quiet, or have we got to run you through?" He had a

fierce black mustache that curled up on each side of his face like a steer's horns.

O'Leary eyed the nearest sword-point, six inches from his throat. Rolling his eyes sideways, he could see two more blades poised, aimed at his heart. Across from him, the Red Bull gaped, his mouth hanging open.

"You, there!" the mustached officer bellowed, eyeing the red-head. "Who're you?"

"Me, offither?" the big man chirped. "Why, I wath jutht thitting here, thipping my therry and waiting for my thupper—"

The cop blinked, then guffawed. "The bum looks enough like the Red Bull to be his twin," one of the other guardsmen said.

"Beat it, you," another ordered. The redhead scrambled from his place, hurried unsteadily to the door. Lafayette caught a glimpse of faces peering in as it opened. The mob was still noisy outside.

"All right, on your feet," the man on his left commanded. O'Leary smiled negligently at the man, focussing his attention on the swords. *Salamis*, he thought. *Swords into salamis, kazaam!*

A sharp point prodded his side; he jumped. The bright steel blade was set against his ribs, just above the kidney. "Salami!" O'Leary commanded aloud. "Turn into a salami, damn it!"

The blade—still stubbornly steel—poked harder. “No spells now, Clyde, or you won’t make it to a cell!”

“Hey!” Lafayette yelled. “Careful! You’ll break the skin!”

“Look, Mac, have I got to slit your weasand to convince you this is a pinch? We’re musketeers of the City Guard, see? We’re putting the sneeze on for disturbing the peace!”

“You mean about the wine bottle,” O’Leary said. “I can explain—”

“Tell it to the executioner,” a three-striper snarled. “On your feet, bub!”

Lafayette got up. “This is ridiculous,” he started—

A hard hand gripped his arm, propelled him doorward. He shook it off, grabbed his hat from the table, settled it over his eyes. No need to get excited, he reminded himself. The salami gambit hadn’t worked, but that was because he hadn’t had time to concentrate properly and get his Psychic Energies attuned—besides which, he had already discovered it was tricky trying to change anything in plain view. It was a little ridiculous, letting the dream take over; things were moving too fast right now. He was a little woozy from the wine. But as soon as he had a quiet moment, he would handle these fellows. . . .

He stumbled through the door,

out into the frosty night air. A rank of frightened faces gaped at him. Fists shook. A vegetable came flying, bounced off his shoulder.

“All right, clear the way there!” the tallest Musketeer roared. “Make way, in the King’s name!” He and two of his men laid about them with the flats of their blades, opening a route to a waiting steam-car.

“Watch it, Mac,” the Musketeer detailed to guard O’Leary said, “Us police aren’t what you’d call popular—” He ducked as a ripe tomato whizzed past. “Can’t say as I blame ’em much, the way his Majesty has got us putting the screws on lately. Everything that ain’t compulsory is illegal.”

“Sounds like a totalitarian regime,” O’Leary commented. “Why don’t you start a revolution?”

“You kidding? King Goruble’s got a army that would—” he broke off. “Never mind that,” he said. He looked at O’Leary curiously, edged closer.

“Say, is that the straight dope?” he said from the side of his mouth. “I mean about you being a sorcerer?”

O’Leary eyed the man. “You mean an intelligent fellow like you believes in magic?”

“Naw—but, well—they got you on a 902—that’s a necromancy rap; o’course that’s just

a standard charge we use to hold suspicious characters for twenty-four hours. But I figure maybe where there's a frog there's a puddle—"

"Did you ever see anyone perform magic?" Lafayette demanded.

"No—but my wife's aunt's cousin claims he knew a fellow—"

"I'm no magician," Lafayette said. "As a matter of fact, I'm—but you wouldn't understand."

"Look, what I was wondering—well, my wife, she's kind of running to fat lately. Stringy hair, no makeup; you know the routine. Only been married a year. Maybe you could give me something to slip into her Martini to kind of like put the old zazzle back; warm her up a little, if you know what I mean. . . ." He winked elaborately, casually shoved an over-eager spectator back into line.

"That's silly—" Lafayette started, then paused. Well, why not? Good practice. He squinted, pictured a popular movie starlet whose name he had forgotten, imagined her as married to the cop at his side, then pictured her hurrying along a street, attracted by the mob-noise. . . . The scene winked. O'Leary relaxed, feeling complacent. OK, now he could get back in command of the situation—

"Roy!" a girlish voice called

above the clamor. "Oh, Roy!" The cop beside O'Leary jumped, looked around. A lovely girl with huge dark eyes and soft brown hair was pushing through the crowd.

"Gertrude! Is it you?" the cop bleated, a look of delighted astonishment spreading across his face.

"Oh, Roy! I was so worried!" The girl hurled herself at the cop, staggering him. His sword dropped. O'Leary retrieved it, handed it back.

"I heard there was a dangerous arrest, and you were on it, and I know how brave you are, and I was afraid—"

"Now, now, Gertrude, I'm in the pink. Everything's jake—"

"You mean it was a false alarm? Oh, I'm sooo relieved"

"False alarm? Yeah—I mean" The Musketeer turned to blink at Lafayette. He swallowed hard. "Cripes!" he muttered. "This guy is the McCoy!" He thrust the girl aside. "Excuse me, baby!" He cupped a hand beside his mouth. "Hey, Sarge?"

The large musketeer loomed up beside him. "Yeah?"

"This guy—" the cop jerked a thumb at O'Leary. "He's the goods! I mean—he's a sorcerer, like they said!"

"You lost your marbles, Shorty? Get your pris'ner and let's move out!"

"But look at Gertrude!" He pointed. The big cop glanced, jumped, gaped. He swept his hat off, executed an elaborate bow.

"Holy Moses, Gertrude," he said. "You got a new hair-do or something?"

"Hair-do?" Shorty snorted. "She's lost fifty pounds o' lard, stacked what's left in the right places developed a curl in her hair, and remembered how to smile! And he done it!" He pointed at O'Leary.

"Oh, it was nothing," Lafayette said modestly. "And now, if you fellows don't mind—"

Abruptly, steel rasped. Four sharp blades jumped out, poised, ringing O'Leary in. The sergeant mopped sweat from his forehead with his free hand.

"I'm warning you, Mister, don't try nothing! I'll have twelve inches of steel into you before you get past the first abracadabra!"

Lafayette snorted. "The whole thing is getting silly," he said. "That's the trouble with dreams; just when they begin to get interesting, things start to go wrong. I may as well just wake up and start over tomorrow night. . . ."

He squinted, concentrating; he was getting pretty good at the trick now, he thought complacently. Just picture what you wanted, build it up in the mind's eye—



Someone was jerking at his arm. Damned nuisance. Hard to concentrate. *Mrs. MacGlint's; the old familiar wallpaper, the homey smells, the creaky floor. . . .* He opened an eye, saw a ring of angry faces. He shut his eyes tight, seized on the fading visualization of his room, working to solidify it. *Wake up,* he commanded himself. *This is just a whacky dream. . . .*

The sounds around were fading now; he could almost see the blotched walls, the curtained alcove, the orange-crate table—

The hand was hauling at his arm again. He stumbled, almost fell, His eyes snapped open. A voice yelled in his ear.

The mob sounds swelled back to normal. Lafayette's breath made a frosty cloud before his face. The Musketeers were staring at him, mouths wide.

"Did you see that, Sarge?" Shorty choked. "Like he turned to smoke. . . !" They were backing away. The three-striper stood his ground, swallowed hard.

"Look, pal," he said desperately. "Be nice and come along quiet, huh? I mean, if you got to do a fade, do it in front of witnesses, you know what I mean? If I report in with a story like this—and no pinch—well, it's goodbye retirement, and me with twenty-one years on the force."

For the moment, O'Leary saw, it seemed there was no help for it: he was stuck in the damned dream—at least until he could manage a moment of peace and quiet. Might as well put a good face on it, he decided.

"Certainly, Sergeant," O'Leary said grandly. "I'll be glad to accompany you. Just keep it couth, if you don't mind."

"Sure—kid gloves all the way, buddy. Now, if you don't mind just stepping this way? The sergeant indicated the lane to the waiting vehicle. O'Leary strolled to the car, stood by while one of the Guardsmen opened the rear door, then clambered up, seated himself on the wooden bench.

"All clear," he said. "But-

tonhher up." As the cops hurried to close the door, O'Leary caught a glimpse of four nervous faces—looking oddly different. . . .

Then he saw it: The big sergeant was now clean-shaven; somehow in the re-shuffling of scenes, his immense mustachios had been inadvertently transferred to the upper lip of Shorty. O'Leary smiled, relaxed. There was really no need to be in a crashing hurry to get back to reality; why not stay with it a bit longer, and see what his subconscious came up with next? He could always wake up later. There were slamming noises; the carriage lurched, started off with a creak and grumble of wood. O'Leary braced himself with one foot against the opposite bench and settled down for the ride.

CHAPTER III

It was a bumpy twenty-minute trip. Lafayette held on, feeling his teeth clack at each uneven cobble, regretting that he had neglected to provide padded seats and a window. The wagon swayed, mounted a slight incline, halted with a jolt. Feet clattered; voices muttered. The door clanked, swung open. Lafayette stepped down, looked around interestedly at a wide, cobbled courtyard fronted on all four sides by elaborate facades of rusticated stone, ornate with columns, pilasters,

niches with statues, bright-lit rows of high, Gothic-arched windows. Far above, the slopes of massive Mansard roofs gleamed a dull green in the moonlight. Inside the quadrangle, there were flower beds and geometric shapes of manicured lawn; clumps of tall poplars shimmered their silvery leaves in the night breeze. Flaming lanterns atop tall poles lighted a cavernous colonnaded entry, beside which two brass-helmeted, ramrod-stiff guardsmen in baggy knickers of Bromo-seltzer blue and puff-sleeved jackets in red-and-yellow stripes stood with arquebusses at order arms.

"Now, if you'll just step this way, ah, sir," the sergeant said nervously, "I'll turn you over to the household detachment. After that you can disappear any time you like, just so I get a receipt from the desk-sergeant first, OK?"

"Be calm, sergeant," O'Leary soothed. "I'm not going to vanish just yet." He shook his head admiringly. "This is the fanciest police station I ever saw."

"You kidding, Mac? I mean," the non-com amended hastily, "uh, this is the palace. Where the king lives, you know. King Goruble the First."

"I didn't know," Lafayette corrected, starting in the indicated direction. He stumbled, grabbed for his hat. It was difficult walk-

ing in the unfamiliar boots across the uneven paving stones, and the sword had a disconcerting way of attempting to get between his legs until he grabbed its hilt and held it in place.

The rigid sentries snapped to as the detachment mounted the wide steps; one barked a challenge. The sergeant replied, urged O'Leary on into the well-lit interior of a high-vaulted, mirror-lined hall, with a floor of polished marble in red and black squares. Elaborate gilt chandeliers depended from the fretted ceiling; opposite the mirrors, vast, somber-hued draperies reflected woodland scenes.

Lafayette followed his escort along to a desk where a man in a steel breastplate sat, picking his teeth with a dagger. He cocked an eyebrow at O'Leary as the party came up.

"Book this, uh, gentleman in, Sarge," Lafayette's escort said. "And give me a receipt."

"Gentleman?" The desk sergeant put the dagger away, picked up a quill. "What's the charge?"

"A 902." Lafayette's cop looked defiantly at the pained expression that appeared on the other's lined face.

"Are you kidding, Sarge?" the desk man growled. "Grow up! You can use a 902 to hold a drunk overnight, but you don't book 'em into Royal Court—"

"This one's the real article."

"That's right, Sarge," Shorty chimed in. "You oughta see what he done to Gertrude!"

"Gertrude? What is this, an assault?"

"Naw—Gertrude's the wife. He taken fifty pound off'n her and put the old shake back in her hips. Wow!" Shorty made lines in the air indicating Gertrude's new contours, then looked guiltily at O'Leary.

"Sorry, Bud," he whispered behind his hand. "I appreciate the favor, but—"

"You guys are nuts," the desk man said. "Get out of here before I lose my temper and have the lot of you clapped into irons!"

The Musketeer sergeant's face darkened. He half-drew his sword with a rasp of steel. "Book him and give me a receipt, or I'll tickle your backbone from the front, you paper-pushing son of a—"

The desk sergeant was on his feet, whipping a sabre from the sheath hung on the back of his chair, which fell over with a clatter. "Draw on a member of the Queen's Own Light Cavalry, will you, you flatfooted night-watchman—"

"Quiet, you men!" someone barked. Lafayette, who had been watching the action open-mouthed, turned to see a dapper, grey-haired man in shirtsleeves frowning from an open doorway,

surrounded by half a dozen elaborately garbed men in fantastic powered wigs.

"Gentlemen, what's the meaning of this altercation, right outside our gaming room?" The newcomer, looking aggrieved, waved the playing cards clutched in a hand heavy with rings.

Everyone came to attention, a multiple clack of heels.

"Ah, Your Majesty, sir, this police officer," the desk sergeant stumbled. "He was wising off, sir, and—"

"I beg your Majesty's pardon, Your Majesty," the arresting sergeant cut in, "but if Your Majesty would—"

"See here, can't you go somewhere else to argue," the king demanded. "Confound it, things are coming to a pretty pass when we can't play a few quiet hands of stud without some unseemly interruption!" The monarch turned to re-enter the room, his courtiers scattering from his path.

"If it please Your Majesty," the formerly mustached Musketeer persisted. "This prisoner is—"

"It doesn't please me in the least!" the king thrust out his mustached lip. "Scat, I say! Begone! And silently!"

The sergeant's face grew stubborn. "Your Majesty, I got to have a receipt for my prisoner. He's a dangerous sorcerer."

The king opened his mouth, then closed it.

"Sorcerer?" he said. He came across, eyed O'Leary with interest. At close range, Lafayette noted, the king looked older, more careworn, but meticulously groomed, with fine lines around his eyes and mouth.

"Are you sure of this?" the king said in a low voice.

"Absolutely, Your Majesty," the arresting cop said.

The desk sergeant bustled around the desk. "Your Majesty, I'm sorry about this; these nut cases, we get 'em all the time—"

"Are you a magician?" the king pursed his mouth, raised one carefully arched eyebrow at Lafayette.

"Why does everyone ask the same question?" Lafayette shook his head. "It would all be lots more fun if you just accepted me as one of yourselves. Just consider me a . . . ah . . . scientist."

The king's frown returned. "You show less than proper respect for our person," he commented. "And what in the name of the Sea-fiend is a—what did you call yourself?"

"A scientist. Someone who knows things," O'Leary explained. "You see, I'm engaged in an experiment. Now, none of you fellows realize it, but none of you actually exist—"

The king was sniffing loudly.

"The fellow reeks of wine," he said. He sniffed again. "Smells like good stuff," he remarked to a satin-coated dandy at his elbow.

"Phaugh, Majesty," the courtier said in a high nasal, waving a hanky under his nose. "Me-thinks the scoundrel is well and truly snockered. Didst hear him but now? None of us exist, quoth he—including Your Majesty!"

"Sir—he's a warlock, take my word for it!" the sergeant burst out. "Any minute he's liable to poof! Disappear!"

"Yeah, Yer Majesty," Shorty added, wagging his head, making his curls flop. "The guy is terrific!"

"How say you, knave?" the courtier fixed O'Leary with a slightly blood-shot eye. "Art a dabbler in the Black Arts?"

"Actually, it's all very simple," Lafayette said. His head was beginning to throb slightly as the glow of the wine faded. "I just—ah—have this slight ability to manipulate the environment."

The king's forehead wrinkled. "What does that mean?"

"Well. . . ." Lafayette considered. "Take wine, for example." He squinted his eyes, concentrated on the upper right drawer of the desk beside him. He felt a slight, reassuring jar. "Look in the drawer," he said. "The top one."

The king gestured. "Do as he says."

One of the perfumed flunkeys minced forward, drew open the drawer, glanced inside, then looking surprised, lifted out a bottle, held it up.

"Hey!" the desk sergeant started—

"Drinking on duty, eh?" the king beetled an eyebrow at the unfortunate fellow. "Ten days in the dungeon on canned soup."

"B—but, Your Majesty, it's not mine!"

"That's right," Lafayette put in. "He didn't even know it was there."

"Then it's ten days for not knowing the contents of his own desk," the king said blandly. He took the bottle, looked at the label, held it up to the light and squinted at it.

"Good color," he stated. "Who has a corkscrew?"

Four manicured hands shot out with four elaborate corkscrews. The king handed over the bottle, watched as the cork was drawn with a loud *whok!*

He took the bottle, sniffed, then tilted it and took a healthy drag. A delighted expression lifted his rather sharp features.

"Zounds! We like it! Damned good vintage, that! Better than we find at our own table!" He looked at Lafayette approvingly.

"Still say you're not a magician, eh?"

"No, 'fraid not. After all, magic's impossible." O'Leary wagged an admonitory finger. "I suppose I seem a little unusual to you, but there's a perfectly simple explanation. Now, in this dream—"

"Enough!" the king held up a manicured hand. "This talk of dreams, I like it not—and yet, this wine I like right well. 'Tis a matter for my council to consider." He turned to a slight, pasty-faced man with a large moist nose, dressed in powder-blue silk with ruffles at the throat.

"Mel, get the boys together, we'll run this up the flagpole and blue-sky it. Maybe the fellow has a simple explanation for these, ah, irregularities." He smacked his lips, looked fondly at the bottle and handed it to O'Leary. As the latter reached for it, the monarch seemed to start suddenly, half-withdrew the bottle, then held it out again, staring at O'Leary's hand as he took the flask.

"We'll meet—immediately," the king said, sounding shaken.

"Tonight, Majesty?" a fat man in pink velvet squeaked.

"Certainly! In the High Chamber in a quarter of an hour!" King Goruble waved a hand at the Musketeers. "You men be there! And as for you—" he shot a sharp glance at O'Leary. "You come with me, lad. I have a few questions to put to you."

* * *

The king waved his retainers back, closed the heavy door behind himself and Lafayette, who stared around the richly decorated gaming room admiringly. There were huge gilt-framed pictures against the panelled walls, a well-stocked bar, deep rugs, soft lights to supplement the bright luminaries hanging over the card and billard tables.

"I see you have electric lights here," O'Leary commented. "I can't quite figure out just what sort of place this is I've wandered into."

"This is the kingdom of Artesia." The king pulled at his lower lip, watching O'Leary speculatively. "Have you lost your wits, boy? Perhaps, ah, forgotten your name, your station?"

"No; I'm Lafayette O'Leary. I don't have a station. It's just that I can't quite place the, ah, context. Swords, steam-cars, knee-breeches, electric lights. . . ."

"O'Leary, eh? A curious name. You came from a far land, I wot; you know nothing of our fair realm of Artesia?"

"Ummm," said Lafayette. "I guess you could say that; but in another sense, I live here—or near here—"

"Eh? What mean you?"

"Oh, nothing much. You wouldn't understand."

Gorable worried his lower lip with even, white false teeth. "What errand brought you hith-

er?" He sounded worried, O'Leary thought.

"Oh, no errand. Just . . . looking around."

"Looking for what?"

"Nothing special. Just sight-seeing, you might say."

"You came not to, ah, crave audience with ourself, perchance?"

"No—not that I'm not honored—"

"How came you here?" Gorable demanded abruptly.

"Well, it gets a little complicated. To tell you the truth, I don't really understand it myself—"

"You have—friends in the capital?"

"Don't know a soul."

Gorable took three paces, turned, took three paces back. He stopped, eyed O'Leary's right hand.

"Your ring," he said. "An interesting bauble." His eyes cut to O'Leary's face. "You, ah, bought it here?"

"Oh, no, I've had it for years."

Gorable frowned. "Where did you get it?"

"I guess you could say it came with me. It was hanging around my neck on a string when they found me on the orphanage doorstep."

"Orphanage? A place for waifs and strays?"

O'Leary nodded.

Gorable became suddenly brisk.

"Just slip it off, there's a good fellow; I'd fain have a look at it."

"Sorry; it's too small to get over the knuckle."

"Hmmm." The king looked at O'Leary sharply. "Yes; well, let me make a suggestion, my lad. Turn the ring so that the device is inward. Others, seeing the symbol of the axe and dragon, might place some bothersome interpretation on't."

"What kind of interpretation?"

Goruble spread his hands. "There's a tale, told in the taverns; a mystical hero, 'tis said, will appear one day bearing that symbol, to rid the land of, ah, certain encumbrances. Sheer balderdash, of course, but it might prove embarrassing to you to be taken for the warrior of the prophecy."

"Thanks for the tip." O'Leary twisted the ring on his finger. "Now, do you mind if I ask a few questions?"

"Ah, doubtless you're wondering why you were brought here to the palace, rather than being trussed in chains and cast into a dungeon along with the usual run of felons."

"No, I can't say that I am. Nothing around here seems to make any sense. But now that you mention it—why *am* I here?"

"'Twas our royal command. We instructed the Captain of the City Garrison a fortnight since

to comb the city and bring to us any person suspect of witchery."

Lafayette nodded, found himself yawning, patted his mouth. "Excuse me," he said. "Go on, I'm listening."

"'Tis a most strange manner of deportment you affect," the king said snappishly. "Hast no respect for royalty?"

"Oh, sure, uh, Your Majesty," O'Leary said. "I guess I'm just a little tired."

The monarch sat himself in deep leather chair, watched open-mouthed as Lafayette settled himself in another, crossed his legs comfortably.

"Here," the king barked. "We've given you no leave to sit!"

O'Leary was yawning again. "Look, let's skip all that," he suggested in a reasonable tone. "I'm pooped. You know, I have an idea these dream-adventures are just as fatiguing as real ones. After all, your mind—part of it, anyway—thinks you're really awake, so it reacts—"

"Have done!" the king yelped. "Your prattle threatens to unhinge my wits!" He glared at O'Leary as though pondering a difficult decision. "Look here, young man," he said. "Are you sure there isn't something you'd like to, well, tell me? A matter we might ah, discuss plainly . . . ? He leaned forward, lowered his voice. ". . . to our mutual advantage?"

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean—"

"Answer me straightly; yea or nay? Speak without fear; we offer you amnesty."

"Nay," Lafayette said flatly. "Absolutely nay."

"Nay?" the king's shoulders slumped. "Drat it, I was hoping . . . perhaps. . . ."

"Look here," Lafayette said in a kindly tone. "Why don't you tell me what your problem is? Maybe I can help you. I do have certain, ah, techniques—"

The king sat erect, looking wary. "We took you here aside to, ah, advise you privily that you'd have our royal pardon in advance for the practice of your forbidden arts in the service of the crown. You spurn our offer—and in the same breath hint at the possession of demonic powers. Almost it seems you ask to have your bones stretched!"

"I wonder," O'Leary said. "If I went to sleep now, would I wake up here—or back at Mrs. Mac-Glint's House?"

"Bah?" the king exploded. "But for a certain mystery I sense about you, I'd banish you forthwith to the county jail on a charge of lunacy!" He eyed the wine bottle on the table. "Tell me," he said in a confidential tone. "How *did* the bottle get in the desk drawer?"

"It was always there," O'Leary said. "I just pointed it out."

"But how—" The king shook his head. "Enough." He went to a bell-cord. "We'll hear your case in open court—if you're sure you have nothing to impart in confidence. . . .?" He looked at O'Leary expectantly.

"This is all nonsense," O'Leary said. "Impart what? Why don't you just tell me about yourself? I have an idea that you represent some sort of authority symbol—"

"Symbol?" Goruble roared. "We'll show you whether we be symbol or Sovereign!" He yanked the cord. The door opened; a squad of Household troops stood waiting.

"Escort him to the bar of justice," Goruble ordered. "He stands accused of sorcery."

"Oh, well," O'Leary said airily. "I guess it's no use trying to be reasonable. It may be amusing at that. Lead on, my good man." He gestured sardonically at the bull-necked corporal as the squad moved to box him in.

It was a five-minute walk along echoing corridors to the chamber where the hearing was to be held. A crowd of gaudily-clad men—and a few women in full skirts and cleavage—eyed O'Leary curiously as he came up under guard. The ceremonial sentries beside the double doors motioned him and his escort through into a domed chamber, a rococo composition in red and green marble

with heavy hangings of green velvet with gold fringes that reminded Lafayette of the lobby of the Colby opera house. At one side of the room a vast chair occupied a raised dais. A row of boys in baggy shorts, long stockings, pointed shoes, sailor's shirts and bangs raised long horns, blew a discordant fanfare. Through doors at the opposite side of the room the figure of the king appeared, wearing a scarlet robe now, followed by the usual retinue of hangers-on. Everyone bowed low, the women curtsying. Lafayette felt a smart kick in the shin.

"Bow, bumpkin!" a bearded stranger in pea-green knickers hissed. Lafayette bent over, rubbed the spot where the other's boot had bruised him. "How would you like a punch in the jaw?" he inquired.

"Silence! Wouldst have me rub your nose on the floor, wittold!"

"You and what other six guys?" O'Leary came back. "Ever had a broken leg before?"

"Before what?"

"Before you had a broken arm. I may just cross your eyes, too, while I'm at it."

"Art daft, varlet?"

"Maybe you haven't heard. I'm here on a witchcraft rap."

"Ulp?" The man moved away hastily. The king was seated on his throne now, amid much bustling of courtiers stationing them-

selves in position according to an elaborate scheme of precedence, each elbowing for a spot a foot or two closer to the throne. There were more trumpeting; then an old dodderer in a long black robe stepped forward, pounded a heavy rod on the floor.

"The Court of Justice of His Majesty King Goruble is now in session, he quavered. "All those who crave boons, draw nigh." Then, without pausing: "Let those who have offended against the just laws of the realm be brought forward."

"That's you, bud," a black-haired guard muttered. "Let's go." O'Leary followed as the man pushed through the throng to a spot ten feet from the throne where King Goruble sat, nibbling a slice of orange. The sovereign spat two seeds on the polished floor, looking O'Leary over.

"Well, how plead you, my man?"

"I don't know," O'Leary said. "What's the charge?"

"Sorcery! Guilty or not guilty?"

"Oh, that again. I was hoping you'd thought up something more original, like loitering at the Post Office."

A feminine-looking fellow in parakeet green stepped from the ranks of the retainers grouped around the throne, made an elaborate leg, waved an elegant bit of lace from which an odor of

dime-store perfume wafted.

"An't please your Majesty," he said, "the fellow's insolence gives him away. 'Tis plain to see, he has a powerful protector. The villain is, I doubt not, a paid spy in the hire of the rebel Lod!"

"Lod?" Lafayette raised his eyebrows. "Who's he?"

"As is doubtless well-known to you, his creature," the accuser smiled sourly at O'Leary. "Thus yclept is the fearsome giant, the bandit who impertinently presses a suit for the hand of her Highness, the Princess Adoranne."

"And dreams of the day he will usurp our throne," Goruble added. He slapped the carved arm of the throne, looking mad.

"Well, fellow, do you deny it?" the green-clad exquisite persisted.

"I never heard of this Lod," Lafayette said impatiently. "And I've already told you the sorcery business was silly. There *isn't* any such thing!"

Gorable narrowed his eyes at O'Leary, pinched his chin between jeweled fingers.

"No such thing, eh?" He gestured. "Let Nicodaeus come forward!"

A tall, well-muscled but slightly paunchy grey-haired man in yellow tights and a short cloak ornately appliqued with stars and crescent moons stepped from the ranks, bowed medium low before the throne, took a pair of rimless



glasses from a breast pocket, put them on, turned and studied Lafayette.

"You deny the existence of magic, eh?" he asked in a mellow baritone. "A skeptic." He wagged his head, smiling ruefully, reached up and took an egg from his mouth. A little murmur of wonder went through the crowd. The grey-haired man sauntered a few feet, paused before a plump lady-in-waiting, plucked a gaily-colored scarf from her well-filled bodice, tossed it aside, drew out another, and another. The fat woman retreated, squealing and giggling as the onlookers tittered.

"Well done, Nicodaeus!" a fat

man in pale purple puffed. "Oh, jolly well done!"

Nicodaeus strolled to the dais, leaned, with a murmured apology took a mouse from the king's pocket, dropped the tiny animal on the floor. It scurried away, amid dutiful squealing from the ladies. He plucked another from the king's shoe, a third from the royal ear. The monarch twitched, shot a sharp glance at O'Leary, waved the magician aside.

"Well, how say you now, O'Leary!" he demanded. "True, the feats of my faithful Nicodaeus are harmless white sorcery, blessed in the temple of Goop the Good and employed only in defense of our crown; but none can deny the ordinary laws of nature have here been set aside—"

"Fooie," Lafayette said. "That's just sleight-of-hand. Any carnival side-show prestidigitator has a better routine."

Nicodaeus looked thoughtfully at O'Leary, walked over to stand before him.

"Do you mind telling me," the magician said quietly, "just where you come from?"

"Well, I'm, ah, a traveller from a distant land, you might say," O'Leary improvised. Nicodaeus turned to face King Goruble.

"Majesty, when I heard your police had picked up a sorcerer, I looked over the report. The arrest was made in a tavern in the Street of the Alehouses, about

eight P.M. All the witnesses agree that he performed some sort of hocus-pocus with a wine bottle. Then when the officers were taking him out to the wagon, he reportedly tried to vanish, but didn't quite have the skill to manage it. I also heard a story that he cast some sort of spell on a woman, the wife of one of the arresting officers; changed her appearance, it seems—"

"Yes, yes, I know all that, Nicodaeus!"

"Your majesty, in my opinion all this is meaningless gossip; the product of wine-lubricated imaginations."

"Eh?" Goruble sat forward. "You're saying the man is innocent?"

"Not at all, Majesty! Hear me out. The really important point hasn't been mentioned yet. The accused was first seen, as I said, in the alehouse. . . ." He paused dramatically. "Before that—no one had caught a glimpse of him!"

"So?"

"Your Majesty doesn't seem to get the point," Nicodaeus said patiently. "The City Guards say he wasn't observed to approach the street where he was taken. The sentries at the city gates swear he never passed that way. He came from a far land, he says. Did he come by horse? If so, where are the stains of travel—and where's the animal itself?"

Did he walk? Look at his boots; the soles show no more dust than a stroll in a garden might account for!”

“Are you saying he flew here?” Goruble shot a sharp look at Lafayette.

“Flew?” Nicodaeus looked annoyed. “Of course not. I’m suggesting that he obviously slipped into the city by stealth—and that he has confederates who housed and clothed him.”

“So you agree he’s a spy?” Goruble sounded pleased.

Lafayette sighed. “If I wanted to sneak into town, why would I suddenly walk into a tavern in plain sight of the cops?”

“I think the costume explains that,” Nicodaeus said. “You’re tricked out as the Phantom Outlaw, I believe. You intended to convince the gullible patrons of the dive that you were this mythical ghost, and then force them to do your bidding by threats of supernatural vengeance.”

Lafayette folded his arms. “I’m getting tired of this nonsense,” he stated loudly. “Starting now, this dream is going the way *I* want it to, or I’m just going to wake up and to hell with it!” He pointed at Nicodaeus. “This phoney, now; if you’ll detail a couple of men to hold him down while somebody goes through his pockets, and the trick compartments in that dizzy-looking cloak, you’d find out

where all those mice come from! and—”

The magician caught O’Leary’s eye, shook his head. “Play along,” he hissed from the corner of his mouth.

“Lafayette ignored him. “. . . I’m getting just about fed up with nonsense about magic and torture chambers—” he went on. Nicodaeus stepped close. “Trust me—I’ll get you out of this—” He turned to the king, bowed his head smoothly. “The king is wise—”

“Nuts to all of you,” O’Leary said. “This is just like a dream I had a couple of weeks ago; I was in a garden with nice green grass and a little stream, and fruit trees, and all I wanted to do was relax and smell the flowers, but people kept coming along, bothering me. There was a fat bishop on a bicycle and a fireman playing a banjo, and then two midgets with a pet skunk—”

Nicodaeus thrust past O’Leary. “Majesty, the man appears to be guilty, as your Majesty so graciously pointed out. Still there are some curious aspects to the case. I ask that the fellow be paroled to my custody pending final disposition—”

Lafayette snorted disgustedly. “Some trial; you haven’t even made up your minds what I’m accused of, and you’re all ready to jail me—”

“Jail?” King Goruble snapped.

"You delude yourself, false knave—and you as well, Nicodaeus. This is no petty offense! The security of the realm is affected!"

"But, Your Majesty," the magician began—

"Have done! It is our royal will! The fellow will be turned over to the royal inquisitors, who'll have his secrets from him quick enough! And those who aided him will dangle from the gibbet beside him, you may depend on that!"

"Gibbet?" Nicodaeus looked upset.

"The fate of traitors is hanging!" The king slapped the arm of his throne again, looking down at O'Leary. "Now, if you have nothing more to say—"

"More?" Lafayette protested. "I haven't said anything, yet! This is a lot of nonsense! I'm just a visitor; I thought I'd have a great time here, see a lot of sights, meet some interesting people; instead, it's been one idiotic conversation after another about my being a magician. I suppose that's just my subconscious, trying to rationalize everything."

"This subconscious," the green-clad courtier said craftily. "This is a familiar spirit, I trow?"

"Just a figure of speech," Lafayette said. "Look, I have a suggestion: Suppose we forget all this, and plan something that's fun, like a picnic—"

"A picnic?" Goruble's face darkened. "While rebels plot openly to steal our throne? I think I see it now! You seek to lull me, that my enemy, astride his infernal dragon, may strike while revelries distract us from our vigilance!"

