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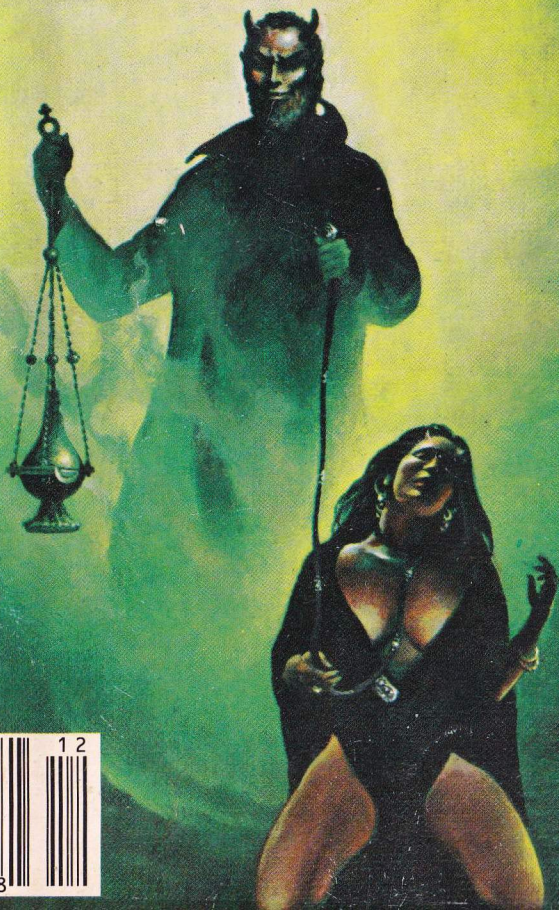
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Sword & Sorcery and Fantasy Stories

DECEMBER 1977

Vol. 6, No. 4

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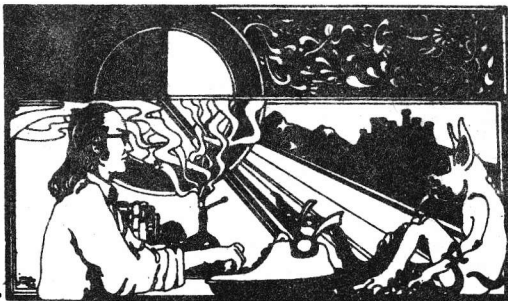
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**TED
WHITE**

editorial



AS OTHERS SEE US: In the July 28th issue of *Rolling Stone*, Michael Rogers in his "Alternating Currents" column offers up a piece entitled "'Star Wars': it's only science fiction, but I like it."

In this column Rogers tells us he has written a science fiction novel, and he gives us this "definition" of science fiction:

"During my last two years in college, I fell in with a set of graduate students in creative writing. As the certified squirt among those dedicated elders, I tended to take their opinions to heart. And the one opinion that struck deepest and stayed longest was the notion that science fiction is not really fit or dignified work for any serious practitioner of the art of storytelling.

"... Fiction, they argued, is concerned with the stuff of human life: how we react and change in the face of crisis and conflict, and whether that reaction is noble or mean.

"Science fiction, however, allows one to arbitrarily establish and then alter the environment of one's characters—to change, on command, the very nature of their reality. So when one's character is stuck in a terrible bind, instead of doing the hard and honorable thing, i.e., showing how that terrible bind alters the character, one will instead (writers being the lazy creatures we are) change the ground rules of the surrounding reality. Suddenly there will be a new invention, a new weapon, a previously

unrevealed characteristic of the alien ecology, one or all of which promptly acts to save the endangered character's bacon, at no cost to the character itself.

"In short, for writers, science fiction is cheating—the easy way out of facing real human dilemmas."

Rogers adds, "I was already midway through my first novel, an incontrovertibly science-fictionish story in which the protagonist was, on several occasions, plucked from disaster by the unexpected intervention of dubious and nonexistent technology."

In other words, if it's dishonest, it's science fiction.

A remarkable redefinition.

I very much suspect that most science fiction writers will take strong exception to Roger's observations and those of his grad-student friends—I do.

To begin with, there are damned few "serious practitioner(s) of the art of storytelling" left anywhere *outside* science fiction. (The few who do remain outside our field are in other genres—mysteries, westerns, historicals—the art of storytelling has all but perished in the mainstream of "serious" literature where plots are frowned upon as old fashioned and pandering to the unwashed masses.)

More important, the definition of science fiction given by Rogers is a definition of *bad* science fiction, and, by extension, of bad fiction in gen-

(Cont. on page 120)

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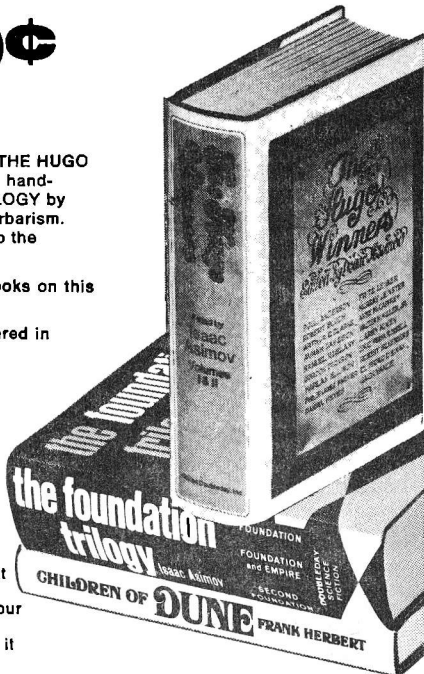
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In each of his adventures here ("Algy," August, 1976; "The Figurine," February, 1977), Willy Newbury has gotten a little older, his stories a little more contemporary. This time he confronts a Cult of Love, whose goal is to resurrect the god-

PRIAPUS

L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

Illustrated by MICHAEL WM. KALUTA

I LIKE my brother-in-law but, after what has happened each time I have visited him, I am wary of going there again. The first time, when I was in California on business, I was almost roasted alive in a burning bank building. The second time . . .

The winter our son Stephen was a sophomore, I came down with the flu, which left me as limp as a wet noodle. The president of the Harrison Trust, Esau Drexel, said:

"Willy, take the rest of the month off and go somewhere warm. Business is slow, and we can handle it. Take Denise with you."

"And leave those three kids alone in the house?"

"Oh, forget about being the heavy father! They're old enough to manage, and they're about as well-behaved as you can expect of kids nowadays. Why, when I was your boy's age . . ."

Having wangled an invitation from Avery and Stella Hopkins, Denise and I flew to San Romano and the Californian sunshine. True, we arrived in the middle of a two-day winter downpour, but then things cleared up to let us get some tan and tennis.

My skinny little Robert Hopkins, as hairy as ever but more subdued than the year before, was a junior at the local college, where Avery Hopkins was Professor of Middle English.

"You know, Uncle Willy," said Robert at dinner, "all that stuff about burning banks and such was attacking the problem from the wrong end. I see that now. Like, if you really want to change the System, it does no good to use the same material means that the oppressing class does, because you end up just as materialistic as the oppressors. That's where the Communists went wrong. You've got to approach it on another plane, like you was making an end run in football."

"As if you were making an end run," said Avery Hopkins.

"Okay, okay, as if you were making an end run. Not that I'm any kind of jock."

"I never suspected that of you," I said. "How do you get to this other plane?"

"That takes special knowledge. There's a little study group working on it right now. We're figuring out a scientific way to use love as a weapon."

I glanced a question at Robert's par-



ents. My sister Stella said: "It's some occult group that Robert has joined. We don't think much of their ideas; but they got Bob to give up marijuana, so they can't be all bad."

"So long as he keeps his marks up," said Avery Hopkins, "it's his business what ideological vagary he pursues. The young are always careening from one extreme belief to another. As Aristotle says, they despise money because they don't know what it is to be without it."

Remembering Robert's antics of the previous year, I expected a tantrum or at least an outburst. Instead, he smiled benignly.

"You'll learn," he said. "Uncle Willy, would you and Aunt Denise like to attend one of our ceremonies? I've tried to get Mom and Dad to go, but they won't touch it. The Master Daubeny's promised us a climax."

"I might," I said. "As for Denise, ask her."

"I might, also," said Denise. "My great big stubborn idiot of a husband needs me to keep him out of the trouble."

NEXT DAY, Stella took Denise on a round of the shops of San Romano. Avery Hopkins asked if I should like to see his campus. Nothing loath, I submitted to his guided tour. Since I am an engineer by training and a banker only by circumstance, the scientific laboratories interested me most. In the Worth Biology Building, Hopkins met a young instructor.

"This is Jerry Kleinfuss," said Hopkins. "My brother-in-law, Wilson Newbury. What's new, Jerry? Has anybody put piranhas in the swimming tank again?"

"Good God!" I said. "Has some poor devil been devoured while taking a swim?"

"No," replied Kleinfuss. "Some undergraduate did put a few of these fish in the tank and then spread the story during a meet. You should have seen the swimmers leap out of the water like seals! But these piranhas were of a harmless species. What puzzles us now is: who stole one of our *Urechis* worms?"

"Your what?" I said.

"*Urechis*, a large marine worm. We got several for experiments from the coast near Santa Barbara. Now somebody's pinched one, tank and all."

"Why should anybody do that?"

Kleinfuss shrugged. "We have no idea, unless the thief wanted to fry and eat it. I don't think the result would be anything to write home about."

"Could I see one of these worms?"

"Sure. Right this way."

Kleinfuss led Hopkins and me into a room lined with small glass tanks, containing various marine organisms. Some had jointed legs, some tentacles, and some other appendages.

"Here they are," said Kleinfuss.

In each of three tanks, a large pink worm was moving slowly about in the water. Each worm was a cylinder, about eight or nine inches long and an inch in diameter. It was just the color of human flesh, which it amazingly resembled. It even had little blue veins visible through the skin. The effect was startling.

I burst out laughing. "I see the organs," I said, "but where are the organisms?"

Kleinfuss smiled. "You're not the first to notice the resemblance. Anyway, that vacant place in the row is where our missing worm was. We called him Priapus. The others are Casanova, Lothario, and Don Juan. To catch them, you stick a length of rubber tube down the burrow. The

worm swallows the tube and swarms up it, forming a kind of fleshy sleeve on the outside of the tube. Then you have only to pull out the tube and scrape off the worm."

THAT EVENING, the Hopkinses had another couple to dinner. These were Associate Professor Marvin Held, from the Language Department, and his wife Ethel, an assistant professor of psychology. Held, a big, bushy-bearded chap who taught Romance languages, defented Latin and bewailed its disappearance from modern high-school curricula.

"I don't know," I said. "I've forgotten most of my high-school Latin. I'd rather have put the time on a widely-spoken modern language, like Spanish."

"Oh, you're both wrong," said young Robert in his squeaky voice. "I know people who've been all over the world, and they always found somebody who spoke English if they holered long and loud enough."

Held snorted. "No wonder we're becoming a nation of illiterates! First the kids demand a say in college policies, and our spineless administration gives in. Then they find there's nothing duller than committee meetings to decide if full credit shall be given for French 1-A from Primeval Baptist College of Mud Creek, Mississippi. So they stop coming around. Next, they don't want to have to learn any history, or any foreign languages, and so on. Then they ask credit for what they call 'life experience.' What they really want is a diploma for merely existing, without any work at all."

"Instead of studying nine-tenths of the irrelevant crap you guys give us," said Robert, "it would be more to the point, like, to spend the time learning

to use the unseen forces of the universe."

"For my money," I said, "languages are the main unseen force around. Just get stuck in Iraq, as I once did, not knowing any Arabic beyond 'Yes,' 'No,' and 'Where's the toilet?' and you might change your mind."

Denise added: "No one can call himself a civilized, educated man without at least the French."

Ignoring her, Robert said: "That's not what I meant at all, Uncle Willy. Come to the big do of the Agapean Association, day after tomorrow, and you'll see. We're gonna invoke the spirit of love."

Marvin Held said: "Bob, I've heard rumors about this outfit. Could Ethel and I come, too? It might be of professional interest."

"So you can look at us like bugs under a microscope?" said Robert. "Okay, come along. You might decide that the bugs have got the right idea and join us."

After the Helds had gone, Avery Hopkins said to me: "Willy, I think I ought to warn you. The rumor is that these people put on orgies."

"Really?" I said. "I've always wanted to attend an orgy. I don't know how Denise will take it; she was strictly brought up by a very proper French Protestant family. What sort of cult is it?"

"One of these sex-and-magic things that are springing up, now that the youth revolt has begun to run out of steam."

"Well, the state has always had a fine climate for nuts. I'm a little old for organized orgiastics myself, but I still want to see. I'm an old wildlife watcher, and such excesses make *Homo sapiens* a fascinating species to watch."

EARLY in this century, a man named Bannister made a mint in oil and built a mansion in San Romano. The Agapean Association had leased this mansion, which stood on an estate-sized lot, surrounded by palms, acacias, and pepper trees. The house was a huge, rambly place, pseudo-Spanish outside and medieval German baronial within. It had run down since the days of the Bannister family but was not yet decrepit enough to be really spooky.

Marvin and Ethel Held drove us to the mansion, since we might have had trouble finding it in an unfamiliar city by ourselves. Robert Hopkins was not with us. Having promised to meet us at the Bannister house, he had gone to fetch his own girl friend.

There was a delay getting in. A pair of muscular Agapeans in black robes guarded the front door. They would not admit us until Robert came to vouch for us, and Robert was late. When the formalities had at last been complied with, we were shooed into the huge living room just as the lights were being turned down for the big show.

"Sandy and I gotta get dressed," whispered Robert. "Visitors sit in the last row. You go ahead and sit; we'll be with you in, like, half a minute."

The seats were arranged in concentric crescents. We found four vacant chairs at one end of the rear row. Thence we could see many of the others present, either in profile or in three-quarters full-face.

As our eyes became accustomed to the dim light, Denise gasped. The front rows, composed of sofas, divans, and ottomans placed end to end, were occupied by thirty-odd people, in couples. Most were young, and all were naked. Some were petting.

Robert Hopkins, looking like a plucked chicken without his clothes

and followed by his equally naked girl, stole in from the other side and took seats at the end of one of the forward rows. Robert's idea of "getting dressed" was not what most would understand by the term.

Denise whispered: "Willy, I do not think we ought to stay here. *C'est une indécence, donc!*"

"Oh, come!" I whispered back. "You took me to that nudist place in France."

"That was different—the clean, healthy nature. This is a depravity."

"Stick around," I said. "Nobody claims we have to strip, too."

Denise subsided. In front of the seats, a temporary wooden dais rose a foot from the floor. On this platform, a stand upheld a small glass tank. In the tank was water and something pink and wriggly. I recognized a urechis worm, doubtless the one stolen from the biology laboratory.

At each end of the dais, a huge candle burned in an oversized brass holder, standing high above the floor. To one side, an incense burner sent up a thread of fragrant smoke.

A man in a red robe strode out of the shadows and took his stance on the dais, behind the tank with the worm. He was a slight, balding man of about my age, with a thin film of black hair combed across his bare cranium.

"Good evening, companions in transcendental adventure," intoned the Master Daubeny. "May infinite love be yours. Tonight we shall undertake the greatest of our magical operations, to secure for ourselves and for all of factious mankind the infinite blessing of love. We shall invoke love in its purest, most concentrated form, the form of the god Priapus, the god of the ultimate act of love, personified by this marine creature before me."

"By the laws of sympathetic magic, an invocation directed at this animal, which by its form symbolizes the outstanding characteristic of the god, will draw the god himself unto us. We shall then perform the appropriate—here, here!" He spoke chidingly to Robert and Sandy, who had been fondling each other's persons and gave every sign of being about to jump the gun. "You must wait till after the god manifests himself. Patience, patience!"

"To continue. We shall perform the ultimate act of love as a reverent tribute to the god. For what ails mankind today? Why wars, crimes, and strikes? Because there is not enough love. With the help of Priapus, we shall, by our command of the occult currents, instill more love, first into our fellow countrymen and then into all the world. . . ."

He went on for half an hour, talking about the different planes of existence, the materialization of spiritual abstractions, and the need for transcendental currents of love throughout the seven-dimensional universe. These currents were to be set flowing by a mass act of communal copulation.

From what I could see of the young men in the audience, they were ready to perform their rôles in the rite. The soliders of my outfit in the Second World War never stood up straighter. All the couples were kissing and fondling. I itched to grab Denise and join the revel, but her expression of stern disapproval squelched that idea. She whispered:

"Willy, I will not stay here longer, to see the beautiful making of the love turned into a circus!"

"Oh, come on!" I said. "What they do won't hurt us. Besides, if you left me here, who knows what mischief I might not get into?"

PRIAPUS

On the other side of her, a similar argument had broken out between the Helds. With them, however, it was the man who wished to leave and the woman to stay. As a psychologist, Ethel Held did not want to miss anything.

At last the sermon was over. Daubeny pulled a wand out of his baggy sleeve and began to utter his incantation. He faced in various directions, moved his wand as if he were leading an invisible orchestra, and chanted.

The Master's voice rose to a shout. From an occasional word, I realized that he was speaking Latin. He ended with a scream:

"*Veni, magistre venereonum! Veni, veni, veni!*"

I was braced for a bit of conjuring or other hocus-pocus but not for what happened. The flames of the two big candles shrank to mere points, glowing like stationary fireflies. Then came a brilliant flash of cold, white light and a clap of thunder.

A young woman stood at one end of the dais, facing the Master Daubeny. Tall, slim, dark, and aquiline-nosed, she wore a knee-length Classical chiton, which left one small, virginal breast bare. In her left hand she bore a strung double-curved bow. A quiver of arrows hung at her back from a leathern baldric.

Standing in the darkened room in a blaze of light from no source that I could see, the maiden stared at the Master, then at the audience. The naked worshipers were sitting up, their foreplay forgotten. They stared—I suppose "aghast" is the word.

"So!" she said in a ringing alto. "You calla me for your—how you say—your *comissione turpi*—your *obscena misbehaviors*?"

It had not occurred to me that

Diana—for such I presumed our transcendental visitor to be—would speak English with a strong Italian accent.

“Willy!” said Marvin Held in a low, tense voice. “Let’s get the hell out of here, pronto! I’ll explain outside.”

He rose. So did Denise and Ethel Held. Being at the end of the row, I had to rise, too.

“Quick!” said Held. “Don’t argue; I’ll tell you later.” I meekly accompanied the others of our quartet.

“So,” continued the apparition, “I fixa you *dissolutos!*”

We stumbled out into the entrance hall. As we reached the front door of the mansion, the spectral presence ripped out a long sentence in Latin. I caught only the final words: “. . . *cum impotentia, sterilitate, et frigore!*”

We were on our way to the Helds’ car when a call of “Hey!” made us pause. It was Robert and Sandy. Robert wore his shirt and ragged blue jeans but had fled barefoot; the girl was equally disheveled.

“What—what happened?” he panted. “All I know is, Sandy and I couldn’t wait, so we split to the bedroom and were screwing away when the big boom came. It kind of, like, took our minds off what we were doing. When I stuck my nose in the meeting hall, there was this dame on the platform, hollering in some language, and the four of you running out. Even I could see things weren’t going according to plan. So I grabbed Sandy, and we high-tailed it out of there. What happened?”

Held explained: “Your wizard invoked Priapus, the phallic god, but got Diana instead. Being the goddess of chastity as well as of the moon and of hunting, she was outraged by what she saw. Therefore she cursed ev-

erybody in the room with impotence, sterility, and frigidity. Knowing the Classical myths, I guessed what might be coming.”

(According to what the older Hopkins wrote us later, the curse worked. I don’t know if the effect every wore off.)

“Oh, man!” wailed Robert Hopkins. “D’you suppose the curse reached as far as us?”

“I don’t know,” said Held. “You’ll have to wait and see.”

“How come the Master goofed?”

“Didn’t know his Latin. In his invocation, he said *magistre venerationum*. In the first place, he thought *magistre* was the vocative of *magister*; but only second-declension nouns in *-us* take that ending. In the second, there’s no such word as *venerationum*. He formed a genitive plural from a non-existent third-declension noun *venereo*, which would be the ablative—” Ethel Held poked her husband in the ribs. He concluded: “Anyway, he meant to say *magister venerariorum*, ‘master of the lovemakings.’ With his bad pronunciation, what he actually said sounded like *magistra venationum*, ‘mistress of the hunts,’ and it naturally fetched Diana.”

“Professor Held,” said Robert in a small voice, “do you think I could switch to, like, a language major next year?”

“Come to my office tomorrow and we’ll talk it over.”

Late that night, Denise gave a happy sigh. “At least, my old one, we know that the curse did not reach so far as us. But when I tell you that it is time to leave a place, do not argue with me, but come along *à l’instant!*”

“Yes, dear,” I said.

—L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

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KNOCK, AND SEE WHAT ENTERS

C.L. Grant (whose last story for us was "Red River Lies Drowning"—February, 1977) has recently stated that he writes horror stories, and this one, although realistic science fiction, is no exception to that statement . . .

C. L. GRANT

Illustrated by Richard Olsen

FALLCO was looking for the end of the world.

This was his July: sweat, not perspiration; heat, not warmth; and a dearth of rain that shriveled leaves to parchment and souls to dust.

And of all the news, this was his assignment: the lure of an alleged Second Coming to be manifest in a temple of stained grey canvas, not gleaming marble or polished wood; and its high priest, who wore a dark blue business suit that hung without creases and was not quite old enough to be quaint.

He stood unimpressively, this man of Calling, behind a chipped and cheap lectern, facing but not seeing a congregation of some two hundred uncaringly uncomfortable suppliants. He seemed younger than most of them, though not young, and his uplifted face stretched out the folds of loose pale skin that ran down into his collar. His eyes were closed, his mouth worked for words and a swallow of the stifling air. He was preparing himself, and the world, for a miracle.

The Reverend Case Barry. Prophet.

And Keith Falco stood at the rear of the tent, flanked by two men not much taller but very much bigger than he. Nor was he young, or handsome, but so nondescriptly dressed that he could have vanished had he stepped into the crowd. His hands hung limply at his sides while one foot tapped slowly on the hardened ground. Impatiently. Distractedly. To pass the interminable time, he scanned the crowd for people he had met during the past two days: more specifically, searching for a woman with light brown hair and a black ribbon around her neck. But from where he stood, all the heads looked alike, and he scowled to himself as he shifted weight from one foot to the other and continued the tapping.

Laurel, he thought with undirected melancholy, your gods aren't coming this season.

Then a finger jabbed him in the back. He winced without turning, but his foot stilled and he contented himself with singling out heads and wondering what the hell they were doing there.

A fat woman, moaning.

A little girl, whimpering.

A well-dressed man stirring with every sign of boredom.

Falco pulled a handkerchief from his hip pocket to mop his face and the backs of his hands. In his quieter moments, alone in the cramped whiteness of his apartment, he tended to believe that there must be some sort of god, some sort of twisted intelligence goading the world through its insanity, but now all he could think of was: *Christ, I wish they'd let me wear my camera!*

(AND THINKING of a just past May when Rafael Munoz, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, was brutally assassinated as he mediated a truce in the US-Japanese trade war; when the lame duck President of the United States traveled to Paris to deliver the eulogy for the Second President of the Sixth Republic, killed in a skiing accident; when the Vice-President, acting under the Federal Anti-Disturbance Act, dispatched troops to quell university riots in Texas, Oregon, North Dakota and Kansas; when the famine in India marked its fourteenth straight month, and three earthquakes shattered Iraq and the Turkish Confederation.)

THIRTY MINUTES later, he tried vainly to work out the stiffness in his shoulders without raising his arms and causing his escorts undue alarm. The evangelist had begun again, setting a pace for a controlled climb toward a state of near-hysterical supplication, and Falco had discovered himself standing at rigid attention so intent was he not to succumb to the sea-like rhythm of gentle writhing that had infested the congregation. The tympanic insistence of the sermon-prayer, the chanting of the hymns, the continuous



KNOCK, AND SEE WHAT ENTERS

underlying organ music all washed over him. He was positive he would not submit, but the moisture on his hands and face, under his arms and down the center of his back and chest was born of the inescapable tension trapped and magnified by the unyielding canvas. The preacher expected his prayers to be answered, the assemblage radiated conviction, and the anticipation was blossoming into a force Falco was about ready to believe would actually develop into something frighteningly tangible.

Dammit, be objective, he ordered himself sternly, *let's keep this con-founded thing completely objective, Keith, old boy. The world is counting on you, you know. Thousands of readers, millions of listeners huddled over their midmeals will want to know what's going on here. Let's not let them down, buddy. Keep your head, Falco, damnit. Somebody's got to write the epitaph for this thing.*

A SILENCE. Pause. A plateau for a gathering of breath.