"A dragon, eh? That sounds interesting. What is it, the fire-breathing variety?"

"The monster breathes naught but a foul reek of human blood, as all men well know—particularly his paid spies! I waste my time, I see. Take him away, and extract the truth from him—and meanwhile gag him, to prevent his reciting spells!"

"Look, fellows," Lafayette said in a reasonable tone. "How can I confess with a gag in my mouth? And if I were a magician, I wouldn't be standing here letting you drag me away to be tortured, now would I?"

"Enough!" King Goruble snapped. "Take the rascal away, and extract the details of the plot!" Armed men thrust forward, looming up beside O'Leary.

"Your Majesty, a moment!" Nicodaeus cried out. He threw a comradely arm about Lafayette's shoulders, led him closer to the throne. "It just came to me!" he announced. "This man is no criminal! We've been making a terrible mistake! How stupid of me not to have realized sooner—"

"What are you babbling about,

Nicodaeus?" Goruble snapped. "One minute you're sewing up a watertight case, the next you're hugging the man like a long-lost brother!"

"My mistake, my liege!" Nicodaeus said hastily. "This is a fine young man, an upstanding subject of Your Majesty, a model youth. . . ."

"What do you know about him?" Goruble's voice was sharp. "A moment since, you said you'd never seen him before!"

"Yes. . . . Well, as to that—"

There was a tinkle of bells, and a face like a gargoyle's appeared between the king's feet.

"What's afoot!" a deep bass voice rumbled. "Your natterings disturb my slumbers!"

"Be quiet, Yockabump!" King Goruble snapped. "I'm conducting important business."

The face came farther out, a small body behind it; it was a dwarf, rising to bandy legs, looking around, scratching his chest.

"Solemn faces!" he bellowed. "All a bunch of stick-in-the-muds!" He whipped out an harmonica, tapped it on his oversized palm, started a lively tune.

"Sticks-in-the-mud, you mean," Goruble corrected. "Go away now, Yockabump! I told you I'm busy!" He glared at Nicodaeus. "Well, I'm waiting! What do you know of the fellow that should prevent his hanging by his thumbs?"

Yockabump stopped playing.

"You mean," he boomed, pointing at O'Leary, "you don't recognize this hero?"

Goruble stared down at him. "Hero? Recognize? No, I don't—"

Yockabump bounded forward, struck a pose and recited:

*When the dragon came out of
the west,*

*The worst ran away with the
best;*

*But one man with an axe
stopped the beast in his
tracks*

*And came home with the hide
of the pest.*

King Goruble frowned darkly. "Nonsense!" he said flatly. He turned to the dwarf. "No interference from you, mannikin; this is a matter of deepest import. Don't distract us with foolish stories—"

"But he is, in very truth, sire, the dragon-slayer of the prophecy!"

"Why, ah, as a matter of fact" Nicodaeus patted O'Leary heartily on the shoulder. "I was just about to make the announcement—"

Yockabump waddled up to O'Leary, threw back his head and stared at him.

"He doesn't *look* like a hero," he announced in his sub-cellar bass. "But a hero he is!" He turned his heavy head, winked grotesquely at the magician,

faced O'Leary again. "Tell us, Sir Knight, how you'll face the foul monster, how you'll overcome those mighty jaws, those awful talons!"

Goruble chewed at his lip, staring at O'Leary.

"Jaws and talons, eh," Lafayette said, smiling condescendingly. "No wings? No fiery breath? No—"

"Scales, yes—I think," Nicodaeus said. "I haven't seen him myself, of course—but the reports—"

A slender fellow in a pale yellow suit with a starched ruff came forward, sniffing a snuff box. He closed it with a click, tucked it in a sleeve, eyed O'Leary curiously.

"How say you, fellow? Wilt despatch the great beast that guards the approaches to the stronghold of Lod?"

There was a sudden silence. Goruble blinked at O'Leary, his lips thrust out.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Agree!" Nicodaeus muttered in O'Leary's ear.

"Certainly!" Lafayette made an expansive gesture. "I'll be only too pleased to attend to this little matter. My favorite sport, actually. I often kill half a dozen dragons before breakfast. I'll promise to annihilate any number of mythical beasts, if that will make you happy."

"Very well. . . ." Goruble looked grim. "A celebration is in

order, I suppose," he said sardonically. "I hereby decree a fete for tonight in honor of our valiant new friend, O'Leary." He broke off and shot Lafayette a fierce look. "And you'd better deliver the goods, young fellow," he added in an undertone, "or I'll have the hide off you in strips!"

CHAPTER IV

The room that O'Leary was shown to was forty feet long, thirty wide, carpeted, tapestried and gilt-decorated. There was an immense four-poster bed, a vast, carved wardrobe, a gaily decorated chamber-pot in a rosewood stand, a tall mirror in a frame, and a row of curtained windows with a view of strung lanterns in a garden where fountains played among moonlit statues of nymphs and satyrs. He tried a door, looked into a cedar-lined closet filled with elaborate costumes on satin-covered hangers. Another door opened into a tiny chapel, complete with a wheel of Goop and a fresh package of sacrificial incense sticks. There was one more door. O'Leary paused to give thought to what would be behind it, picturing the details of a cozy tiled bath with heated floor, glassed-in shower stall, plenty of hot water. . . . He reached for the knob, swung the door wide, stepped through—

There was a loud squeal; La-

fayette halted, staring. In the center of the small room was a long wooden tub containing soapy water and a girl, her dark hair piled high on her head, a few bubbles proving inadequate concealment for her charm. She stared back at him, an expression of amazement on her pretty features.

"Wha. . . ?" Lafayette stammered. "Where . . . but I was just. . . ." He waved a hand vaguely toward the door he had been concentrating on.

The girl gazed at him wide-eyed. "You—you must be the new wizard, sir!" She reached the towel from the rack attached to the side of the tub, stood, wrapping it around herself.

"I—I'm sorry!" O'Leary blurted, his eyes straying to the expanse of white thigh revealed by the skimpy towel. "I was just—I mean—" He stared around at shelves stacked with clean sheets and towels.

"Something's wrong here," he said protestingly. "This was supposed to be a bathroom!"

The girl giggled. "You can have by bath, sir; I'd hardly started—"

"But it wasn't supposed to be like this! I had in mind a nice tile bath, and a shower and plenty of hot water and soap and shaving cream—"

"This water's just right, sir." The girl stepped out onto the rug,

loosened the towel, began modestly drying her neck, holding the towel more or less before her. "I'm Daphne; I'm the upstairs chambermaid—"

"Gosh, Miss, I didn't mean to disturb you. I was just—"

"I've never met a real magician before," Daphne said. "It was so exciting! One minute I was right there in my room, looking at the crack in the plaster, and the next—zip! Here I was!"

"You were somewhere else—taking a bath?" Lafayette frowned. "I must have made a mistake," he mused. "Probably distracted by all the excitement—"

"I heard about the fete," the girl said. "It is exciting. There hasn't been a real affair in the palace for months, now—since that horrible ogre Lod came with his men under a truce flag to woo Princess Adoranne."

"Look, ah, Daphne, I have to get ready; after all, I'm sort of the guest of honor, so—"

"Oh. . . ." Daphne looked disappointed. "You didn't summon me on purpose?"

"No. Ah, I mean, I have to take a bath now—"

"Would you like me to scrub your back?"

"No, thanks." O'Leary felt himself blushing. "I'm sort of used to bathing myself. But thanks just the same. But, uh, maybe I'll see you at the party."

"Me, sir? But I'm only a chambermaid! They won't even let me watch from the kitchen door!"

"Nonsense! You're as pretty as any of them! Come as my guest."

"I couldn't, sir! And besides—I haven't a thing to wear." She tucked the towel demurely about her slender figure, smiling shyly.

"Well, I think that can be fixed." Lafayette turned to the clothes closet, considered. "What size do you wear, Daphne?"

"Size? Why, as you see, sir." She held her arms from her sides, twirled slowly around. Lafayette took a deep, calming breath, fixed his eye on the closet, concentrating. He opened the door, glanced over the array of finery, reached, pulled out a pink and gold brocaded gown.

"How about this?" He held it up for Daphne to see. She gasped. "It's lovely, sir! Is it really for me?"

"It certainly is. Now, just run along like a good girl; I'll be looking forward to seeing you at the party."

"I've never seen anything so pretty," she took the dress tenderly in her arms. "If you'll just lend me a robe, sir, I'll be off like a flash. I know just where I can borrow a pair of shoes to go with it, and. . . ."

Lafayette found a terry-cloth robe, bundled it about her shoulders, saw her to the door.

"I'd like to apologize again

about, ah, disturbing you in your bath," he said. "It was just an accident—"

"Think nothing of it, sir." She smiled up at him. "This is the most exciting thing that ever happened to me. Who'd have ever thought magicians were so young—and so handsome?" She went to tiptoes, kissed him quickly on the end of the nose, then turned and darted away along the hall.

There was a rap at the door as Lafayette was buttoning the last gilt button on the dark blue coat he had selected from the dozens in the closet.

"Come in," he called. He heard the door open behind him.

"I hope you don't mind my barging in on you," a deep voice said. Lafayette turned. Nicodaeus, trim in a grey outfit, closed the door behind him, took out a pack of cigarettes, offered them, lit up with what appeared to be a Ronson lighter.

"Say, you're the first one I've seen smoking cigarettes here," O'Leary said. "And that lighter—"

Nicodaeus fingered the lighter, looking at O'Leary. "Plenty of time for explanations later, my young friend. I just wanted to er, have a little chat with you."

"I want to thank you for helping me out this evening."

Lafayette plucked his sword belt from the bed, buckled it on,

paused to admire the cut of his new knee-breeches in the mirror. "For a while there it looked like Old Goruble had his heart set on railroading me into the Iron Maiden. What's eating the old boy?"

"He had an idea that if you knew a little magic, you might be a big help in the up-coming war with Lod's rebels. He was a bit put out when you denied it. You must excuse him; he's rather naive in some ways. I was glad to help you out; but frankly, I'm a little curious about you myself. Ah . . . if you don't mind telling me, where *did* you come from?"

In the mirror O'Leary watched the magician, still fiddling with the lighter. "That's kind of a long story, Nicodaeus. But you can rest assured I didn't come here to help any usurpers take over the throne."

"Eh?" The magician adjusted his glasses, looked piercingly at O'Leary. "What *did* you come for?" He was standing close behind O'Leary now.

"Just a sight-seeing trip," O'Leary said.

"You've never visited Artsia before?"

"Nope. Not that I know of. There was one dream I remember, about a glass house and a telescope—but there's probably no connection." He turned suddenly. Nicodaeus started,

dropped the lighter in his pocket.

"What's that you had in your hand?" O'Leary demanded. "What are you creeping up behind me for?"

"Oh, that. . . ." Nicodaeus blinked, smiling weakly. "Why, it's, ah, a little camera; you see I have a hobby—candid shots—and I just—"

"Let me see it."

Nicodaeus hesitated, then dipped into the pocket of his weskit, fished it out. It was made in the shape of a lighter—even worked as one, O'Leary saw—but it was heavy. And there were tiny dials set in its back. He handed it back. "I guess I'm overly suspicious, after being threatened by three different horrible fates in less than two hours."

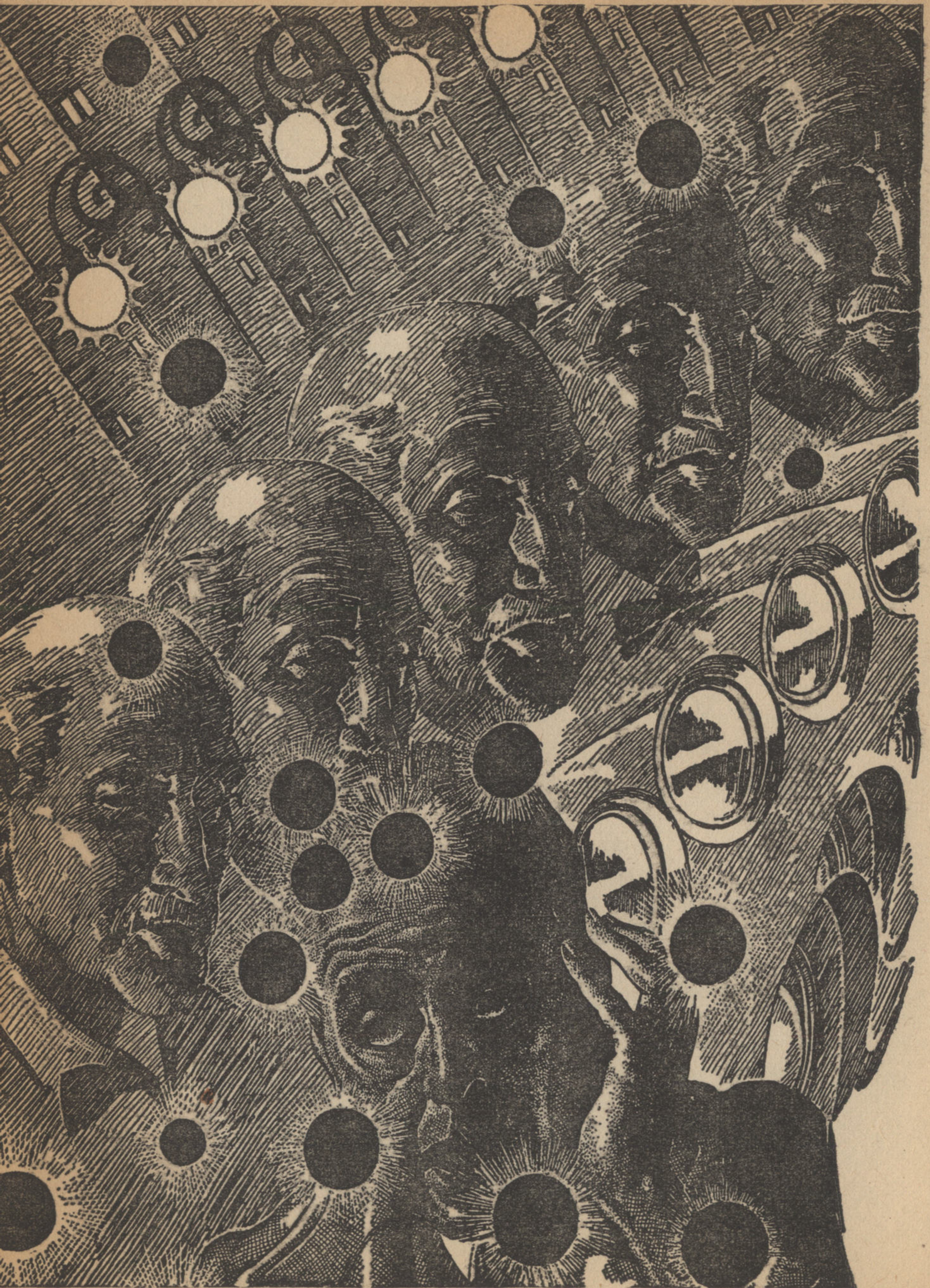
"Think nothing of it, my dear O'Leary." Nicodaeus glanced at the other's hand.

"Ah—I noticed your ring. Very interesting design. Mind if I have a closer look at it?"

O'Leary shook his head. "I can't take it off." He held out his hand for scrutiny. "What's so interesting about a ring?"

Nicodaeus looked grave. "The device of the axe and dragon happens to have a peculiar significance here in Artesia. It's the insignia of the old royal house. There's an old prophecy—you know how people like to pretend

(Continued on page 146)





By RAY BRADBURY

TOMORROW *and* TOMORROW

There aren't too many stories that successfully blend love and science fiction, but the few we do have—"Helen O'Loy" by Lester del Rey, "The Lovers" by Philip Jose Farmer, and "Flowers for Algernon" by Daniel Keyes—are unforgettable. And so is Ray Bradbury's "Tomorrow and Tomorrow," in which the lovers are separated by the cruellest of barriers, for young Steve Temple falls for a girl living in the future, his only contact with her an incredible typewriter, her only request that he turn killer now—even though to do so would mean that she'd completely forget that a man named Temple used to live and used to love her—centuries ago.

Illustrator: FINLAY

UP TO the time he opened the door, the day hadn't been any different from all the other days. Walking Los Angeles hunting for a job he couldn't find, looking in store windows at food he couldn't buy, and wondering why the habit of living got so strong you couldn't break it even after you didn't want it any longer.

It hadn't been quite so bad as long as he had his typewriter to come home to. He could thumb his nose at the world outside for a while and build new ones—bright shiny worlds where he was a very glamorous guy indeed and never went hungry. He could kid himself, even, that some day he might be a writer, rolling in money and adoration.

He'd rather have parted with his right leg than his typewriter. But none of the Uncle Bennies were paying money for right legs, and a guy has to eat and pay his rent.

"Oh yeah?" he snarled at the door panel. "Name two reasons why?"

He couldn't name one. He unlocked it, closed it behind him, turned on the lights, and started to take off his hat. He didn't. He forgot he had a hat, or a head under it. He just stood, staring.

There was a typewriter on the floor.

It was his room, all right. Cracked ceiling, dingy paper,

blue-striped pajamas trailing off an unmade wall bed, the memory of this morning's coffee.

It was not his typewriter.

There was no possible way for any typewriter to get there. That was bad enough, like finding a camel in the bathtub. But even at that, an ordinary camel you could take. It was the green ones with wings that really bothered you.

The typewriter was like that. It was big, and made of something that looked like polished silver, and it shimmered like a fish under water. It was so streamlined that it flowed into itself with an eerie feeling of motion. There was a sheet of fine crisp paper in the roller, and a lot of unfamiliar crimson keys on the board.

He stood staring at it, a man like the room he slept in, no particular size, shape, color, or age. Just a greyish blob of humanity with tired eyes behind thick lenses and a face with nothing in it but defeat. John Doe through the ages, the eternal zero without which multiplication can't exist.

He closed his eyes, shook his head, and looked again. It was still there. He said aloud:

"I have not been drinking. My name is Steve Temple. I live at 221 East 9th Street, and I owe three weeks rent. I have not had any dinner."

His voice sounded all right. It made sense.

THE typewriter didn't, but it stayed there just the same.

He took a deep breath and walked around it, carefully. It had four sides. It looked solid, except for the shimmer. It squatted calmly on the dingy rug and let its beautiful streamlining flow around on itself, looking as though it had grown there with the building.

He realized that he was sweating, very hard. That made him mad. It was his last clean shirt, and he owed the laundry.

"All right," he said to the typewriter. "You're here. And you're scaring hell out of me, if it makes you any happier. Now what?"

He bent over it, slowly, not liking it. Not liking it at all. Wanting to touch it because it was so beautiful, and cold clear down to his heels for the same reason

.....
It began to type, all by itself in the middle of the floor.

He didn't move. He couldn't. He crouched, frozen, watching the bright keys flash and strike with nobody touching them.

"Calling the past! Calling the past! Calling the past! . . . !"

It was like water hitting an oiled window and running off, not leaving a mark. He heard a chime ringing softly and he saw

the words. No wires—no operator—but it worked. Wireless. A radio-controlled typewriter.

He picked it up as if it were scalding him and set it on the table.

"Calling the past! Calling the past! Press down on stud marked **SENDING** and type reply. Press down on stud marked **Sending** —"

Steve felt something move. It was his hand, all by itself. *Press the stud.* He pressed.

The machine stopped and waited.

Silence. There was too much of it, too suddenly. Temple felt the blood rise in his cheeks, burn his ears. It was so very quiet that he finally had to make noise.

So he typed:

"Every good boy does fine. Every good boy does fine. Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country —"

Slamming, the typewriter jumped as if hit by fists. The chime jangled. Control jerked away from Temple.

"Hello!" the machine exclaimed. "You're alive there, then. I was afraid I'd reach past the era of typewriters. . . . Hitler didn't kill you, then—you're fortunate!"

"Hell, no," Temple retorted, loud. "Hitler's been dead ten years!" Then, realizing that speaking was impractical, he

said on paper: "This is 1955. Hitler's dead," and then he stared at his fingers, kicking himself, wondering what had made him put it down.

Typewriter keys gleamed, moving.

"Who are you, quick! Where are you located?"

Temple replied, "May I ask the same question? Is this a gag?" He snapped his fingers, inhaled hard. "Harry—is that you, Harry? It must be! Haven't heard from you since '47—you and your practical jokes!"

The RECEIVING stud clicked coldly. The SENDING stud spunged up.

"Sorry. Not Harry. Name is Ellen Abbott. Female. 26 years old. Year 2442. Five feet ten inches tall. Blonde hair, blue eyes—semantician and dimensional research expert. Sorry. Not Harry."

Steve Temple tried to blink the words away. It didn't work.

THE machine shuddered. Keys, carriage, platinum and scarlet keys dissolved as if showered in some instant-acid. It wasn't there any more. It was gone. And a moment later it slipped back, shining and hard under his hands. It came back bursting out its message quick and dark:

"I've got to get this over to you in a hurry, and yet to do it

correctly it should take a long period of carefully worded propaganda. But there isn't time. Idle talk in a dictatorship like Kraken's is fatal. I'll give you the simple, down to the bone facts. First, though, explain your background, the exact date and other associative details. I *must* know. If you can't help me, I'll withdraw the machine, refocus it in another era. Please reply —"

Steve wiped sweat off his face. "Name, Steve Temple. Profession—writer. Age 29, feel like a hundred. Date: Monday evening, January 10th, in the year 1955. I must be crazy."

Crazy or not, the typewriter made words:

"Good. I've focussed on the hairline of the Crisis! There's a lot to be done before January 14th, Friday of your year. My sand's running out. Hold on. The Guard is coming, escorting Kraken. They're taking me from this cell to Trial. I think they'll give the verdict tonight. So—tomorrow night: same time, I'll push contact with you again. I don't dare withdraw the machine. Chances of refocussing it to you are bad—Stand by—"

That was all.

The machine just sat there, shining white and saying nothing. Temple touched the keys. They were frozen hard.

He stood up, his eyes wide,

and put his last cigarette in his mouth, forgetting to light it. Then he looked around for his hat, found it on his head, and locked himself out of the room quick.

He walked in the park. That was nothing new, walking in the park, but it helped; he looked at stars, people and boats on the water. He walked until he got drunk-tired and he wasn't scared any more. Then he went back.

Without turning on the lights, he undressed and went to bed. An old trick. That way you imagined you were stopping over for a night at the Biltmore.

But there was no getting away from that odor of ancient cabbage. The Biltmore, he told himself, was getting run down.

Suddenly he switched on the lights. Looking across the room dazedly, minus his glasses, he saw the typewriter.

He turned the lights out again, pulled the covers way up over his ears.

"Sorry. Not Harry. Name is Ellen Abbott. Year 2442. Sorry. Not Harry."

He shivered.

SOMEBODY had kicked him in the head, for no reason. At least that's how it felt when he woke up the next morning. The room had a disturbed, electric feel to it, as if someone had drifted in, hovered over him,

and vanished instantly just before his eyes opened.

The door was locked on the inside.

Bed-springs whined when he shifted weight to drop long legs over the edge. Standing, he put on his glasses.

He saw the typewriter. He sat down again, very slowly.

Stubborn dream, that. It persisted in being real. Yet he had completely forgotten it during sleep, and he didn't know why he should forget something so dramatically shoved into his life.

Dressing, tidying up the room, he pretended to be interested in everything but the machine. It was a poor job of acting. Stalling as long as he dared, he exited reluctantly to hunt jobs. Pausing outside the door, he listened. Not a sound but his own breathing in his mouth. Then—he remembered. Tonight. Ellen Abbott had said it. Tonight. Same time.

He walked off to find work that didn't exist.

He must have walked a lot; his feet were swollen. He must have talked to dozens of people and had dozens of jobs refused him, and somewhere along the line he boarded a streetcar, because, that evening coming home he found an unused transfer in his hand. He found a dollar bill, too. Borrowed, he didn't know where, and he didn't care. Get-

ting to his room fast was the main thing.

It was the first time he had ever rushed home to that room or any room. Funny. The apartment house door swung ahead of him. He walked up rickety steps with his head down. Halfway up, he stopped. His face came up, jerking, all white afire and alert.

There it was. A faint singing of chimes. And beating as quickly as his heart, the sounds that were the typewriter keys.

It had been years since he had tried leaping steps three at a try. He learned how to do it all over again.

Closing the door he stiffened when he saw it. Like a man deep under clear thick water he walked across the room in dreamy slow motion. Clicking off somewhere, the typewriter sounded, but it was right in front of him:

“Hello—Steve Temple . . . !”

He held himself in. Fingers twitching indecisively on the keys, he shut his jaw, hard. Then he let himself go and it was easy.

“Hello, Ellen,” he wrote. “HELLO, ELLEN!”

In the first few quiet moments after contact was sealed, Temple reluctantly sketched in his life for her. Cramped, grey years dragging on like men slog-ging it out in a chain-gang. Nights of looking at a door, waiting for a knock, for some-

one to come in and be his friend. And nobody ever there but the landlord whining about his rent. His only friends lived between book-covers: a few of them had grown out of his typewriter before it was pawned. That was all.

Then Ellen Abbott spoke:

“If you’re going to help me, and you are the only one I depend on now to mould the future, Steve Temple, you deserve a complete explanation. My father was Professor Abbott. You’ve heard of him, of course. No, how blind of me. How would you know him; you’ve been dead five hundred years—”

Steve swallowed nervously. “I feel quite alive, thanks. Go on.”

Ellen Abbott went on:

“It’s a paradox. I’m unborn to you, and therefore unbelievable. And you’re dead and buried five centuries ago, and yet the whole future of the world revolves about us, two impossibilities, and especially about you if you agree to act on our behalf.

“Steve Temple, you will have to believe what I say. I can’t expect instantaneously blind obedience, but there are only three days, and if you refuse at the last act, and if you refuse at the last moment, all my talking will be for nothing when I could have been pleading with someone else in your age. I must convince you of my utter sincerity. There’s a job for you to do—”

Temple saw the next words and everything got dark and uneven inside him. The small room got cold, and Steve didn't move; he sat and stared at the words as they appeared:

"You have a job to do for me—no, not for me, but for all of us in the future."

THE next thing that came into focus was a cup of coffee in his right hand. Contracting his throat muscles, coffee scalded his stomach. The Greek was there. You could smell him, fat and greasy behind his beanery counter. Something white flashed: the Greek's teeth.

"Hello, Greek." Temple's lips barely moved. "How did I get here?"

"You walked in, just like you done every night last three years. You oughta take it easy. You look like a ghost. What's up?"

"Same thing. Is it foggy tonight?"

"Don't *you* know?"

"Me?" Steve chafed hands that were rimed with cool moisture. "Oh, yeah. *Sure*. Sure, it's foggy. I forgot." He drew a trembling breath, and it felt like the first one he had had in hours. "Funny thing, Greek—five hundred years from now they'll do away with fog"

"Chamber of Commerce pass a law?"

"Weather control," said Steve.

Control. He thought the word over and over again, and added. "Yeah. All kinds of control. A dictatorship, maybe."

"You think so?" Pursing his brows, the Greek leaned heavy on the counter. "You think, the way things work now, we get into one?"

"Five hundred years from now," said Steve.

"Hell. Who cares? Five hundred years!"

"Who cares? Maybe I do, Greek. I don't know yet." Steve stirred his coffee for a while. "Look, Greek, if you'd known Hitler for what he'd be forty years ago, and you'd had the chance, would you have killed him?"

"Sure! Who wouldn't? Look what a mess he made?"

"Think. Think about all the guys who grew up with Hitler, though. Some one of them must have guessed what he'd be. Did **THEY** do anything about it? No."

The Greek shrugged heavily.

Temple slumped over his coffee for a moment. "How about me, Greek? Would you kill me, knowing I'd be tomorrow's tyrant?"

The Greek made laughter. "You—another Hitler?"

Temple smiled twistedly. "See! You don't believe I could endanger the world. That's how Hitler got away with it. Because

he was a little guy long before he was a big guy, and nobody pays any attention to the little guys."

"Hitler was *different*."

"Was he?" Steve tightened up. "A paperhanger? Different? That's funny. Nobody recognizes a murderer until it's too late."

"Okay. Suppose I bump you off," offered the Greek. "So, how do I prove you're the next dictator. You're dead, so you're no dictator. It don't work out. They toss me in the clink."

"That's the whole thing." Temple was looking at a picture hung on the wall. A campaign advertisement of a healthy, pink faced man with crisp white hair and eyes that were blue and open. Under the picture was a label: J. H. McCracken for Congress, 13th District.

THINGS got black. Trembling violently, Temple rose from his seat, looked about wildly, passed his hands in front of his eyes and yelled it: "Greek! What's the date? Quick! I forget! I keep forgetting important things!"

It sounded as if the Greek was in an echo-chamber. "Five o'clock in the morning. January 11th. Ten cents, please."

"Oh, yeah. Yeah." Steve stood there, swaying, and still staring at that picture. The one of J. H. McCracken, electee to Congress.

"I've still got time, then. Three days before they kill Ellen—"

The Greek said, "Huh?" and Steve said, "Nothing," and he laid out two nickels on the counter. A moment later he faced the door of the beanery, opening it, and somewhere back a million miles the Greek was talking, "You going so soon?" and Steve replied, "I guess so." And then he said, "Greek . . . ?"

"Yeah?"

"Ever have a million nightmares and wake up afraid and wound tight in the dark, and then go back to sleep and have one of those dreams that are high and swift and beautiful and shine like stars? It's good, Greek. It's a change. You forget all the nightmares for a while. You wake up alive for the first days in years. That's what happened to me, Greek"

The door opened under his hand; the fog came in cold and salty against the warm food-smell. He thought about things and got scared he would forget them—Ellen and the machine and the future. He must NOT forget. Ever. There, on the wall, hung J. H. McCracken's picture. Now, take the *M* and the *c* off the last name and spell what's left with a *K*. The guy looked decent. He looked as if he loved his wife and kids.

Like it or not, it was a fact. J. H. McCracken was one of the

men he had to kill! He had to remember that.

He remembered something else, the first, the unconsciously ironic words that he had typed the night before on the machine:

“Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of—”

The future! Steve Temple walked outside and shut the door in the Greek’s puzzled face. Just like that.

The fog went away after awhile, taking the darkness with it, and pretty soon it was high noon.

Threading into the open rolling green of Griffith hills a bus carried Steve Temple to the warm, open fresh places described in the vivid tongue of Ellen Abbott.

He walked alone. Up ahead, where the years mellowed down into a haze with distance, there would be people, moving and speaking and living in the palatial structure of a Dictator. Buildings would soar up like silver spears hurled and frozen. There would be music, coming soft and sweet from the hidden radio-sources in trees and on hills and in coves. And across the sky airships would drift like flecks of dream-stuff.

Most of all, five hundred years from now—Temple climbed a high hill and stood looking at the calm quiet, closing his eyes—on this exact spot a woman named

Abbott would be held in the uppermost tier of a crystalline palace. Crimson keys would whisper under her fingers and her message would vibrate through five centuries—to him.

THE future was so real, he put out a hand, almost touching it. Wind rattled typewriter paper in his grasp, a scroll of dialogue twisted from the machine during the midnight hours.

In the midst of that future’s bright fabric, the black liquid threat of Kraken spread, staining. Kraken, the fourth of a dynasty, the pallid, soft-faced man who held the world in two fists and wouldn’t let it go.

Steve rubbed his jaw. Here he was hating a guy he would never meet.

He could only meet him indirectly. Hell. It was a fantastic sort of thing. Waging a war against a man, fighting across all those years. Who’d have thought a little guy like him would ever be given the chance to play hero to the world?

Ellen said a lot on paper. Steve read it over:

“Father and I sweated on the dimensional method as the only force powerful enough to uproot Kraken’s rigid foundation. Tracing history back to its most probable point, the Crisis where it would be easiest for the elimination of his ancestors, was our

job. Kraken passed laws forbidding Time-research, fearing it for what it was. He found out what my father was doing. On the day of my father's murder, I was captured and held. But the work was already done. I brought my 'typewriter' with me to the cell, supposedly to write my last day 'memoirs.' "

Here, Steve had interjected: "Why a typewriter?" and she gave the answer:

"Father wanted to go back to The Crisis and be sure the assassinations were done correctly. Guinea pig experiments resulted—well—rather unpleasantly. Some guinea pigs came back inside out. We don't know why. They just did. Not all of them. Some came back incomplete, minus heads, lacking bodies, and some never returned. We couldn't risk my Father on the job. Time 'travel' was impossible. Someone in the Past had to undertake the job, unquestioningly, without pay—"

"A guy by the name of Temple?"

"Yes. If he can, and if he will and if he is fully convinced that that future depends on it. Are you convinced, Steve?"

"I don't know. I think I am, but—"

"We tried radio, Steve. Speaking directly, how much easier it would be convincing you. But the fourth dimension destroys

radio waves. That was eliminated. Metal is more stolid than flesh or radio-wave, and out of that fact the typewriter came, strong, hard and welded of special alloys, the very last method we could use, the very best; and we've finally pushed through to you but time is shorter for all of us—"

Steve knew the rest of it by heart. This machine was a dimensional remanifestation of hers, self energized and compact. More about Kraken. The slaughter of innocent people, the slavery of billions. And the pages ending with: "You can make the dead to walk, Steve. You can resurrect my father, kill Kraken, free me from prison. All this you can do. I must go now. Tomorrow night again"

Steve looked up from the folded typed papers, looked up the sky where there should have been a tangible dictator's palace and Ellen in the top of it.