Falco rocked on his feet, the first alternative he could think of to keep himself from squirming like a child. The quiet was becoming unbearable. Here and there over the heads of the people, sounds of asthmatic wheezing exploded weakly, lingered and died. A chair creaked, a foot scuffled; but there was no restlessness, only patient attendance. The congregation watched the preacher, the preacher watched the air, and Falco glared at them all through a growing, illogical anger. This wasn't his place, yet something told him it was.

Until recently, he had been fairly comfortable, reasonably tenured as a senior science reporter for the North American Wire Service Combine, safely and securely shuttling back and

forth between launching pads and laboratories, satellite Hubs and observatories, dressing up as best he could all the paraphernalia of rocketry which had, a century after Sputnik, gone stale. Once, for a period of eight luxurious years, he had enjoyed a by-line, front page headlines and lead items on the air; then came the printed media's wane, and now he knew he was lucky to snare one full column a month in a non-influential market. It was little comfort to know that there were few reporters who had been able to make the transition to the Networks—those, that is, who bothered to try.

He shook himself and counted the crowd again; two hundred even, not including Reverend Barry or his tiny, wrinkled organist and the chorus of ten who backed him up when the going was slow and the response weak. *Two damn hundred,* he thought with weary bitterness. *Me, they send for a meeting of a couple of hundred lousy, unenthusiastic fanatics.*

This place is making you morbid, he told himself a moment later. *Stop the pity, for crying out loud. Save it for the bust at the end. Human interest, Keith old buddy. Human interest.*

Then, he answered, *they should have sent someone who gives a damn. The world sure as hell doesn't.*

(AND THINKING of a just past June when Pope Alexander died of a series of heart attacks at his home in Madrid and the College of Cardinals—eleven men dragging the past almost to the present—took sixteen days to choose one of their own number, and there was no replacement; when massive food riots ripped through the Latin Union, except in Paraguay where the people didn't bother any more; when there was uncontrolled plague in the

Sudan; when there were tremors in Alberta and Wisconsin.)

SHUT UP, Falco. They wouldn't like your attitude.

And *they* being Andy Versag, a hook-nosed, baby-faced caretaker of a gasping enterprise. Falco grinned to himself. The memory of their last meeting was indelible.

"There's this little place, Keith, in of all places south Jersey, smack in the middle of what they once called the pine barrens. There's no City encroachment yet; it's Government Protection Land from the Philayork Corridor all the way down to the whatever-it-is Bay down there. Anyway, my sister-in-law told me about it a while back. Seems there's this man, a self-proclaimed suit-and-tie prophet who's been stirring up a few local believers into waiting for the immediate, right-now-with-no-delay Second Coming. He's even conned a few members out of the Cities, including the Sector General's wife. And my sister-in-law."

"So what? That story is so old, may I respectfully say, that it stopped being news the year after Christ himself died. For Christ's sake."

Versag ignored him, scratched his nose. "This man—according to my sister-in-law who has a college degree plus and is no dope, Falco—has so far predicted that Pope's heart attack, the riots here and down in the Union, the Frenchie's death, and Munoz's assassination. Precisely, Keith. Not the usual something rotten will happen this year bull. He gives dates, places, and causes. Exactly."

"Well, if it's true, then why haven't the Networks gotten to him? Or the Government? Or the UN?"

"Because he's religious."

"So?"

"Falco, have you been so busy in those precious Hubs of yours that you don't even read your own paper?"

"You are going to give me a lecture."

"Religion, my aging boy, is out. Dead. Fragmented beyond saving. Since those Anglicans finally folded and the World Council gave up the ghost, nobody cares about gods and things anymore. Any god you care to mention has died, and the number of clergymen still plugging along wouldn't fill this office twice. Once."

"That I can't buy, Andy. People always believe in something."

"Of course, they do, idiot, but not in public. And certainly not in an organized way. But this guy, this Case Barry, has managed to develop the first genuine, viable cult in nearly three decades."

"Well, damnit Andy, so the hell what? If this is really true, this prediction stuff, you or someone else would have popped the lid weeks ago. Why do you have to pay attention to it now? And why do you have to pick on me to go? I thought I was your friend."

"Why now? Probably because I believe a little of it myself. That's beside the fact that my sister-in-law already told the Networks and they laughed at her. And beside the fact that if we don't do something soon, you and I will both be in a pension camp."

"I'll ignore that last remark, but don't tell me you believe. You're as atheistic as me. More."

"Wrong, Falco, as usual. You're no more a complete nonbeliever than I am. You're just too damned proud to admit you wish there was an open church near your place so you could sneak in once in a while."

"What are you, my confessor?"

"That's hardly likely, Keith, and

why don't we drop the hard guy stiff for a minute, huh? It doesn't suit you. The way things have been going nowadays, this guy Barry just might make some sense, even if he is slightly off base. Look, he's somehow managed to make some predictions—"

"According to a relative you don't particularly like."

"—and he has built up a fair-sized following just desparate enough and hungry enough to think he can do what he says. If the World's going to end, Keith, they want it to be with an ecclesiastical bang, not an Eliot whimper."

"Nicely put. Can I quote you?"

"Shut up. Look, how many rockets have you seen in the past fifteen years?"

"Don't ask me. I stopped keeping track."

"How many shuttles have you taken Up?"

"Off hand? I don't remember. But I fail to see—"

"Fallco, it's so easy it's frightening. You are bored. The papers and the Networks are bored. I am screaming bored. The public is damned bored, and more dreary than I've seen in my whole misbegotten life. And I, for one, do not think it is a so-called phase."

"Ah! The something-vital-is-missing syndrome, right?"

"I knew you weren't all that stupid, Keith."

"I must be. I don't believe it."

"You don't have to. Just do me a favor. Take a few days vacation. Re-join the human race, and get my sister-in-law off my back. Go to Jersey and get some religion. And if you find a god there—I don't care which one—call me collect."

"Sermons yet."

"Get the hell out of here. And take

the portagear with you. I can't afford to send a crew, too."

FALLCO: Ladies and gentlemen, this is Keith Fallco, and I'm speaking with Mrs. Irene Sturges, a widow who is attending a Second Coming convocation here in southern New Jersey. As you can see, we're standing in front of the large tent erected to hold the estimated two hundred attendees. Mrs. Sturges was one of the first to arrive. Mrs. Sturges, the obvious question is, I suppose, why are you here?

Mrs. Sturges: Because I believe Reverend Barry has truly received the word of the Second Coming. And I want to be here when it happens.

Fallco: Exactly why do you believe him? Why him, and not one of the other evangelists, rabbis, ministers, or what have you?

Mrs. Sturges: Have you met him?

Fallco: No. In fact, I'm due to see him sometime this afternoon.

Mrs. Sturges: Well, when you see him, Mr. Fallco—is that right? Fallco?—when you see him, you'll know I'm right. God is coming.

Fallco: Which god, Mrs. Sturges?

Mrs. Sturges: Are you trying to be funny?

Fallco: No, ma'm. But you'll have to admit there have been an awful lot of gods and religions in the world's history. Marduk, Ra, Zeus, Manitou—literally hundreds of them.

Mrs. Sturges: I don't know about that, Mr. Fallco. I just believe that Reverend Barry has received the Word, and God is coming to take care of the world.

Fallco: And what's going to happen then?

Mrs. Sturges: We'll get our due, Mr. Fallco. We'll be judged and uplifted. You should read your Revela-

tions, young man.

Fallco: Do you actually believe this end-of-the-world philosophy of Reverend Barry's? I would think you'd be somewhat frightened about dying. You seem to have a good many years left in you.

Mrs. Sturgess: Is that a compliment?"

Fallco: Yes, ma'm, it is.

Mrs. Sturgess: Well, thank you. And yes, I do welcome it, kind of. For one thing, it's not really dying. And I'm afraid the world has just about had its fill of living, don't you think?

Fallco: Speaking for myself, I don't think I have, Mrs. Sturgess.

Mrs. Sturgess: Well, you should read your Bible, Mr. Fallco. Then you'd know we were only given until we used up our time. Then . . . the Coming.

Fallco: I prefer the *Book of the Dead*.

Mrs. Sturgess: Are you making fun of God, Mr. Fallco?

Fallco: No, Mrs. Sturgess, I'm not. Forgive me if I seem a bit short. I've had a long day.

Mrs. Sturges: Don't worry, Mr. Fallco. It's almost over. Tonight's the night, and I'm so happy I could cry.

(KEITH, too accustomed to super-sonics, had limped into Sector Trenton in a peeling turbochopper that he knew should have been retired from service a decade before. There he rented a ground car and headed southwest out of the City, miserably unimpressed by the miles of buckling roads seemingly laid along the trail of a drunken trapper. He was equally un-inspired by the dark and scraggly, twisted pines that for some unknown bureaucratic reason were protected from the crawling megapol society.

Using a map scrawled by Versag's sister-in-law, who was too ill to attend the Coming, he plunged into a country he thought time should have forgotten; and he threatened, mentally, to draft an expose of Nature rather than the illusory Second Coming. And all the open space was making him agoraphobic.

(With functioning road signs nonexistent, he managed to by-pass the village three times; and when he found it, discovered he would have to wait at least until the next day for his interview because Reverend Barry was too busy walking in the forest alone with his god. At least that's what the bartender told him, and when Fallco looked hard into the man's face, he saw no reason to doubt it.)

Fallco: Cover stuff, Bill; mix and dub where necessary and don't you wish you could have come with me? There are at least five roads leading into the New Jersey village of Martinsgale, and none seem to pause long enough to allow the casual traveler, however rare, to stop and look around. You can see how few homes there are, all packed now with visitors who don't seem to mind the discomfort; the State Store which, I'm told, is serviced by a once-a-fortnight chopper; the School which, as you can see, is the only building that appears to be painted regularly. And beyond it all, the vast forest which surrounds and buries this tiny community so far removed from the mainstream of American life in the self-contained delights of our glorious Cities. A strange place for a miracle, but then, stranger things have happened in the past, and no doubt will happen in the future. Cut. Edit this, Bill, need I say. Andy, if you're listening, this is a dump. An

old-fashioned slum, for Christ's sake. And the people! God Almighty, there's this one guy who swears the Olympians are coming, another who has the inside track on the benevolence of the Great Spirit. You're right about one thing, though: they are all deserate. But when this Barry fails, what are they going to do? Commit mass suicide?

(FINDING NO ONE who would admit to the mantle of local authority, Fallco had returned to the so-called hotel and cornered the nearsighted bartender, a dumpy, flushed old man who told him quite frankly that all he wanted out of life was to push the buttons that mixed the drinks. Fallco wondered why he just didn't pack it in and report to a Population Board, but he didn't ask, only watched. The village, he noted, floated in a vacuum, and not even Barry's arrival had stirred it much. When asked about the rest of the media, the bartender told him he was the only reporter around. There hadn't been any viphone calls. *Scoop*, Fallco thought mockingly. *I'm sitting on a goddamned scoop.*

(After a liquid dinner, a woman twenty years his senior accosted him on the street and offered him the use of her attic, the only space left in her house that hadn't been rented out to the gathering faithful.

"Free," she added toothlessly. "You just get my picture on the screen?"

"Yes, ma'm, I sure will," he said. "I'll do just that."

"Before the Coming?"

(Fallco stopped in the middle of the street. "Well, I can't promise that.")

(She grinned. "Don't matter. Don't think I want to see myself anyway.") And when she laughed, Fallco smiled,

thinking he had at last found some genuine sanity.

"Tell you what," she said, reaching the steps of an old and life-worn ranch-style house, "you take that thing of yours and talk to my granddaughter. All she does is sit around all day and stare at the sky. That's not healthy. You do that and I won't charge you anything."

(Fallco couldn't resist: "If there's a Second Coming, money won't do you much good anyway.")

(She looked at him sideways. "I'm no Christian.")

(And before Fallco could ask what it was she did believe in, she had gently pushed him through the door and pointed to a set of bare wooden steps. "The roof's low, but I expect you won't be up there much, anyway.")

"You're right about that," he said. "Absolutely.")

Fallco: Ladies and gentlemen, this is Keith Fallco speaking with Miss Arlene Holtzman, a teenager who lives right here in Martinsdale and has been a part of Reverend Barry's little flock since its inception. Arlene, before Reverend Barry came to your town, did you ever go to church?

Arlene: Do I talk into that thing on your coat? Where's the camera?

Fallco: Bill, stay on your toes for this one. Arlene, you just talk with me as if I weren't taping your voice or picture, like we just met on the street. The recorder, as you guessed, is this yellow gadget on my coat. Don't worry about a thing, okay? So, let's try it again. Arlene, before Reverend Barry came to your town, did you ever go to church?