Instead, he saw nothing but clouds.

"—make the dead to walk."

He hitchhiked back to his room.

MAKE the dead to walk. Yes. Slay Kraken and automatically another Probable world would become concrete. The people he would have slain would live. Ellen's father—he, too, would not be assassinated.

The worlds of probable IFS. IF he sat looking at the typewriter, not touching it, for the rest of the week, Ellen Abbott would be slain. IF he killed McCracken, she would live.

There were a lot of IFS in life. A lot of things he COULD do if he so chose. He could go to New York or Chicago or Seattle. He had a choice. He could eat or starve in those cities. He had a choice. He could commit murder. Or robbery. Or kill himself. Choice. A lot of IFS. Each one, once chosen, leading to a different life, an existence different from the others.

So Ellen and Kraken weren't improbable. She lived in the most Probable IF-world. She would continue living in it and be executed Friday night if he didn't stop it. IF. IF. IF.

IF he had the nerve. IF he was successful. IF someone didn't stop him. IF he lived that long. Tomorrow's world was a honeycomb of probabilities, waiting to be filled with reality, with definite, decided actions.

THAT evening Ellen and he talked about music and painting. He learned of her passionate regard for Beethoven, Debussy, Chopin, Gliere, and someone named Mourdene born in 1987. Her favorite literature was the product of Dickens, Chaucer, Christopher Morley . . .

They didn't even mention a

man by the name of McCracken. Or another, named Kraken.

Through it all, Temple didn't have a body or a voice or anything but fire and warmth around him. His room was transformed with some touch, some essence of her yet unborn world. It was like sunlight pouring in through high, cathedral windows, washing away with clean light all the dingy world of 1955. You can't be lonely with sun on your face and inside you and your fingers working in unison on a machine with someone named Ellen Abbott, talking about sociology and psychology, literature, semantics and so many other important things.

"All the details must be clear, Steve. If you will believe in my world as it is and as it will become after you change it, you must know everything. I didn't expect you to learn or make up your mind immediately. That would be against every known rule of logic. I gambled on you —"

When midnight came, they were still bursting back and forth with a tide of information. Fashions, religions, beliefs.

And even—love.

"Very sorry," wrote Ellen, "that there was never time for love. I was so busy so many years, running from city to city, working, encouraging father. At the time, he was my one devo-

tion. Very sorry. If only there were time—”

“There’ll be time,” retorted Steve quietly. “If what you say about Probable futures is sound theory, then there’ll be plenty. More than you can use. I’ll see to it.”

“And—if you should fail?”

He didn’t want to think about it at all—not at all.

THERE was suddenly a lot of silence in the room. In the middle of it, Steve heard his heart pulsing at the base of his throat. He didn’t remember writing it; his hands only moved a few times, and there it was:

“I—I’d like to see you, Ellen. *Just once.*”

More silence. The silence lasted so long that he was afraid she would never speak again. But, she did.

“You’re a fine man, Steve Temple. Time changes little in the way of emotion. Look. There’s a weak energy field encompassing this machine. Press your fingers down, bend near the machine and concentrate. Maybe—for an instant—our images may become *en rapport*. Press close, Steve”

Steve obeyed instantly, something in his blank grey eyes that had never been there before. Something warm. His lips went back from his teeth, tight with expectancy.

Something happened to his lungs so he couldn’t breathe.

She was there.

Just a faint quavering outline at first, increasing. Sitting across from him. Across from him by five hundred years. Her hair was like the sun, and her eyes were grave and blue under the glow of that hair, and her pink mouth opened mutely and formed the words, “Hello, Steve —”

Just like that.

Then the image washed out, and the room was warm as molten steel on all sides of him, and they typed a bit longer, his eyes swimming, and then it was over for that night. She was gone, and he sat there looking at the place she had been. The room very slowly got cold again.

That night he had dreams *before* he went to sleep.

HE HAD never taken anything in his life.

He stole a gun, a nice new shiny paralysis gun from a Weapon Shop on East Ninth. It took half the day to get up the nerve to do it, five minutes to do it, and the rest of the day to try to calm down and forget about doing it.

By that time it was Thursday evening, and five hundred years away a woman was sitting down to write her “memoirs”

They talked less of frivolous

art things. They talked the hard, grim stuff that faced him in a short time. That glimpse, that one vivid materialization of her image the previous night, had convinced him. Someone so cool, so soft, so right in her loveliness, someone like her—well, he could sacrifice for her.

She put the blueprints at his fingertips with a few clean strokes of the keys. Late tomorrow afternoon, J. H. McCracken would be in his offices in North Los Angeles, preparing last moment details before planing to Washington. He must not leave the office. His son must not leave the office, either. They were to die.

“You understand everything, Steve?”

“Yes. I have the gun.”

“Is there anything that’s not clear?”

“Ellen—from time to time I forget things. Things waver. The first night, I slept; when I woke up, I’d forgotten. In the beanery, again, I had to be reminded of the date. I don’t want to forget you, Ellen. Why does it happen?”

“Oh, Steve, you still don’t understand. Time is such a strange creature to you. Like a fog, shifting in light and dark winds, the future is twisted by circumstance. There are two Ellen Abbots, and only one of them knows Steve Temple. When

something occurs that threatens her chances of ever existing, naturally you forget her. Your very contact, small as it is, with Time, is enough to waver it. That’s why you have flashing, momentary amnesia.”

He repeated it:

“I don’t want to forget you. I’ve gone ahead, hoping that if I indirectly killed Kraken, it would insure you life, but—”

She cleared it up for him. She did such a good job of it that it was like a hard blow in the stomach—like the rough kick of a mule.

“Steve, with Kraken eradicated, automatically a new free world will be born. As before, the same people will be in it, but they’ll be singing. The name Kraken will be a blank to them. And the millions he butchered will live again. In THAT world, there’ll be no place for Professor Abbott and his daughter Ellen.

“I won’t remember you, Steve. I will have never met you. There would be no reason, Kraken gone, for me to meet you. I’ll forget we ever conversed late at night or that I ever dreamed of building a time-typewriter. And that’s the way it will be, Steve, tomorrow night, when you kill J. H. McCracken.”

It stunned him. “But—I thought”

“I didn’t fool you purposely, Steve. I thought you realized

that tomorrow night would be the end, no matter what."

"I thought that some way you might get through alive to 1955 someday, or help ME to come to your time." His fingers shook.

"Oh, Steve. Steve."

He was getting sick. His throat ached, tight and hot.

"It's late, and the Guard is coming to check. We'd better say our last goodbye now—"

"No! Please, Ellen. Wait. Tomorrow."

"It'll be too late, then, if you kill McCracken."

"I have a plan. It'll work—I know it'll work. Just so I can talk with you once more, Ellen. Just one more time."

"All right. I know it's impossible, but—tomorrow night. Good luck. Good luck and good night."

The machine stopped moving.

It hit him hard, the silence. He sat there, weaving dazedly in the chair, laughing a little at himself.

Well—he could always go back to walking in the fog. There was always a lot of fog. It walked beside you, behind you, ahead of you, and it never spoke. It touched you once in awhile on the face as if it understood. That was all. He'd walk all night, come home, undress in the dark, and turn in, praying that once he slept he would never wake up again. Never.

"I'll forget we ever conversed late at night. I won't remember you, Steve."

IN THE late afternoon of January 14th, Friday, Steve Temple shoved the paralysis gun inside his dirty jacket and zippered it.

No matter what action he took, Ellen Abbott would be destroyed today. An execution chamber awaited her if he didn't move fast. And if he succeeded, then, too, the Ellen he had known would vanish like smoke-wisps in the wind.

He would have to kill McCracken very carefully so as to speak to Ellen again. He had to get to her once more before all of Time changed, reconsolidating itself for Eternity, to give her his final message. He thought it over. He knew exactly the words to say.

He started walking, fast.

It didn't feel like his body, it felt like somebody else's. Like getting used to a new suit, all tight and close and too warm for the weather; that's how it was. Eyes, mouth, his whole face set in one lined pattern he didn't dare break. Once he relaxed, it would smash the whole thing.

He got his shoulders back where they hadn't been in years, and he made fists of hands that had long ago relaxed in despair. It was almost like getting back

a hunk of self-respect, clutching a gun, knowing you were going to change the whole damned future's profile.

He had lungs again, and used them for breathing, and his heart wasn't just lying still in his chest. It yelled, wanting out. Sky clear overhead, his heels came down, smooth, swift, on concrete walks. Suddenly it was four o'clock in the afternoon. Strange buildings rose around him, numbers passing the calm scrutiny of his eyes. He kept walking because if he stopped, he'd never get his legs going again.

This was the street.

Suddenly he began to cry. It was all hidden behind the tautened lines of his face, warm and bitter, his brain lurching against dim skull-walls, his throat retching down to where the heart slammed upon it. Warm water got half out of his eyes before he stopped it. A wind blew far away, whining, but it was a very calm day, and there was no wind. Nothing must happen now to stop him, he thought. Nothing. He turned in at an alley, walked back to a side-door, opened it, went in.

He climbed a backstairs flight where the sun, his feet scraping softly, and his heartbeat were the only tangibles in a crazy nightmare. He met nobody. He wished he would meet

someone, someone who would say it was only play-acting, that he could toss the gun away, wake up. Nobody stopped him. Nobody said that to him. It was four long flights of sunlit stairs.

Inside his head, his brain ran around trying to put on the brakes, but there were none. He had to do it. You can't let the same thing happen all over again, like Hitler. Hitler growing up. Nobody laying a hand on him, or pumping his vile body full of lead. McCracken. The guy he was going to kill looked innocent. Everybody said what a swell guy he was. Yeah. But how about his sons, and THEIR sons?

Ellen. Moving his lips. Ellen. His heart moved. Ellen. Moving his feet. And there was the door. Silver-lettered across it:

J. H. McCracken, U. S. Congressional Rep.

PALE and quiet, Steve opened the door and stood looking at a young man who sat behind a bleached walnut desk. A green metal triangle said: William McCracken. The Representative's son.

One glimpse of a square, surprised face, mouth widened to the teeth, hands coming up to fend off the inevitable.

A pressure of a finger. The gun in Steve's hand kept purring contentedly like a sleepy

cat. He snapped it off, quick. All of it had taken an instant. One breath. One heart-beat. It was very easy and very hard to kill a man. He readjusted a stud on the paralyzing-tube.

From the next office, quietly: "Oh, Will, step in a moment, son. I want to check those Washington plane tickets again."

Sometimes it's hard to open a door, even an unlocked one.

That voice. J. H. McCracken, newly elected people's man.

Tighter and quieter, Steve opened the second door and this time McCracken was closer when he said, "Did you get them all right, son? No slip-ups?"

Steve looked at McCracken's broad back and said, "No slip-ups," so that McCracken heard. He swiveled around in his chair, a lit cigar in one hand, a fountain pen in the other. His eyes were blue and didn't see the gun. "Oh, hello," he said, smiling. Then he saw the gun and the smile went away inside him.

Steve said, "You don't know me. You don't know why you're being killed because you always leaned over backward to be clean. You never cheated at marbles. Neither did I. That doesn't mean someone else might not cheat five hundred years from now. Time's verdict says you're guilty. It's too bad you don't look like a crook, it would make it easier"

McCracken opened his mouth, thinking he could talk out of it.

THE gun sang its little song. There was no more talk. Steve sweated. Not too much power. Just enough to weaken the cardiac nerves. Walking in close, Steve kept the weapon singing half-power. Snapping it off, he bent, inserted fingers in the grey vest. The heart was still there, weak. Fading.

He said something funny to the body: "Don't die yet. Do me a favor—keep alive until I talk to Ellen again"

Then he shuddered so violently it was enough to rip the flesh from his bones. Sick, teeth chattering, his eyes blurred, he dropped the gun, picked it up and began worrying. It was a long way to his room, to the typewriter and Ellen.

He had to make it, though. Somehow he'd cheat the future. He'd think of some way to keep Ellen for himself. Some way.

He got hold of his fear, held it in one place, kept it there. Opening the door, he came face to face with McCracken's bewildered office staff. Three women, two men coming to say their goodbyes, frozen in shocked attitudes over the son's body.

Temple slammed the door, ran to a window, opened it, climbed out onto a fire-escape, shut it, started down. Someone flung up

the window behind him, yelled. Someone opened it and came down after him. Their feet made an iron clangor on the metal ladders.

Leaping to the alleyway, Steve fled for the corner, yanked open the door of the first cab he found, flopped in, shouting directions. Two of McCracken's men rounded the alley-corner, shouting. The cab slid away from the curb, smooth and quick. The cabbie hadn't heard a thing.

Temple fell back in the seat, mouth full of saliva he couldn't swallow, so he spat it out. He didn't feel like a book-hero. He only felt cold, scared and small, crouching there. He had changed the future. Nobody knew it but himself and Ellen Abbott.

And she would forget.

"Wait, Ellen. Wait for me, please."

So this is what it's like to save a world. To have frozen insides and hot tears on your face and hands that shake violently if you quit grasping your knees. ELLEN!

The cab hurled itself to a stop in front of his hotel. He staggered out, saying wild, silly things to nobody. He heard the cabbie yell, but he ran ahead, anyway. He got inside, ran upstairs.

He unlocked his door and then stood there, afraid to open it.

Afraid to look inside his room. The cabbie was coming up the steps behind him, cursing. What if everything was too late . . . ?

Sucking his breath in, Steve opened the door.

It was there! The typewriter was still there!"

Steve slammed the door, locked it, and then in one insane stumbling movement he was across the room to the machine, yelling and typing simultaneously.

"Ellen! Ellen Abbott! Ellen, I did it. It's all over. Are you still there?"

A PAUSE. Looking at the blank, horribly blank paper, his blood pounding through his veins until they ached. It seemed centuries before the typewriter keys moved and then it said:

"Oh, Steve, you succeeded. You did it for us. And I hardly know what to say. There's no reward for you. I can't even help you, and I wish I could. Things are changing already, getting misty and melting like waxen figures, flowing away in the Time Stream"

"Hold on a while longer, Ellen. Please!"

"Before, we had all of Time, Steve. Now, I can't hold reforming matter and moments. It's like snatching at stars!"

Down below, in a sunlit street, a car braked to a stop. Voices

broke out of the car, a metal door rapped home. McCracken's men, coming to find Steve Temple. Maybe with guns—

"Ellen! One last thing. Here, in my time, one of your ancestors must have lived—somewhere! Where, Ellen?"

"Don't hurt yourself, Steve. Don't you understand. It's no use!"

"Please. Tell me. Someone I could speak to, someone I could see. Tell me. Where?"

"Cincinnati. Her name is Helen Anson. But—"

Heavy footsteps pounding in the hotel hall, muffled voices.

"The address is 6987 C Street"

Then—the time was up. Across the city, McCracken lay pulsing out his last life. And here every beat of his fading heart acted upon Ellen and Steve Temple.

"Steve. Steve, I—"

Then he gave her his last message. The thing he had wanted to say for a long time, from inside him. The door was being beaten by fists and shoulders as he said it, but he said it anyhow, in the desperation of the last seconds:

"Ellen. Ellen, I love you. Hear me, Ellen! I love you! Don't go away now. Don't!"

He kept typing it over and over and over again, and he was crying like a kid and his throat

couldn't say it all, and he kept typing it over and over

. . . until the keys misted, dissolved, melted and flowed away under his fingers, and he kept typing it until all the hard, bright wonder of the machine was gone, and his hands fell through empty air to rap upon the top of an empty table.

And when they broke the door open, even then he didn't stop crying. . . .

THE END

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One of the remarkable things about Fritz Leiber is the ease with which he writes any kind of story. Science fiction, fantasy, weird—you name it and he's done them all. Just think of Gather, Darkness, "Scylla's Daughter," and (in the old Unknown) "Smoke Ghost," and you'll see what we mean. In that last story particularly Leiber helped to modernize the tale of terror, to take it out of haunted castles and moldering graveyards and put it into the dark, night-marish streets of a modern city. "I'm Looking for Jeff," written much later, belongs in this same category. After reading it, see if ever again you can drop in at a bar like the Tomtoms without thinking of Bobby—who always took the second stool from the left though no one could see her, except old Pops the bartender, young Martin Bellows (who lived to regret it), and now you—who probably will never forget her.

I'M LOOKING FOR "Jeff"

By FRITZ LEIBER

Illustrator: EMSH

AT six-thirty that afternoon, Martin Bellows was sitting at the bar of the Tomtoms. In front of him was a tall glass of beer, and behind the bar were two men in white aprons. The two men, one of them so old he was past caring about it, were discussing a matter—and while Martin wasn't really listening, much of the discussion seemed to be for his entertainment.

"If that girl comes in again, I won't serve her. And if she starts to get funny, I'll give her some real eye-shadow!"

"Regular fire eater, aren't you, Pops?"

"All this week, ever since she started to come in here, there's been trouble.

"Listen to him, will you? Aw, Pops, there's always trouble at a bar. Either somebody makes a

play for somebody's girl, or else it's two life-long buddies—"

"I mean nasty trouble. What about those two girls Monday night? What about what the big guy did to Jack? What about Jake and Janice picking the Tomtoms to break up, and the way they did it? *She* was behind it every time. What about the broken glass in the cracked ice?"

"Shut up! Pops is nuts, friend. He gets wild ideas."

Martin Bellows looked up from his beer at Sol, the young working owner of the Tomtoms, and at the other man behind the bar. Then he glanced down the empty stretch of polished mahogany and over his shoulder at the dim, silent stretches of the booths, where the lights from behind the bar hardly picked up the silver and gilt. He grimaced faintly.

"Anything for a little life."

"Life!" Pops snorted. "That isn't what she'd give you, Mister."

There's no lonelier place in the world than a nightspot in the early hours of evening. It makes one think of all the guys who are alone—without a girl or a friend—restlessly searching. Its noiseless gloom is a sounding board for the faintest fears and aches of the heart. Its atmosphere, used to being pushed around by the loud mouths of happy drunks, is stagnant. The dark corners

that should be filled with laughter and desire are ghostly. The bandstand, with the empty chairs sitting around in lifelike positions.

Martin felt it and hitched his stool an inch closer to the old man and the anxious, sharp-eyed Sol.

"Tell me about her, Pops," he said to the old man. "No, let him, Sol."

"All right, but I'm warning you it's a pipe dream."

Pops ignored his boss's remark. He spun the glass he was polishing in a slower rhythm. His face, puffed by beer and thumbed into odd hills and gullies by a lifetime of evanescent but illuminating experiences, grew thoughtful. Outside, traffic moaned and a distant train hooted. Pops pressed his lips together, bringing out a new set of hummocks in his cheeks.

"Name's Bobby," he began abruptly. "Blonde. About twenty. Always orders brandies. Smooth, kid face, except for the faintest scar that goes all the way across it. Black dress that splits down to her belly-button."

A car slammed to a stop outside. The three men looked up. But after a moment they heard the car go on.

"Never set eyes on her till last Sunday night," Pops continued. "Says she's from Michigan City."



I'M LOOKING FOR JEFF

Always asking for a guy named Jeff. Always waiting to start her particular kind of hell."

"Who's this Jeff?" Martin asked.

Pops shrugged.

"And what's her particular kind of hell?"

Pops shrugged again, this time in Sol's direction. "He don't believe in her," he said gruffly.

"I'd like to meet her, Pops," Martin said smilingly. "Like some excitement. Beginning to feel a big evening coming on. And Bobby sounds like my kind of girl."

"I wouldn't introduce her to my last year's best friend!"

Sol laughed lightly but conclusively. He leaned across the bar, confidentially, glancing back at the older man with secretive humor. He touched Martin's sleeve. "You've heard Pops' big story. Now get this: I've never been able to notice this girl, and I'm always here until I close. So far as I know she's just one of his pipe dreams. You know, the guy's a little weak in the head." He leaned a bit closer and spoke in a loud and mocking stage-whisper. "*Used weed when he was a boy.*"

Pops' face grew a bit red, and the new set of hummocks stood out more sharply. "All right, Mr. Wise," he said. "I got something for you."

He put the glass down in the

shining ranks, hung up the towel, fished a cigar box from under the bar.

"Last night she forgot her lighter," he explained. "It's covered with a dull, shiny black stuff, same as her dress. Look!"

The other two men leaned forward, but when Pops flipped up the cover, there was nothing inside but the white paper lining.

Sol looked around at Martin with a slow grin. "You see?"

Pops swore and ripped out the lining. "One of the band must have swiped it!"

Sol laid his hand gently on the older man's arm. "Our musicians are nice, honest boys, Pops."

"But I tell you I put it there last thing last night."

"No, Pops, you just thought you did." He turned to Martin. "Not that strange things don't sometimes happen in bars. Why, just these last few days—"

A door slammed. The three men looked around. But it must have been a car outside, for nothing came in.

"Just these last few days," Sol repeated, "I've been noticing the damndest thing."

"What?" Martin asked.

Sol shot another of his secretively humorous glances toward Pops. "I'd like to tell you," he explained, "but I can't in front of Pops. He gets ideas."

Martin stood up, grinning. "Got to go anyhow. See you later."

Not five minutes later, Pops smelled the perfume. A rotten, sickly smell. And his ears caught the mouse-faint creaking of the midmost barstool, and the tiny, ghostly sigh. And the awful feel of it went deep down inside him and grated on his bones like chalk. He began to tremble.

Then the creaking and the sigh came again through the gloom of the Tomtoms, a little impatiently, and he had to turn, although it was the last thing he wanted to do, and he had to look at the emptiness of the bar. And there, at the midmost stool, he saw it.

It was terribly indistinct, just a shadowy image superimposed on the silvers and gilts and midnight blues of the far wall, but he knew every part of it. The gleaming blackness of the dress, like the sheerest black silk stocking held up in near darkness. The pale gold of the hair, like motes in the beam of an amber spotlight. The paleness of face and hands, like puffs of powder floating up from a spilled compact. The eyes, like two tiny dark moths hovering.

"What's the matter, Pops?" Sol asked sharply.

He didn't hear the question. Although he'd have given anything not to have to do it, he was edging shakily down the bar, hand grasping the inner margin for support, until he stood before the midmost stool.

Then he heard it, the faint clear voice that seemed to ride a mosquito's whine, as they say the human voice rides a radio wave. The voice that knifed deep, deep into his head.

"Been talking about me, Pops?"

He just trembled.

"Seen Jeff tonight, Pops?"

He shook his head.

"What's the matter, Pops? What if I'm dead and rotting? Don't shake so, Pops, you've got the wrong build for a shimmy dancer. You should be complimented I show myself to you. You know, Pops, at heart every woman's a stripper. But most of them just show themselves to the guy they like, or need. I'm that way. I don't show myself to the bums. And now give me a drink."

His trembling only increased.

The twin moths veered toward him. "Got polio, Pops?"

In a spasm of haste he jerked around, stooping. By blind fumbling he found the brandy bottle under the ranked glasses, poured a shaky shot, set it down on the bar and stepped back.

"What the hell are you up to!"

He didn't even hear the angry question, or realize that Sol was moving toward him. Instead, he stood pressed back as far as he could, and watched the powder-cloud fingers wind around the shot glass like tendrils of smoke, and heard the bat-shrill voice

laugh ruefully and say, "Can't manage it that way, haven't got strength enough yet," and watched the twin moths, and something red and white-edged just below them, dip toward the brandy.

Then for a moment a feeling reached out and touched Sol, for though no hand was on the bar, the shot glass shook, and a little rill of brandy snaked down its side and pooled on the mahogany.

"What the . . .," Sol began, and then finished, "Those damn trucks, they shake the whole neighborhood."

And all the while Pops was listening to the bat-shrill voice: "That helped, Pops," and then, with a wheedling restlessness, "What's on tonight, Pops? Where can a girl get herself some fun? Who was the tall, dark and handsome that left a while ago? You called him Martin?"

Sol, finally fed up, came striding toward Pops. "And now you'll please explain just what the—"

"Wait!" Pops hand snapped out and clamped on Sol's arm so that the younger man winced. "She's getting up," he gasped. "She's going after him. We got to warn him."

Sol's sharp gaze quickly flashed where Pops was looking. Then, with a little snarl, he shook off Pops' hand and gripped him in turn.

"Look here, Pops, are you really smoking weed?"

The older man struggled to free himself. "We got to warn him, I tell you, before she drinks herself strong enough to make him notice her, and starts putting her broken-bottle ideas into his head."

"Pops!" The shout in the ear stiffened the older man, so that he stood there quietly, though rigid, while Sol said, "They probably have some nut bars out on West Madison Street they don't mind having nuts behind. Probably, I don't know. But you're going to have to start looking for one of them if you pull any more of these goofy acts, or start talking about any Bobby and broken glass." His fingers kneaded the old man's biceps. "Get it?"

Pops' eyes were still wild. But he nodded twice, stiffly.

The evening started out heavy and indigestible for Martin Belows, but after a while it began to float like the diamond-dusted clouds of light around the street lamps. The session with Pops and Sol had given him a funny sort of edge, but he rode out the mood, drifting from tavern to tavern, occasionally treating a decent-looking guy to a drink and letting himself be treated in turn, sharing that courtesy silently, not talking very much, kidding a bit with the girls behind the bars while he covertly eyed those in

front. After five taverns and eight drinks, he found he'd picked up one of them.

She was a small willowy girl with hair like a winter sunrise and a sleekly-fitting black dress, high-necked but occasionally revealing a narrow ribbon of sweet flesh. Her eyes were dark and friendly, and not exactly law-abiding, and her face had the smooth matte quality of pale doe-skin. He was aware of a faint gardenia perfume. He put his arm around her and kissed her lightly, under the street lamp, not closing his eyes, and as he did so he noticed that her face had a blemish. The tiniest line of paler flesh, like a single strand of spiderweb, began at her left temple and went straight across the lids of her left eye and the bridge of her nose and back across the right cheek. It enhanced her beauty, he thought.

"Where'll we go?" he asked.

"How about the Tomtoms?"

"A little too early." Then, "Say! I'll bet your name is Bobby. That's what Pops"

She shrugged. "He likes to talk."

"Sure you are! Pops was spieling about you at a great rate." He smiled at her fondly. "Claims you're an evil influence."

"Yes?"

"But don't worry about that. Pops is stark, raving nuts. Why, only this evening—"

"Well, let's go some place else," she interrupted. "I need a drink, lover."

And they were off, Martin with his heart singing, because what you always look for and never find had actually happened to him: he had found a girl who set his imagination and his thirst aflame. Every minute made him more desirous and prouder of her. Bobby was the perfect girl, he decided. She didn't get loud, or quarrelsome, or complaining, or soul-baring, or full of supposedly cute, deliberately exasperating whims. Instead, she was gay and smooth and beautiful, fitting his mood like a glove, yet with that hint of danger and savagery that can never be divorced from the dizzy fumes of alcohol and the dark streets of cities. He found himself growing very foolish about her. He even came to dote on her spiderlike scar, as if it were an expert repair job done on an expensive French doll.

They went to three or four delightful taverns, one where a gray-haired woman sang meltingly, one that showed silent comedies on a small screen instead of television, one full of framed pencil portraits of unknown, unimportant people. Martin got through all the early stages of intoxication—the eager, the uneasy, the dreamily blissful—and emerged safely into that

crystal world where time almost stands still, where nothing is surer than your movements and nothing realer than your feelings, where the tight shell of personality is shattered and even dark walls and smoky sky and gray cement underfoot are sentient parts of you.

But after a while he kissed Bobby again, in the street, holding her longer and closer this time, plunging his lips to her neck, drowning in the autumn-garden sweetness of gardenia perfume, murmuring unsteadily, "You've got a place around here?"

"Yes."

"Well"

"Not now, lover," she breathed. "First let's go to the Tomtoms."

He nodded and drew a bit back from her, not angrily.

"Who's Jeff?" he asked.

She looked up at him. "Do you want to know?"

"Yes."

"Look, lover," she said softly, "I don't think you'll ever meet Jeff. But if you do, I want you to promise me one thing—I won't ever ask for anything else." She paused, and all the latent savagery glowed in the pale mask of her features. "I want you to promise me that you'll break the bottom off a beer bottle and jam it into his fat face."

"What'd he do to you?"

The pale mask was enigmatic.

"Something much worse than you're thinking," she told him.

Looking down at Bobby's still, expectant face, Martin felt a thrill of murderous excitement go through him.

"Promise?" she asked.

"Promise," he said huskily.

Sol was content only during the busy hours when life ran high in the Tomtoms. Lovers for an evening or forever, touching knees under the tables, meant money in the register.

Sol and Pops had had a busy two hours, but now there was a lull between jazz sessions, and Sol had time to chew the rag a bit with a burly and interesting-looking stranger.

"Talk about funny things, friend, here's one for you," he said, leaning across the bar with a confidential smile. "See that stool second on your left? Every night this week, after one a.m., nobody sits on it."

"It's empty now," the burly man told him.

"Sure, and the one next to you. But I'm talking about after one a.m.—that's a couple of minutes yet—when our business hits its peak. No matter how big the crowd is—they could be standing two deep other places—nobody ever occupies that one stool. Why? I don't know. Maybe it's just chance. Maybe there's something funny I haven't figured

out yet makes them sheer off from it."

"Just chance," the burly man opined stolidly. He had a fighter's jaw and a hooded gaze.

Sol smiled. Across the room the musicians were climbing back onto the bandstand, leisurely settling themselves.

"Maybe, friend. But I got a feeling it's something else. Maybe something very obvious, like that it's got a leg that's a teensy bit loose. But I'm willing to bet it'll stay empty tonight. You watch. Six nights in a row is too good for just chance. And I'd swear on a stack of Bibles it's been empty six nights straight."

"That just ain't so, Sol."

Sol turned. Pops was standing behind him, eyes scared and angry like they'd been earlier, lips working a little.

"What do you mean, Pops?" Sol asked him, trying not to show irritation in front of his new customer.

Pops walked off muttering.

"Got to see that the girls are taking care of the tables," Sol excused himself to the burly man and went after Pops. When he caught up with him he said in an undertone, not looking at him, "Damn it, Pops, are you just trying to make yourself unpleasant?" Across the room the bandleader stood up and smiled around at his boys. "If you think I'm going to take that kind of

stuff from you, you're crazy."

"But, Sol," Pops' voice was quavery now, almost as if he were looking for protection, "there ain't ever been an empty place at the bar after one a.m. this week. And as for that particular stool —"

The humorous trumpet-bray opening the first number, spraying a ridicule of all pomp and circumstance across every square inch of the Tomtoms, cut him short.

"Yes?" Sol prompted.

But now Pops was no longer aware of him. It was one a.m. and across the smoky distance of the Tomtoms he was watching her come, materializing from the gloom of the entry, no longer a thing of smoke but strong with the night and the night's secret powers, solidly blocking off the first booths and the green of the dice-table as she passed them.

He noted without surprise or regret that she'd caught the nice boy she'd gone after, as she caught everything she went after. And now nearer and nearer—the towel dropped from Pops' fingers—past the bandstand, past the short, chromium-fenced stretch of bar where the girls got the drinks for the tables, until she spun herself up onto the midmost barstool and smiled cruelly at him. "'Lo, Pops."

The nice boy sat down next to her and said, "Two brandies,

Pops. Soda chasers." Then he took out a pack of cigarettes, began to battle through his pockets for matches.

She touched his arm. "Get me my lighter, Pops," she said.

Pops shook.

She leaned forward a little. The smile left her face. "I said get me my lighter, Pops."

He ducked like a man being shot at. His numb hands found the cigar box under the bar. There was something small and black inside. He grabbed it up as if it were a spider and thrust it down blindly on the bar, jerked back his hand. Bobby picked it up and flicked her thumb and lifted a small yellow flame to the nice boy's cigarette. The nice boy smiled at her lovingly and then asked, "Hey, Pops, what about our drinks?"

For Martin, the crystal world was getting to be something of a china shop. Stronger and stronger, slowly and pleasurably working toward a climax like the jazz, he could feel the urge toward wild and happy action. Masculine action, straight-armed, knife-edged, dramatic, destroying or loving half to death everything around him. Waiting for the inevitable—whatever it would be—he almost gloated.

The old man half spilled their drinks, he was in such a hurry setting them down.

Pops really did seem a bit nuts,

just like Sol had said, and Martin stopped the remark he'd half intended to make about finding Pops' girl. Instead, he looked at Bobby.

"You drink mine, lover," she said, leaning close to be heard over the loud music, and again he saw the scar. "I've had enough."

Martin didn't mind. The double brandy burned icily along his nerves, building higher the cool flame of savagery that was fanned by the band blaring derision at the haughty heads and high towers of civilization.

A burly man, who was taking up a little too much room beside Martin, caught Sol's attention as the latter passed inside the bar, and said, "So far you're winning. It's still empty." Sol nodded, smiled, and whispered some witicism. The burly man laughed, and in appreciation said a dirty word.

Martin tapped his shoulder. "I'll trouble you not to use that sort of language in front of my girl."

The burly man looked at him and beyond him, said, "You're drunk, Joe," and turned away.

Martin tapped his shoulder again. "I said I'd trouble you—"

"You will Joe, if you keep it up," the burly man told him, keeping a poker face. "Where is this girl you're talking about?"

In the washroom? I tell you, Joe, you're drunk."

"She's sitting right beside me," Martin said, enunciating each word with care and staring grimly into the eyes of the poker face.

The burly man smiled. He seemed suddenly amused. "Okay, Joe," he said, "let's investigate this girl of yours. What's she like? Describe her to me."

"Why, you—" Martin began, drawing back his arm.

Bobby caught hold of it. "No, lover," she said in a curiously intent voice. "Do as he says."

"Why the devil—"

"Please, lover," she told him. She was smiling tightly. Her eyes were gleaming. "Do just as he says."

Martin shrugged. His own smile was tight as he turned back to the burly man. "She's about twenty. She's got hair like pale gold. She looks a bit like Veronica Lake. She's dressed in black and she's got a black cigarette lighter."

Martin paused. Something in the poker face had changed. Perhaps it was a shade less ruddy. Bobby was tugging at his arm.

"You haven't told him about the scar," she said excitedly.

He looked at her, frowning.

"Tell him about the scar too."

"Oh, yes," he said, "and she's got the faintest scar running down from her left temple over

her left eyelid and the bridge of her nose, and across her right cheek to the lobe of her—"

He stopped abruptly. The poker face was ashen, its lips were working. Then a red tide started to flood up into it, the eyes began to look murder.

Martin could feel Bobby's warm breath in his ear, the flick of her wet tongue. "Now, lover. Get him now. That's Jeff."

Swiftly, yet very deliberately, Martin shattered the rim of his chaser glass against the shot glass and jammed it into the burly man's flushing face.

A shriek that wasn't in the score came out of the clarinet. Someone in the booths screamed hysterically. A bar stool went over as someone else cringed away. Pops screamed. Then everything was whirling movement and yells, grabbing hands and hurtling shoulders, scrambles and sprawls, crashes and thumps, flashes of darkness and light, hot breaths and cold drafts, until Martin realized that he was running with Bobby beside him through gray pools of street light, around a corner into a darker street, around another corner. . . .

Martin stopped, dragging Bobby to a stop by her wrist. Her dress had fallen open. He could glimpse her small breasts. He grabbed her in his arms and buried his face in her warm neck,

sucking in the sweet, heavy reek of gardenia.

She pulled away from him convulsively. "Come on, lover," she gasped in an agony of impatience. "Hurry, lover, hurry."

And they were running again. Another block and she led him up some hollowed steps and past a glass door and tarnished brass mailboxes and up a worn-carpeted stair. She fumbled at a door in a frenzy of haste, threw it open. He followed her into darkness.

"Oh, lover, hurry," she threw to him.

He slammed the door.

Then it came to him, and it stopped him in his tracks. The awful stench. There was gardenia in it, but that was the smallest part. It was an elaboration of all that is decayed and rotten in gardenia, swollen to an unbearable putrescence.

"Come to me, lover," he heard her cry. "Hurry, hurry, lover, hurry—what's the matter?"

The light went on. The room was small and dingy with table and chairs in the center and dark, overstuffed things back against the walls. Bobby dropped to the sagging sofa. Her face was white, taut, apprehensive.

"What did you say?" she asked him.

"That awful stink," he told her, involuntarily grimacing his distaste. "There must be some-

thing dead in here."

Suddenly her face turned to hate. "Get out!"

"Bobby," he pleaded, shocked. "Don't get angry. It's not your fault."

"Get out!"

"Bobby, what's the matter? Are you sick? You look green."

"Get out!"

"Bobby, what are you doing to your face? What's happening to you? Bobby! BOBBY!"

Pops spun the glass against the towel with practiced rhythm. He eyed the two girls on the opposite side of the bar with the fatherliness of an old and snub-nosed satyr. He drew out the moment as long as he could.

"Yep," he said finally, "it wasn't half an hour after he screwed the glass in that guy's face here that the police picked him up in the street outside her apartment, screaming and gibbering like a baboon. At first they were sure he was the one who killed her, and I guess they gave him a real going-over. But then it turned out he had an iron-clad alibi for the time of the crime."

"Really?" the redhead asked.

Pops nodded. "Sure thing. Know who really did it? They found out."

"Who?" the cute little brunette prompted.

"The same guy that got the

glass in his face," Pops announced triumphantly. "This Jeff Croper fellow. Seems he was some sort of a racketeer. Got to know this Bobby in Michigan City. They had a fight up there, don't know what, guess maybe she was two-timing him. Anyway, she thought he was over being mad, and he let her think so. He brought her down to Chicago, took her to this apartment he had, and beat her to death."

"That's right," the old man affirmed, rubbing it in when the cute little brunette winced. "Beat her to death with a beer bottle."

The redhead inquired curiously, "Did she ever come here, Pops? Did you ever see her?"

For a moment the glass in Pops' towel stopped twirling. Then he pursed his lips. "Nope," he said emphatically, "I couldn't have. 'Cause he murdered her the night he brought her down

to Chicago. And that was a week before they found her." He chuckled. "A few days more and it would have been the sanitary inspectors who discovered the body—or the garbage man."

He leaned forward, smiling, waiting until the cute brunette had lifted her unwilling fascinated eyes. "Incidentally, that's why they couldn't pin it on this Martin Bellows kid. A week before—at the time she was killed—he was hundreds of miles away."

He twirled the gleaming glass. He noticed that the cute brunette was still intently watching him. "Yep," he said reflectively, "it was quite a job that other guy did on her. Beat her to death with a beer bottle. Broke the bottle doing it. One of the last swipes he gave her laid her face open all the way from her left temple to her right ear."

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If you know anyone who can burn a hole in a rug just by thinking about it or who can give a telekinetic boost to our Moon rocket when it's ready to blast off, then get in touch with Sam Waverley of Wild Talents, Inc., a unique organization that finds unusual jobs for unusual people. But if you come across someone like Sidney Eskin (scientist and escapee from Blackstone Sanitarium), who "observes" people in a peculiar and disconcerting way, we don't think Mr. Waverley would take kindly to your sending him over for an interview. Why not? Well, let Robert Sheckley tell you about the whole incredible mess. It's one of the best and funniest stories he did before turning his talents to other fields from which we all hope he'll soon return.

WILD TALENTS, INC.

By **ROBERT SHECKLEY**

Illustrator: **EMSH**

GLANCING at his watch, Waverley saw that he still had ten minutes before the reporters were due. "Now then," he said in his best interviewing voice, "What can I do for you, sir?"

The man on the other side of the desk looked startled for a moment, as though unaccustomed to being addressed as "sir." Then he grinned, suddenly and startlingly.

"This is the place, isn't it?" he asked. "The place of refuge?"

Waverley looked intently at the thin, bright-eyed man. "This is Wild Talents, Incorporated," he said. "We're interested in any supernatural powers."

"I knew that," the man said, nodding his head vigorously. "That's why I escaped. I know you'll save me from them." He glanced fearfully over his shoulder.

"We'll see," Waverley said dip-



EMSH-

lOMATICALLY, settling back in his chair. His young organization seemed to hold an irresistible fascination for the lunatic fringe. As soon as he had announced his interest in psi functions and the like, an unending stream of psychotics and quacks had beat a path to his door.

But Waverley didn't bar even the obvious ones. Ridiculously enough, you sometimes found a genuine psi among the riffraff, a diamond in the rubbish. So—

"What do you do, Mr.—"

"Eskin. Sidney Eskin," the man said. "I am a scientist, sir." He drew his ragged jacket together, assuming an absurd dignity. "I observe people, I watch them, and note down what they are doing, all in strict accordance with the best scientific methods and procedure."

"I see," Waverley said. "You say you escaped?"

"From the Blackstone Sanitarium, sir. Frightened by my investigations, secret enemies had me locked up. But I escaped, and have come to you for aid and sanctuary."

Tentatively, Waverley classified the man as paranoidal. He wondered if Eskin would become violent if he tried to call Blackstone.

"You say you observe people," Waverley said mildly. "That doesn't sound supernatural—"

"Let me show you," the man

said, with a sudden show of panic. He stared intently at Waverley. "Your secretary is in the reception room, seated at her desk. She is, at the moment, powdering her nose. She is doing it very delicately, applying the strokes with a circular motion. Now she is reaching forward, the powder box in her hand—ah! She has inadvertently spilled it against the typewriter. She says 'Damn!' under her breath. Now she—"

"Hold it," Waverley said. He hurried over and opened the door to the reception room.

Doris Fleet, his secretary, was mopping up spilled powder. Some of it had dusted her black hair a creamy white, giving her the appearance of a kitten that had rolled in flour.

"I'm sorry, Sam," she said.

"On the contrary," Waverley said. "I'm grateful." He didn't bother to explain, but closed the door and hurried back to Eskin.

"You will protect me?" Eskin asked, leaning over the desk. "You won't let them take me back?"

"Can you observe like that all the time?" Waverley asked.

"Of course!"

"Then don't worry about a thing," Waverley said, calmly, but with a pulse of excitement rising within him. Lunatic or not, Eskin wasn't going to waste his talents in any sanitarium. Not if

Waverley had anything to do about it.

The intercom on his desk buzzed. He flipped the switch, and Doris Fleet said, "The reporters are here, Mr. Waverley."

"Hold them a moment," Waverley said, smiling to himself at her "official" tone of voice. He ushered Eskin to a little room adjoining his office. "Stay here," he told him. "Don't make any noise, and don't worry."

He closed the door, locked it, and told Doris to let the reporters in.

There were seven of them, pads out, and Waverley thought he could detect a certain grudging respect in their faces. Wild Talents, Inc., wasn't a back-page filler any more. Not since Billy Walker, Waverley's star psi, had aided the flight of the *Venture* to Mars with a terrific telekinetic boost. Since then, Wild Talents had been front page news.

Waverley had played it for all it was worth, holding back until he felt the maximum point of interest had been reached.

This was the point. Waverley waited until they were all quiet.

"Wild Talents, Incorporated, gentlemen," he told them, "is an attempt to find the occasional person among the general population who has what we call psi powers."

"What is a psi power?" a lanky reporter asked.

"It's difficult to define," Waverley said, smiling with what he hoped was perfect candor. "Let me put it to you this way—"

"*Sam!*" He heard Doris Fleet's voice in his head as clearly as though she were standing beside him. Although she might not be the best of secretaries, Doris *was* a telepath. Her ability worked only about twenty percent of the time, but that twenty percent sometimes came in handy.

"Sam, two of the men in your office. They're not reporters."

"What are they?" he thought back.

"I don't know," Doris told him. "But I think they might mean trouble."

"Can you get a line on what sort of trouble?"

"No. They're the ones in the dark suits. They're thinking—
Her thought died out.

Telepathy is lightning fast. The entire exchange had taken perhaps a second. Waverley spotted the two men, sitting a little apart from the rest, and taking no notes. He went on.

"A psi, gentlemen, is a person with some form of mental control or development, the true nature of which we can only guess at. Today, most psi's are to be found in circuses and sideshows. They lead, for the most part, unhappy, neurotic lives. My organization is trying to find the work

that their special talents equip them for. Next we hope to discover why and how it works, and what makes it so erratic. We want—”

He continued, laying it on thick. Public acceptance was a big factor in his work, a factor he had to have on his side. The public, stimulated by atomic power and enormously excited by the recent flights to the Moon and Mars, was prepared to accept the idea of psi, if it were made sufficiently understandable for them.

So he painted the picture in rosy colors, skipping over most of the stumbling blocks. He showed the psi, capable of dealing with his environment on a direct mental level; the psi, not a deviation or freak, but mankind fully realized.

He almost had tears in his eyes by the time he was through.

“To sum up,” he told them, “our hope is that, someday, everyone will be capable of psi powers.”

After a barrage of questions, the conference broke up. The two men in dark suits remained.

“Was there some further information you wanted?” Waverley asked politely. “I have some brochures—”

“Have you got a man named Eskin here?” one of the men asked.

“Why?” Waverley countered.

“Have you?”

“Why?”

“All right, we’ll play it that way,” one of the men sighed. They showed their credentials. “Eskin was confined in Blackstone Sanitarium. We have reason to believe he came here, and we want him back.”

“What’s wrong with him?” Waverley asked.

“Have you seen him?”

“Gentlemen, we’re getting nowhere. Suppose I had seen him—and mind you, I’m not admitting it. Suppose I had a means of rehabilitating him, making a decent, worthy citizen out of him. Would you still insist on having him back?”

“You can’t rehabilitate Eskin,” one of the men told him. “He’s found a perfectly satisfactory adjustment. Unfortunately, it’s one that the public cannot countenance.”

“What is it?” Waverley asked.

“Have you seen him?”

“No, but if I do, I’ll get in touch with you,” Waverley said pleasantly.

“Mr. Waverley. This attitude—”

“Is he dangerous?” Waverley asked.

“Not especially. But—”

“Has he any supernormal powers?”

“Probably,” one of the men said unhappily. “But his method of using them—”

"Can't say I've ever seen the chap," Waverley said coolly.

The men glanced at each other. "All right," one of them said, "if you'll admit having him we'll sign him over to your custody."

"Now you're talking," Waverley said. The release was quickly signed, and Waverley ushered the two men out. As they reached the door, Waverley saw what he thought was a wink pass between them. He must have imagined it, he decided.

"Was I right?" Doris asked him.

"Perfectly," Waverley said. "You've still got powder in your hair."

Doris located a mirror in her cavernous shoulder bag, and started dusting.

"Forget it," Waverley said, leaning over and kissing the tip of her nose. "Marry me tomorrow."

Doris considered for a moment. "Hairdresser tomorrow."

"Day after, then."

"I'm swimming the English Channel that day. Would next week be all right—"

Waverley kissed her. "Next week is not only all right, it's obligatory," he said. "And I'm not fooling."

"All right," Doris said, a little breathlessly. "But is this *really* it, Sam?"

"It is," Waverley said. Their

wedding date had been postponed twice already. The first time, the problem of Billy Walker had come up. Walker hadn't wanted to go on the *Venture* to Mars, and Waverley had stayed with him day and night, bolstering his courage.

The next delay had been when Waverley found a wealthy backer for Wild Talents, Inc. It was 'round the clock work at first, organizing, contacting companies that might be able to use a psi, finding psis. But this time—

He bent over her again, but Doris said, "How about that man in your office?"

"Oh, yes," Waverley said with mild regret. "I think he's genuine. I'd better see what he's doing." He walked through his office to the anteroom.

The psi had found pencil and paper, and was busy scribbling. He looked up when Waverley and Doris walked in, and gave them a wild, triumphant grin.

"Ah, my protector! Sir, I will demonstrate my scientific observations. Here is a complete account of all that transpired between A, you, and B, Miss Fleet." He handed them a stack of papers.

Eskin had written a complete account of Waverley's conversation with Doris, plus a faithful anatomical description of their kisses. He appended the physical data with a careful descrip-

tion of the emotions of both, before, during, and after each kiss.

Doris frowned. She had a love of personal privacy, and being observed by this ragged little man didn't please her.

"Very interesting," Waverley said, suppressing a smile for Doris' sake. The man needed some guidance, he decided. But that could wait for tomorrow.

After finding Eskin a place to sleep, Waverley and Doris had dinner and discussed their marriage plans. Then they went to Doris' apartment, where they disregarded television until one o'clock in the morning.

Next morning the first applicant was a sprucely dressed man in his middle thirties, who introduced himself as a lightning calculator. Waverley located a book of logarithms and put the man through his paces. He was very good. Waverley took his name and address and promised to get in touch with him.

He was a little disappointed. Lightning calculators were the least wild of the wild talents. It was difficult to place them in really good jobs unless they had creative mathematical ability to go with their computing skill.

The morning shipment of magazines and newspapers arrived, and Waverley had a few minutes to browse through them. He subscribed to practically everything,

in hopes of finding little-known jobs that his psi's might fill.

An elderly man with the purple-veined face of an alcoholic came in next. He was wearing a good suit, but with ragged, torn cuffs. His new shirt was impossibly filthy. His shoes, for some reason, were shined.

"I can turn water into wine," the man said.

"Go right ahead," Waverley told him. He went to the cooler and handed the man a cup of water.

The man looked at it, mumbled a few words, and, with his free hand, made a pass at the water. He registered astonishment when nothing happened. He looked sternly at the water, muttered his formula again, and again made a pass. Still nothing happened.

"You know how it is," he said to Waverley. "We psi's, our power just goes off and on. I'm usually good about forty percent of the time."

"This is just an off-day?" Waverley asked, with dangerous calm.

"That's right," the man said. "Look, if you could stake me for a few days, I'd get it again. I'm too sober now, but you should see me when I'm really—"

"You read about this in the papers, didn't you?" Waverley asked.

"What? No, certainly not!"

"Get out of here," Waverley said. It was amazing, how many frauds his business attracted. People who thought he was dealing in some sort of pseudo-magic, people who thought he would be an easy mark for a sad story.

There were entirely too many of them.

The next applicant was a short, stocky girl of eighteen or nineteen, plainly and unattractively dressed in a cheap print dress. She was obviously ill at ease.

Waverley pulled up a chair for her and gave her a cigarette, which she puffed nervously.

"My name's Emma Cranick," she told him, rubbing one perspiring hand against her thigh. "I—are you sure you won't laugh at me?"

"Sure; go on," Waverley said, sorting a batch of papers on his desk. He knew the girl would feel better if he didn't look at her.

"Well, I—this sounds ridiculous, but I can start fires. Just by wanting to. I *can!*" She glared at him defiantly.

A poltergeist, Waverley thought. Stone-throwing and fire-starting. She was the first one he had seen, although he had long been aware of the phenomenon. It seemed to center mostly in adolescent girls, for some unknown reason.

"Would you care to show me, Emma?" Waverley asked softly.

The girl obliged by burning a hole in Waverley's new rug. He poured a few cups of water over it, then had her burn a curtain as a check.

"That's fine," he told the girl, and watched her face brighten. She had been thrown off her uncle's farm. She was "queer" if she started fires that way, and her uncle had no place for anyone who was "queer."

She was rooming at the YWCA, and Waverley promised to get in touch with her.

"Don't forget," he said as she started out. "Yours is a valuable talent—a very valuable one. Don't be frightened of it."

This time her smile almost made her pretty.

A poltergeist, he thought, after she had gone. Now what in hell could he do with a poltergeist girl? Starting fires. . . . A stoker, perhaps? No, that didn't seem reasonable.

The trouble was, the wild talents were rarely reasonable. He had fibbed a bit to the reporters about that, but psi's just weren't tailor-made for the present world.

He started leafing through a magazine, wondering who could use a poltergeist.

"Sam!" Doris Fleet was standing in the door, her hands on her hips. "Look at this."

He walked over. Eskin had arrived, and was standing beside the reception desk, a foolish smile

on his face. Doris handed Waverley a sheaf of papers.

Waverley read through them. They contained a complete account of everything he and Doris had done, from the moment he had walked into her apartment until he had left.

But complete wasn't the word. The psi had explored their every move and action. And, as if that wasn't bad enough, Waverley saw now why Eskin had been locked up. The man was a voyeur, a peeping tom. A supernormal peeping tom, who could watch people from miles away.

Like most couples on the verge of marriage, Waverley and Doris did considerable smooching, and didn't consider themselves any the worse for it. But it was something else again to see that smooching written down, dissected, analyzed.

The psi had picked up a complete anatomical vocabulary somewhere, because he had described every step of their courtship procedure in the correct terms. Diagrams followed, then a physiological analysis. Then the psi had probed deeper, into hormone secretions, cellular structures, nerve and muscle reactions and the like.

It was the most amazing bit of pornography-veiled-as-science that Waverley had ever seen.

"Come in here," Waverley said. He brought Eskin into his office.

Doris followed, her face a study in embarrassment.

"Now then. Just what do you mean by this?" Waverley asked. "Didn't I save you from the asylum?"

"Yes sir," Eskin said. "And believe me, I'm very grateful."

"Then I want your promise that there'll be no more of this."

"Oh, no!" the man said, horrified. "I can't stop. I have my research to consider."

In the next half hour Waverley discovered a lot of things. Eskin could observe anyone he came in contact with, no matter where that person went. But all he was interested in was the individual's sex life. He completely rationalized this voyeurism by his certainty that he was serving science.

Waverley sent him to the ante-room, locked the door and turned to Doris.

"I'm terribly sorry about this," he said, "but I'm sure we can resubliminate him. It shouldn't be too difficult."

"Oh, it shouldn't?" Doris asked.

"No," Waverley said, with a confidence he didn't feel. "I'll figure it out."

"Fine," Doris said. She put the psi's papers in an ashtray, found a match and burned them. "Until we do, I think we had better postpone the wedding."

"But why?"

"Oh, Sam," Doris said, "how

can I marry you and know that slimy little *thing* is watching every move we make? And writing it all down?"

"Now calm down," Waverley said uncomfortably. "You're perfectly right. I'll go to work on him. Perhaps you'd better take the rest of the day off."

"I'm going to," Doris said, and started for the door.

"Supper this evening?" Waverley asked her.

"No," she said firmly. "I'm sorry, Sam, but one thing'll lead to another, and not while that peeping tom is loose." She slammed the door shut.

Waverley unlocked the ante-room door. "Come in here, Sidney," he said. "You and I are going to have a fine long talk."

Waverley tried to explain, slowly and patiently, that what Eskin did wasn't truly scientific. He tried to show that it was a sexual deviation or overintensification, rationalized as a scientific motive.

"But Mr. Waverley," Eskin said, "if I was just peeking at people, that would be one thing. But I write it all down, I use the correct terms; I classify and define. I hope to write a definitive work on the sexual habits of every human being in the world."

Waverley explained that people have a right to personal privacy. Eskin replied that science came above petty squeamishness. Wav-

erley tried to batter at his fortifications for the rest of the day. But, paranoid-like, Eskin had an answer for everything, an answer which fit completely into his view of himself and the world.

"The trouble is," he told Waverley, "people aren't scientific. Not even scientists. Would you believe it, in the Sanitarium the doctors kept me locked in solitary most of the time. Just because I observed and wrote down their sexual habits at home? Of course, being in solitary couldn't stop me."

Waverley wondered how Eskin had lived as long as he had. It would have been little wonder if an irate doctor slipped him an overdose of something. It probably required strong self-discipline not to.

"I didn't think that *you* were against me," the psi said sorrowfully. "I didn't realize that you were so old-fashioned."

"I'm not against you," Waverley said, trying to think of some way of dealing with the man. Then, in a sudden happy burst of inspiration, he had it.

"Sidney," he said, "I think I know of a job for you. A nice job, one you'll like."

"Really?" the voyeur said, his face lighting up.

"I think so," Waverley said. He checked the idea in a recent magazine, located a telephone number and dialed.

"Hello? Is this the Bellen Foundation?" He introduced himself, making sure they knew who he was. "I hear that you gentlemen are engaged in a new survey on the sexual habit of males of Eastern Patagonian descent. Would you be interested in an interviewer who can *really* get the facts?"

After a few more minutes of conversation, Waverley hung up and wrote out the address. "Go right over, Sid," he said. "I think we have found your niche in life."

"Thank you very much," the psychotic said, and hurried out.

The next morning Waverley's first appointment was with Bill Symes, one of Waverley's brightest hopes. Symes had a fine psi talent placed in a clear, intelligent mind.

This morning he looked confused and unhappy. "I wanted to speak to you first, Sam," Symes said. "I'm leaving my job."

"Why?" Waverley wanted to know. He had thought that Symes was as well placed and happy as a psi could be.

"Well—I just don't fit in."

Symes was able to "feel" stresses and strains in metal. Like most psi's, he didn't know how he did it. Nevertheless, Symes was able to "sense" microshrinkage and porosity faster and more accurately than an X-ray machine, and with none of the problems of

interpretation that an X-ray inspection leaves.

Symes talent was on an all-or-nothing basis; either he could do it, or he couldn't. Therefore he didn't make mistakes. Even though his talent completely shut off forty percent of the time, he was still a valuable asset in the aircraft engine industry, where every part must be X-rayed for possible flaws.

"What do you mean, you don't fit in?" Waverley asked. "Don't you think you're worth the money you're getting?"

"It's not that," Symes said. "It's the guys I work with. They think I'm a freak."

"You knew that when you started," Waverley reminded him.

Symes shrugged his shoulders. "All right, Sam. Let me put it this way." He lighted a cigarette. "What in hell am I? What are any of us psi's? We can do something, but we don't know how we do it. We have no control over it, no insight into it. Either it's there, or it isn't. We're not supermen, but we're also not normal human beings. We're—I don't know what we are."

"Bill," Waverley said softly, "it's not the other men worrying you. It's you. *You* are starting to think you're a freak."

"Neither fish nor fowl," Symes quoted, "nor good red meat. I'm going to take up dirt farming."

Waverley shook his head. Psi's

were easily discouraged from trying to get their talents out of the parlor-trick stage. The commercial world was built—theoretically—along lines of one hundred percent function. A machine that didn't work all the time was considered useless. A carry-over of that attitude was present in the psi's, who considered their talents a mechanical extension of themselves, instead of an integral part. They felt inferior if they couldn't produce with machine-like regularity.

Waverley didn't know what to do. Psi's would have to find themselves, true. But not by retreating to the farms.

"Look, Sam," Symes said. "I know how much psi means to you. But I've got a right to some normality also. I'm sorry."

"All right, Bill," Waverley said, realizing that any more arguments would just antagonize Symes. Besides, he knew that psi's were hams, also. They liked to do their tricks. Perhaps a dose of dirt-farming would send Bill back to his real work.

"Keep in touch with me, will you?"

"Sure. So long, Sam."

Waverley frowned, chewed his lip for a few moments, then went in to see Doris.

"Marriage date back on?" he asked her.

"How about Eskin?"

He told her about Eskin's new

job, and the date was set for the following week. That evening they had supper together in a cozy little restaurant. Later they returned to Doris' apartment, to resume their practice of ignoring television.

The next morning, while leafing through his magazines. Waverley had a sudden idea. He called Emma Cranick at once and told her to come over.

"How do you feel about traveling?" he asked the girl. "Do you enjoy seeing new places?"

"Oh, I do," Emma said. "This is the first time I've been off my Uncle's farm."

"Do you mind hardships? Bitter cold?"

"I'm never cold," she told him. "I can warm myself, just like I can start fires."

"Fine," Waverley said. "It's just possible. . . ."

He got on the telephone. In fifteen minutes he had made an appointment for the poltergeist girl. "Emma," he said, "have you ever heard of the Harkins expedition?"

"No," she said. "Why?"

"Well, they're going to the Antarctic. One of the problems of an expedition of that sort is heat for emergencies. Do you understand?"

The girl broke into a smile. "I think I do."

"You'll have to go down and convince them," Waverley said.

"No, wait! I'll go down with you. You should be worth your weight in gold to an expedition like that."

It wasn't too difficult. Several women scientists were going on the expedition, and, after seven or eight demonstrations, they agreed that Emma would be an asset. Strong and healthy, she could easily pull her own weight. Self-warmed, she would be able to function in any weather. And her fire-making abilities. . . .

Waverley returned to his office at a leisurely pace, a self-satisfied smile on his lips. Someday girls like Emma would be useful on Mars, when a colony was established there. Heat would be difficult to conserve in Mars' thin air. She was a logical choice for a colonist.

Things like that reaffirmed his faith in the future of psi. There was a place for *all* psi talents. It was just a question of finding the right job, or creating one.

Back in the office, a surprise was waiting for him. Eskin, the voyeur, was back. And Doris Fleet had a wrathful look in her eyes.

"What's wrong, Sid?" Waverley asked. "Back to pay us a visit?"

"Back for good," Eskin said unhappily. "They fired me, Mr. Waverley."

"Why?"

"They're not real scientists,"

Eskin said sadly. "I showed them my results on their test cases, and they were shocked. Can you imagine it, Mr. Waverley? Scientists—shocked!"

Waverley suppressed a grin. He had always had a feeling that surveys of that sort uncovered about a sixteenth of the truth.

"Besides, they couldn't keep their scientific detachment. I ran a series of studies on the scientists' home lives for a control factor. And they threw me out!"

"That's a pity," Waverley said, avoiding Doris Fleet's look.

"I tried to point out that there was nothing wrong in it," Eskin said. "I showed them the series I've been running on you and Miss Fleet—"

"What?" Doris yelled, standing up so suddenly she knocked over her chair.

"Certainly. I keep my reports on all subjects," the psi said. "One must run follow-up tests—"

"That does it," Doris said. "I never heard such a—Sam! Throw him out!"

"What good will that do?" Waverley asked. "He'll just go on observing us."

Doris stood for a moment, her lips pressed into a thin line. "I won't stand for it!" she said suddenly. "I just won't!" She picked up her handbag and started toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Waverley asked.

"To enter a nunnery!" Doris shouted and disappeared through the door.

"She wasn't the girl for you anyhow," the psi said. "Extremely prudish. I've been observing your sexual needs pretty closely, and you—"

"Shut up," Waverley said. "Let me think." No answer sprang into his mind, full-blown. No matter what job he found for Eskin, the man would still go on with his observations. And Doris wouldn't marry him.

"Go into the other room," Waverley said. "I need time to think."

"Shall I leave my report here?" the psi said, showing him a stack of papers two inches thick.

"Yeah, drop it on the desk." The psi went into the anteroom. Waverley sat down to think.

Over the next few days. Waverley gave every available minute to the voyeur's problem. Doris didn't come back to work the next morning, or the morning after that. Waverley called her apartment, but no one answered.

The poltergeist girl left with the Antarctic expedition, and was given a big fanfare by the press.

Two telekinetic psi's were found in East Africa and sent to Wild Talents.

Waverley thought and thought.

A man dropped into the office

with a trained dog act, and was very indignant to hear that Wild Talents was not a theatrical agency. He left in a huff.

Waverley went on thinking.

Howard Aircraft called him. Since Bill Symes had left, Inspection had become the plant's worst bottleneck. Production had been geared to the psi's methods. When he was going good, Symes could glance at a piece of metal and jot down his analysis. The part didn't even have to be moved.

Under the older method of X-ray inspection, the parts had to be shipped to Inspection, lined up, put under the machine, and the plates developed. Then a radiologist had to read the film, and a supervisor had to pass on it.

They wanted Symes back.

The psi returned. He had his fill of farming in a surprisingly short time. Besides, he knew now that he was needed. And that made all the difference.

Waverley sat at his desk, reading over the voyeur's reports, trying to find some clue he might have missed.

The man certainly had an amazing talent. He analyzed right down to hormones and microscopic lesions. Now how in hell could he do that, Waverley asked himself. Microscopic vision? Why not?

Waverley considered sending Eskin back to Blackstone. After all, the man was doing more harm

than good. Under psychiatric care, he might lose his compulsion—and his talent, perhaps.

But *was* Eskin insane? Or was he a genius, with an ability far beyond his age? With a nervous shudder, Waverley imagined a line in some future history book:—“*Through his stupidity and rigidity in dealing with the genius Eskin, psi research was held up for—*” Oh, no! He couldn’t chance that sort of thing. Let’s see now, there had to be a way.

A man who could—of course!

“Come in here, Eskin,” Waverley said to the potential genius, who spent most of his days in the anteroom.

“Yes sir,” the psi said, and sat down in front of Waverley’s desk.

“Sid,” Waverley said, “how would you like to do a sexual report that would really aid science? One that would open a field never before explored?”

“What do you mean?” the psi asked dubiously.

“Look, Sid. Straight sexual surveys are old stuff. Everybody does them. Maybe not as well as you, but they still do them. Now would you like it if I could introduce you to an almost unexplored field of science? A field that would really test your abilities to the utmost?”

“I’d like that,” the psi said. “But it would have to do with sex.”

“Of course,” Waverley said.

“But you don’t care what aspect of sex, do you?”

“I don’t know,” Eskin said.

“If you could do this—and I don’t know that you can—your name would go down in history. You’d be able to publish your papers in the best scientific journals. No one would bother you, and you could get all the help you want.”

“It sounds wonderful! What is it?”

Waverley told him, and watched Eskin closely. The psi considered. Then he said, “I think I could do that, Mr. Waverley. It wouldn’t be easy, but if you really think that science—”

“I know so,” Waverley said, in a tone of profoundest conviction. “You’ll need some texts, to get some background on the field. I’ll help you select them.”

“I’ll start right now!” the psi said, and closed his eyes for greater concentration.

“Wait a minute,” Waverley said. “Are you able to observe Miss Fleet now?”

“I can if I want to,” the psi said. “But I think this is more important.”

“It is,” Waverley told him. “I was just curious if you could tell me where she is.”

The psi thought for a moment. “She isn’t doing anything sexual,” he said. “She’s in a room, but I don’t know where the room is. Now let me concentrate.”

"Sure. Go ahead."

Eskin closed his eyes again. "Yes, I can see them! Give me pencil and paper!"

Waverley left him as Eskin began his preliminary investigations.

Now where had that girl gone? Waverley telephoned her apartment again, to see if she had come back. But there was no answer. One by one, he called all her friends. They hadn't seen her.

Where? Where in the world?

Waverley closed his eyes and thought:—*Doris. Can you hear me, Doris?*

There was no reply. He concentrated harder. He was no telepath, but Doris was. If she was thinking of him

Doris!

Sam!

No message was necessary, because he knew she was coming back.

"Where did you go?" he asked, holding her tightly.

"To a hotel," she said. "I just waited there and tried to read your mind."

"Could you?"

"No," she said. "Not until the last, when you were trying, too."