Arlene: No sir, There aren't any in this town. The place that was—over there and down a block—it's a museum now. Hardly anybody goes

there anyway.

Falco: Do you believe in God?

Arlene: My mother does. My grandmother, too, sort of. I guess I should, but I don't think so.

Falco: Well, hypothetically, what do you think God will look like when he comes? If he comes, that is.

Arlene: Oh, he'll come all right. I know that much.

Falco: Now wait a minute, Arlene. You just said you don't believe in God. I don't understand.

Arlene: So? I don't believe in euthanasia, but we got Population Boards, don't we? He'll come all right, don't worry about that.

Falco: I'm a bit confused.

Arlene: You can say that again.

Falco: I mean, I'm sorry but I can't accept your analogy of God and the Population Board. I mean, God is something entirely different. Would you mind telling me why you think he's coming?

Arlene: Well, if he doesn't, what's left?

Falco: I see. How old are you, Arlene?

Arlene: Fourteen.

Falco: Are you kidding? You must be at least twenty, nineteen, anyway.

Arlene: That's because I'm tired all the time. So's my mother. It sort of runs in the family, I guess. The fact is, Mr. Falco, most everybody's kind of tired most of the time these days. You live in a City, don't you see that too? I could when Gram and I went in last month. You do, too, you know that? Just like the others.

Falco: I've had a long day, Arlene, but thanks for talking with me.

Arlene: It passes the time, doesn't it?

AUTOMATICALLY, Falco reached into his jacket pocket for the recorder

controls and blinked when his hand fumbled and found only his billfold. Momentarily confused, he turned to look at his bodyguards. They returned his stare blankly, and finally he was able to reorient himself.

The tent.

The preacher.

How long had he been drifting, he wondered, and smiled at the notion of being asleep on his feet when the end came. The silence in the tent continued, meanwhile, but without the nervous coughing and shifting bodies. Unaccountably, he felt himself getting edgy. *Laurel*, he thought, *if I have a spectacular breakdown right here and now, you'll know who to blame.* But nothing happened, and to keep himself from a laughing I-told-you-so, he tried to decide whether or not to speak with Laurel again when this lamentable travesty had run its course.

Late that afternoon he had made up his mind to give it all up and risk a confrontation with Versag. Barry was apparently not going to present himself despite assurances that the preacher knew Falco was waiting. He was trying to find different ways of defining charlatan when Laurel appeared.

He was sitting on the Holtzman front steps in no mood at all for people. He hated the two interviews already taped, and when word of his profession had spread, several of the visitors had approached him, their faces twistingly pious, their eyes hungrily scanning his lapels. He was civil, and firm, and their religions trailed behind them when they left. Finally, a door opened and closed behind him and a woman sat beside him. He smiled perfunctorily, noticing only that she was wearing little more than a girdled green tunic and a wide black

ribbon around her neck, then he resumed his scowling.

"May I assume you've covered more exciting stories in your career?" Her voice was high, and barely rasping.

Falco grunted.

"Not being up on the latest City innovations, my cigarette doesn't light itself."

He turned his head. "Sorry, I don't smoke."

The woman's eyes glittered behind feathered bangs. "Damn, another myth gone."

He smiled in spite of his mood and looked closer. Pretty she wasn't, and too thin by far for his taste. Her hair was dark, made darker by the tight white skin that rendered her face disturbingly featureless. She didn't appear to be a housewife, charwoman, even technician. Nothing about her suggested work.

"Mind if I ask what brings you here?"

She shook her head.

"This won't be an interview, you know. The ones I've had aren't exactly lead-item fare, and I just may throw my damned machine away."

She shrugged and tossed the unlighted cigarette to the ground. "I'm just waiting, that's all."

"Ah," said Falco, "for the Coming, right?"

"No. For my husband."

"Is he one of the faithful?"

"He's the minister." She laughed, then, at his confusion. "Relax, reporter, hardly anybody here knows but him."

"How about filling me in?" He knew he was too brusque, but he was damning himself for his stupidity and had no time to be clever.

"Why don't you ask him yourself?"

He snorted. "I can't get close to

him."

She smiled, and for a second looked more feminine than she appeared. "I'm a wanderer," she said, gazing across the street at nothing in particular. "I read history and things like that. I look at pictures. Case and I did a lot of that before this business started." Falco, listening intently, was startled at her lack of emotion; he had thought the least she could do was sound ethereal. "You can ask him why he does what he does, but I'll tell you about the rest of these people."

"I already know," he said, and gave her a terse account of his briefing with Andy.

"Astute man, your boss. He's right, of course."

"Of course *not*," Falco snapped.

"But there are signs," she said.

"There are always signs, lady. All the time."

She smiled again, and looked at him for the first time. "How closely have you been paying attention?" Her tone added: *little boy*. "Look at your May, Mr. Falco, and your June and July. It's what used to be called the set-up. The softener. The moment before the *coup de grace*."

"Impossible," Falco said. "There are a dozen different gods being looked for here. Somebody's going to be damned disappointed."

A ground car passed, spitting dust that hung long and slow above the street. For while, Falco watched the scrub pines making a farce of the sunset, the woman's peculiar voice buzzing in his ears. He thought she was finished with him when she stood. But before she walked away, she turned to him and aid, "They're all coraing."

"Right," he said. "And what does your husband say about that?"

"He thinks I'm crazy," she laughed. "But they will. When Case knocks, Mr. Fallco, those people are going to bring through every god they've been expecting, or have been afraid of. But it really doesn't matter what they look like, does it?"

He had the frustrating impression he was being led like a child through a distastefully simple catechism. "Okay, I'll bite. Why doesn't it matter? Assuming it happens, that is."

"Really, Mr. Fallco. Use your head. It's what they're going to do when they get here that counts. Look at their hands, Mr. Fallco. It will be interesting to see which head of the coin turns up."

She paused, as if expecting an answer, then turned and hurried down the street toward the tent. There were people on the road, now, moving in currents of slow and fast, silently ahead of the gathering night, and it wasn't until Fallco had taken a step away from the house that he spotted the man standing on the sidewalk, in a dark blue business suit. He was smiling.

"You're afraid it's true, aren't you, Mr. Fallco?" the man said. "Just like the rest of them"

AGAIN, always, the looming presence of the tent and its sagging, billowing folds that cast shadows upward to hover around the poles. A circus tent, macabre, Fallco decided and folded his arms across his chest. *If Barry, and Laurel for that matter, are correct, I suppose I should be reviewing my life, settling my affairs and pleading my sins.* But there wasn't much of a life to speak of, no loves or hates worth mentioning. With all the City nursing, there was little he could do for himself. He frowned. He was disturbed.

Still, the silence. Sharpened now, honed and poised *The man*, Fallco admitted, *definitely has power, but a showman without a show. He's wasted here.*

Abruptly, the canvas reacted to a rising wind, rippling grey water that ran with darkness. But the air inside remained the same: without movement, stifling and damp as a drowning sponge. The front flaps were staked to the ground and they sagged inward, retreated, sagged again. A narrow gust brushed Fallco's cheek like a wayward feather. *Don't bother to knock*, Fallco thought. *Come right in.*

"YOU MUST BE Case Barry."

"Mr. Fallco, welcome! Walk with me, won't you. Our time is short, you know. I can tell by the look on your face, though, that you're not one of my believers."

"Shall I use the old saw about being a man of science?"

"Be my guest, if it makes you feel more comfortable. Now, what do you want to know?"

"Who are you? What do you expect to prove by all this?"

"Well, let's see . . . I was brought up in western Virginia, went to school, spent the first ten years of my ministry plugging with moderate success through the redneck backwoods of Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee. No children; you've met Laurel. Several months ago we were in New York Sector and met a wonderfully receptive couple named Versag who persuaded me to leave the City altogether and set my roots down here in Martingsgale. I was tired, you see; tired of walking, seeing nothing and tending only to the old who remembered what a Bible was for. So I came. I preach to a few, and fewer every week. Last February, while

walking in the pines, I got the Call and began my prophecies."

"Ah . . . predictions?"

"Prophecies, Mr. Fallco. Predictions are based on trends, statistics, and hunches. My prophecies are based solely on the Word of God."

THE ORGANIST cast withered fingers and there was music, neither loud nor insistent, but the very presence of sound was a temporary relief. There was, however, no singing, no humming, no tapping of feet. Imperceptively, the crowd had shifted. Barry lowered his hands to grip the sides of the lecturn. From where Fallco was standing, his eyes seemed totally white. The tent pegs protested.

"REVEREND BARRY, why haven't you publicized this?"

"There weren't many around when Christ came the first time, Mr. Fallco."

"Your wife seems to think we'll be seeing more than just Christ, sir."

"My wife, Mr. Fallco, is from Sector Miami, and has some unfortunate City notions. She has faith, but no hope."

"I'm not sure about that, but . . . why you?"

THERE WAS a movement behind him. He turned quickly and saw one of his escorts struggling with a peg that secured half the front flap. The canvas slapped at his hands silently. The wind outside made no noise. Fallco realized he was making himself jumpy and ordered a deep breath to calm his nerves. He looked inquiringly at the second man, who merely shook his head and nodded at Fallco to turn around again. He did. His hands were shaking.

"WHAT I MEAN IS, Reverend, why

you? What do you have that's so all-fired good that this miracle of yours should take place at all?"

"You haven't asked me about my prophecies."

"I don't know that you actually called those tragedies."

"It's true."

"Maybe."

"You'll believe me in a couple of hours, Mr. Fallco."

"I'm not so sure that I'm going to stay, Mr. Barry. Between you and your weird wife and that boss of mine, I'm not so sure I haven't been hoaxed."

"You'll stay, Mr. Fallco, and that's not a dare. You honestly cannot afford not to."

"Reverend, will you please answer me just one question without all the mumbo-jumbo?"

"Certainly. Which one?"

"Just what in hell do you hope to prove?"

"How about, love will conquer."

"Brother."

"You sell the world short, Mr. Fallco."

"If you say so, Reverend Barry."

WIND.

Nice timing, Reverend, Fallco thought.

There was a sound. He looked up and saw the preacher's bloodless lips moving purposelessly. Down near the front, a man stood, swaying. A woman, nodding. Chairs scraped metallically. A sound. From everywhere. They all stood, awkwardly, not looking behind them, not caring about anything but the man at the lecturn whose face was now flushed and running with sweat. The black-surpliced chorus began a hymn that no one heard; it faltered, its members dropping the folders they held in their

hands.

No! Fallco thought. A hand grabbed at his arm. He shrugged it off and stepped to the aisle, looking for Laurel.

This is the way the world ends, a buzzing insisted.

Andy?

Bang, son. No whimpers.

Fallco heard the canvas rip above his head, a long shuddering shriek more like metal than cloth. The air rushed out, spun and returned, exploding colorlessly and casting the people down like straw. The lectern was torn from Reverend Barry's hands and splintered on the makeshift platform. But the preacher didn't lose his balance, and his hands fisted. There was no rapture in his face.

There was, instead, fear.

Fallco tried to think but was too stunned to summon reason. Instead, he staggered forward into the sea of hallelujahs that had begun to swell from the people weeping on the ground. He wanted to tell them to be afraid, but their hands strained for air;

he wanted to tell them to run, but their bodies sprawled and writhed.

The wind died.

Love, Mr. Fallco, will conquer.

He looked for Laurel, saw her standing calmly by her husband's side.

Watch for the hands, Mr. Fallco.

A single peal of thunder, a single bolt of lightning.

Fallco, pressing his knuckles into his eyes, wrenched himself away from the flash of blue-white light and stumbled back to the rear of the shattered tent. His bodyguards were gone.

A wild look back before he ran into the pines.

What he knew he saw were hands gripping the heads of a man and a woman.

What he refused to acknowledge was the face of the god that had torn them from their bodies.

And what laughter he heard before the stars fell in came from the jaws of a jackal.

—C. L. GRANT

ON SALE OCTOBER 20th IN THE BIG AMAZING ALL STAR ISSUE

The Sleeping Beast, a novelet by A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

A Forbidden World, a Short novel by Dave Bischoff and Ted White—They'd been marooned on an unknown world, their only hope to find the spaceport that their lifeship's instruments indicated existed to the east.

A Handheld Primer, by Christopher Anvil

The Space Roc, by Robert F. Young

The Looking Glass Of The Law, by Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.

The King Is Dead: Long Live The Queen!, by Stephen Tall

The **AMAZING INTERVIEW: Edmond Hamilton and Leigh Brackett**, conducted by Darrell Schweitzer

Plus, our usual features

KNOCK, AND SEE WHAT ENTERS

Dave Bischoff's last story for us, "The Apprentice" (February, 1977), took another look at vampires. This time he has gone to the London of the last century to follow the adventures of an urchin named—

TOP HAT

DAVE BISCHOFF

Illustrated by Dan Steffan

TOP HAT was his name, and he was extremely good at finding lost things. One day, he found a ring, a ghost, and this very strange adventure.

He was ten years old at the time, that time being when the great Victoria was the new-crowned Queen of all Great Britain, and the British people were forging their great Empire.

It all started one fine summer's day in a section of London named Westminster, where most of that city's important buildings and people are. Top Hat was walking there, whistling a cheery tune, looking for things on the ground.

Top Hat's father was a dock worker who lived in the East End of the city, a mile or two away. He would have preferred the boy earning money to help the family by working in a factory or some such, but he couldn't deny that his son had a remarkable knack for finding things of value on the streets and sidewalks of London town. It was almost as though Top Hat's eyes were magnets, and things people had dropped and lost were metal, although they were mostly items like silk handkerchiefs, wallets, and combs. However, on occasion the

boy *would* find valuable cuff-links, or even pocket watches.

Always, if there was identification on the item he found, Top Hat would try to locate the owner, who would usually reward him. But if they were not marked, he sold them to a pawnbroker near Picadilly Circus. By doing this, Top Hat made much more money than he would have in some dark and dingy, foul-smelling factory. Besides, he loved roaming the streets of London. He loved to be free.

On that particular fine summer day, he had gone as far north as Covent Garden, but had found nothing. It was getting on toward dark. He would have to return home.

So, he adjusted the battered, silky black top hat he always wore, and decided to try one more block. He had found the hat in Hyde Park, and could not bring himself to sell it, he liked it so. People made fun of it, and called him 'Top Hat'. The hat stayed on, and so did the name. He also favored wearing a bright red cloth bow tie, and a long black dress coat with tails that almost touched the ground behind his heels.

His real name was Arthur Hopkins, if you must know.

Squinting his eyes down hard, he looked for something, anything, on the ground that might be of value. Just around the corner, he noticed a crowd gathered about the entrance to a narrow alleyway. Being naturally curious, he joined it to discover what was happening.

"This here's the spot, all right," he heard a hushed Cockney voice say.

"The poor man!" whispered another.

Among the crowd, he spotted Tom Moore, a pickpocket he knew, plying his crooked trade on the unsuspecting citizens gathered to gawk.

"Oy there Tom, you old villain!" he called.

Tom Moore looked up with a start, expecting an officer of the law. Instead, he saw only Top Hat. "Oh. It's just you." He dabbed at his sweating brow with a tattered neckerchief. "Getting so these days a man can't do a dishonest day's work without gettin' bothered by people. What do you want, Top Hat?"

"What happened here, Tom? Anything exciting?" asked the boy.

"Naw. Just some bloke got himself murdered here last night."

"Murder!" The boy's eyes opened wide. "Who was it?"

"No one would have taken no notice, normally. But 'twas a Lord."

Top Hat would have liked to ask more questions, but Tom's eyes riveted on a bulging wallet pocket, and he moved off to be about his work.

By milling among the crowd, Top Hat discovered all the facts from overhead conversations. The murdered man's name was Lord Petherton—a very famous man. He'd been stabbed and found dead in the early morning hours by a passerby. The whole city had just found out the news, and curious people had come to see the



scene of the crime.

"C'mon. Let's be moving off, ladies and gents!" A pair of constables were waving the people away. But Top Hat wanted to stay, so he ducked farther down the alley to where it turned sharply, and hid in a doorway.

It took quite a few minutes for the police to move everyone away. When they were through, it was dusk. Top Hat left his hiding place and was just about to set off for home, when something lying in the back of the alley attracted his attention. Closer inspection showed it to be a very fine gold ring, with a lustrous, large red ruby imbedded in it.

"Good Heavens!" he yelped, and he picked it up, hardly believing his eyes. It was a beautiful thing, all shiny and smooth. There were strange markings carved in it that Top Hat couldn't read. He slipped on his biggest finger.

"Eh there, Toppie. Watcha got there, lad?" Old Tom shuffled toward him, leering in a way that was supposed to be a friendly smile. "Let your pal see it, Toppie, so's you don't get slapped. D'ya hear me, little boy?"

Top Hat shook his head defiantly, and stepped back.

"Now that ain't going to do you no good, Toppie. This is a dead-end alleyway and . . ."

Suddenly, the pickpocket jerked his eyes past the boy, and gulped. "Oh Lord!" he said softly. His eyes bulged with fear, and his adam's apple quivered in his scrawny neck. He turned around and ran out of the alley faster than Top Hat had ever seen Old Tom Moore move before.

"Excitable chap, that fellow, don't you think?" came a deep upper class accent from behind him. He turned around, and there stood a large fat

man in a long grey cloak and hat. He carried a silver-headed cane and wore fancy gloves. He was obviously a gentleman of distinction and breeding. He was also transparent.

"I suppose seeing someone walking out of a solid stone wall could be somewhat of a disquieting experience for a normal person," the man observed calmly. "Don't you think, Top Hat?"

The boy's eyes opened wider than before, and his jaw dropped a bit lower.

"Well speak up, fellow!" said the apparition impatiently.

"You're a ghost!" squeaked Top Hat.

The ghost raised his eyebrows. "Well. Good to see you have some powers of observation." He bowed. "At your service. And thank you for your assistance."

"Assistance? What do you mean?"

"You brought me back here."

Top Hat swallowed. "I *did*?"

"Yes. Whether or not you realize it, you have some magic powers of your own. When you put on my ring, I was able to use it, and your powers, to come back here to take care of a few odd things left unfinished because of the unfortunate incident of last evening."

"Yes, I suppose I *do* have a nose for finding things."

"Quite. A magical power. It gave me the energy I needed to use the ring to bring me back." Lord Petherton took out a pipe from his coat and lit it. "Just not the same." He shrugged his shoulders and threw the ghost-pipe away. "Takes some getting used to, being dead. Remember that, my boy. You'll be dead someday too, you know."

"Uh, sir, if you don't mind, I'd better get home. My parents will be

wondering where I am soon." He slowly edged away from the spectre.

"Nonsense! I won't hear of it," the ghost intoned in a deep voice. "Now get back here. I'll need *your* help to straighten things out. There's only so much in the way of physical things that I can do in my present bodiless state—and *that* takes a tremendous amount of will power. You *will* help me, won't you young chap?"

He looked down with concerned eyes.

"But I say! I've scared the wits out of you too! No need to be afraid, little man. I'm a good ghost. Definitely not of the wicked variety."

Top Hat obeyed, and found that he wasn't fearful anymore—he simply told himself not to be. In fact, he found that he had an earnest desire to help Lord Petherton.

The spirit paced about the alley awhile, collecting his thoughts. The he held up a finger and began to speak: "There are more things in this world than are dreamt of in your philosophy, Horatio—I mean, Top Hat. And I happen to be one of those things, at the moment. Before my underhanded demise, however, I dived into the things unknown—merely as a hobby, you understand. An avocation. Sort of a part-time white sorcerer—a good magician you might say. In my spare time I would concoct spells to cure colds, and stop the rain from coming down on a picnic. Things like that. Nothing very earthshaking, mind you.

"Then one day I was puttering about in an obscure little knick-knack shop, and I came across a very peculiar ring. The very one you are wearing at this moment. I purchased it for some small amount of money, and took it home to my estate just north of London.

"Well, needless to say, I found that it was no ordinary ring at all. According to one of my ancient dusty volumes of sorcery history, it was created by a very powerful black magician of the Dark Ages who invested it with his very soul to assure the power of its magic. Normally I'm a sensible chap, but in this case my curiosity got the better of me. Lord knows, I should have gotten rid of the thing immediately. But I had to find out what I could do with it."

The ghost shook his head sadly. "Oh, I found that I could accomplish many wonderful, lovely things using that ring. Cure sickness. Make plants grow. But it is basically a *bad* ring, for it hold a black soul inside, and was made for Black Magic, which is not a very nice sort of magic at all, let me tell you.

"Of course, I never even thought of giving the black sorcery aspects of it a try. But, evidently, the very fact that I was using it at all gave off some sort of signal to the black magicians in the area.

"They came by the dozens, trying to purchase it from me. I refused. One fellow kept after me, though. A chap by the name of Mister Shady Glumhole. Has an assistant called Blackpool Scumm. Nasty, awful people, let me assure you. Mr. Glumhole refuses to wear anything but black clothing, black gloves, black scarf, and a black hat. He has black hair and a black beard as well. Night black. *Evil* black. Even his skin seems to have the faintest tinge of black beneath its usual pallor. Mr. Scumm is a fat greasy little man who wheezes when he talks, and has the most unimaginably *foul* breath. A ghastly pair—not very nice sorts at all.

"After a few weeks of these fellows' interminable bothering, and after I

realized the evil the ring held, I resolved to bring it to a goldsmith here in town to be melted down and so destroyed.

"My mistake was in letting Mr. Glumhole learn of my plans. He and his cohort followed me, and waylaid me in this alley. Oh, I fought, but that foul snake Mr. Scumm had a knife—he stabbed me. Before I died, I managed to throw the ring away from me. And what with the uproar I created, bellowing like some wounded Yorkshire bull, the police came soon, and the villains didn't have time to search for the thing. So they stuck me in a corner, where the Peelers wouldn't find me—little good that would have done *me* by that time anyway—and they made good their escape.

"Normally, I would have floated off to my reward. But things were in just too much of a mess for me to leave in good conscience. When the hustle-bustle of the curious crowds cleared away you, my friend, found the ring, allowing my spirit to assume the ghostly form you now see. It is my earnest plea that you assist me in righting the terrible wrongs I was indirectly responsible for here. The ring must be destroyed."

Top Hat gulped, but looking at Lord Petherton's heavy, friendly face dissolved his fears. "What can I do, gov'nor?"

"Oh, splendid! First thing is . . ." The ghost was interrupted by mumbling, whispering voices approaching the darkening alleyway. "Good Heavens! It is them, coming back for the ring! Quick—hide! They're dangerous, and if they see the ring on your finger, they'll slit your throat to get it."

Top Hat jumped behind an old crate. Through a crack in the slats he

was able to view the whole alley. The ghost faded back into the wall.

An awful scraping of shoe leather scuffled into the alley.

Two men entered.

Sure enough, one was tall and thin, and dressed all in black, just as Lord Petherton had described him. He carried a long black cane that he often tapped on the pavement for no particular reason.

A chill sped down Top Hat's spine just to look at him.

He had a long, hooked nose—and his eyes were pinpricks of black against bloodshot white. His hair was long and spread out over his forehead and shoulders in greasy ringlets. A constant snuffle came from him, as though he had a cold.

"Sniff sniff—Hold there, Blackpool," he grated, squinting his eyes to accustom them to the darkness. "This is the spot all right. Sniff sniff. Now, you set to looking for that ring, my man, or dinner shall be a week late for you." His pale lips drew back in a trembling sneer. He gave an ugly chuckle, showing his yellow, rotting teeth. "Haw, haw. I know it's here somewhere, that ring. And I shall find it—I shall, by the Devil's Big Toe—sniff sniff."

Obediently the smaller man moved off and began scanning the dirty, trash-cluttered ground. Short, fat, and not exactly lovely, Mr. Scumm gave off a continuing asthmatic breathing like a man on the verge of snoring. "Yes . . . Yessssss . . . Mr. Glumhull . . ." he wheezed.

The tall man gave him a startled look and struck him on the head with his cane. "Mr. Glumhole, you dunce! Can't you ever get it right?"

Mr. Scumm squealed and scurried into a corner, holding up gnarled hands to protect himself. "I'm

s . . . sorry, s . . . sir”

Mr. Glumhole twitched his long, scraggly mustache. “Very well, worm—and don’t do it again. You know how sensitive I am about my name.” He surveyed the alley. “Now, where *was* it we left the miserable carcass of that idiot Petherton?”

From the wall, Top Hat heard a muffled cry of outrage. “Idiot indeed!” But Lord Petherton did not leave his hiding place.

Blackpool Scumm jumped a foot into the air, knitting his heavy, swarthy brows furiously.

“What was that?” he whimpered.

Mr. Glumhole raised his bush eyebrows calmly. “What was what, Scumm?”

“I could have sworn I heard something!”

“Balderdash! Now get to work. I want that ring *tonight*.”