"Just as well," Waverley said. "I'd never have any secrets from you. If you ever try anything like that again—I'll send the goblins out looking for you."

"I wouldn't want that," she said, looking at him seriously. "I guess I'd better not leave again. But Sam—how about—"

"Come on in and look."

"All right."

In the other room, Eskin was writing busily on a piece of paper. He hesitated, then started scribbling again. Then he drew a tentative diagram, looked at it and crossed it out, and started another.

"What is he doing?" Doris asked. "What's that supposed to be a picture of?"

"I don't know," Waverley said. "I haven't studied their names. It's some sort of germ."

"Sam, what's happened?"

"Resublimation," Waverley said. "I explained to him that there were other forms of sex he could observe, that would benefit mankind and science far more, and win him endless prestige. So he's looking for the sex-cycle of bacteria."

"Without a microscope?"

"That's right. With his drive, he'll devour everything ever written about bacterial life. He'll find something valuable, too."

"Resublimation," Doris mused. "But *do* germs have a sex life?"

"I don't know," Waverley said. "But Eskin will find out. And there's no reason why he can't do some perfectly good research in the bargain. After all, the line be-

tween many scientists and peeping toms is pretty fine. Sex was really secondary to Eskin after he had sublimated it into scientific observation. This is just one more step in the same way." He cleared his throat carefully.

"Now would you care to discuss dates and places?"

"Yes—if you're sure it's permanent."

"Look at him."

The psi was scribbling furiously, oblivious to the outside world. On his face was an exalted, dedicated look.

"I guess so." Doris smiled and moved closer to Waverley. Then she looked at the closed door. "There's someone in the waiting room, Sam."

Waverley kept back a curse.

Telepathy could be damnably inconvenient at times. But business was business. He accompanied Doris to the door.

A young girl was sitting on a chair. She was thin, delicate, frightened-looking. Waverley could tell, by the redness of her eyes, that she had been crying recently.

"Mr. Waverley? You're the Wild Talents man?"

Waverley nodded.

"You have to help me. I'm a clairvoyant, Mr. Waverley. A real one. And you have to help me get rid of it. You must!"

"We'll see," Waverley said, a pulse of excitement beating in his throat. A clairvoyant!

"Suppose you come in here and tell me all about it."

Don't Miss

MURRAY LEINSTER'S NEW NOVEL

KILLER SHIP

IN THE NEW OCTOBER AMAZING

NOW ON SALE AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

You're a competent young dentist named Harry Spencer, with a nice little office in a clinic where something has been getting into the blood plasma stores down the hall. One night a tall dark stranger walks in and wants some cavities filled—but no extractions, please. Nothing unusual about that, but his biting teeth are rather large (something like the fangs of a wolf), and when you try to examine one of his bicuspids with the hand-mirror, it doesn't show any reflection!—Only one writer could think of an opening like that—Robert Bloch, of course, author of "Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper," that classic tale of terror, and *Psycho*, the novel from which Alfred Hitchcock made the picture that shocked America. "Tooth or Consequences," written somewhat later, has the same skillful plotting and macabre wit. It has something else too—an ending that will knock you right out of your seat.

Tooth or Consequences

By ROBERT BLOCH

DOCTOR KING rose to his feet abruptly. His lonely vigil as night physician in the clinic was interrupted by a curious sound. A very curious sound. A *clicking* sound.

Harry Spencer stood in the doorway. He was the young dentist from the office down the hall. King knew him well, but now he stared curiously, wondering if Spencer had a pair of dice in his hand.

No dice. But Spencer moved

slowly into the office, a look of dismay on his usually cheerful face.

"Do you hear that noise, Doctor?"

"Yes," said King. "Sort of a clicking, isn't it?"

"Clicking, hell!" gasped Harry Spencer. "That's my teeth chattering!"

"A dentist with chattering teeth," chuckled King. "That's a novelty." But his eyes held no smile as he scrutinized the agitated Spencer.

"Sit down — I'll get you a drink," he promised. And he did. Spencer gulped the whiskey gratefully. His teeth now clicked only against the glass.

"Better?"

"Much better, thank you. But Doctor— I didn't come in here for a drink. I need your help."

"Suppose you tell me the story," King suggested.

Spencer shrugged. "You may think I'm crazy. I wonder myself. But—you asked for it."

King sat back as the young dentist began to speak.

"I had only one patient tonight. He came in about an hour ago. I'd dozed off in my chair, and when I looked around, this stranger was standing in front of me, smiling. He was a tall, dark man."

"Mae West type, eh?"

"You wouldn't joke about this guy if you saw him, Doctor. Or heard him talk. He looked—funny to me. Oh, nothing I could put my finger on. Just that he made me nervous, because he was so calm, so deliberate, so *cold*."

"He said his name was Vonier. Claimed to be a mill-worker. He was off the job at night, and he heard about the clinic; so he came here to get some cavities filled."

"What's wrong with that?" asked King.

"Nothing. But he had a few ideas on how he wanted to be treated. He refused to fill out a

patient's card with his name and address. He said that if he could come to me twice a week with no questions asked, he'd pay double for my work."

"Just an eccentric," King commented.

"Perhaps. But that no questions asked idea—that's bad. I realized that the minute I got him into the chair and took a look at his mouth. Then I wanted to ask questions."

Spencer shuddered.

"I wanted to ask him why his teeth were so large. So abnormally developed. Particularly the *biting* teeth."

Spencer shuddered.

King smiled. "Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother?" he suggested.

"I told you it sounds crazy," Spencer murmured. "But there was nothing funny about that stranger's teeth. Like the fangs of a wolf, or a dog. That's what they were, I tell you! Fangs. Fangs in the throat of a stranger with cold, deep eyes."

"Have you been having trouble with your nerves recently?" asked King, smoothly.

"No—but I will have from now on. You see, I haven't told you the worst part yet. The part that made my own teeth misbehave.

"After I took my first inspection, I got my hand-mirror to examine a bicuspid. I thrust it into his mouth for a back view."

"Go on."

"I put it into his mouth to see the reflection—and *there was nothing there!*"

"Nothing?"

"No reflection at all! It may sound foolish, but have you any idea of how horrible it was at the time? You do the natural thing and get the unnatural. Like—like turning on your cold water faucet and having a snake wriggle out.

"I backed away from the chair and told him to go away. Told him to come back tomorrow night—I wasn't feeling well. He just smiled and left, because he could see it was true. *I wasn't* feeling well at all. That's why I ran down the hall to you."

Doctor King grunted. Then he went to work.

"Hallucinations, eh?" he mumbled, as he helped remove Spencer's shirt. "Dizzy spells," he commented, busying himself with a stethoscope. "Delusions," he chanted, applying armbands.

Then—"Aha, just as I thought! Nothing wrong with you at all Spencer, except perhaps a little high blood pressure. Here—take these. Three a day, one after every meal. Ought to fix you up perfectly."

"What are they?"

"Garlic pills. Perfectly harmless. Now, don't worry. Come in again at the end of the week. You ought to come around nicely if

you'll just forget this little incident."

Spencer thanked him, pocketed his pills, and left the office. King had given him back his courage, and his pills were easy to swallow. His advice, though—that wasn't easy to swallow.

Spencer did his best to forget, but that night he had a dream. It was a dream about a stranger with deep dark eyes, and long, pointed teeth. The teeth chattered, and Spencer woke up and listened to the clicking of his own mouth.

HARRY SPENCER breezed in to Doctor King's office with a hearty, "Hello, Doc!"

"Well, how's it going?"

"Swell. No trouble at all."

"Glad to hear it. No more—spells."

"Not at all. This Vonier fellow came in again this evening. I examined his teeth with the mirror."

"Reflection O.K.?"

"Of course. Say, Doc, I must have sounded like a fool when I came babbling in the other night."

"Nonsense. I appreciate your little problem. Now, perhaps, you can help me with one of mine."

"Certainly—what's up?"

"Nothing much. But maybe you could help me. It seems something has happened to our blood plasma stores."

"Your what?"

"You know we keep canned blood for transfusions here at the clinic. In case of factory accidents at the mill. Well, during the last week they tell me some of the cans have been disappearing."

"Stolen?"

"Apparently. And at night. There's plenty of staff people on duty all day, but in the evenings there's no one here in the clinic but you and myself. The refrigerator is down in the annex corridor. Haven't noticed anyone prowling around, have you?"

Spencer shook his head.

"No. But that's funny. Stealing cans of blood. Could it be a practical joke?"

King turned to his desk as he spoke. "No—I don't think so. You see, I found one of the cans outside in the alley last night. It had been ripped open. Here, take a look. Tell me what you think."

He held out the gleaming metal container to Spencer.

Spencer stared at the corrugated edges of the can for a long moment.

"Somebody has been feeding wolfhounds," he said. "There are toothmarks on this can."

"Thought so," said King. "Well, there's nothing to worry about. I'm putting a new lock on the refrigerator."

"No," said Spencer, edging out of the office. "Nothing to worry about at all."

But on the way home he worried, just the same.

During the last week, blood had disappeared.

During the last week, Vonier had come to the clinic.

The long arm of coincidence?

Granted. The long arm of coincidence might sweep away a few cans of blood. But the long arm of coincidence didn't have any teeth in it. Teeth, biting into can tops. Long, pointed teeth, like the ones in Vonier's mouth.

The following evening Spencer took a look at those long, pointed teeth again.

Vonier came in quietly, sat down in the chair. Spencer tried to smile professionally as he produced his mirror and made his inspection.

Then he gulped.

The mirror thrust in Vonier's mouth showed nothing, again. Nothing at all.

He went dizzy, for a moment, because he remembered there was a new lock on the refrigerator down the hall. And now there was no reflection in the mirror.

Vampires have no reflections.

After drinking blood, after absorbing the *humanity* of blood, they might become normally visible in mirrors for a short time. Vonier, sneaking in and ripping open cans with his teeth, drinking deep. Then coming into the office for dental work. Once before he had missed, somehow, and

there had been no reflection. Now the refrigerator was locked, and again there was no reflection.

SPENCER stared down into the thin, pale face in the chair. His mind whirled as he stepped back. He nicked his thumb accidentally as one hand brushed the instruments on his table.

"You'll—you'll have to excuse me," he murmured. "Another spell, I'm afraid. You'd better come in again tomorrow."

The tall, dark man smiled, shrugged, arose from the chair.

Spencer couldn't help it. He sat down, closed his eyes. He heard Vonier's footsteps across the floor. His eyelids flickered momentarily—but he saw.

He saw Vonier bend over the white tile table, his head dart like a serpent's to the spot where the tiny red jet lay. His tongue lapped—then Vonier grimaced with a look of curious pain.

Spencer sat there, trying to control his shudderings as Vonier left the room.

Now it couldn't be denied.

The dark stranger with the long teeth, the bad teeth, was a vampire.

Abnormal teeth because of an abnormal diet. Why not?

It explained the decay, too. There was another explanation for the decay—an explanation involving sleeping all day in a terrible way. In a coffin, packed in

grave-earth, hidden somewhere in the city.

Vonier, who came only at night. Who drank blood from cans. Whose reflection vanished when he had no nourishment.

"The blood is the life."

Of course he wouldn't allow his teeth to be pulled! A toothless vampire?

Naturally he wouldn't give his address. If Spencer tracked him down by day he knew what he'd find.

Certainly he had to grimace when he encountered the spot of Spencer's blood. Spencer was taking garlic pills, and vampires cannot endure garlic. Some authorities—Spencer shuddered when he thought of a demonolatrism as an *authority!*—said that garlic killed vampires. Why should it have such an effect?

Well, why is an allergy?

So there it was.

Spencer didn't sleep that night. Early in the morning he went down to the public library. He wanted to read certain books.

About silver bullets and stakes through hearts, and crucifixes and holy water.

About bodies that decay not in the tomb, and rest not.

About things that never die, that walk by night and drink deep from the throats of men.

About sunset to sunrise and pointed fangs and the legends of all nations in all times.

Early that evening he went in to Doctor King's office. He didn't have the courage to speak. King would accuse him of madness, in the stupid, melodramatic way in which people actually do accuse others of madness. The police would do nothing, and Spencer must keep still, keep the lock on the refrigerator door, keep thinking.

Doctor King gave him something to think about, all right.

"I'm out of those garlic pills right now, Spencer. Get another batch in Monday, I expect. It won't hurt you to wait a few days, I guess."

He guessed.

No garlic pills. No garlic in the bloodstream. And a *hungry* vampire!

Spencer backed out of the office, hurried down to his own quarters. "I must keep that refrigerator locked," he whispered. "I must. What if there's an accident and they need blood in a hurry and it's gone?"

Yes. But—*what if Vonier is hungry and goes for your neck?*

There was a solution to this problem, Spencer realized. He could run like hell.

He opened his office door with that resolve.

And the vampire walked in.

VONIER was tall, dark, thin. That's the way vampires are supposed to be—but so are a

good third of all normal males.

Vonier was a foreigner with an accent. But there are many such in a mill town.

Vonier was pale. But Spencer was even paler, just now.

Now, it wasn't height, weight, complexion or accent that marked the vampire for what he was. It wasn't even the teeth, or the peculiar *faded* quality of his dark suit.

It was something about his lips. Lips that were thin, yet full. A paradox, unless you saw it. Lips that were used too much in partaking of nourishment, now become overly developed.

And of course, Vonier's eyes remained. Remained, staring sightlessly in death for twelve hours out of every twenty-four. Staring sightlessly at—what? No wonder they were dark and deep and knowing. No wonder they glared in hunger greater than human hunger. How long had they stared and hungered? How old was this creature?

Vampires are ageless and deathless until stake or silver strike their hearts into corruption. How many throats had been ripped before this thing discovered the blood transfusion cans in the refrigerator? How many would be ripped again, now that the cans were protected by a stout lock? And how soon?

Very soon, Spencer thought, unless he could act. For Mr. Von-

ier was quite pallid tonight. He was slow in his movements, almost drunkenly deliberate. Only his eyes were quick. Quick and hot, as they gazed at the dentist's throat with a desire he had never seen in human eyes before. An unimaginable desire.

"You're — late," Spencer choked out.

"I was held up," Vonier answered, with a little smile. "I had to do some shopping."

Shopping. That's what you do when you're *hungry*.

"Well, let's get started."

Vonier slid into the chair.

"What must you do tonight, Doctor?"

Spencer's voice trembled. He had to put this over. He had to.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Vonier, that some of those teeth must come out. If you'll let me make a cast of your mouth now—just a wax impression—I can tell you in a jiffy where the trouble is."

"Please, no. I am very sensitive. I do not wish for you to place anything in my mouth."

What? No nice little plaster of paris cast that Spencer had worked on? No nice little plaster of Paris cast, treated with liquid air, to harden immediately in the vampire's mouth and clamp his teeth together forever?

That *was* a disappointment.

But there was plan number two. Spencer's voice mastered a tremor. "Still, you'll have to have

a few extractions. Those lower left molars are pretty bad."

"I do not wish—"

"I'm the Doctor! I'll give you gas, so it won't bother you. Those teeth are probably dead, anyway."

Dead.

Vonier smiled, but Spencer didn't like it. He got the gas going, fumbled with the tube and cone.

"Breathe deeply."

Do dead men breathe?

The gates of Hell closed. Eyelids fluttered down over them.

He—it—was sleeping.

Now! Spencer was stern. Sure, they'd call it murder. But he must chance it.

HE FUMBLED with the drill. Put in the new head. The long steel bit he'd bought specially. The steel bit that was like a sharp splinter. Sharp as a stake. A stake to drive into the heart.

The drill buzzed. Spencer fed more gas into the creature that lay all white and still under the cold blue light; lay like a slick and glassy corpse in the morgue. Fill it with gas, and then drive that drill home into the heart—

Pulses pounding, he guided the drill towards the rotten chest. One swift stab, now.

"Just a moment."

The eyes flickered. Lightning. More lightning in the steel clutch of the long, cold hands.

"My teeth are not there, Doctor. You know that."

"I—"

"You know a lot more, too. Don't you, Doctor?"

Vonier sat up. The smile was full now, the long fangs exposed.

"You know why the blood was stolen, don't you? You know about my teeth, too. You know why your garlic kept me off last night. Isn't that so, Doctor?"

"Y-yes." Spencer said it the way men used to when the Inquisitors tightened the rack.

"Ah. Then don't you know that one of—us—cannot be killed by poison, or bullet, or sword? That fire does not consume us when we walk, nor gas drug our senses?"

Spencer realized the truth too late. Much too late.

"Who has locked the refrigerator?" A soft voice. Soft as the clinging caress of a serpent. And so cold.

"I don't know. The clinic doctors must have the key."

"Get it for me tomorrow. You know why. I will have it or you will provide me with nourishment."

"Garlic—" Spencer began. It took courage to say anything without screaming.

The vampire smiled. "I think not. Something has happened to your supply of garlic, hasn't it?"

"How do you know?"

Mr. Vonier's answer was quite dreadful. "The *carnivora*, my

dear Doctor, have a very acute sense of smell."

The black-clad figure slid from the chair moved toward the door. Then Vonier turned. Spencer looked into a haggard white face. There was hunger there—but for the first time he read something inherent in all starvation. A kind of pathos.

"I don't like this," Mr. Vonier said, softly. "You must believe that, Doctor. I was—normal—once. It's what psychiatrists might call a compulsion, you know. A compulsion. Something driving you.

"But that's beside the point, isn't it? You are not interested in the long years. The long nights. The longer days—"

Spencer stared, but Vonier regained his composure swiftly.

"I tried to fight it. I took blood from the cans, instead of in my *regular* way. But when you are denied food too long, you get hungry.

"Remember that. Give me the key tomorrow night—or I shall force my way to nourishment with my teeth. They are very sharp teeth, aren't they, Doctor? Good night."

The door closed.

Spencer didn't follow. He could have taken that last chance, trailed the vampire to its lair somewhere in the city, waited until daylight and entered with a stake.

But human beings are human beings. Sometimes they faint. Spencer did when the door closed.

IT WAS dawn when he came to. Dawn—of the last day.

Spencer didn't waver. If it wasn't his neck tonight, it would be somebody else's neck. He had to protect the blood supply, for he had seen the injured workmen roll in, their families clustering about them in moaning groups. They could not be denied. There was no way out unless he could find it himself.

The priest couldn't help him. It was noon when Spencer went to Father Donnelly and gave him the refrigerator key to keep. He wanted to confess, but at the last moment he knew it would be no use. He just told Father Donnelly to keep the key for him.

He took a crucifix, too.

That might hold *it* off for a little while. The crucifix could not destroy, but like garlic, the shape held an allergy.

Then Spencer went home, took out his revolver, and began to mould a silver bullet.

The stake had failed. Garlic had failed. Gas had failed. Poison and fire wouldn't work. He couldn't pull the teeth or trap the mouth.

So mould a silver bullet.

Why should silver affect *them*? Perhaps it was the contact of silver with the blood stream. The blood circulates in 46 seconds.

That is, in normal men. The physiology of vampires must be strange enough. Silver poisoned, silver might disturb elements of dead blood mingled with living blood.

The physiology of vampires
. . . .

Spencer believed in the silver bullet. He had to. It was the last resource of vampire legends and it had to work.

But it didn't.

Evidently legend was legend—legend from a day of rough pistols and muzzle-loaders. It was already dusk when Spencer realized he was beaten by ballistics. Mould and file as he would, the bullet wouldn't fit for firing.

And he had melted the silver crucifix for the bullet!

It was the old story. Science against the Powers of Darkness, that sort of thing. And this time science had failed. Spencer smiled wryly. He wished he had the crucifix now. But with it or without it, he had his rendezvous to keep.

How he walked to the clinic he never knew. Every step was a battle. But Vonier would be there, and if he didn't show up Vonier would stalk abroad. Stalk abroad and drink—

Spencer hurried in. No weapons now. He knew what this meant. He was walking the Last Mile when he went down the hall to his office.

He sat there counting the min-

utes. Silver bullets shooting into Time. Silver bullets and a silver key and a silver crucifix. 46 seconds, and the physiology of a vampire. . . .

The door opened.

Vonier.

He didn't say anything. He didn't need to. Spencer read it in his eyes, read the hunger blazing there. The smile in the pale face the ageless face, was sardonic.

"I have two cavities to fill tonight, Doctor. One in my teeth and one in my stomach."

Spencer almost laughed. There was a jest—with teeth in it.

"Before we proceed, please, will you take a look at this one here? It's very painful."

Harry Spencer's most difficult patient climbed into the chair, and like an ordinary mortal, indicated a yellow fang. His long, talon-like finger fumbled in his mouth.

"Zhiz un eer."

Just another patient, indicating the source of his pain. Just another—

Spencer looked at the infected incisor. Enamel decay. Cavity. Against the roots, deep.

Fill the teeth of the creature that was to kill him? Anything! Just to stall, stall for time, stall against the question of where the key was. Perhaps the creature thought he had brought the key. Perhaps these last few moments might suggest a way out.

Harry Spencer was, after all, a professional man. He gave his patient's teeth a professional examination. He would give this tooth a professional filling.

"Lose the fear in routine. It's just another patient," Spencer's brain mumbled to him. Then he shivered in fear as he looked into the deep eyes of Vonier, saw what waited there, what lurked in hunger.

HIS FINGERS didn't tremble as he drilled. How he longed to plunge that drill down the red throat—into the lungs from which welled an odour of unspeakable corruption! But it would do no good. Vampires do not die by steel.

His fingers didn't tremble as he turned away and compounded the filling.

But they did tremble as he packed it into the enlarged cavity. For a moment his pick slipped, and he cut a tiny nick in the gum of the creature as he finished the job. A little gout of blood welled, and Vonier winced in pain. But the filling was in place.

Vonier sat up. "There, now." His voice was hoarse with a hunger no longer concealed. "And now, Doctor—if you'll just hand over the key?"

He read the answer in Spencer's eyes, read it in Spencer's beaded forehead.

The vampire rose swiftly.

Arms wound about Spencer's body, tight as the grip of shrouds. Fingers like white worms writhed into Spencer's throat, bending him back.

Clothes smelling of grave-earth, a breath of carrion, and through it all the white face burning bright, bending closer. Spencer saw the yellow fangs gleam, saw the teeth descend to his neck.

He fought desperately—but Vonier held him as though he were a puppet with flailing arms. Vonier held him and the teeth descended.

Even at this last moment he could think about how long they were, and how sharp, and how they could sink into a throat and tear the life away.

The vampire ripped his head backwards, stabbed that mouth down into Spencer's neck—

And fell.

Spencer went down, too, when the grip was released. The creature was somewhere beneath him, groaning. Or was he? Groans died away, and Spencer stared at a litter on the rug.

Less than a minute since it had risen from the chair and gripped him. Less than a minute, and it was gone. Even the rotted clothing. . . .

And it was less than a minute later that Doctor King walked into the room.

"Hello, Spencer. Just closed up the office for the night. Thought I'd drop in and see how you felt."

Spencer was busily engaged with a broom, sweeping up a little pile of powdery dust on the floor.

"Had a patient tonight?" King asked.

Spencer nodded. "He's gone though. Filled a tooth for him."

He stopped and picked something gleaming from the dust at his feet.

"Funny thing—the filling seems to have dropped out when he left. Careless of me."

"You're a bad dentist, eh?" King chuckled.

"No," said Spencer. He stared for a long moment at the tiny silver filling he held amidst the dust in his hand.

"No—I'd say I'm a damned good dentist, at that!"

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the eye of TANDYLA

By L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

Illustrator: FINLAY

In the notes to one of his own stories (included in The Spell of Seven, an excellent collection he recently edited for Pyramid), L. Sprague de Camp modestly left it up to his readers to judge whether or not his heroic fantasies could be ranked with those of outstanding writers like Robert E. Howard, Fritz Leiber and Jack Vance. Our vote, of course, is an unequivocal yes, and to back it up we bring you one of his best, this time about chubby little Derezong Taash, sorcerer to King Vuar the Capricious, whose favorite concubine has a sudden desire for the fabulous Eye of Tandyala (zealously guarded by the powerful wizards of Lotor), which Derezong must steal or else pay for—with the loss of his head.

ONE DAY—so long ago that mountains have arisen since, with cities on their flanks—Derezong Taash, sorcerer to King Vuar the capricious, sat in his library reading the Collected Fragments of Lontang and drinking the green wine of Zhysk. He was at peace with himself and the world, for nobody had tried to murder him for ten whole days, by natural means or otherwise. When tired

of puzzling out the cryptic glyphs, Derezong would gaze over the rim of his goblet at his demon-screen, on which the great Shuazid (before King Vuar took a capricious dislike to him) had depicted Derezong's entire stable of demons, from the fearful Fernazot down to the slightest sprite that submitted to his summons.

One wondered, on seeing Derezong, why even a sprite should



Virgil
Finlay

bother. For Derezong Taash was a chubby little man (little for a Lorska, that is) with white hair framing a round youthful face. When he had undergone the zom-pur-treatment, he had carelessly forgotten to name his hair among the things for which he wanted eternal youth—an omission which had furnished his fellow magicians with fair scope for ribald ridicule.

On this occasion, Derezong Taash planned, when drunk enough, to heave his pudgy form out of the reading chair and totter in to dinner with his assistant, Zhamel Seh. Four of Derezong's sons should serve the food as a precaution against Derezong's ill-wishers, and Zhamel Seh should taste it first as a further precaution. After they had consumed a few jars more of wine, Derezong would choose three of his prettiest concubines and stagger off to bed. A harmless program, one would have said. In fact Derezong Taash had already, in his mind, chosen the three, though he had not yet decided upon their order.

And then the knock upon the door and the high voice of King Vuar's most insolent page: "My lord sorcerer, the king will see you forthwith!"

"What about?" grumbled Derezong Taash.

"Do I know where the storks go in winter? Am I privy to the

secrets of the living dead of Sedo? Has the North Wind confided to me what lies beyond the ramparts of the Riphai?"

"I suppose not." Derezong yawned, rose, and toddled throneward. He glanced back over his shoulders as he went, disliking to walk through the halls of the palace without Zhamel to guard his back against a sudden stab.

The lamplight gleamed upon King Vuar's glabrous pate, and the king looked up at Derezong Taash from under his hedge of heavy brows. He sat upon his throne in the audience chamber, and over his head upon the wall was fastened the hunting-horn of the great King Zynah, Vuar's father.

On the secondary throne sat the king's favorite concubine Ilepro, from Lotor: a dumpy middle-aged Lotri, hairy and toothy. What the king saw in her Perhaps in middle age he had become bored with beauty and sought spice from its anti-thesis. Or perhaps after the High Chief of Lotor, Konesp, had practically forced his widowed sister upon the king after Ilepro's husband had died of a hunting accident, the monarch had fallen truly in love with her.

OR perhaps the hand of the wizard-priest of Lotor was to be discerned behind these bi-

zarre events. Sorcery or its equivalent would be needed to account for King Vuar's designating Ilepro's young son by her Lotri husband as his heir, if indeed he had done so as rumor whispered. Derezong was thankful that the youth was not present, though that quartet of Lotri women, swathed in their superfluous furs, squatted around the feet of Ilepro.

Derezong was sure there was something here that he did not understand, and that he would not like any better when he did understand it. Despite the present peace-treaty between Lotor and Lorsk, he doubted that the Lotris had forgotten the harrying that King Zynah had inflicted upon them in retaliation for their raids.

After his preliminary prostration, Derezong Taash observed something else that had escaped his original notice: that on a small table in front of the throne, which usually bore a vase of flowers, there now reposed a silver plate, and on the plate the head of the Minister of Commerce, wearing that witlessly blank expression that heads are wont to do when separated from their proper bodies.

Evidently King Vuar was not in his jolliest mood.

"Yes, O King?" said Derezong Taash, his eyes swivelling nervously from the head of the late

minister to that of his sovereign.

King Vuar said: "Good my lord, my concubine Ilepro, whom I think you know, has a desire that you alone can satisfy."

"Yes, Sire?" Jumping to a wrong conclusion, Derezong Taash goggled like a bullfrog in spring. For one thing, King Vuar was not at all noted for generosity in sharing his women, and for another thing, of all the royal harem, Derezong had the least desire to share Ilepro.

The king said: "She wishes that jewel that forms the third eye of the goddess Tandyla. You know that temple in Lotor?"

"Yes, Sire." Although he retained his blandest smile, Derezong's heart sank to the vicinity of his knees. This was going to prove even less entertaining than intimacy with Ilepro.

"This small-souled buckster," said Vuar, indicating the head, "said, when I put the proposal to him, that the gem could not be bought, wherefore I caused his length to be lessened. This hasty act I now regret, for it transpires that he was right. Therefore, our only remaining course is to steal the thing."

"Y-yes, Sire."

The king rested his long chin upon his fist and his agate eyes saw distant things. The lamp-light gleamed upon the ring of gray metal on his finger, a ring made from the heart of a falling

star, and of such might as a magic-repellent that not even the sendings of the wizards of Lotor had power to harm its wearer.

He continued: "We can either essay to seize it openly, which would mean war, or by stealth. Now, although I will go to some trouble to gratify the whims of Ilepro, my plans do not include a Lotrian war. At least, not until all other expedients have been attempted. You, therefore, are hereby commissioned to go to Lotor and obtain this jewel."

"Yes indeed, Sire," said Derezong with a heartiness that was, to say the least, a bit forced. Any thoughts of protest that he might have entertained had some minutes since been banished by the sight of the unlucky minister's head.

"Of course," said Vuar in tones of friendly consideration, "should you feel your own powers inadequate, I'm sure the King of Zhysk will lend me his wizard to assist you. . . ."

"Never, Sire!" cried Derezong, drawing himself up to his full five-five. "That bungler, far from helping, would be but an anchor stone about my neck!"

King Vuar smiled a lupine smile, though Derezong could not perceive the reason. "So be it."

BACK in his own quarters Derezong Taash rang for his assistant. After the third ring

Zhamel Seh sauntered in, balancing his big bronze sword by the pommel on his palm.

"Some day," said Derezong, "you'll amputate some poor wight's toe showing off that trick, and I only hope it will be yours. We leave tomorrow on a mission."

Zhamel Seh grasped his sword securely by the hilt and grinned down upon his employer. "Good! Whither?"

Derezong Taash told him.

"Better yet! Action! Excitement!" Zhamel swished the air with his sword. "Since you put the geas upon the queen's mother have we sat in these apartments like barnacles on a pile, doing nought to earn King Vuar's bounty."

"What's wrong with that? I plague none and nobody plagues me. And now with winter coming on, we must journey forth to the ends of rocky Lotor to try to lift this worthless bauble the king's sack of a favorite has set her silly heart upon."

"I wonder why," said Zhamel. "Since she's Lotri by birth, you'd think she'd wish to ward her land's religious symbols instead of raping them away for her own adornment."

"One never knows. Our own women are unpredictable enough, and as for Lotris. . . . But let's to the task of planning our course and equipage."

That night, Derezong Taash took only one concubine to bed with him.

THEY rode east to fertile Zhysk on the shores of the Tritonian Sea, and in the city of Bienkar sought out Derezong's friend, Goshap Tuzh the lapidary, from whom they solicited information to forearm them against adversity.

"This jewel," said Goshap Tuzh, "is about the size of a small fist, egg-shaped without facets, and of a dark purple hue. When seen from one end, it displays rays like a sapphire, but seven instead of six. It forms the pupil of the central eye of the statue of Tandyla, being held in place by leaden prongs. As to what other means, natural or otherwise, the priests of Tandyla employ to guard their treasure, I know not, save that they are both effective and unpleasing. Twenty-three attempts have been made to pilfer the stone in the last five centuries, all terminating fatally for the thieves. The last time I, Goshap Tuzh, saw the body of the thief. . . ."

As Goshap told the manner in which the unsuccessful thief had been used, Zhamel gagged and Derezong looked into his wine with an expression of distaste, as if some many-legged creeping thing swam therein—although he and his assistant were by no

means the softest characters in a hard age.

"Its properties?" said Derezong Taash.

"Considerable, though perhaps overrated by distant rumor. It is the world's most sovereign anti-demonic, repelling even the dread Tr'lang himself, who is of all demons the deadliest."

"Is it even stronger than King Vuar's ring of star-metal?"

"Much. However, for our old friendship, let me advise you to change your name and take service with some less exacting liege lord. There's no profit in seeking to snatch this Eye."

Derezong Taash ran his fingers through his silky-white hair and beard. "True, he ever wounds me by his brutally voiced suspicions of my competence, but to relinquish such luxe as I enjoy were not so simple. Where else can I obtain such priceless books and enrapturing women for the asking? Nay, save when he becomes seized of these whimsies, King Vuar's a very good master indeed."

"But that's my point. When do you know his caprice notorious may not be turned against you?"

"I know not; betimes I think it must be easier to serve a barbarian king. Barbaians, being wrapped in a mummy-cloth of custom and ritual, are more predictable."

"Then why not flee? Across

the Tritonian Sea lies lordly Torrutseish, where one of your worth would soon rise—”

“You forget,” said Derezong, “King Vuar holds hostages: my not inconsiderable family of fourteen concubines, twelve sons, nine daughters, and several squalling grandchildren. And for them I must stick it out, though the Western Sea swallow the entire land of Pusaad as is predicted in the prophecies.”

Goshap shrugged. “’Tis your affair. I do but indigitate that you are one of these awkward intermediates: Too tub-like ever to make a prow swordsman, and unable to attain the highest grade of magical adepty because you’ll not forswear the delights of your zenana.”

“Thank you, good Goshap,” said Derezong, sipping the green wine. “Howsoever, I live not to attain pre-eminence in some austere regimen disciplinary, but to enjoy life. And now who’s a reliable apothecary in Biekar from whom I can obtain a packet of syr-powder of highest grade and purity?”

“Dualor can furnish you. What semblance do you propose upon yourselves to cast?”

“I thought we’d go as a pair of traders from Parsk. So, if you hear of such a couple traversing Lotor accompanied by vast uproar and vociferation, fail not to show the due surprise.”

DEREZONG TAASH bought his syr-powder with squares of gold bearing the stamp of King Vuar, then returned to their inn where he drew his pentacles and cast his powder and recited the Incantation of the Nines. At the end, both he and Zhamel Seh were both lying helpless on the floor, with their appearance changed to that of a pair of dark hawk-nosed fellows in the fluttery garb of Parsk, with rings in their ears.

When they recovered their strength, they rode forth. They crossed the desert of Reshape without suffering excessively either from thirst, or from the bites of venomous serpents, or from attacks of spirits of the waste. They passed through the Forest of Antro without being assailed by brigands, sword-toothed cats, or the Witch of Antro. And at last they wound among the iron hills of Lotor.

As they stopped for one night, Derezong said: “By my reckoning and according to what passersby have told us, the temple should lie not more than one day’s journey ahead. Hence, it were time to try whether we can effect our direption by surrogate instead of in our own vulnerable persons.” And he began drawing pentacles in the dirt.

“You mean to call up Feranzot?” asked Zhamel Seh.

“The same.”

Zhamel shuddered. "Some day you'll leave an angle of a pentacle unclosed, and that will be the end of us."

"No doubt. But to assail this stronghold of powers chthonian by any but the mightiest means were an even surer passport to extinction. So light the rushes and begin."

"I can fancy nothing riskier than dealing with Feranzot," grumbled Zhamel, "save perhaps invoking the terrible Tr'lang himself." But he did as he was bid.

They went through the Incantation of Br'tong, as reconstructed by Derezong Taash from the Fragments of Lontang, and the dark shape of Feranzot appeared outside the main pentacle, wavering and rippling. Derezong felt the heat of his body sucked forth by the cold of the daev, and felt the overwhelming depression the thing's presence engendered. Zhamel Seh, for all his thews, cowered.

"What would you?" whispered Feranzot.

Derezong Taash gathered his weakened forces and replied: "You shall steal the jewel in the middle eye of the statue of the goddess Tandyla in the nearby temple thereof and render it to me."

"That I cannot."

"And why not?"

"First, because the priests of

Tandyla have traced around their temple a circle of such puissance that no sending or semblance or spirit, save the great Tr'lang, can cross it. Second, because the Eye itself is surrounded by an aura of such baleful influence that not I, nor any other of my kind, nor even Tr'lang himself, can exert a purchase upon it on this plane. May I return to my own dimension now?"

"Depart, depart, depart. . . . Well, Zhamel, it looks as though we should be compelled to essay this undelightsome task ourselves."

NEXT day they continued their ride. The hills became mountains of uncommon ruggedness, and the road a mere trail cut into cliffs of excessive steepness. The horses, more accustomed to the bison-swarmling plains of windy Lorsk, disliked the new topography, and rubbed their riders' legs painfully against the cliffside in their endeavor to keep away from the edge.

Little sun penetrated these gorges of black rock, which began to darken almost immediately after noon. Then the sky clouded over and the rocks became shiny with cold mist. The trail crossed the gorge by a spidery bridge suspended from ropes. The horses balked.

"Not that I blame them," said

Derezong Taash, dismounting. "By the red-hot talons of Vrazh, it takes the thought of my fairest concubine to nerve me to cross!"

When led in line with Zhamel belaboring their rumps from the rear, the animals crossed, though unwillingly. Derezong, towing them, took one brief look over the side of the bridge at the white thread of water foaming far below and decided not to do that again. Feet and hooves resounded hollowly on the planking and echoed from the cliff-sides, and the wind played with the ropes as with the strings of a great harp.

On the other side of the gorge, the road continued its winding upward way. They passed another pair, a man and a woman, riding down the trail, and had to back around a bend to find a place with room enough to pass. The man and the woman went by looking somberly at the ground, barely acknowledging with a grunt the cheerful greeting Derezong tossed at them.

Then the road turned sharply into a great cleft in the cliff, wherein their hooffalls echoed thrice as loud as life and they could scarcely see to pick their way. The bottom of the cleft sloped upward, so that in time they came out upon an area of tumbled stones with a few

dwarfed trees. The road ran dimly on through the stones until it ended in a flight of steps, which in turn led up to the Temple of Tandyla itself. Of this temple of ill repute, the travellers could see only the lower parts, for the upper ones disappeared into the cloud floor. What they could see of it was all black and shiny and rising to sharp peaks.

Derezong remembered the unpleasant attributes ascribed to the goddess, and the even more disagreeable habits credited to her priests. It was said, for instance, that the worship of Tandyla, surely a sinister enough figure in the Pusaadian pantheon, was a mere blind to cover dark rites concerning the demon Tr'lang, who in elder days had been a god in his own right. That was before the towering Lorskas, driven from the mainland by the conquering Hauskirik, had swarmed across the Tritonian Sea to Pusaad, before that land had begun its ominous subsidence.

DEREZONG TAASH assured himself that gods and demons alike were not usually so formidable as their priests, from base motives of gain, tried to make them out. Also, that wild tales of the habits of priests usually turned out to be at least somewhat exaggerated. Although he did not fully believe

his own assurances, they would have to suffice for want of better.

In front of the half-hidden temple, Derezong Taash pulled up, dismounted, and with Zhamel's help weighted down the reins of their beasts with heavy stones to hinder them from straying.

As they started for the steps Zhamel cried: "Master!"

"What is't?"

"Look upon us!"

Derezong looked. The semblance of traders from Parsk had vanished, and they were again King Vuar's court magician and his assistant, plain for all to see. They must have stepped across that line that Fernazot had warned them of. Derezong took a sharp look at the entrance. Half-hidden in the inadequate light, two men flanked the doorway. His eye caught the gleam of polished bronze. But if these doorkeepers had observed the change in the looks of the visitors, they gave no sign.

Derezong Taash drove his short legs up the shiny black steps. The guards came into full view, thick-bodied Lotris with beetling brows. Men said they were akin to the savages of Ierarne in the far Northeast, who knew not horse-taming and fought with sharpened stone. These stood staring straight ahead, each facing the other like statues. Derezong and Zhamel passed between them.

They found themselves in a vestibule where a pair of young Lotri girls said: "Your boots and swords, sirs."

Derezong lifted off his baldric and handed it to the nearest, scabbard and all; then pulled off his boots and stood barefoot with the grass he had stuffed into them to keep them from chafing sticking out from between his toes. He was glad to feel the second sword hanging down his back inside his shirt.

A low remark passed between Zhamel and one of the girls—a girl who, Derezong observed, was not bad looking for a Lotri, in a plump moon-faced way.

"Come on," said Derezong Taash, and led the way into the naos of the temple.

It was much like other temples: a big rectangular room smelling of incense, with a third of the area partitioned off by a railing, behind which rose the huge black squat statue of Tandylya. The smooth basalt of which it was carved reflected feebly the highlights from the few lamps, and up at the top, where its head disappeared into the shadows, a point of purple light showed where the jewel in its forehead caught the rays.

A couple of Lotris knelt before the railing, mumbling prayers. A priest appeared from the shadows on one side, waddled across the naos behind the rail-

ing. Derezong half expected the priest to turn on him with a demand that he and Zhamel follow him into the sanctum of the high priest, but the priest kept on walking and disappeared into the darkness on the other side.

DEREZONG TAASH and his companion advanced, a slow step at a time, towards the railing. As they neared it, the two Lotris completed their devotions and rose. One of them dropped something that jingled into a large tub-like receptacle behind the railing, and the two squat figures walked quickly out.

For the moment, Derezong and Zhamel were entirely alone in the big room, though in the silence they could hear faint motions and voices from other parts of the temple. Derezong brought out his container of syr-powder and sprinkled it while racing through the Incantation of An-suan. When he finished, there stood between himself and Zhamel a replica of himself.

Derezong Taash climbed over the railing and trotted on the tips of his plump toes around behind the statue. Here in the shadows, he could see doors in the walls. The statue sat with its back almost but not quite touching the wall behind it, so that an active man, by bracing his back against the statue and his feet against the wall, could lever him-

self up. Though Derezong was "active" only in a qualified sense, he slipped into the gap and squirmed into a snugly-fitting fold in the goddess's stone draperies. Here he lay, hardly breathing, until he heard Zhamel's footfalls die away.

The plan was that Zhamel should walk out of the temple, accompanied by the double of Derezong. The guards, believing that the temple was now deserted of visitors, would relax. Derezong would steal the stone; Zhamel should raise a haro outside, urging the guards to "Come quickly!" and while their attention was thus distracted, Derezong would rush out.

Derezong waited a while longer. The soft footsteps of another priest padded past and a door closed. Somewhere, a Lotri girl laughed.

Derezong began to worm his way up between the statue and the wall. It was hard going for one of his girth, and sweat ran out from under his cap of fisher-fur and down his face. Still no interruption. He arrived on a level with the shoulder and squirmed out on to that projection, holding the right ear for safety. The slick stone was cold under his bare feet. By craning his neck, he could see the ill-favored face of the goddess in profile, and by stretching he could reach the jewel in her forehead.

DEREZONG TAASH took out of his tunic a small bronze pry-bar he had brought along for this purpose. With it he began to pry up the leaden prongs that held the gem in place, carefully lest he mar the stone or cause it to fall to the floor below. Every few pries, he tested it with his finger. Soon it felt loose.

The temple was quiet.

Around the clock he went with his little bar, prying. Then the stone came out, rubbing gently against the smooth inner surfaces of the bent-out leaden prongs. Derezung Taash reached for the inside of his tunic, to hide the stone and the bar. But the two objects proved too much for his pudgy fingers to handle at once. The bar came loose and fell with a loud ping—ping down the front of the statue, bouncing from breast to belly to lap, to end with a sonorous clank on the stone floor in front of the image.

Derezung Taash froze rigid. Seconds passed and nothing happened. Surely the guards had heard. . . .

But still there was silence.

Derezung Taash secured the jewel in his tunic and squirmed back over the shoulder to the darkness behind the statue. Little by little, he slid down the space between statue and wall. He reached the floor. Still no noise save an occasional faint

sound such as might have been made by the temple servants preparing dinner for their masters. He waited for the diversion promised by Zhamel Seh.

He waited and waited. From somewhere came the screech of a man in the last agonies.

At last, giving up, Derezung Taash hurried around the hip of the statue. He scooped up the pry-bar with one quick motion, climbed back over the railing, and tiptoed toward the exit.

There stood the guards with swords out, ready for him.

Derezung Taash reached back over his shoulder and pulled out his second sword. In a real fight, he knew he would have little hope against one hardened and experienced sword-fighter, let alone two. His one slim chance lay in bursting through them by a sudden berserk attack, then to keep on running.

He expected such adroit and skillful warriors to separate and come at him from opposite sides. Instead, one of them stepped forward and took an awkward swipe at him. Derezung parried with a clash of bronze and struck back. Clang! clang! went the blades, and then his foe staggered back, dropped his sword with a clatter, clutched both hands to his chest, and folded up in a heap on the floor. Derezung was astonished; he could have sworn he had not gotten home.

Then the other man was upon him. At the second clash of blades, that of the guard spun out of his hand, to fall ringingly to the stone pave. The guard leaped back, turned and ran, disappearing through one of the many ambient doors.

DEREZONG TAASH glanced at his sword, wondering if he had not known his own strength all this time. The whole exchange had taken perhaps ten seconds, and so far as he could tell in the dim light, no blood besmeared his blade. He was tempted to test the deadness of the fallen guard by poking him, but lacked both time and ruthlessness to do so. Instead, he ran out of the vestibule and looked for Zhamel and the double of himself.

No sign of either. The four horses were still tethered a score of paces from the steps of the temple. The stones were sharp under Derezong's bare and unhardened soles. Derezong hesitated, but only for a flash. He was in a way fond of Zhamel Seh, and his assistant's brawn had gotten him out of trouble about as often as Zhamel's lack of insight had gotten them into it. But to plunge back into the temple in search of his erratic aide would be rash to the point of madness. And he did have definite orders from the king.

He sheathed his sword, scrambled on to the back of his horse, and cantered off, leading the other three beasts by their bridles.

During the ride down the narrow cleft, Derezong had time to think, and the more he thought the less he liked what he thought. The behavior of the guards was inexplicable on any grounds but their being drunk or crazy, and he did not believe either. Their failure to attack him simultaneously; their failure to note the fall of the pry-bar; the ease with which he, an indifferent swordsman, had bested them; the fact that one fell down without being touched; their failure to yell for help. . . .

Unless they planned it that way. The whole thing had been too easy to account for by any other hypothesis. Maybe they wanted him to steal the accursed bauble.

At the lower end of the cleft, where the road turned out on to the side of the cliff forming the main gorge, he pulled up, dismounted, and tied the animals, keeping an ear cocked for the sound of pursuers echoing down the cleft. He took out the Eye of Tandyla and looked at it. Yes, when seen end-on it showed the rayed effect promised by Goshap Tuzh. Otherwise, it exhibited no special odd or unnatural properties. So far.

Derezong Taash set it care-

fully on the ground and backed away from it to see it from a greater distance. As he backed, the stone moved slightly and started to roll towards him.

AT first he thought he had not laid it down on a level enough place, and leaped to seize it before it should roll over the edge into the gulf. He put it back and heaped a little barrier of pebbles and dust around it. Now it should not roll!

But when he backed again, it did, right over his little rampart. Derezong Taash began to sweat anew, and not, this time, from physical exertion. The stone rolled toward him, faster and faster. He tried to dodge by shrinking into a recess in the cliff-wall. The stone swerved and came to rest at the toe of one of his bare feet, like a pet animal asking for a pat on the head.

He scooped out a small hole, laid the gem in it, placed a large stone over the hole, and walked away. The large stone shook and the purple egg appeared, pushing aside the pebbles in its path as if it were being pulled out from under the rock by an invisible cord. It rolled to his feet again and stopped.

Derezong Taash picked up the stone and looked at it again. It didn't seem to be scratched. He remembered the urgency with which Chief Konesp was said to

have pressed his sister upon King Vuar, and the fact that the demand for the stone originated with this same Ilepro.

With a sudden burst of emotion, Derezong Taash threw the stone from him, towards the far side of the gorge.

By all calculation, the gem should have followed a curved path, arching downward to shatter against the opposite cliff. Instead, it slowed in mid-flight over the gorge, looped back, and flew into the hand that had just thrown it.

Derezong Taash did not doubt that the priests of Tandyla had laid a subtle trap for King Vuar in the form of this jewel. What it would do to the king and to the kingdom of Lorsk if Derezong carried out his mission, he had no idea. So far as he knew, it was merely an antidemonic, and therefore should protect Vuar instead of harming him. Nevertheless, he was sure something unpleasant was planned, of which he was less than eager to be the agency. He placed the gem on a flat rock, found a stone the size of his head, raised it in both hands, and brought it down upon the jewel.

Or so he intended. On the way down, the stone struck a projecting shelf of rock, and a second later Derezong was capering about like a devil-dancer of Dzen, sucking his mashed fingers and

cursing the priests of Tandyla in the names of the most fearful demons in his repertory. The stone lay unharmed.

For, Derezong reasoned, these priests must have put upon the gem not only a following-spell, but also the Incantation of Duzhateng, so that every effort on the part of Derezong to destroy the object would rebound to his own damage. If he essayed some more elaborate scheme of destruction, he would probably end up with a broken leg. The Incantation of Duzhateng could be lifted only by a complicated spell for which Derezong did not have the materials, which included some very odd and repellent substances indeed.

NOW, Derezong Taash knew that there was only one way in which he could both neutralize these spells and secure the jewel so that it should plague him no more, and that was to put it back in the hole in the forehead of the statue of Tandyla and hammer down the leaden prongs that held it in its setting. Which task, however, promised to present more difficulties than the original theft. For if the priests of Tandyla had meant Derezong to steal the object, they might show greater acumen in thwarting his attempt to return it, than they had in guarding it in the first place.

One could but try. Derezong Taash put the jewel into his tunic, mounted his horse (leaving the other three still tethered) and rode back up the echoing cleft. When he came out upon the little plateau upon which squatted the temple of Tandyla, he saw that he had indeed been forestalled. Around the entrance to the temple stood a double row of guards, the bronze scales of their cuirasses glimmering faintly in the fading light. The front rank carried shields of mammoth hide and big bronze swords, while those in the rear bore long pikes which they held in both hands and thrust between the men of the front rank. They thus presented a formidable hedge to any attacker, who had first to get past the spear-points and then deal with the swords.

One possibility was to gallop at them in the hope that one or two directly in one's way would flinch aside opening a path by which one could burst through the serried line. Then, one could ride on into the temple and perhaps get the gem back into place before being caught up with. If not, there would be a great smash, some battered guards, a wounded horse, and a thoroughly skewered and sliced sorcerer all tangled in a kicking heap.

Derezong Taash hesitated, then thought of his precious

manuscripts and adorable concubines awaiting him in King Vuar's palace, which he could never safely enter again unless he brought either the gem or an acceptable excuse for not having it. He kicked his mount into motion.

As the animal cantered toward the line, the spear-points got closer and larger and sharper-looking. Derezong saw that the guards were not going to flinch aside and obligingly let him through. Then, a figure came out of the temple and ran down the steps to the rear of the guards. It wore a priest's robe, but just before the shock of impact Derezong recognized the rugged features of Zhamel Seh.

DEREZONG TAASH hauled on his reins, and the horse skidded to a halt with its nose a scant span from the nearest point. Derezong—living in a stirrupless age—slid forward until he bestrode the animal's neck. Clutching its mane with his left hand, he felt for the gem with his right.

"Zhamel!" he called. "Catch!"

He threw, Zhamel leaped high and caught the stone before it had time to loop back.

"Now put it back!" cried Derezong.

"What? Art mad?"

"Put it back, speedily, and secure it!"

Zhamel, trained to obey commands no matter how bizarre, dashed back into the temple, albeit wagging his head as if in sorrow for his master's loss of sanity. Derezong Taash untangled himself from his horse's mane and pulled the beast back out of reach of the spears. Under their lacquered helmets, the heads of the guards turned this way and that in evident perplexity. Derezong surmised that they had been given one simple order—to keep him out—and that they had not been told how to cope with fraternization between the stranger and one of their own priests.

As the guards did not seem to be coming after him, Derezong sat on his horse, eyes on the portal. He'd give Zhamel a fair chance to accomplish his mission and escape, though he thought little of the youth's chances. If Zhamel tried to push or cut his way through the guards, they would make mincemeat of him, unarmored as he was. And he, Derezong, would have to find and train another assistant, who would probably prove as unsatisfactory as his predecessor. Still, Derezong could not leave the boy utterly to his fate.

Then, Zhamel Seh ran down the steps carrying a long pike of the kind held by the rear-rank guards. Holding this pike level, he ran at the guards as though

he were about to spear one in the back. Derezong, knowing that such a scheme would not work, shut his eyes.

But just before he reached the guards, Zhamel Seh dug the point of the pike into the ground and pole-vaulted. Up he went, legs jerking and dangling like those of a man being hanged, over the lacquered helmets and the bronze swords and the mammoth hide shields. He came down in front of the guards, breaking one of their pikes with a loud snap, rolled to his feet, and ran towards Derezong Taash. The latter had already turned his horse around.

AS Zhamel caught hold of the edge of the saddle pad, an uproar arose behind them as priests ran out of the temple shouting. Derezong drummed with his bare heels on the stallion's ribs and set off at a canter, Zhamel swinging along in great leaps beside him. They wended their way down the cleft while the sound of hooves wafted after them.

Derezong Taash wasted no breath in questions while picking his way down the trail. At the bottom, where the cleft ended on one side of the great gorge, they halted for Zhamel to mount his own horse, then continued on as fast as they dared. The echoes of the pursuers' hooves came

down the cleft with a deafening clatter.

"My poor feet!" groaned Zhamel Seh.

At the suspension-bridge, the horses balked again, but Derezong mercilessly pricked and slapped his mount with his sword until the beast trotted out upon the swaying walkway. The cold wind hummed through the ropes, and the daylight was almost gone.

At the far end, with a great sigh of relief, Derezong Taash looked back. Down the cliffside road came a line of pursuers, riding at reckless speed.

He said: "Had I but time and materials, I'd cast a spell on yonder bridge that should make it look as 'twere broken and dangling useless."

"What's wrong with making it broken and useless in very truth?" cried Zhamel, pulling his horse up against the cliffside and hoisting himself so that he stood upon his saddle.

He swung his sword at the cables. As the first of the pursuers reached the far side of the bridge, the structure sagged and fell away with a great swish of ropes and clatter of planks. The men from the temple set up an outcry, and an arrow whizzed across the gap to shatter against the rock.

Derezong and Zhamel resumed their journey.

A FORTNIGHT later, they sat in the garden back of the shop of Goshap Tuzh the lapidary in sunny Bienkar. Zhamel Seh told his part of the tale:

“. . . so on my way out, this little Lotri cast her orbs upon me once again. Now, thought I, there'll be time in plenty to perform the Master's work and make myself agreeable in this quarter as well—”

“Young cullion!” growled Derezhong into his wine.

“—so I followed her. And in truth all was going in most propitious and agreeable wise, when who should come in but one of these chinless wonders in cowl and robe, and went for me with a knife. I tried to fend the fellow off, and fear that in the fracas his neck by ill hap got broke. So, knowing there might be trouble, I borrowed his habit and sallied forth therein, to find that Master, horses, and Master's double had all gone.”

“And how time had flown!” said Derezhong Taash in sarcastic tones. “I trust at least that the young Lotri has cause to remember this episode with pleasure. The double no doubt, being a mere thing of shadow and not a being rational, walked straight out and vanished when it crossed the magical barrier erected by the priests.”

“And,” continued Zhamel, “there were priests and guards

rushing about chittering like a pack of monkeys. I rushed about as if I were one of them, saw them range the guards around the portal, and then the Master returned and threw me the stone. I grasped the situation, swarmed up the statue, popped Tandyla's third eye back into its socket, and hammered the prongs in upon it with the pommel of my dagger. Then I fetched a pike from the armory, pausing but to knock senseless a couple of Lotris who sought to detain me for interrogation, and you know the rest.”

DEREZHONG TAASH rounded out the story and said: “Good Goshap, perchance you can advise our next course, for I fear that should we present ourselves before King Vuar in proper persons, without the gem, he'd have our heads set tastefully on silver platters ere we our explanation finished. No doubt, remorse would afterwards o'erwhelm him, but that would help us not.”

“Since he holds you in despite, why not leave him, as I've urged before?” said Goshap.

Derezhong Taash shrugged. “Others, alas, show a like lack of appreciation, and would prove no easier masters. For had these priests of Tandyla confided in my ability to perform a simple task like carrying their gemstone from Lotor to Lorsk, their plot would doubtless have borne

its intended fruit. But fearing lest I should lose or sell it on the way, they put a supernumerary spell upon it—”

“How could they, when the stone has anti-magical properties?”

“Its anti-magical properties comprise simple antidemonism, whereas the following-spell and the Incantation of Duzhateng are sympathetic magic, not sorcerous. At any rate, they caused it to follow me hither and thither, thus arousing my already awakened suspicions to the fever-pitch.” He sighed and took a pull on the green wine. “What this sorry world needs is more confidence. But say on, Goshap.”

“Well, then, why not write him a letter setting forth the circumstances? I’ll lend you a slave to convey it to Lorsk in advance of your persons, so that when you arrive, King Vuar’s wrath shall have subsided.”

Derezong pondered. “Sage though I deem your suggestion, it faces one obstacle insurmountable. Namely: That of all the men at the court of Lorsk, but six can read; and among these King Vuar is not numbered. Whereas of the six, at least five are among my enemies, who’d like nought better than to see me tumbled from my place. And should the task of reading my missive to the king devolve on one of these, you can fancy how

he’d distort my harmless pictographs to my discredit. Could we trick old Vuar into thinking we’d performed our task, as by passing off on him a stone similar to that he expects of us? Know you of such?”

“Now there,” said Goshap, “is a proposal indeed. Let me cogitate. . . . Last year, when the bony specter of want came upon the land, King Daior placed his best crown in pawn to the Temple of Kelk, for treasure wherewith to still the clamorings of his people. Now, this crown bears at its apex a purple star sapphire of wondrous size and fineness, said to have been shaped by the gods before the Creation for their own enjoyment, and being in magnitude and hue not unlike that which forms the Eye of Tandyla. And the gem has never been redeemed, wherefore the priests of Kelk have set the crown on exhibition, thereby mulcting the curious of further offerings. But as to how this well-guarded gem shall be transferred from this crown to your possession, ask me not, and in truth I had liefer know nought of the matter.”

NEXT day, Derezong Taash cast upon himself and Zhamel Seh the likeness of Atlantes, from the misty mountain range in the desert of Gautha, far to the East across the Tritonian Sea,

where it was said in Pusaad that there were men with snakes for legs and others with no heads but faces in their chests.

Zhamel Seh grumbled: "What are we magicians or thieves? Perhaps if we succeed in this, the King of Torrutseish across the Tritonian Sea has some bauble he specially fancies, that we could rob him of."

Derezong Taash did not argue the point, but led the way to the square fronted by the Temple of Kelk. They strode up to the temple with the Atlantean swagger, and into where the crown lay upon a cushion on a table with a lamp to illuminate it and two seven-foot Lorskas to guard it, one with a drawn sword and the other with a nocked arrow. The guards looked down over their great black beards at the red-haired Atlanteans in their blue cloaks and armlets of orichalc who pointed and jabbered as they saw the crown. And then the shorter Atlantean, that was Derezong Taash beneath the illusion, wandered out, leaving the other to gape.

Scarcely had the shorter Atlas passed the portal than he gave a loud squawk. The guards, looking that way, saw his head in profile projecting past the edge of the doorway and looking upward as though his body were being bent backward, while a pair of hands gripped his throat.

The guards, not knowing that Derezong was strangling himself, rushed to the portal. As they neared it, the head of the assailed Atlantean disappeared from view, and they arrived to find Derezong Taash in his proper form strolling up to the entrance. All the while behind them the powerful fingers of Zhamel Seh pried loose the stone from King Dairo's crown.

"Is aught amiss, sirs?" said Derezong to the guards, who stared about wildly as Zhamel Seh came out of the temple behind them. As he did so, he also dropped his Atlantean disguise and become another Lorska like the guards, though not quite so tall and bushy-bearded.

"If you seek an Atlas," said Derezong in answer to their questions, "I saw two such issue from your fane and slink off into yonder alley with furtive gait. Perhaps it behooves you to see whether they have committed some depredation in your hallowed precincts?"

As the guards rushed back into the temple to see, Derezong Taash and his assistant made off briskly in the opposite direction. Zhamel Seh muttered: "At least, let's hope we shall not have to return this jewel to the place whence we obtained it!"

DEREZONG and Zhamel reached Lezohtr late at

night, but had not even finished greeting their loving concubines when a messenger informed Derezong Taash that the king wanted him at once.

Derezong Taash found King Vuar in the audience room, evidently fresh-risen from his bed, for he wore nought but his crown and a bearskin wrapped about his bony body. Ilepro was there, too, clad with like informality, and with her were her ever-present Lotrian quarter.

"You have it?" said King Vuar, lifting a bushy brow that boded no good for a negative answer.

"Here, Sire," said Derezong, heaving himself up off the floor and advancing with the jewel from the crown of King Daior.

King Vuar took it in his fingertips and looked at it in the light of the single lamp. Derezong Taash wondered if the king would think to count the rays to see if there were six or seven; but he reassured himself with the thought that King Vuar was notoriously weak in higher mathematics.

The king extended the jewel towards Ilepro. "Here, Madam," he said. "And let us hope that with this transaction ends your incessant plaint."

"My lord is as generous as the sun," said Ilepro in her thick Lotrian accent. "'Tis true I have a little more to say, but not for

servile ears." She spoke in Lotrian to her four attendants, who scuttled out.

"Well?" said the king.

Ilepro stared into the sapphire and made a motion with her free hand, meanwhile reciting something in her native tongue. Although she went too fast for Derezong Taash to understand, he caught a word, several times repeated, that shook him to the core. The word was "Tr'lang".

"Sire!" he cried. "I fear this northern witch is up to no good—"

"What?" roared King Vuar. "You vilipend my favorite, and before my very optics? I'll have your head—"

"But Sire! King! Look!"

The king broke into his tirade long enough to look, and never resumed it. For the flame of the lamp had shrunk to a bare spark. Cold eddies stirred the air of the room, in the midst of which the gloom thickened into shadow and the shadow into substance. At first, it seemed a shapeless darkness, a sable fog, but then a pair of glowing points appeared, palpable eyes, at twice the height of a man.

Derezong's mind sought for exorcisms while his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth with terror. For his own Feranzot was but a kitten compared to this, and no pentacle protected him.

The eyes grew plainer, and lower down horny talons threw back faint highlights from the feeble flame of the lamp. The cold in the room was as if an iceberg had walked in, and Derezong smelt an odor as of burning feathers.

ILEPRO pointed at the king and cried something in her own language. Derezong thought he saw fangs as a great mouth opened and Tr'lang swept forward towards Ilepro. She held the jewel in front of her, as if to ward off the daev. But it paid no attention. As the blackness settled around her, she gave a piercing scream.

The door now flew open again and the four Lotri women rushed back in. Ilepro's screams continued, diminuendo, with a curious effect of distance, as if Tr'lang were dragging her far away. All that could be seen was a dwindling shapeless shape of shadow in the middle of the floor.

The foremost of the Lotris cried "Ilepro!" and sprang towards the shape, shedding wraps with one hand while tugging out a great bronze sword with the other. As the other three did likewise, Derezong Taash realized that they were not women at all, but burly male Lotris given a superficially feminine look by shaving their beards and padding their clothes

in appropriate places. The first of the four swung his sword through the place where the shape of Tr'lang had been, but without meeting resistance other than that of air. Then he turned toward the king and Derezong.

"Take these alive!" he said in Lotrian. "They shall stand surety for our safe departure."

The four moved forward, their swords ready and their free hands spread to clutch like the talons of the just-departed demon. Then the opposite door opened and in came Zhamel Seh with an armful of swords. Two he tossed to Derezong Taash and King Vuar, who caught them by the hilts; the third he gripped in his own large fist as he took his place beside the other two.

"Too late," said another Lotri. "Slay them and run's our only chance."

Suiting the deed to the declaration, he rushed upon the three Lorskas. Clang! Clang! went the swords as the seven men slashed and parried in the gloom. King Vuar had whirled his bearskin around his left arm for a shield and fought naked save for his crown. While the Lorskas had an advantage of reach, they were handicapped by the king's age and Derezong's embonpoint and mediocrity of swordsmanship.

Though Derezong cut and thrust nobly, he found himself pushed back towards a corner,

and felt the sting of a flesh-wound in the shoulder. And whatever the ignorant might think of a wizard's powers, it was quite impossible to fight physically for one's life and cast a spell at the same time.

THE king bellowed for help, but no answer came, for in these inner chambers the thick stone walls and hangings deadened sound before it reached the outer rooms of the palace where King Vuar's guards had their stations. Like the others, he, too, was driven back until the three were fighting shoulder to shoulder in the corner. A blade hit Derezong's head flatsides and made him dizzy, while a metallic sound told that another blow had gotten home on the king's crown, and a yelp from Zhamel Seh revealed that he also had been hurt.

Derezong Taash found himself fast tiring. Each breath was a labor, and the hilt was slippery in his aching fingers. Soon they'd beat down his guard and finish him, unless he found some more indirect shift by which to make head against them.

He threw his sword, not at the Lotri in front of him, but at the little lamp that flickered on the table. The lamp flew off with a clatter and went out as Derezong Taash dropped on all fours and crept after his sword. Behind

him in the darkness he could hear the footsteps and the hard breathing of men, afraid to strike for fear of smiting a friend and afraid to speak lest they reveal themselves to a foe.

Derezong Taash felt along the wall until he came to the hunting-horn of King Zynah. Wrenching the relic from the wall, he filled his lungs and blew a tremendous blast.

The blast of the horn resounded deafeningly in the confined space. Derezong took several steps, lest one of the Lotris locate him by sound and cut him down in the dark, and blew again. With loud trappings and clankings, the guards of King Vuar approached. The door burst open and in they came with weapons ready and torches high.

"Take them!" said King Vuar, pointing at the Lotris.

One of the Lotris tried to resist, but a guardsman's sword sheared the hand from his arm as he swung, and the Lotri yelled and sank to the floor to bleed to death. The others were subdued with little trouble.

"Now," said the king, "I can give you the boon of a quick death, or I can turn you over to the tormentors for a slower and much more interesting one. Do you confess your plans and purposes in full, the former alternative shall be permitted you. Speak."

The Lotri who had led the others when they entered the room said: "Know, King, that I am Paanuvel, the husband of Ilepro. The others are gentlemen of the court of Ilepro's brother Konesp, High Chief of Lotor."

"Gentlemen!" snorted King Vuar.