Mr. Scumm went to work, scouring the dark ground with his eyes and his clumsy hands. Shady Glumhole leaned against a wall, musing aloud about the ring.

“Ah, but I do want that ring. Boric’s Ring they call it, Mr. Scumm. Boric’s Ring. And if I can but hold it in my hands for one minute, have it on my finger for sixty seconds, oh! what power I shall have! What evil I will concoct. How rich we shall be, my servant!”

“Yesss . . . ssirr,” whispered Mr. Scumm from his crouched position. “And will I have my black suit and cane, just like you, Master Glumhole?”

Glumhole smile evilly. “My good man, you shall have ten of them. No, a thousand! Anything your twisted heart desires, Blackpool.”

Mr. Scumm breathed faster with excitement, and devoted all his attention to the search for the ring.

Twittering with glee, swishing his cane about in the air, Mr. Glumhole stalked the entrance of the alley, watching out for police while he chortled out his enthusiasm. “Oh, I am roused to the heights of sinful ecstasy tonight, my bad fellow. Tonight I shall gain what I have searched, connived, and killed for these past five years.” He found a small puddle of water and gazed down at his dim reflection. “Oh—*oh!* My lovely wickedness is simply too much to bear,” he crooned, stroking his face with much love.

He pivoted and speared his servant with a cold voice and a sharp stare. “Well—have you found it?”

“No, m’lord, sir,” croaked Mr. Scumm apologetically. “But I am looking awfully hard, your Badness.”

“Be quick about it—sniff sniff. We haven’t much time.”

Affirming that there was no danger approaching with a hasty glance into the street, he darted back to the rear of the alley, and stopped but a few feet from the startled Top Hat. From his voluminous top cloak, Glumhole drew out a small purple-ribboned blood-red box.

“Blast it!” he cursed. “I know it’s somewhere about in this place. If only Petherton hadn’t thrown it away, and screamed like a stuck pig!” Bringing his eyes down to the box, he inspected it closely. “I had hoped my little box here would not be needed—sniff sniff—but I must find that ring, and the sooner the better!”

A little gray cloud of dust blew out of the box, floated down slowly to the ground, and changed into a miniature bulldog, gray and black, with a spiked ring around its neck.

“There you are my beauty, my John Bullie-boy! Speak, dog!” Glumhole chuckled. “Speak for your

master!"

"Oh, come off it, chap." The dog sighed, and scratched at its fleas. "What do you want of me now? You realized that I have only three more tasks to perform for you, and then you must set me free."

"Stupid cur," muttered Mr. Glumhole under his foul breath. "Bullie, I'm looking for a ring. Can you sniff it out for me?"

The pint-sized spirit dog strutted about the alley a few moments, his pug nose to the ground. Then he reared his sniffing nose up into the air.

"Got it," he said, yawning.

"Oh, excellent. Good boy!" The tall man grinned. "Where is it?"

"First things first, Shady. To begin with, did you realize that we are not alone in this alley?"

"What?"

"That's right, old man. I sense two other souls. And one of them has the ring."

"Where, where?" Glumhole twirled about, scanning the alley with his beady eyes.

"Oh dear, I do hate being a tattletale." But the little dog pointed with his tiny paw in the direction where Top Hat was hidden. "You'll find it on the kid's finger, behind the crate."

The dog ambled off, looking for a nearby lamp-post or tree.

"Aha!" breathed Mr. Glumhole. "Behind that crate, you say. Let's see." He dashed over to it and flung it aside, revealing wide-eyed Top Hat, who was shaking with fear.

"What do we have here? A little boy! I *eat* little boys for breakfast!" He laughed—a laugh that suddenly turned into a growl. "Mr. Scumm. Come here, please." Scumm slid up to his master's side and peered down at Top Hat.

"My, my!" continued Glumhole. "See, Mr. Scumm. He *does* have the ring! Little child, please give me the ring. Or I fear I shall have to cut off your finger to get it!"

Top Hat felt a shiver of hate envelope him, and he struck out at Glumhole with his fists.

"Aaaaaooww!" Glumhole jumped back, holding a bloody nose. "So he fights, does he? Blackpool—get him!"

Mr. Scumm moved in and Top Hat crawled back swiftly, but his path was blocked by the wall.

Scumm wheezed with delight. "Gotcha now, puny boy!"

"Hold a moment, fellow." Lord Petherton stepped out from the wall. "He is of no consequence to you dastards. Leave him be!" he boomed.

Mr. Scumm's eyes bulged. "Snakes alive! His *ghost* has come back!"

Mr. Glumhole pursed his lips. "I was afraid of this. Well, Petherton. You realize that there's nothing much you can do to prevent us from taking the ring from this boy. You are only a few shreds of ectoplasm stuck together by your stubborn will."

"That is where you are wrong, sir. You forget—I have some knowledge in the use of the ring you seek. Observe, if you please!"

He touched Top Hat's ring finger and spoke a few words that didn't make any sense to the boy.

Suddenly things around them grew faint, as though some dense fog was beginning to settle down over the alley. Mr. Glumhole and Mr. Scumm became dimmer and dimmer. "Drat!" the tall man was screaming as he lunged toward the ring. "I won't let it get away from me again!"

Top Hat couldn't step away in time. But Glumhole's hand went straight through his body, as though it were mist, and hit the wall on the other

side of him. The man yelped with pain and cursed with frustration.

"They're disappearing!" said an awed Mr. Scumm.

"I'll find you before this night is over! I'll find you . . ." Mr. Glumhole yelled. "I'll find . . . I'll . . ." and his words faded out, as did his image.

"What's happening?" Top Hat said, looking around him. Everything was all smoky and black. The ghost stood behind him, his hand on his shoulder.

"We're just taking a shortcut to my home, courtesy of the ring."

A large house surrounded by tall trees began to materialize in front of them.

"Yes! I'd hoped to zip us straight into my study, but this will have to do. At least my sense of direction is still intact."

They found themselves on the lawn in front of Petherton Manor.

"Yes, here we are, Top Hat. Safe from those villains awhile. Long enough to do what I must."

"It's a very beautiful house, sir."

"Why, thank you. Been in the family for years. The Pethertons go back to William the Conqueror, you know."

They began walking toward the front door. "If it's not locked we can sneak in and head downstairs where I have my study," said the ghost. "And we can try to see if this ring you've got on your finger can't be destroyed."

The door was not locked. Top Hat opened it, and they slipped into the hall quietly.

"Down the corridor, my boy. Fourth door to the right. And then down the flight of stairs."

Passing by a large room, they heard voices: "Percy. Percy! We are calling you, we beckon you to speak with us from the netherworld. Speak

to your loving wife."

"Heaven's name, what is this?" wondered the ghost. "Open that door a smidgen, Top Hat."

In the middle of the darkened room a group of people huddled around a table. Obviously the leader of the group, a gypsy woman wailed into the night. "Oh, spirit of Lord Percy Petherton, favor us with your presence."

"Gracious me—it's that charlatan of a gypsy we've been trying to boot off our property for months!" chirped the ghost, thoroughly amused. "And leading a seance for my family to contact me!"

"Look, sir." Top Hat pointed to a pair of boots partially hidden by long draperies.

"Ah! That will be her conniving husband, to imitate my voice. I wonder what she's charging poor Lady Petherton for this nonsense."

A small graying woman to the right of the gypsy lady started speaking. "Percy? Percy? Can you hear us from the Other Side? *Do* answer us, husband, and tell us who murdered you, so we may avenge your death."

"My dear, dear wife. I shall miss her," sighed Lord Petherton, wiping away an ectoplasmic tear. Then he brightened and winked at Top Hat. "But we shall have some fun with the gypsies, what?"

Drifting through the door and up to the ceiling, the ghost gave a series of bloodcurdling groans.

Lady Petherton stood. "Percy? Is that you? It sounds as though you've got yourself an upset stomach again. I'll bet you've been gorging yourself in Heaven, you pig! You know you can't handle rich foods. How many times—"

"Must you nag me even in the afterlife, Margery, my love. Oh, a man

just can't escape such a wife!" The ghost chuckled.

Top Hat saw the boots behind the draperies begin to shake.

"Have you been taking your cod liver oil, Percy?" badgered the widow. "Let me see how you look. Right now!"

"Yes, my love," agreed the ghost.

He floated down and settled on the table. "I see we have some vagabonds for company tonight. Hullo, Magda darling!"

The gypsy screamed and fell back in a faint.

"Goodness. I thought nomads were supposed to have a hearty constitution," said Lord Petherton. "I wonder what sort of one her husband behind the curtains has."

A yelp issued from the corner. The gypsy dashed out into the hall, tripping over Top Hat's extended foot.

"Uh oh! The demon I posted by the door is going to get him for sure!" said the ghost. Whooping with fright, the man gained his feet and galloped away for all he was worth. A moment brought the sound of the front door opening and slamming.

The others in the circle, family and friends, sat paralyzed with awe. But Lady Petherton was not fazed in the least. "Percy!" She wagged at him with her finger. "How rude of you to scare those people. It's just like you! And how dare you go off and get yourself murdered without a single word to us, your family, who love you dearly."

Lord Petherton bent over and gave her a ghostly kiss on the forehead. "Sorry, my dear. Really I am. But I really had no idea I was going to leave you so soon. I suppose I ought to say goodbye now."

"Wait. First tell us what scoundrels did you in!"

"Don't worry, my love. They shall be taken care of." He began to drift back to the door. "Fare thee well, Margery. There is a world beyond this one, and we shall meet again there."

Lady Petherton's eyes misted. "Goodbye, Percy. And if you dare give those lady spirits a *glance* before I get there, you'll wish you hadn't."

The ghost met Top Hat on the other side of the wall.

"Come, lad. There's no more time to waste. We must be about our task with some speed."

They found the cellar door and raced down to study.

A spacious room, it was cluttered with all sorts of curious odds and ends. Strangely formed rocks. Buttons. Old moth-eaten books. Threadbare clothing. A whole rack of jars cryptically labeled.

Lord Petherton looked through this mass of stuff, checking books, papers, everything, as he searched desperately.

"Here, Top Hat!" he called. "Give us a hand, won't you? I'm looking for a charcoal-colored volume of spells that contains the second-best way of disposing of the ring. I'm afraid we must make use of it, as we have nowhere to melt it down."

Top Hat proceeded to search, raising much dust. "What will happen to the ring?" he asked, turning up his nose at an old dead frog he'd pulled out of a sack.

The ghost was studying titles on a shelf of books.

"It will be banished to a place where no living soul can touch it—on the far side of forever, the long ago yesteryears of eternity. That is, if I can find the stupid book. I was only looking at it the other day."

Top Hat stepped over a pile of

medieval weapons to a pile of books. "I've an idea, sir! Why don't we use the ring to find it?"

Lord Petherton looked up from a box of bat wings with joy in his pale eyes. "Of course. Why didn't I think of that? What an intelligent boy you are, Top Hat." He glided over to the boy and hovered there, his hand on the ring. "Hmm. Question is, how do we go about it?" he thought aloud.

"Have you a piece of string?"

"String? Yes, I suppose so. There—on my desk."

"We could use some more light as well." Top Hat lit a few more candles, then located a short length of twine. He slipped off the gold ring and tied it to the string so that it dangled on one end.

"Right," he piped, immensely pleased with himself. "Boric's Ring, I command you to show us where . . . where . . ." He stopped and considered. "What is the name of the book, Lord Petherton?"

The ghost wrinkled his forehead in thought. "Ah yes—I've got it. It's called 'Ancient Spell and Magicks'."

"Boric's Ring, we command you to point toward the book entitled 'Ancient Spells and Magicks.'"

The string began to quiver, and then to swing back and forth. Eventually, it stopped on the high point of a swing, and began to point.

"It's over in this direction, my Lord!" exclaimed Top Hat.

He let go of the twine, and the ring shot over to a pile of books on the desk.

"Of course! How stupid of me. That's exactly where I left it." The ghost directed Top Hat to rummage around in the pile. A charcoal-colored leather-bound surfaced. "That's it." He leaned over Top Hat's shoulder as the lad leafed through it for him.

"Hold it. Hold it! That's the spell. Hmm. Shouldn't be *too* difficult. Wish I could speak better Latin, though."

Suddenly a very cold wind blew through the room, blowing Top Hat's cherished headgear off.

"Have you got a window open, sir?" the boy asked, retrieving the hat.

"Window? There's no window in the room"

"Then where is that wind coming from? It's getting stronger."

The candles blew out, leaving only a guttering torch.

"From here, my little bag of wolf-food," a deep, slimy voice said from nowhere. "From here."

Top Hat recognized his voice, and shivered. It was Shady Glumhole's voice.

"Thought you were rid of us, did you?" Blackpool Scumm's titter resounded through the room.

First, their shadows began to form at the far end of the study. Their features began to become distinguishable. Then, they arrived. The tiny spirit-dog wagged its stumpy tail by their sides.

"Here we are," it yapped.

"You're a good dog, John-Bully." Glumhole patted its head, then sneered at Top Hat and Lord Petherton. "You may as well give me that ring now. You haven't a prayer of keeping it."

"And what makes you think so?" cried Top Hat, stalling for time while Lord Petherton puzzled out the spell.

Glumhole smirked. "I have the good services of my faithful dog here—"

John Bully cocked his head up at the tall man. "Oh, I forgot to tell you. That last little miracle I performed? Actually it was worth two tasks, since

I transported both of you. So, I'm free to go whenever I wish."

"What? You traitorous dog, you!" Glumhole kicked at the dog with his boot, but John-Bully doged, barked, and pounced, biting the man's leg.

"Yeouch!" howled Glumhole.

"Fare thee badly, you rogues!" it growled, vanishing in a puff of blue and yellow smoke.

A ruffled Glumhole rubbed his sore leg with one hand, and pointed at Top Hat with the other. "Get the brat, Mr. Scumm. Snatch the ring away from him and bring it back to me."

Obediently, Blackpool Scumm lumbered over across the room, but Top Hat was not about to let the man catch him so easily. Clutching the ring in one hand, he jumped and bounced and slid away from the fat man like a slippery fish.

Meanwhile, Lord Petherton was burbling out Latin phrases.

"Are you almost finished, sir? I can't keep away from him much longer!" called the boy, just avoiding a lunge by Blackpool.

"Yes. Yes. A moment more. I only need some diamond dust. I have some in a jar somewhere I think. But *you* shall have to throw it." The ghost began to examine the shelf of glass containers.

However, Mr. Glumhole was not about to let the ring stay away from him much longer. He loped in to join the frantic chase of the boy, and by a turn of bad luck hooked him by the scruff of the collar with his long fingers.

"See how easy it is, Mr. Scumm," he croaked between clenched teeth. "Now just get a firmer hold of the puppy, like so, and twist the ring out of him!"

Top Hat fought like an alley cat, squirming, hopping up and down,

pounding his captors with his fists. But they managed to grab his right hand, and tug at the ring, which the lad had managed to put on a finger.

"No, no, you fool," puffed Glumhole. "Let me take it off!"

One final pull and he had the ring. Blackpool hurled the boy into a corner, where he landed in a pile of rags.

Shady Glumhole backed away, holding the ring out before him, twittering and giggling to himself. "Mine. Mine! All mine!" His eyes glittered like quartz in moonlight as he put it on his finger, and then he pranced about the room. "Oh, I feel the power already! What devilry we shall perform, Blackpool. Come over here and touch it. Feel the *evil* of necromancy!"

Fascinated, Scumm put his hand on the ring. "Yes, your Rottenness. I feel it. I can *feel* it!"

Mr. Glumhole gurgled with glee. "And the first thing we shall do is to destroy those two trouble-makers for the pains they have caused us!"

His eyes grew sharp, his beard bristled like an angry porcupine. Strange words began to mumble from his lips like slow flowing spittle.

"Hurry, sir!" screamed Top Hat. "He's chanting a spell!"

"I see it!" cried the ghost. "But I can't pick it up! Come here, Top Hat!"

"There's no time! Besides, those two won't let me pass. You've *got* to!"

Lord Petherton began to flicker, he concentrated so hard. But his hand became more solid when the rest of him became less so. That hand managed to pick out a small glass vial, and hurl it.

The vial twirled end over end in magical slow-motion. It met with Blackpool Scumm's forehead, where it burst to pieces. Sparkling diamond

dust, like a million falling stars, drifted down in a silver flow onto the ring.

Dazzling brilliance flared up like sparklers and fireworks, dashing white light into every part of the room. Somewhere a peal of thunder rolled and smoke blossomed up into a large pearl-gray cloud around the ring holders.

"Rats and toads!" shrieked Glumhole's voice above the growling thunder. "You've not heard the last of me!"

But when the cloud finally wisped away, the two men were gone. As was the magic ring.

"Whew! That was a close one," sighed the ghost. "Nearly spent me, throwing that diamond-dust. If spirits could perspire, I'd be soaked through and through now."

Top Hat scrambled out of the corner. "What *happened* to those two, sir?"

Lord Petherton smiled grimly. "Unfortunately for them, anyone touching an article being banished to the nether zone goes along with it. That's where those characters are now—off beyond forever, most likely squabbling among themselves. But they deserve each other, don't you think?"

His eyes twinkled. "My boy, I

couldn't have done it without you! Thanks to your bravery and gallantry, things have been righted and I can go off to where I belong."

Top Hat bit his lip and looked down at his shoes.

"Here, here, chappie! Don't get all choked up. Perhaps I can visit you again someday."

Top Hat brightened. "Oh, but that would be *grand*, sir!"

"We'll see about it. Meanwhile we must get you home. I dare swear your parents are worried silly about you."

"I dare say they are!" came a shrill voice from behind. Top Hat turned, and saw Lady Petherton descending the stairs. "I'll send a messenger right away to tell them you'll be spending the night here. You must be awfully tired, little boy. I can tell you have been of much help to my husband, and I shall see that you are rewarded." She turned up her nose. "But my, *my* you are *dirty*! Before you go to bed we *must* give you a nice hot bath!"

Top Hat turned around to entreat the ghost for help with this new danger.

However, the ghost had wisely disappeared.

—DAVID BISCHOFF

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THE PILLARS OF HELL

LIN CARTER

Illustrated by Tony Gleeson

1. In the Land of Silence

FOR MANY a long and weary year have we wandered down across the world, following a red star with a trail of flame like a crimson dragon of the skies. It was in the time of my great-grand sire, Zorm, that we rose up from the land of our fathers amidst the great mountains of the north, and took the first step on the endless trail which has led us ever south. Down from the wintry peaks of the Roof of the World we came, fleeing before the chill breath of the Great Ice, following the Dragon Star like a burning beacon, and the vision of a warm and golden land of fruit-burdened boughs and eternal summer.

Hard has been the trail we followed, and many the fellow-tribesman who has fallen by the wayside, prey to the strange and uncanny perils of these new lands unknown to us. I, Jugrid the son of Junga the Light-Bringer, have seen many fall, to rise no more. Thom-Ra, our stalwart chief, fell in my childhood before the thunderous hooves of the great mastodon, while we traversed the trackless Plains of Thune; and his son, Zuruk, who was chief after him, I saw die before the assault of the Brown Men of

the Plains. Now it is Charn, brother of Zuruk, who leads us on—Charn, the boyhood friend of my own father, Junga.

My grandsire, Gomar the Hunter, was a boy when our tribe rose up and left the valley of our ancestors; my father, Junga, was born during the long trek through the snow-bound mountains; and I, Jugrid, first saw the light of day on the Plains of Thune. Long, I say, long has been our journeying, and the end is not yet.

When I was just entered into my sixteenth year we came at last out of the measureless Plains and left the wind-swept tundra behind us forever. We crossed a range of wooded hills, forded a rushing river, and entered upon a land strange and new to us, a land where sparse patches of scrubby grass withered and died before the hot breath of the panting wind. A land of sere and desert sand which Zorm the Ancient, who yet lived, named the Land of Silence.

Yes, the aged seer, Zorm, yet lived. One hundred and eleven summers had he seen, the oldest of men, although now he was but skin and bones and could not walk but must be carried in a litter of skins. Blind he was, but as his outer sight faded, his

gaze turned inwards, the better to read the visions sent him by the Gods.

This land we were entered upon now was a strange, dead land of crimson sand and rolling dunes, with never a green leaf or a spear of living grass to rest the eyes upon. Truly was it called the Land of Silence, for the air was motionless here: no winds blew, storms never came, and no birds sang. Silent as the grave was this weird, rolling land of crimson sands, and our hearts grew faint within our breasts that we must cross this drear and desert waste. But cross it we must and we would, for ever the Dragon Star burned like a bearded flame in the southern skies, beckoning us on, and we are the People of the Dragon.

But the men of the tribe muttered and grumbled, and the women whispered of night-terrors and Things that glibbered from the shadows of the sands—as women will always whisper, while the world lasts. Charn, the chief, they said, was young and inexperienced . . . a wiser man, they hinted, would have sought a way around the wastes of crimson sand, rather than plunging into this uncanny Land of Silence, where the People would perish of thirst.

But Junga, my father, spoke up for Charn the chief, and bade the people obey his behest; and Junga, my father, commanded the respect of all, for it was he who had slain the dreadful Slime-beast amidst the marshes of Thune; and he, the Light-bringer, who had brought the gift of fire back to the camping-place of the People. And Zorm, like a ghost, whispered from his litter that the Way of the Dragon lay across the crimson sands of the Land of Silence, not around them. And so we went on as Charn



the chief had commanded, though there were still those who grumbled and were unconvinced. Among these, the loudest was Kugar the Cunning, the scrawny and ill-kempt son of Tuma the Limping.

From old had there been enmity between Kugar and myself, for that ever on the hunt he hung back and was never to be found in the forefront of the chase, where danger was, preferring the rear, where men such as he were safe. And I think he envied me my swelling thews and rippling muscles, the square cut of my jaw and the fearless glint of my blue eyes. For he was hunched and flabby and ill-favored; especially was he not favored by the women, although he found many an excuse to be with them. And oftentimes he made my blood seethe when he cast his oily, smirking eyes upon the dark-haired girl, Athala . . . Athala of the green cat's-eyes and the lissom body . . . Athala, whom I hungered to make my own.

But that is another story . . .

2. *Men who Vanish in the Night*

FOR NEARLY a moon had we trudged ever south across the silent sands of this accursed land, and no living thing had we seen in all this time, save for high-flying carrion-birds, who circled lazily against the blue zenith, and, once, a hissing reptile as crimson as the sands which hid him.

We had fallen upon this lizard-beast, hacking with our stone axes and thrusting our long spears, for our supplies of game were nigh exhausted, and fresh meat, even the meat of monster lizards, would not be ill fare. But the thing was hard to slay, and long in the dying, as are all its cold-blooded kind. And there was some nameless venom in its claws and

long fangs that gave a dire illness to men, that they fell ill of the sweating sickness and were long in the dying.

Charn the chief, who had ever gone in the first rank of our warriors in time of battle, was one of those the venomous claws of the giant lizard-thing had raked ere it died. Now he lay lashed to a litter, raving of a burning fever, shielded from the rays of the sun by tattered skins draped over poles, and tended by the sharp-tongued Thora, his unwed sister. And, until the chief perished, or grew well enough to lead us on, we could go no further, and must camp in this place of naked red rocks, where a scant trickle of sour water ran through a parched gully.

And ever Kugar and his cronies muttered dire things about our lingering in this accursed place . . . that we should all die here under the fangs of the lizard-things, or of the fever, or of thirst, when the trickle of water dried up. But we paid little attention to Kugar's premonitions of doom, dismissing them as we dismiss the croakings of old women.

Until dawn broke and four men of the tribe were missing from their sleeping skins.

They had not been carried off by marauding beasts or by men, nor had they wandered singly away, as men will sometimes wander in the spell of an evil dream. This we knew because the prints of their feet could clearly be seen in the smooth red sand: one by one, they had risen up from their pallets and gone striding off into the desert, into the east. But where, and for what purpose? And why did they not return? None could answer these questions, not even blind Zorm the Ancient, to whom the Gods gave counsel in dreams.

We were troubled and fearful and

kept close to our camp in the rocky gorge all that day, save for my father, Junga, and the most skillful and tireless of our huntsmen. They ranged far to the east, but found no sign of the missing men . . . found nothing at all, save for a kind of ruin where pillars or columns rose from the shifting sands, pillars such as might have once borne up the roof of an ancient temple in time gone by.

By that point, said my father, the slow sifting of the sands had blurred the footprints of our missing tribesmen beyond the following.

Kugar muttered grim omens, and said that were it not for the sickness of our chief, we could be swiftly gone from this accursed place where men rise up from their beds and walk in their dreams to an unknown death. And one of his cronies, Nuba the One-Eyed, grinned suggestively, and added—

“If Charn, our chief, is too ill to lead us, let us give the chieftainship to wise and clever Kugar. Only until Charn the chief has recovered his strength, of course . . .”