"As my brother-in-law has no sons of his own, he and I concocted this sublime scheme for bringing his kingdom and yours under the eventual united rule of my son Pendetr. This magician of yours was to steal the Eye of Tandyla, so that, when Ilepro conjured up the daev Tr'lang, the monster would not assail her as she'd be protected by the gem's powers; it should, instead, dispose of you. For we knew that no lesser creature of the outer dimensions could assail you whilst you wear the ring of star-metal. Then she'd proclaim the child Pendetr king, as you've already named him heir, with herself as regent till he comes of age. But the antisorcellarious virtues of this jewel are evidently not what they once were, for Tr'lang engulfed my wife though she thrust the gem in's maw."

"You have spoken well and frankly," said King Vuar, "though I question the morality of turning your wife over to me as my concubine, yourself being not only alive but present here in disguise. However, the customs

of the Lotris are not ours. Lead them out, guards, and take off their heads."

"One more word, King," said Paanuvel. "For myself I care little, now that my beloved Ilepro's gone. But I ask that you make not the child Pendetr suffer for his father's faulty schemes."

"I will think on't. Now, off with you and with your heads." The king turned to Derezong Taash, who was mopping at his flesh-wound. "What is the cause of the failure of the Eye of Tandyla?"

DEREZONG, in fear and trembling, told the true tale of their foray into Lotor and their subsequent theft of the sapphire in Bienkar.

"Aha!" said King Vuar. "So that's what we get for not counting the rays seen in the stone!"

He paused to pick up the jewel from where it lay upon the floor, and the quaking Derezong foresaw his own severance, like that which the Lotris were even now experiencing.

Then Vuar smiled thinly. "A fortunate failure, it seems," said the king. "I am indebted to you both, first for your shrewdness in penetrating the plans of the Lotris to usurp the throne of Lorsk, second for fighting beside me to such good purpose this night.

"Howsoever, we have here a

situation fraught with some slight embarrassment. For King Daior is a good friend of mine, which friendship I would not willingly forego. And even though I should return the gem to him with explanation and apology, the fact that my servants purloined it in the first place would not sit well with him. My command to you, therefore, is to return at once to Bienkar—”

“Oh, no!” cried Derezong Taash, the words escaping involuntarily from him under the impetus of strong emotion.

“—return to Bienkar,” continued the king as if he had not

heard, “and smuggle the jewel back to its original position in the crown of the King of Zhysk, without letting anyone know that you are involved either in the disappearance of the stone or in its eventual restoration. For such accomplished rogues as you and your apprentice have shown yourselves to be, this slight feat will pose no serious obstacle. And so goodnight, my lord sorcerer.”

King Vuar threw his bearskin about him and tramped off to his apartments, leaving Derezong and Zhamel staring at one another with expressions of mingled horror and a vast dismay.

THE END

Editorial (Cont. from page 4)

when you remember the wonder of *The Martian Chronicles* and the bite of *Fahrenheit 451*—and excellent stories by Bloch, Wyndham and Sheckley, all meeting the editorial standards we've set: they are the kind of story we ourselves would want to read if we were in your place—and in a sense we are.

Finally, in most of your letters one request rang out loud

and clear: you want a letter column. Well, you'll have it, starting with the next issue. Actually, though, this editorial itself has turned out to be a summary of your reactions to the new *Fantastic*, an opening gun in what we hope will become a highly vocal, steadily informative, even controversial department, one that you the readers will write for yourselves. —JR

An eerie story by the masterful author of Re-birth, Day of the Triffids, and "The Eternal Eve" (in the October Amazing). A disturbing tale about hideous blood-red footprints that shouldn't have been there—because the only one—or thing—that could have made them lay dead, his head bashed in, on the dark floor of a strange old house that two horrified second-story men wished they had never tried to burglarize.

Illustrator: LUNDY

YOU didn't ought to of croaked him," Smudger said resentfully. "What in hell did you want to do a fool thing like that for?"

Spotty turned to look at the house, a black spectre against the night sky. He shuddered.

"It was him or me," he muttered. "I wouldn't of done it if he didn't come for me—and I wouldn't even then, not if he'd come ordinary. . . ."

"What do you mean ordinary?"

"Like anybody else. But he was queer. . . . He wasn't—well, I guess he was crazy—dangerous crazy. . . ."

"All he needed was a tap to keep him quiet," Smudger persisted. "There wasn't no call to bash his loaf in."

"You didn't see him. I tell you, he didn't act human." Spotty shuddered again at the recollec-

CLOSE BEHIND HIM

tion, and bent down to rub the calf of his right leg tenderly.

The man had come into the room while Spotty was sifting rapidly through the contents of a desk. He'd made no sound. It had been just a feeling, a natural alertness, that had brought Spotty round to see him standing there. In that very first glimpse Spotty had felt there was something queer about him. The expression on his face—his attitude—they were wrong. In his biscuit-colored pajamas, he should have looked just an ordinary citizen awakened from sleep, too anxious to have delayed with dressing-gown and slippers. But some way he didn't. An ordinary citizen would have shown nervousness, at least wariness; he would most likely have picked up something to use as a weapon. This man stood crouching, arms a little raised, as though he were about to spring.

Moreover, any citizen whose lips curled back as this man's did to show his tongue licking hungrily between his teeth, should have been considered sufficiently unordinary to be locked away safely. In the course of his profession Spotty had developed reliable nerves, but the look of this man rocked them. Nobody should be pleased by the discovery of a burglar at large in his house. Yet, there could be no doubt that this victim was looking at Spotty

with satisfaction. An unpleasant gloating kind of satisfaction, like that which might appear on a fox's face at the sight of a plump chicken. Spotty hadn't liked the look of him at all, so he had pulled out the convenient piece of pipe that he carried for emergencies.

Far from showing alarm, the man took a step closer. He poised, sprung on his toes like a wrestler.

"You keep off me, mate," said Spotty, holding up his nine inches of lead pipe as a warning.

Either the man did not hear—or the words held no interest for him. His long, bony face snarled. He shifted a little closer. Spotty backed against the edge of the desk. "I don't want no trouble. You just keep off me," he said again.

The man crouched a little lower. Spotty watched him through narrowed eyes. An extra tensing of the man's muscles gave him a fractional warning before the attack.

The man came without feinting or rushing: he simply sprang, like an animal.

In mid-leap he encountered Spotty's boot suddenly erected like a stanchion in his way. It took him in the middle and felled him. He sprawled on the floor doubled up, with one arm hugging his belly. The other hand



threatened, with fingers bent into hooks. His head turned in jerks, his jaws with their curiously sharp teeth were apart, like a dog's about to snap.

Spotty knew just as well as Smudger that what was required was a quietening tap. He had been about to deliver it with professional skill and quality when the man, by an extraordinary wriggle, succeeded in fastening his teeth into Spotty's leg. It was unexpected, excruciating enough to ruin Spotty's aim and make the blow ineffectual. So he had hit again; harder this time. Too hard. And even then he had more or less had to pry the man's teeth out of his leg. . . .

But it was not so much his aching leg—nor even the fact that he had killed the man—that was the chief cause of Spotty's concern. It was the kind of man he had killed.

"Like an animal he was," he said. The recollection made him sweat. "Like a bloody wild animal. The way he looked! His eyes! Christ, they wasn't human.

That aspect of the affair held little interest for Smudger. He'd not seen the man until he was already dead and looking like any other corpse. His present concern was that a mere matter of burglary had been abruptly transferred to the murder category—a class of work he had always kept clear of until now.

The job had looked easy enough. There shouldn't have been any trouble. A man living alone in a large house—a pretty queer customer with a pretty queer temper. On Fridays, Sundays, and sometimes on Wednesdays, there were meetings at which about twenty people came to the house and did not leave until the small hours of the following morning. All this information was according to Smudger's sister, who learned it third hand from the woman who cleaned the house. The woman was darkly speculative, but un-specific, about what went on at these gatherings. But from Smudger's point of view the important thing was that on other nights the man was alone in the house.

He seemed to be a dealer of some kind. People brought odd curios to the house to sell to him. Smudger had been greatly interested to hear that they were paid for—and paid for well—in cash. That was a solid, practical consideration. Beside it, the vaguely ill reputation of the place, the queerness of its furnishings, and the rumors of strange goings-on at the gatherings, were unimportant. The only thing worthy of attention were the facts that the man lived alone and had items of value in his possession.

Smudger had thought of it as a one-man job at first, and with

a little more information he might have tackled it on his own. He had discovered that there was a telephone, but no dog. He was fairly sure of the room in which the money must be kept, but unfortunately his sister's source of information had its limitations. He did not know whether there were burglar alarms or similar precautions, and he was too uncertain of the cleaning woman to attempt to get into the house by a subterfuge for a preliminary investigation. So he had taken Spotty in with him on a fifty-fifty basis.

The reluctance with which he had taken that step had now become an active regret—not only because Spotty had been foolish enough to kill the man, but because the way things had been he could easily have made a hundred per cent haul on his own—and not be fool enough to kill the man had he been detected.

The attaché case which he carried was now well-filled with bundles of notes, along with an assortment of precious-looking objects in gold and silver, probably eminently traceable, but useful if melted down. It was irritating to think that the whole load, instead of merely half of it, might have been his.

The two men stood quietly in the bushes for some minutes and listened. Satisfied, they pushed

through a hole in the hedge, then moved cautiously in its shadow down the length of the neighboring field.

Spotty's chief sensation was relief at being out of the house. He hadn't liked the place from the moment they had entered. For one thing, the furnishings weren't like those he was used to. Unpleasant idols or carved figures of some kind stood about in unexpected places, looming suddenly out of the darkness into his flashlight's beam with hideous expressions on their faces. There were pictures and pieces of tapestry that were macabre and shocking to a simple burglar. Spotty was not particularly sensitive, but these seemed to him highly unsuitable to have about the home.

The same quality extended to more practical objects. The legs of a large oak table had been carved into mythical miscegenates of repulsive appearance. The two bowls which stood upon the table were either genuine or extremely good representations of polished human skulls. Spotty could not imagine why, in one room, anybody should want to mount a crucifix on the wall upside down and place on a shelf beneath it a row of sconces holding nine black candles—then flank the whole with two pictures of an indecency so revolting it almost took his breath away. All

these things had somehow combined to rattle his usual hard-headedness.

But even though he was out of the place now, he didn't feel quite free of its influence. He decided he wouldn't feel properly himself again until they were in the car and several miles away.

After working around two fields they came to the dusty white lane off which they had parked the car. They prospected carefully. By now the sky had cleared of clouds, and the moonlight showed the road empty in both directions. Spotty scrambled through the hedge, across the ditch, and stood on the road in a quietness broken only by Smudger's progress through the hedge. Then he started to walk towards the car.

He had gone about a dozen paces when Smudger's voice stopped him: "Hey, Spotty. What've you got on your feet?"

Spotty stopped and looked down. There was nothing remarkable about his feet; his boots looked just as they had always looked.

"What—?" he began.

"No! Behind you!"

Spotty looked back. From the point where he had stepped on to the road to another some five feet behind where he now stood was a series of footprints, dark in the white dust. He lifted his foot and

examined the sole of his boot; the dust was clinging to it. He turned his eyes back to the footmarks once more. They looked black, and seemed to glisten.

Smudger bent down to peer more closely. When he looked up again there was a bewildered expression on his face. He gazed at Spotty's boots, and then back to the glistening marks. The prints of bare feet. . . .

"There's something funny going on here," he said inadequately.

Looking back over his shoulder, Spotty took another step forward. Five feet behind him a new mark of a bare foot appeared from nowhere. A watery feeling swept over Spotty. He took another experimental step. As mysteriously as before, another footmark appeared. He turned widened eyes on Smudger.

Smudger looked back at him. Neither said anything for a moment. Then Smudger bent down, touched one of the marks with his finger, shone his flashlight on the finger. "Red," he said. "Like blood. . . ."

The words broke the trance that had settled on Spotty. Panic seized him. He stared around wildly, then began to run. After him followed the footprints. Smudger ran too. He noticed that the marks were no longer the prints of a full foot but only its

forepart, as if whatever made them were also running.

Spotty was frightened, but not badly enough to forget the turn where they had parked the car beneath some trees. He made for it, and clambered in. Smudger, breathing heavily, got in on the other side and dropped the attaché case in the back.

"Going to get out of this lot quick," Spotty said, pressing the starter.

"Take it easy," advised Smudger. "We got to think."

But Spotty was in no thinking mood. He got into gear, jolted out of hiding, and turned down the lane.

A mile or so farther on Smudger turned back from craning out of the window.

"Not a sign," he said, relieved. "Reckon we've ditched it—whatever it was." He thought for some moments, then he said: "Look here, if those marks were behind us all the way from the house, they'll be able to follow them by daylight to where we parked the car."

"They'd've found the car marks anyway," Spotty replied.

"But what if they're *still* following?" Smudger suggested.

"You just said they weren't."

"Maybe they couldn't keep up with us. But suppose they're coming along somewhere behind us, leaving a trail?"

Spotty had greatly recovered; he was almost his old practical self again. He stopped the car. "All right. We'll see," he said grimly. "And if they are—what then?"

He lit a cigarette with a hand that was almost steady. Then he leaned out of the car, studying the road behind them. The moonlight was strong enough to show up any dark marks.

"What do you reckon it was?" he said, over his shoulder. "We can't both've been seeing things."

"They were real enough." Smudger looked at the stain still on his finger.

On a sudden idea, Spotty pulled up his right trouser leg. The marks of the teeth were there, and there was a little blood, too, soaked into his sock, but he couldn't make that account for anything.

The minutes passed. Still there was no manifestation of footprints. Smudger got out and walked a few yards back along the road to make sure. After a moment's hesitation Spotty followed him.

"Not a sign," Smudger said. "I reckon—hey!" He broke off, looking beyond Spotty.

Spotty turned around.

Behind him was a trail of dark, naked footprints leading *from* the car.

Spotty stared. He walked back to the car; the footmarks fol-

lowed. It was a chastened Spotty who sat down in the car.

"Well?"

Smudger had nothing to offer. Smudger, in fact, was considerably confused. Several aspects of the situation were competing for his attention. The footsteps were not following *him*, so he found himself less afraid of them than of their possible consequences. They were laying a noticeable trail for anyone to follow to Spotty, and the trouble was that the trail would lead to him, too, if he and Spotty kept together.

The immediate solution that occurred to him was that they split up, and Spotty take care of his own troubles. The best way would be to divide the haul right here and now. If Spotty could succeed in shaking off the footprints, good for him. After all, the killing was none of Smudger's affair.

He was about to make the suggestion when another aspect occurred to him. If Spotty were picked up with part of the stuff on him, the case would be clinched. It was also possible that Spotty, in a bad jam with nothing to lose, might spill. A far safer way would be for him to hold the stuff. Then Spotty could come for his share when, and if, he succeeded in losing the tell-tale prints. It was obviously the only safe and reasonable course.

The trouble was that Spotty, when it was suggested to him, did not see it that way.

They drove a few more miles, each occupied with his own thoughts. In a quiet lane they stopped once more. Again Spotty got out of the car and walked a few yards away from it. The moon was lower, but it still gave enough light to show the footprints following him. He came back looking more worried than frightened. Smudger decided to cut a possible loss and go back to his former plan.

"Look here," he suggested, "what say we share out the takings now, and you drop me off a bit up the road?"

Spotty looked doubtful, but Smudger pressed: "If you can shake that trail off, well and good. If you can't—well, there's no sense in us both getting pinched, is there? Anyway, it was you as croaked him. And one has a better chance of getting away than two."

Spotty was still not keen, but he had no alternative to offer.

Smudger pulled the attaché case out of the back and opened it between them. Spotty began to separate the bundles of notes into two piles. It had been a good haul. As Smudger watched, he felt a great sadness that half of it was going to benefit nobody when Spotty was picked up. Sheer waste, it seemed to him.

Spotty, with his head bent over his work, did not notice Smudger draw the piece of lead pipe out of his pocket. Smudger brought it down on the back of his head with such force and neatness that it is doubtful whether Spotty ever knew anything about it.

Smudger stopped the car at the next bridge and pushed Spotty's body over the low wall. He watched as the ripples widened out across the canal below. Then he drove on.

It was three days later that Smudger got home. He arrived in the kitchen soaked to the skin, and clutching his attaché case. He was looking worn, white, and ready to drop. He dragged a chair away from the table and slumped into it.

"Bill!" his wife whispered. "What is it? Are they after you?"

"No, Liz—at least, it ain't the cops. But something is."

He pointed to a mark close inside the door. At first she thought it was his own wet footprint.

"Get a wet cloth, Liz, and clean up the front step and the passage before anyone sees it," he said.

She hesitated, puzzled.

"For God's sake, do it quick, Liz," he urged her.

Still half bewildered, she went through the dark passage and opened the door. The rain was pelting down, seeming to bounce

up from the road as it hit. The gutters were running like torrents. Everything streamed with wetness save the doorstep protected by the small jutting porch. And on the step was the blood-red print of a naked foot. . . .

In a kind of trance she went down on her knees and swabbed it clean with the wet cloth. Closing the door, she switched on the lights and saw the prints leading towards the kitchen. When she had cleaned them up, she went back to her husband.

"You been hit, Bill?"

He looked at her, elbows on the table, his head supported between his hands.

"No," he said. "It ain't me what's making them marks, Liz—it's what's followin' me."

"Following you? You mean they been following you all the way from the job?" she said incredulously. "How did you get back?"

Smudger explained. His immediate anxiety, after pitching Spotty into the canal, had been to rid himself of the car. It had been a pinch for the job, and the number and description would have been circulated. He had parked it in a quiet spot and gotten out to walk, maybe pick up a lift. When he had gone a few yards he had looked back and seen the line of prints behind him. They had frightened him a good deal more than he now ad-

mitted. Until that moment he had assumed that since they had been following Spotty, they would have followed him into the canal. Now, it seemed, they had transferred their attentions to himself. He tried a few more steps: they followed. With a great effort he got a grip on himself, and refrained from running. He perceived that unless he wanted to leave a clear trail he must go back to the car. He did.

Farther on he tried again, and with a sinking, hopeless feeling observed the same result. Back in the car, he lit a cigarette and considered plans with as much calmness as he could collect.

The thing to do was to find something that would not show tracks—or would not hold them. A flash of inspiration came to him, and he headed the car towards the river.

The sky was barely gray yet. He fancied that he managed to get the car down to the towpath without being seen. At any rate, no one had hailed him as he cut through the long grass to the water's edge. From there he had made his way downstream, plodding along through a few inches of water until he found a row-boat. It was a venerable and decrepit affair, but it served his purpose.

From then on his journey had been unexciting, but also uncomfortable. During the day he

had become extremely hungry, but he did not dare to leave the boat until after dark, and then he moved only in the darkest streets where the marks might not be seen. Both that day and the next two he had spent hoping for rain. This morning, in a drenching downpour that looked as if it might continue for hours, he had sunk the boat and made his way home, trusting that the trail would be washed away. As far as he knew, it had been.

Liz was less impressed than she ought to have been.

"I reckon it must be something on your boots," she said practically. "Why didn't you buy some new ones?"

He looked at her with a dull resentment. "It ain't nothing on my boots," he said. "Didn't I tell you it was following me? You seen the marks. How could they come off my boots? Use your head."

"But it don't make sense. Not the way you say it. *What's following you?*"

"How do I know?" he said bitterly. "All I know is that it makes them marks—and they're getting closer, too."

"How do you mean closer?"

"Just what I say. The first day they were about five feet behind me. Now they're between three and four."

It was not the kind of thing

that Liz could take in too easily.

"It don't make sense," she repeated.

It made no more sense during the days that followed, but she ceased to doubt. Smudger stayed in the house; whatever was following stayed with him. The marks of it were everywhere: on the stairs, upstairs, downstairs. Half Liz's time was spent in cleaning them up lest someone should come in and see them. They got on her nerves. But not as badly as they got on Smudger's. . . .

Even Liz could not deny that the feet were stepping a little more closely behind him—a little more closely each day.

"And what happens when they catch up?" Smudger demanded fearfully. "Tell me that. What can I do? What the hell can I do?"

But Liz had no suggestions. Nor was there anyone else they dared ask about it.

Smudger began to dream nights. He'd whimper and she'd wake him up asking what was the matter. The first time he could not remember, but the dream was repeated, growing a little clearer with each recurrence. A black shape appeared to hang over him as he lay. It was vaguely manlike in form, but it hovered in the air as if suspended. Gradually it sank lower and

lower until it rested upon him—but weightlessly, like a pattern of fog. It seemed to flow up towards his head, and he was in panic lest it should cover his face and smother him, but at his throat it stopped. There was a prickling at the side of his neck. He felt strangely weak, as though tiredness suddenly invaded him. At the same time the shadow appeared to grow denser. He could feel, too, that there began to be some weight in it as it lay upon him. Then, mercifully, Liz would wake him.

So real was the sensation that he inspected his neck carefully in the mirror when he shaved. But there was no mark there.

Gradually the glistening red prints closed in behind him. A foot behind his heels, six inches, three inches. . . .

Then came a morning when he woke tired and listless. He had to force himself to get up, and when he looked in the mirror, there *was* a mark on his throat. He called Liz, in a panic. But it was only a very small mark, and she made nothing of it.

But the next morning his lassitude was greater. It needed all his will-power to drag himself up. The pallor of his face shocked Liz—and himself, too, when he saw it in the shaving mirror. The red mark on his neck stood out more vividly. . . .

The next day he did not get up.

Two days later Liz became frightened enough to call in the doctor. It was a confession of desperation. Neither of them cared for the doctor, who knew or guessed uncomfortably much about the occupations of his patients. One called a doctor for remedies, not for homilies on one's way of life.

He came, he hummed, he ha'ed. He prescribed a tonic, and had a talk with Liz.

"He's seriously anaemic," he said. "But there's more to it than that. Something on his mind." He looked at her. "Have you any idea what it is?"

Liz's denial was unconvincing. He did not even pretend to believe it.

"I'm no magician," he said. "If you don't help me, I can't help him. Some kinds of worry can go on pressing and nagging like an abscess."

Liz continued to deny. For a moment she had been tempted to tell about the footmarks, but caution warned her that once she began, she would likely be trapped into saying more than was healthy.

"Think it over," the doctor advised. "And let me know tomorrow how he is."

The next morning there was no doubt that Smudger was doing very badly. The tonic had done him no good at all. He lay in bed with his eyes, when they were

open, looking unnaturally large in a drawn white face. He was so weak that she had to feed him with a spoon. He was frightened, too, that he was going to die. So was Liz. The alarm in her voice when she telephoned the doctor was unmistakably genuine.

"All right, I'll be round within an hour," he told her. "Have you found out what's on his mind yet?" he added.

"N-no," Liz told him.

When he came, he told her to stay downstairs while he went up to see the patient.

It seemed to her that an intolerably long time passed before she heard his feet on the stairs, and she went out to meet him in the hall. She looked up into his face with mute anxiety. His expression was serious, and puzzled, so that she was afraid to hear him speak.

But at last she asked: "Is—is he going to die, Doctor?"

"He's very weak—very weak indeed," the doctor said. After a pause, he added: "Why didn't you tell me about those footprints he thought were following him?"

She looked up at him in alarm.

"It's all right. He's told me all about it now. I knew there was something on his mind. It's not very surprising, either."

Liz stared at him. "Not—?"

"In the circumstances, no," the doctor said. "A mind op-

pressed by a sense of sin can play a lot of nasty tricks. Nowadays they talk of guilt complexes and inhibitions. Names change. When I was a boy, the same sort of thing was known as a bad conscience.

"When one has the main facts, these things become obvious to anyone of experience. Your husband was engaged in—well, to put it bluntly, burgling the house of a man whose interests were mystic and occult. Something that happened there gave him a shock and unbalanced his judgment.

"As a result, he has difficulty in distinguishing between the real things he sees and the imaginary ones his uneasy conscience shows him. It isn't very complicated. He feels he is being dogged. Somewhere in his subconscious lie the lines from *The Ancient Mariner*:

Because he knows, a frightful fiend

Doth close behind him tread

and the two come together. And, in addition to that, he appears to

have developed a primitive, vampiric type of phobia.

"Now, once we are able to help him dispel this obsession, he—" He broke off, suddenly aware of the look on his listener's face. "What is it?" he asked.

"But, Doctor," Liz said. "Those footmarks. I—" She was cut short abruptly by a sound from above that was half groan and half scream.

The doctor was up the stairs before she could move. When she followed him, it was with a heavy certainty in her heart.

She stood in the doorway watching as he bent over the bed. In a moment he turned, grave-eyed, and gave a slight shake of his head. He put his hand on her shoulder, then went quietly past her out of the room.

For some seconds Liz stood without moving. Then her eyes dropped from the bed to the floor. She trembled. Laughter, a high-pitched, frightening laughter shook her as she looked at the red naked footprints which led away from the bedside, across the floor and down the stairs, after the doctor. . . .

KILLER SHIP by MURRAY LEINSTER

CHRYSALIS by RAY BRADBURY

THE ETERNAL EVE by JOHN WYNDHAM

THE METAL MAN by JACK WILLIAMSON

IN THE OCTOBER AMAZING — NOW ON SALE

(Continued from page 47)

to believe in that sort of thing—to the effect that the kingdom will be saved in its darkest hour by a, ahem, hero, riding a dragon and wielding an axe. He was supposed to appear bearing a symbol of his identity. I suppose that annoying clown Yockabump spotted the ring—he has sharp eyes—and improvised the rest. Luckily for you, I might add. He *could* have set up a howl that it was an evil charm. Lod carries an axe, you see—and of course he owns a dragon.”

Lafayette glanced sharply at Nicodaeus, then laughed. “You almost sound as though you believe in the monster yourself.”

Nicodaeus chuckled comfortably. “A mere fable, of course. Still, I’d go on wearing the ring reversed if I were you.”

“I can’t help wondering,” O’Leary said. “Why should you care what happens to me any more than the rest of them? They all seem to want to see me strung up by the ears.”

“Just a natural desire to help a stranger in distress,” Nicodaeus said, smiling. “After all, having saved you from a session with the hot irons, I have a sort of proprietary interest in seeing you safely through.”

“At one point you just about had Goruble convinced I was a spy. . . .”

“A red herring; I wanted to

distract him from the sorcery aspect. Like all Artesians, he’s prey to superstition.”

“Then I was right; you’re not a native here.”

“Actually, I’m not,” the magician said. “I, ah, come from a country to the south, as a matter of fact. I—”

“They must be way ahead of Artesia, technologically speaking. That lighter, for example. I’ll bet you’re responsible for the electric lights in the palace.”

Nicodaeus smiled. “That’s correct. I do what I can to add to the amenities of palace life.”

“Just what is your position here?”

“I’m an advisor to His Majesty.” Nicodaeus smiled blandly. “He thinks I’m a master of magic, of course, but among these feather-heads a little common sense is sufficient to earn one a reputation as a wise man.” He smiled comfortably. “Look here, my young friend—and I think I have established that I *am* a friend—isn’t there something that you’d care to, ah, confide in me? I could perhaps be of some assistance, in whatever it is you have in mind.”

“Thanks, but I don’t have anything in mind that I need help with.”

“I’m sure we could work out some arrangement, to our mutual benefit,” Nicodaeus went on. “I, with my established position

here; you, with your, ah, whatever you have. . . ." He paused on an interrogative note.

"What are you getting at?" O'Leary demanded. "I've already told you—"

"We're both outsiders here, Mr. O'Leary. I just thought that perhaps—"

"Call me Lafayette. I appreciate what you did for me, but I really don't need any help. Look, the party must be about to begin. Let's beat it downstairs. I don't want to miss anything."

"You're determined to pursue your course alone, I see," Nicodaeus said sadly. "Ah, well, just as you wish, Lafayette. I don't mind saying I'm disappointed. Frankly, I've gotten just a little bit bored lately. I thought—but never mind." He eyed Lafayette, nibbling his lower lip. "You know, I've been giving it some thought, and I wonder if it wouldn't be safer for you to just slip away tonight, before the fete. If you wait until later, His Majesty is likely to start having second thoughts and put a guard on you. He may even change his mind and send you along to the rack after all. Now, I can arrange to have a fast horse waiting—"

"I don't want to leave now, before the party," O'Leary said. "Besides," he added grinning, "I promised to kill off a dragon, remember?"



"But—"

Lafayette winked at Nicodaeus. "I think it might be a little difficult to kill a superstition," he said. "But I at least have to go through the motions. Meanwhile, I hear this Princess Adoranne is quite a dish—"

"Careful, lad. The Princess is Goruble's most jealously guarded treasure. Don't make the mistake of thinking—"

"Thinking: That's the one thing I've determined not to do, as long as I'm here," O'Leary said with finality. "Let's go, Nicodaeus. This is the first royal function I've ever been to; I'm looking forward to it."

"Well, then" Nicodaeus

clapped O'Leary on the back. "On to the ball! Tonight, revelry—and tomorrow, the fight to the death!"

"Fight to the death?" O'Leary looked startled.

"You . . . and the dragon," Nicodaeus reminded him.

"Oh, that." Lafayette smiled. Nicodaeus laughed.

"Yes, that," he said.

At the high-arched entry to the ballroom, O'Leary paused beside Nicodaeus, looked out over an expanse of mirror-polished white marble the size of a football field, crowded with the royal guests, splendid in laces and satins of every imaginable hue, gleaming in the light from the chandeliers that hung from the gold-ribbed vaults of the ceiling like vast bunches of sparkling grapes. Heads turned as the major domo boomed out the name of Nicodaeus, then looked inquiringly at O'Leary.

"Better get on your toes, Humphries," the magician advised the be-ribboned official. "This is Lafayette O'Leary, the young champion who's here to rid the kingdom of Lod's monster."

"Oh, Beg pardon, m'lord. An honor!" He bowed, pounded his staff on the floor.

"Sir Lafayette of Leary!" He trumpeted. "The King's Champion!"

"I'm not a sir," Lafayette started—

"Never mind." Nicodaeus took his arm and led him along toward the nearest group. We'll see about an earldom for you at the first opportunity. Now. . . ." He nodded casually at the expectant faces that moved in to surround them. "Ladies, sirs, may I present my good friend, Sir Lafayette. . . ."

"Are you really going to fight that horrid monster?" a cuddly creature in pale blue flounces breathed, fluttering her fan. A tall, hollow-faced man with thin white hair raised a bony finger. "Ride in fast, smite the brute in the soft underparts, and get out, that's my advice, Sir Lafayette! I've always found that boldness pays—"

"Will you cut off his head?" a plump blonde squeaked. "Ooooh, how terrible! Will there be much blood?"

"I'd like to be riding with you, lad," a stout gentleman with an imposing nose and a walrus mustache wheezed. "Unfortunately, my gout. . . ."

Lafayette nodded, offered breezy comments, accepted a drink from a tray after giving a moment's thought to the contents and feeling the slight jar that signalled successful manipulation. No use drinking cheap booze. . . . He tested the drink: Remy-Martin. He tossed the first

shot down, scooped up another glass. The babble of talk followed as he and Nicodaeus moved on from group to group. The cognac had a pleasant, warming effect. He took another from a passing tray.

A sudden murmur ran through the assemblage. Horns tootled a fanfare. "The princess." The murmur went across the crowd. Lafayette looked in the direction toward which necks were craning, saw a cluster of women entering through a wide archway across the room.

"Which one is Adoranne?" He nudged Nicodaeus.

"She'll appear next."

A girl strolled into view, leading a tiger cub on a leash. She was tall, slender, moving as gracefully as a swan in a gown of palest blue scattered over with tiny pearls. Her hair—the color of spring sunshine Lafayette decided instantly—was straight, cut short in a charming style that complemented the coronet perched atop it. She had a short patrician nose—at least it was the kind of nose that suggested that word to O'Leary—large blue eyes, a perfectly modelled cheek and chin-line. Her figure was that of a trained athlete: trim, slim, vibrant with health. Lafayette tried to take a deep breath; his lips, puckering instinctively for a long low whistle of admiration, managed only a gasp.

"What's the matter?" Nicodaeus whispered.

"Now I know what they mean by breath-taking," he muttered. "Come on. . . ." He started through the crowd.

"What are you doing?" Nicodaeus plucked at his sleeve.

"I want to meet the princess."

"But you can't approach royalty! You have to wait and let her summon you!"

"Oh, don't let's bother with all that protocol. I want to see if she looks as marvelous up close as she does from here."

He pushed through between two bony dowagers just rising from creaky curtseys, smiled at the girl as she turned inquiringly toward him.

"Hi," Lafayette said, looking her over admiringly. "They told me you were beautiful, but that was the understatement of the year. I didn't know I could imagine anything this nice—"

A big young man with curly, dark hair and cigarette ad features, stepped forward, flexed Herculean shoulders that threatened to burst his royal blue gold-braid-looped tunic, inclined his head to the princess, then turned to give O'Leary a warning look.

"Withdraw, bumpkin," he said in a low voice.

"O'Leary waved a hand. "Go play with your blocks." He started around the man, who took a quick step to bar his way.

"Are you deaf, oaf?" he rapped.

"No, I'm Lafayette O'Leary, and if you don't mind, I'd like to—"

The young Hercules put a finger against O'Leary's chest. "Get lost!" he hissed fiercely.

"Now, now, no rough stuff in front of the princess," O'Leary admonished, brushing the hand aside.

"Count Alain," a cool feminine voice said. Both men turned. Princess Adoranne smiled an intimate little smile at the count, turned to Lafayette.

"This must be the brave man who's come to rid us of the dragon." She tugged at the leash as the tiger cub came snuffling around O'Leary's ankles. "Welcome to Artesia."

"Thanks," Lafayette nudged the count aside. "I didn't exactly come here to kill dragons, but since I'm here, I don't mind helping out."

"Have you slain many dragons then, Sir Lafayette?" she smiled at him coolly.

"Nope, never even saw one." He winked. "Did you?"

Adoranne's lips parted in a look of mild surprise. "No," she said. "There is but one, of course, the beast of the rebel Lod."

"I'll bring you his left ear—if dragons have ears."

The princess blushed prettily.

"Fellow, you're over-bold," Alain snapped.

"If I'm going to go dragon-hunting, that's a characteristic I've been advised to cultivate." Lafayette moved closer to the princess. "You know, Adoranne, I really should have demanded half the kingdom and your hand in marriage—"

Count Alain's hand spun O'Leary around; his fist hovered under Lafayette's nose.

"I've warned you for the last time—"

Lafayette disengaged his arm. "I sincerely hope so. By the way, isn't there a little matter you wanted to attend to?" Lafayette envisioned an urgent physiological need.

Count Alain looked uncomfortable. "Your pardon, Highness," he said in a strained voice, turned hastily and hurried toward an inconspicuous door.

O'Leary smiled blandly at the princess. "Nice fellow," he said. "Good friend of yours?"

"One of my dearest companions, since we played together as children."

"Amazing," Lafayette said. "You remember your childhood?"

"Very well, Sir Lafayette. Do you not?"

"Well, sure, but well—let's not get started on that. Would you like to dance?"

The princess's ladies, drawn up in a rank behind her, sniffed loudly, moved as if to close in.

Adoranne looked at O'Leary thoughtfully.

"There's no music," she said.

Lafayette glanced toward the potted palms, envisioned a swinging five-man combo behind them. They were in tuxes, and the music was on the stands, and the instruments out. The leader was saying a word to the boys now, raising a hand. . . . He felt the small thump.

"May I?" Lafayette held out a hand as the opening blast of the Royal Garden Blues rang out. Adoranne smiled, a dazzling display, handed the cub's leash to a lady standing by, took Lafayette's hand. He drew her close—a feather-light vision of sky-blue and pearls and a faint scent of night-blooming jasmine.

"Sir Lafayette!" she gasped. "You have a strange manner with a lady. . . ."

"I'll show you a quaint native dance we do at home."

She followed without apparent difficulty as he tried out one of the Arthur Murray steps he had so often practiced solo in his room with the instruction book in his left hand.

"You follow beautifully," O'Leary said. "But then, I guess that's to be expected."

"Of course. I've been well instructed in the arts of the ballroom. But tell me—why did you agree to go out against Lod's dragon?"

"Oh, I don't know. To keep from finding out if your pop really meant what he said about hot irons, maybe."

"You jest, sir!"

"Sure."

"Tell me—did you swear some great oath—to do a mighty deed?"

"Well. . . ."

"And an oath of secrecy as well?" She nodded, bright-eyed. "Tell me," she asked in an excited whisper, "who are you—really?" The name—Sir Lafayette—does it disguise some noble title in your own land of Leary?"

"Now, where did you get that idea?"

"You comport yourself not as one accustomed to bending the knee," she said, looking at him expectantly.

"Well, now that you mention it—where I come from, I don't have to kneel to anybody."

Adoranne gasped. "I knew it! How exciting! Tell me, Lafayette—where is your country? Not to the east, for there's naught but ocean there—and to the west lies only the desert stronghold of Lod—"

"No fair to try to worm my secrets out of me," Lafayette said waggishly. "It's more fun if I'm mysterious."

"Very well—but promise me that when you reveal yourself, it will be first to me."

"You can count on that, honey," Lafayette assured her.

"Honey?"

"You know—sweet stuff."

Adoranne giggled. "Lafayette—you have the cutest way of putting things!"

"That's one of the nice things about being here," he said. "Usually I'm pretty dumb when it comes to light conversation—"

"Lafayette, you're trying to cozen me! I'll trow there's never a moment when you're at a loss for words."

"Oh, there have been moments. When the musketeers came to arrest me, for example. I'd been having a few quick ones with somebody called the Red Bull—"

Adoranne gasped. "You mean smuggler?"

"He seemed to have some illegal ideas, all right. A reflection of the anarchist in me, I suppose—"

"And they arrested you!" Adoranne giggled. Lafayette, you might have been lodged in a dungeon!"

"Oh, well, I've been in worse places."

"What thrilling adventures you must have had! A prince, wandering incognito—"

"Hold on, I didn't say I was a prince—"

"Then—you must be a king!" Adoranne looked momentarily confused. "Your pardon, Majesty, if I've been too forward—"

"Now, Adoranne—"

The music stopped with a clatter as though the players had tossed their instruments into a pile. Everybody clapped, calling for more. Count Alain shouldered past O'Leary, ducked his head to the princess.

"Adoranne, dare I crave the honor of the next?"

"Sorry, Al, she's taken." Lafayette took the girl's hand, started past the Count, who pivoted to face him.

"'Twas not *your* leave I spoke for, witling!" he hissed. "I warn you, hit the trail before I lose my temper!"

"Look, Al, I'm getting a little tired of this," Lafayette said. "Every time I'm on the verge of having an interesting chat with Adoranne, you butt in—"

"Aye! A greater dullard even than yourself should see when his company's not wanted. Now get ye gone!" People were staring now as the Count's voice rose.

"Alain!" Adoranne looked at him with a shocked expression. "You mustn't speak that way to . . . to . . . a guest," she finished.

"A guest? A hired adventurer, by all accounts! How dare he lay a hand on the person of the Princess Royal!"

"Alain, why can't you two gentlemen be friends?" Adoranne appealed. "After all, Sir

Lafayette is sworn to perform a great service to the crown—”

“His kind finds it easy to talk of great deeds,” Alain snapped, “but when the hour comes for action—”

“I notice you didn’t volunteer, Al,” O’Leary pointed out. “You look like a big strong boy—”

“Strong enough to break your head; and as for dragon-slaying, neither I nor any other mortal man can face a monster bigger than a mountain, armored and fanged—”

“How do you know he’s armored and fanged? Have you seen him?”

“No—but ’tis common knowledge—”

“Uh-huh. Well, Alain, you run along now. After I’ve killed this dragon, I’ll let you come out with a tape measure and see just how big he is—unless you’re too shy, that is.”

“Shy, eh!” The Count’s well-chiselled features scowled two inches from Lafayette’s nose. “I’m not too shy to play a tatoo on your ill-favored hide, a-horse or afoot!”

“Count Alain!” Adoranne’s cool voice was low—but it carried a snap of authority. “Mend your manners, sir!”

“*My* manners!” Alain glared at O’Leary. “This fellow has the manners of a swineherd! And the martial skill as well, I’ll wager!”

“Oh, I don’t know, Al,” O’Leary said casually. “I’ve done a bit of reading on karate, ikedo, judo—”

“These are weapons I know not,” Alain grated. “What do you know of the broadsword, the poniard, the mace? Or the quarter-staff, the lance—”

“Crude,” Lafayette said. “Very crude. I find the art of fencing a much more gentlemanly sport. I read a dandy book on it just last month. The emphasis on the point rather than the edge, you know. The sabre and épée—”

“I’m not unfamiliar with rapier form,” Alain said grimly. “In fact, I’d welcome an opportunity to give you lessons. . . .”

Lafayette laughed indulgently. “*You teach me?* Al, old fellow, if you only knew how foolish that sounds. After all, what could you possibly know that I don’t, eh?” He chuckled.

“Then, Sir Nobody, perhaps your worship would condescend to undertake my instruction!”

“Alain!” Adoranne started.

“It’s all right, Adoranne,” O’Leary said. “Might be fun at that. How about tomorrow afternoon?”

“Tomorrow? Ha! And overnight you’d scuttle for safety, I doubt it not, and we’d see no more of you and your pretensions! ’Tis not so easy as that, knave. The inner courtyard is moon-bright! Let’s repair to our

lessons without further chatter!"

"Sir Lafayette!" Adoranne put a hand on his arm. "For my sake, put aside this mad plan! Count Alain!" she turned to him, stamped her foot. "Apologize at once to His—to Sir Lafayette!"

Alain's features were set in a look of grim determination. Stiffly, he inclined his head half an inch. "I ask your Highness's forgiveness, but I cannot let pass slurs placed upon Your Highness."

"On me!" Adoranne tossed her head. "What do you mean?"

"He forced you to dance with him," Alain said stubbornly.

"Forced me? Sir Lafayette had my permission—"

"All the more reason to give him a taste of a keen edge."

"Not the edge, the point," Lafayette corrected. "Skill rather than brute force, you know—"

"Save your words," Alain snapped. "Let your sword arm pursue your arguments!"

Nicodaeus was at Lafayette's side. "Ah, Count Alain," he said smoothly. "May I suggest—"

"You may not!" Alain's eyes found O'Leary's. "I'll await you in the courtyard." He bobbed his head to the princess, turned on his heel and pushed his way through the gaping circle of on-lookers who at once milled, streaming away in his wake.

"All this excitement about a fencing lesson," O'Leary said.

"These people are real sports fans."

"Sir Lafayette," Adoranne said breathlessly, "you need not heed the Count's ill-natured outburst. I'll command that he beg your forgiveness—"

"Oh, it's all right. The fresh air will do me good. I'm feeling those cognacs a little, I'm afraid—"

"Lafayette—how cool you are in the face of danger. Here. . . ." She took a lacy handkerchief from somewhere, pressed it in Lafayette's hand. "Wear this—and please—deal generously with him." Then she was gone.

"Adoranne—" O'Leary started. A hand took his arm.

"Lafayette," Nicodaeus said at his ear. "Do you know what you're doing? Alain is the top swordsman in the Guards Regiment—"

"I'm just giving him a few tips on sabre technique. He—"

"Tips? The man's a master fencer. He'll have his point under your ribs before you can say Sam Katzman!"

"Nonsense. It's all just good clean fun."

"Fun? The man is furious!"

Lafayette looked thoughtful. "Do you really think he's mad?"

"Just this side of frothing at the mouth," Nicodaeus estimated. "He's been number one with Adoranne for some time now—until you came along and

cut him out of the pattern."

"Jealous, eh? Poor fellow, if he only knew. . . ."

"Only knew what?" Nicodaeus asked sharply.

"Nothing. Well, I have reason to believe he won't know anything I don't." He slapped Nicodaeus heartily on the back. "Now let's see what he can do."

"What he can do is kill you," Nicodaeus said succinctly.

Lafayette stopped dead. "Kill me?"

"He's not out to pink your elbow and call it quits."

"Serious, eh?" Lafayette started on. "Oh, well, not much to do at this point but carry on."

"You could depart via the post-ern gate. Still have that horse ready—"

"And leave Adoranne thinking I finked out? Not a chance."

"You've been drinking, all right," Nicodaeus said. "Well, I'll hold your coat—and if, as things turn out, you have any, ah, last-minute confidences to impart, think of me, my boy."

CHAPTER V

The courtyard was a grim rectangle of granite walled in by the looming rear elevations of the servants' residential wings of the palace, gleaming coldly in the light of a crescent moon that seemed to race like a storm-tossed canoe through seas of

wind-blown cloud. The chill in the air had sharpened; it was close to freezing now. Lafayette looked around at the crowd that had gathered to watch the fencing lesson. They formed a ring three or four deep around the circumference of the impromptu arena, bundled in cloaks, stamping their feet, conversing in low, excited mutters. The wagers being made, O'Leary noted, were two to one in favor of the opposition.

"I'll take your coat," Nicodaeus said briskly. O'Leary pulled it off, shivered as a blast of frigid wind flapped his shirt against his back. Twenty feet away, Count Alain, looking bigger than ever in shirt-sleeves, chatted casually with two elegant-looking seconds, who glanced his way once, nodded coldly, and thereafter ignored him.

"Ah, I see the surgeon is on hand." Nicodaeus pointed out a portly man in a long grey cloak. "Not that there'll be much he can do. Count Alain always goes for the heart."

The Count had accepted his blade from one of his aides now; he flexed it, tested its point with a finger, made a series of cuts at the air.

"I'd better warm up, too," O'Leary drew his rapier from its scabbard, finding it necessary to use both hands to get the point

clear. "It's kind of long, isn't it?" he said. He waved the weapon, took up a stance.

"I hope your practice has been against skilled partners," Nicodaeus said.

"Oh, I just practice by myself." O'Leary tried a lunge, went a little too far, had to hop twice to get his balance. "This thing's heavy," he commented, lowering the tip to the ground. "I'm used to a lighter weapon."

"Be grateful for its weight; Count Alain has a superb right arm. He'll beat a light blade aside like a wooden lath."

"Hey," Lafayette said, nudging the magician. "Look over there—in the black cloak. That looks like—"

"It is," Nicodaeus said. "Don't stare. The cloak is accepted by all present as an effective disguise. It wouldn't do for a lady of her rank to witness an affair of this sort."

Lafayette fumbled out Adoranne's hanky, fluttered it at her, tucked it in his shirt pocket. Across the yard, Count Alain, watching the by-play, set his left fist on his hip, proceeded to whip his blade through a dazzling warm-up pattern. O'Leary gaped at the whistling steel.

"Say, Nicodaeus," he said thoughtfully. "He's good!"

"I told you he was a winner, Lafayette. But if, as you said, you're better—"

"Look, ah, maybe I was hasty" He watched as the Count described a lightning series of figure eights, finished with an elaborate *redoublement* and lowered his point with a calculating glance at O'Leary.

"Go ahead," Nicodaeus whispered. "Show him a little swordsmanship. It will give you a psychological advantage if you can slice yours a hair closer to the test pattern than he did."

"Ah—look here, Nicodaeus, I've been thinking; it wouldn't really be fair of me to show him up, in front of his friends—"

"He'll have to take that chance. After all, he was the one who insisted on the meeting."

Alain's seconds were nodding now. They turned, started across toward O'Leary.

"Too late now," Nicodaeus said.

"Nicodaeus!" O'Leary grabbed his second's arm. "This isn't going just the way I'd figured. I mean, I assumed that since Alain—that is, I don't see how—"

"Later," Nicodaeus disengaged his arm, strode across, engaged in deep conversation with his two opposite numbers.

Lafayette hefted the sword, executed a pair of awkward thrusts. The weapon felt as clumsy as a crowbar in his cold-numbed fingers.

Now Alain stepped forward a few paces, stood waiting, his

slim blade held in his bronzed fist as lightly as a bread stick.

"Come along, Lafayette," Nicodaeus was at his side. "Now, I'll hold a white handkerchief between your crossed blades. . . ."

Lafayette hardly heard Nicodaeus, who was talking rapidly as he urged him forward. Perhaps if he fell down, pretended to hurt his knee. . . . No, no good. Maybe if he sneezed—a sudden attack of asthma—

It wouldn't do. There was only one course left. Damn! And just when he'd started having a good time. But it couldn't be helped. And this time it had better work. O'Leary shut his eyes, conjured up the image of Mrs. MacGlint's Clean Rooms and Board, the cramped bedroom, the peeling, stained wallpaper, the alcove, the sardines. . . .

He opened his eyes. Nicodaeus was staring at him.

"What's the matter? You're not sick?"

O'Leary snapped his eyes shut,

muttering to himself: "*You're asleep, dreaming all this. You're in bed, feeling that broken spring in the mattress—the one that catches you just under the left shoulder-blade. It's almost morning now, and if you just open your eyes slowly. . . .*" He opened one eye, saw Count Alain waiting ten feet away, the rank of expectant faces behind him, the stone wall looming above.

"*It's not real,*" he hissed under his breath. "*It's all a fake, an hallucination! It isn't really here!*" He stamped a boot against the stone paving. "*This isn't real stone, ha ha, just imaginary stone. I'm not really cold; it's a nice night in August! There's no wind blowing. . . .*"

His voice trailed off. There was no use in kidding himself: The stone was solid as ever underfoot. The icy wind was still cutting at his face like a skinning knife, and Alain waited, light glinting on the naked steel in his hand.

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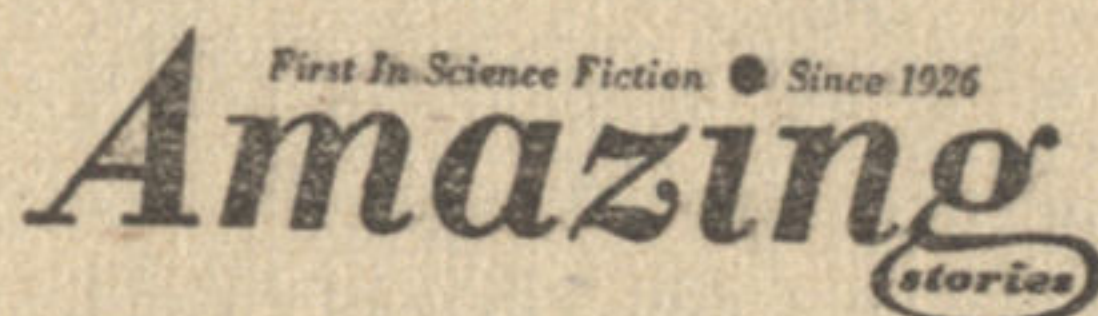
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SPACE DEVASTATOR

[NOTE: For the September issue we reproduced one of Paul's magnificent covers. This time it is the superb work of Julian S. Krupa, whose ingenious space station is still very much in advance of its time—as are the following excerpts from the original explanatory notes.]

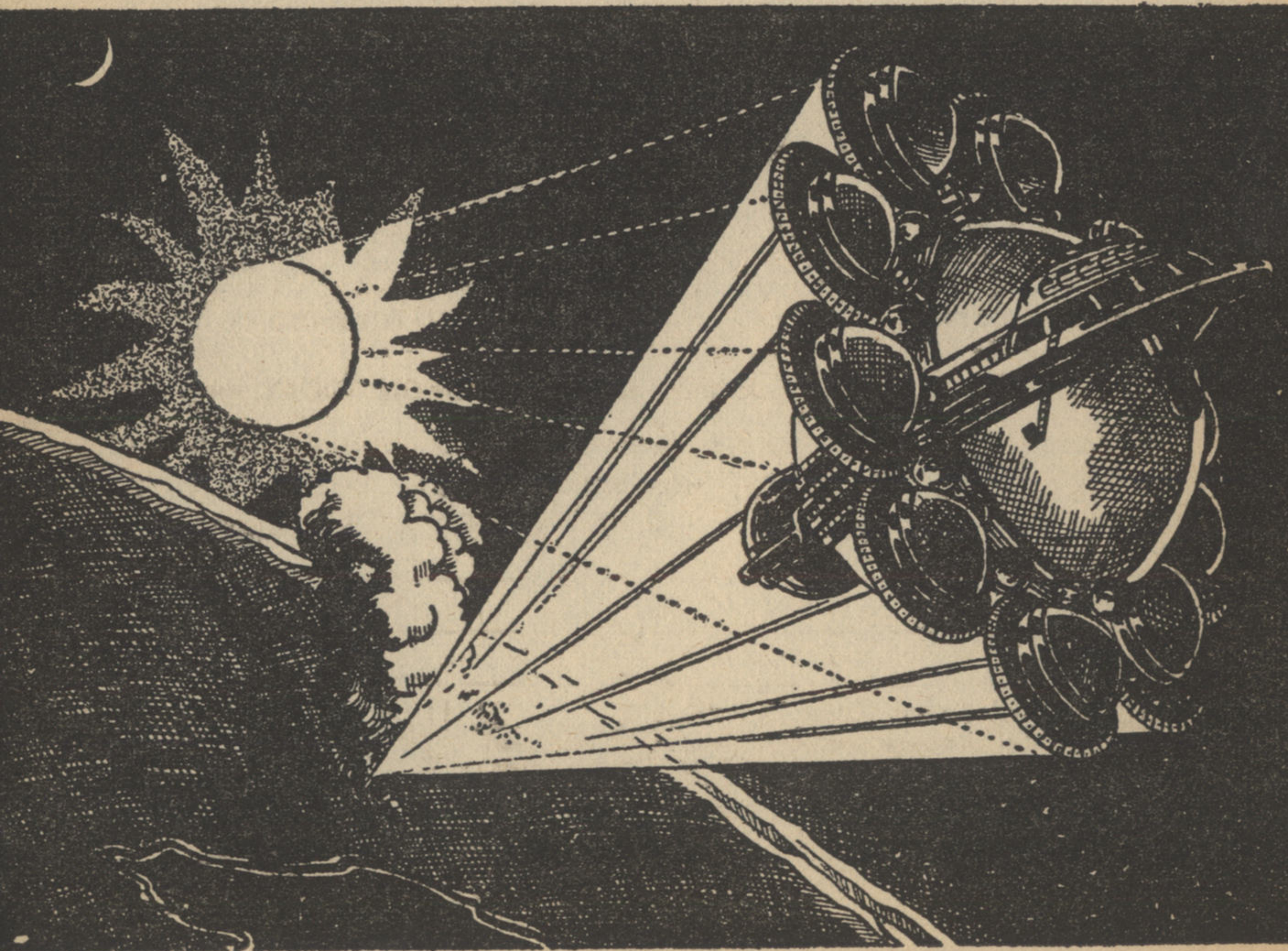
On our [front] cover this month Julian S. Krupa has painted his conception of the most powerful weapon that could ever be devised . . . an artificial satellite that could be built in space and set to circling the earth just as the moon does, on an orbit perhaps 10,000 miles above the surface . . . at a height best calculated to make it effective over a wide radius.

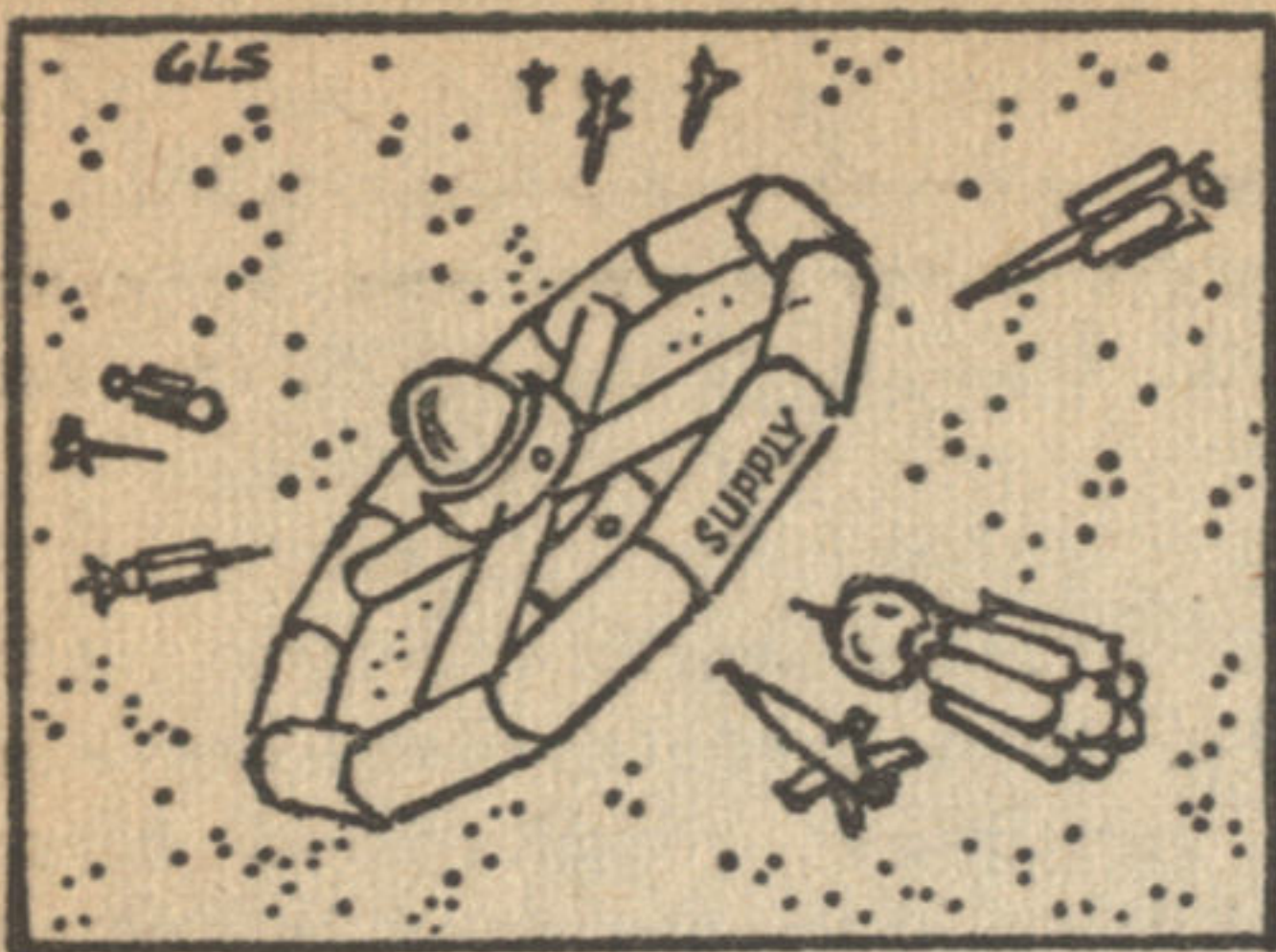
Its potency is manifold. Primarily . . . a sun power machine [which utilizes] the rays of the sun in a very simple [but] extremely powerful [manner . . . its] giant mirrors, concentrating sunlight on a single spot, would create a heat ray far beyond the imaginings of any science-fiction writer in its deadly effectiveness. —In the accompanying illustration, Krupa has shown the space devastator in operation, sending a ravaging beam of terrible heat down upon a

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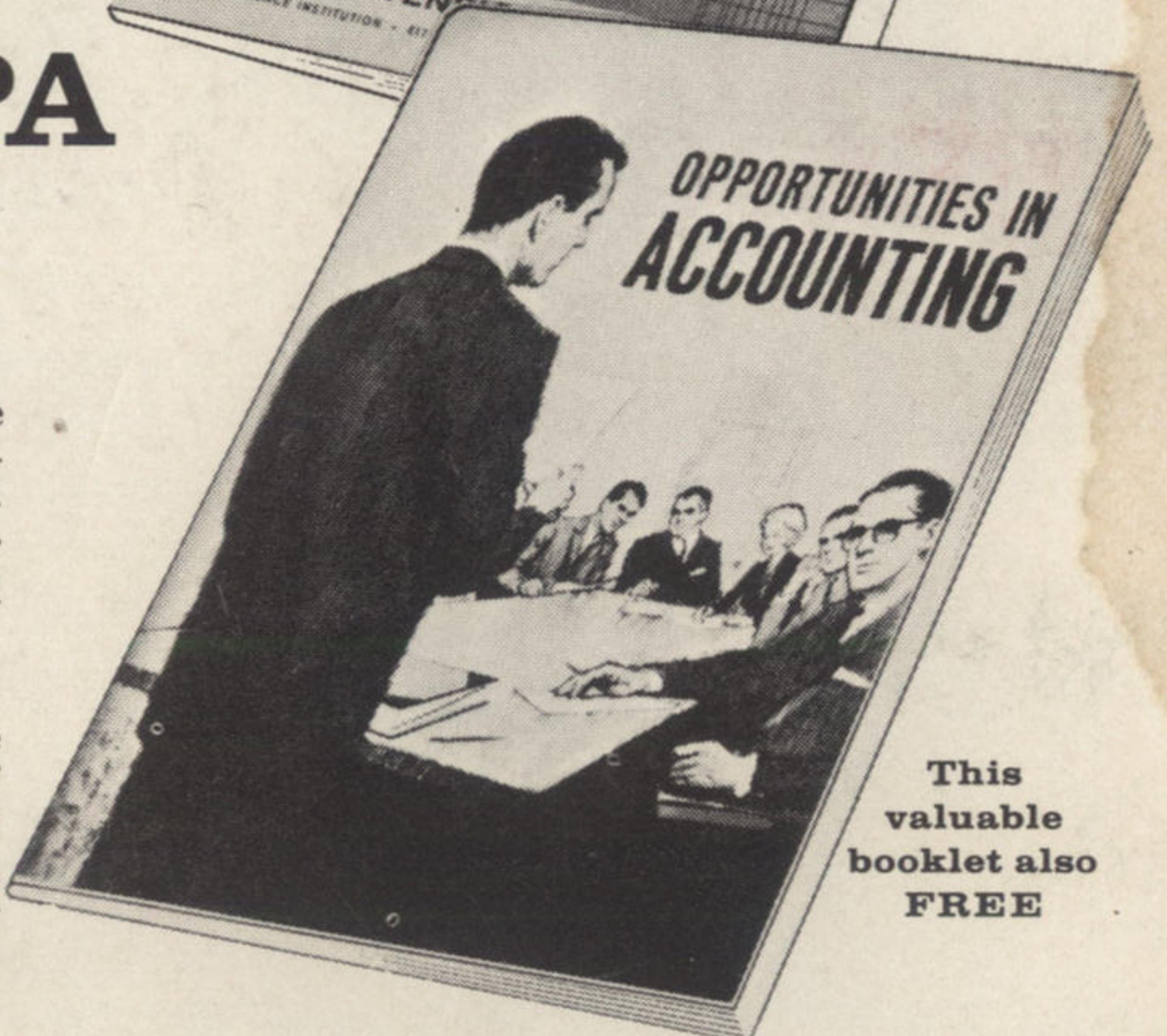
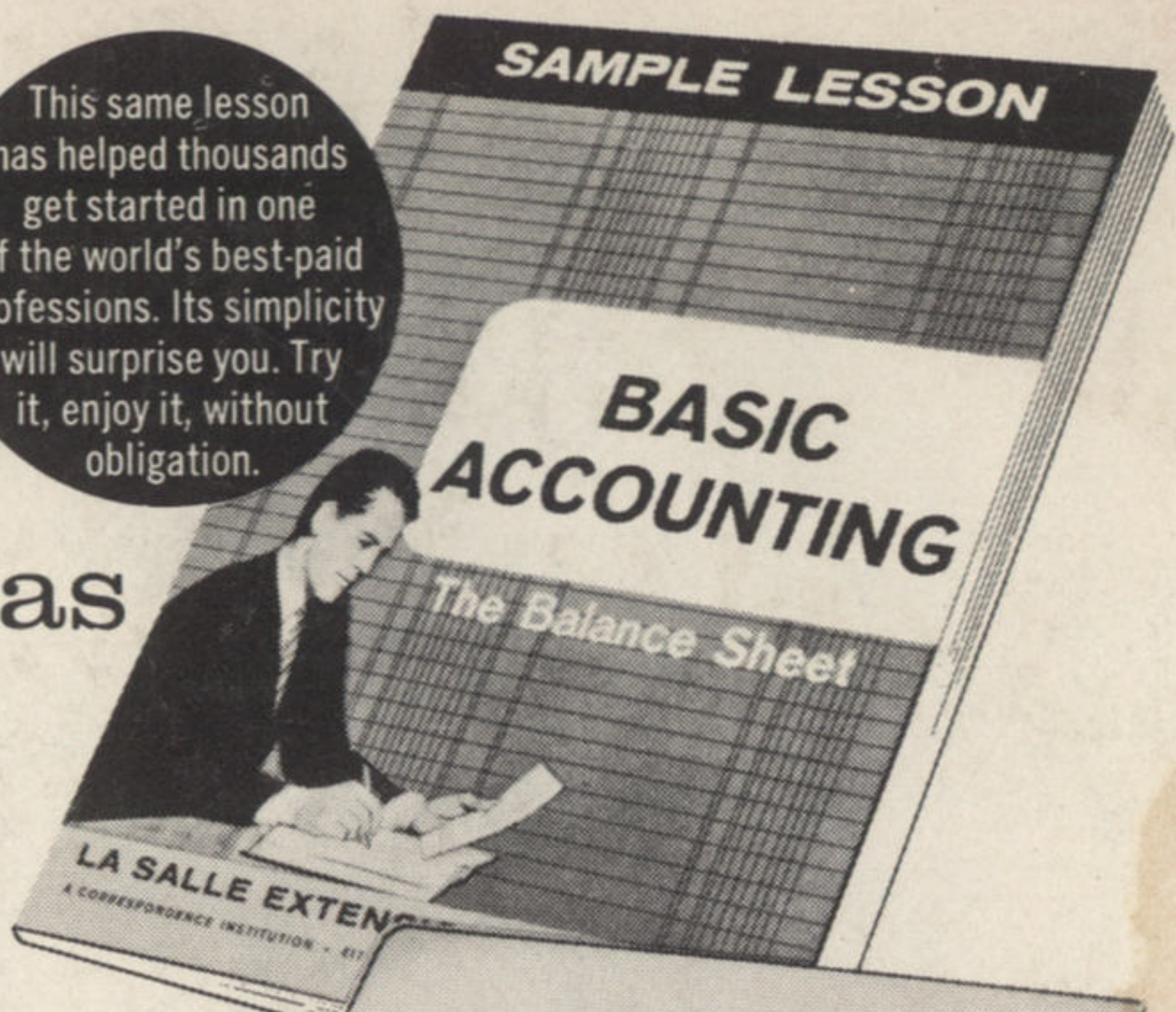
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