Junga my father grunted, and spat in the sand between his feet. “If ever the chieftainship is given to Kugar, I think me Charn shall die swiftly, and in the night, of a strange malady,” he growled, one massive hand closing about the haft of his mighty axe. “Here we stay until our chief recovers his strength and can lead us forth.”

“And if more of our people wander off in the night, O Junga? What then?” leered Nuba, while Kugar stood and glared unspeakingly nearby. My father shrugged.

“We shall set guards about the camp, so that none may pass into the sands unseen,” he said. “If Nuba is so concerned with the well-being of the tribe, he may take the first watch

himself.”

Nuba snarled, heavy lips peeling back to show rotting yellow teeth, his one squint-eye glancing fearfully about, bright as the gaze of a cornered rat. But his bluff was taken, and the watch was his.

3. *Death Strikes from the Shadows*

NONE OF US went easy to our sleeping-skins that night, and even those who did slept a troubled sleep, roiled with horrible dreams. My father had set four guards to patrol the edges of the camp, with Nuba to the western side thereof, and Khomar, my boyhood friend and brother to Athala, the dark-haired girl who filled my dreams, to the southern border of the gully.

At the mid of night he roused me from my sleep and bade me go to the relief of Khomar. I rose sleepily, donned my tunic and buskins of rawhide, cinched my girdle of woven thongs about my waist and took up my spear.

From where he lay, huddled beneath his furs near the fire, the gaunt and wasted form of my great-grand sire, Zorm, stirred and rose on one fleshless arm, supported by Azad, the fatherless and orphaned boy who tended to his needs whenever I or my father was not there. “Grandson Junga,” the aged man whispered, “give the child the great axe . . .” My father hesitated, then bent to obey. Slowly he unwrapped the mighty war-axe of polished stone which had gone ever at the side of his own father, Gomar the Hunter. Great was the massy stone, bound by rawhide thongs to a five-foot wooden haft, and so terrible was the weight thereof that it could crush even the skull of the great horned bison of the Plains like an egg-shell with a single

blow. For a moment my father stood, frowning, chewing on his thick ruff of yellow beard, weighing the great axe in his hands. He had borne it from beside the bones of his father, who had died under the Slime-beast twenty summers ago.

"Give him the Axe of Zar of the Flame," crooned the eerie voice of blind Zorm from his cradle of skins, "that wast born in war by Kuma the son of Zar, and by Tugar, Kuma's son, and by the first five chieftains of the People."

"I shall obey your words, Ancient One," said my father, bowing his head. "But this is the Axe of war—"

"This is war, my grandson," came that eerie whisper, "when death strikes from the shadows, and men walk in their sleep to a nameless doom!"

My blood chilled in my veins at that weird whisper, and the flesh crept on my forearms. But I took up the Axe of my family, and went to join the guards.

And found them gone.

When I reached the place whereat Junga my father had posted Khomar the brother of Athala, I found no one there. For a moment I stood baffled, but unafraid, thinking he had perchance gone a ways apart to relieve nature behind a rock. But then my breath caught in my throat and my heart froze in my breast: for there amidst the sands some little distance off, caught in the rays of the rising moon, I saw his long spear with its glinting blade in the cold light.

There was no mistaking it, that spear, for it was one of the new spears fashioned by the clever craft of old Tuma, with its blade of beaten copper. Only a few of these did we have as yet, for Tuma had mastered the secret of copper-metal after our

brush with the Brown Men of the Plain, who went so-armed with the soft metal, which cut cleaner and deeper than did our old spears with blades of chipped flint.

I picked up the spear, turning it over and over in my hands, then bent to search the crimson sands with keen, quick eyes. There had been no struggle here, that much was plain to see, for the sand was undisturbed. Only the prints of Khomar's buskins in a straight row, leading off from this place step by step into the east.

From the shadows of night, at moon-rising, the unknown death had struck again. And this time the victim had been Khomar, Khomar the laughing, the merry-of-heart, the friend of my boyhood . . .

With my heart heavy in my breast, I ran back to the pallet of Junga my father, to give the alarm and to rouse the camp. And when all were roused and counted, it was seen that of the four guards whom Junga had set to watch the perimeter of the camp, three were missing. All had dropped their weapons and strode off into the east, as if summoned by a Call they could not withstand or refuse. Only Nuba had escaped the doom which had befallen the other guards. Shamefacedly, he snarled that he had stepped aside to relieve himself in the shadow of a rock and must have been thus disposed when the fatal moment fell.

"At least," smiled Kugar the son of Tuma, "let us rejoice and give thanks that the Doom of the Silent Land has not taken from us the brave and valiant Nuba, as it has three other men—whose deaths be upon the spirit of Junga, and none other. For had we done as I, Kugar, suggested, we should be gone far from this evil place where men die in the night!"

"Another hath died in the night, O Kugar," whispered a thin voice from beside the fire. Slowly and painfully the gaunt and wasted figure of Zorm the Ancient lifted itself with one bony arm wrapped about the siender shoulders of the boy Azad. A face white and fleshless as a skull, with milky and sightless eyes, rose into the firelight.

"What means the Ancient One?" murmured Kugar uneasily.

"Look to Charn the chief," said my great grandsire. And Junga my father cried out as one stricken by an arrow and turned pale as death.

4. *The Fangs of Gorah*

IN TRUTH he was not dead, was Charn the chief; but he was not far from it. Some unknown hand had thrown his sleeping furs over his face, muffling his nostrils from the life-giving air, and he was very near to death when the swift feet of my father came to the lean-to, and threw aside the hides, and found him thus.

Thora, his sharp-tongued shrew of a sister who had tended him in his illness, set up a shrill wailing clamor. She had slept deeply and heard nothing in the night, she whimpered, tearing her hair and beating her breast. Kugar made a great show of comforting the distraught woman.

Swiftly, my father Junga bore the wasted body of his friend out into the open air and laid him down close to the fire so that he might take comfort from the warmth thereof. Pale and spent and gasping for breath was our chief, and the death-sweat glistened wetly on his drawn, suffering face. Frail and thin were the strong arms, once mighty of thew and tireless in battle, and strengthless and feeble were the long legs of Charn, which

one had outpaced the very wind. Glorious in his manhood had been Charn, the son of Thom-Ra. But that was in the splendor of his youth, long ere the venom of the crimson sand-lizard had crept into his veins to waste his heavy limbs and drink his strength away to feebleness.

Old Tuma the Lame One, Kugar's sire, was clever in the ways of healing. He laid one ear against the panting breast of Charn the chieftain, then rose, shaking his head, his white locks brilliant in the moonlight.

"He is far gone," muttered the old man, "Almost has his spirit set forth on the ghost-road, bound for the second life."

Yes, in truth he was very near death. The suffocation he had known under the heavy skins had goaded his laboring heart into a desperate racing. And every throb of his pulse, it seemed, drew the lizard's poison closer to his heart. His life was to be measured but in minutes: and Charn the chieftain had no son of his loins to wear the fang-necklace of the leaders of the People after he was gone to join his fathers.

"My time is short," gasped Charn. "Lift me up, so that all of the People may hear. And clasp my hand, Junga, friend and companion of my youth!" Tears streaming from his blue eyes to mingle with the yellow bristle of his beard, my father knelt to support with his arms the failing strength of Charn.

"I have no son to follow me," he said. "Take, therefore, for your chief after I am gone, Junga the Light-bringer, he who slew the Father of Slime amidst the Plains, he who brought back to you the gift of fire."

A murmur of approval ran through the People, for my mighty sire was liked and respected by all. Or almost

all . . .

For Nuba—him who was absent from his guard-post at the time the Doom came for the other guards—him who was absent at about the same time some unknown hand had muffled the face of the stricken Charn in thick furs, seeking to snuff out his feeble life—spoke up scornfully from the shadows:

“Why Junga, who is past his prime, rather than the clever-witted Kugar, here, who is young, and who speaks for many?” he interposed.

“Be silent of tongue, you yelping cur—for all that Kugar be my own flesh and blood,” snapped the white-haired Tuma where he knelt. And Nuba grumbled into silence

“First,” panted Charn, in his slow voice, struggling for every breath, “because it is my will, and because I am your chief, the son of Thom-Ra, the son of Zorm the Ancient. And secondly, because Junga is second only to me in claim of blood-lineage, for that he, too, is the son of a son of Zorm, the wise and ancient chief who ruled the People ere we departed out of the valley of our ancestors. Take, then, O Junga, my brother, the seven-stranded necklace from about my throat—”

Junga my father did so. And with his own hands, with the last of his strength, Charn fastened the necklace of the chieftainship about my father’s throat. So I became the son of a chief.

Then he sank back lifelessly in my father’s arms. Yet still his white lips worked as if striving to speak. My father bent close to catch the words.

“We will . . . hunt together . . . side by side . . . O my brother . . . in the country beyond the clouds . . . someday—”

And thus he died in my father’s arms.

Gently my father laid him out and crossed his hands upon his breast, clasping his copper-bladed spear. And the women set his war-axe beside him, and put his flint knife in his girdle. Then they heaped dry grasses about him, and sticks of wood, and with his own hands my father took up a burning branch from the fire and touched to flame the pyre of Charn. The flames roared up about his body, to cleanse his spirit of its crimes, that it might drift up with the rising smoke, stainless and pure from the purifying flames, to rise up to the country beyond the clouds to reside with the spirits of his fathers forever.

And about the strong throat of Junga hung the seven-stranded necklace of the fangs of Gorah, the white tiger of the snows.

The warriors of our race, when they are come to the age of manhood, were wont in the olden time to go forth alone and bare-handedly upon the mountain to trap and slay the great cave-bear, returning with the claws of their kill threaded on a thong about their neck, as men and full-fledged warriors. Today, as there are no cave-bears in this strange southern clime, the young men thread colored stones upon a thong. But the chieftains of our race, the first of whom was Zar of the Flame, must fight the dreaded snow-tiger. Seven chiefs in our line, from Zar himself to Thom-Ra, the father of Zuruk and Charn, slew the Terror of the Snows, and returned with the Fangs of Gorah about their throat.

That seven-stranded necklace was my father’s now, and I would wear it in my time.

If any of us came alive out of the Land of Silence!

5. *The Watcher in the Night*

DAY WAS UPON US before the body of Charn had fallen to ash. We broke our fast on meagre fare, and after I had seen to the comfort of my great-grand sire, I repaired to the place where Niora, the widowed mother of Athala and the vanished Khomar had slept. They had no man of their kin to hunt for them and I had ranged far into the desert at dawn, and had been fortunate enough to bring down one of the lumbering carrion-birds with my spear.

This I cast down before the knees of the woman, Niora, where she knelt dry-eyed before her fire. "Here is meat for the living, mother of the friend of my boyhood," I said somberly. She looked up at me through the coils of her hair, and her face, still beautiful although drawn with pain and toil, was weary.

"My thanks to you, Jugrid, chief's son," she said dully. "But I have no belly for it, I, whose son lies somewhere amidst the sands, his flesh unburnt in the sacred fire, his spirit earthbound forever, never to join his fathers beyond the clouds. But thank you, chief's son, for your kindness."

I bowed, and went to where Athala stood not far off, listlessly rolling up the sleeping-furs. Even in her sorrow she was more lovely than a springtide morning. I touched her arm.

"He was my brother, too," I said awkwardly. She nodded, saying nothing, too weary for tears.

"If but one might live," she sighed, "why must it be Nuba the One-Eyed skulker, rather than tall Khomar, the swift, the bold, the laughing—" Then she choked back a sob and I let my arm gently encircle her shaking shoulders.

"This very night," I swore,

"Khomar shall be avenged!"

She flashed me a look of scorn, green eyes flashing.

"You boast like a raw boy; not a warrior and a chief's son," she said fiercely. "Come to me again when you have deeds to show, not empty words!" And with that she turned on her heel and went to tend her mother.

Even in her anger, she was more beautiful than the dawn.

THAT NIGHT the chief, my father, posted his guards. He would have set me among them, but I pled a gashed foot and showed him my heel red with blood. He gave me a puzzled look, but held his tongue; although I think he doubted me, and was surprised and hurt at my cowardice.

The blood on my heel was from the bird I slew at dawn, a bit of whose gore I had scraped up in a hollow bit of stone.

That night, before the moon's rising, I crept from my sleeping furs and did on my leather tunic and buskins, and armed myself. At the last, remembering the words which Zorm the Ancient had spake the night before, I took from amongst its wrappings the great Axe of Zar and bound it across my back. Then I crept into the darkness, as stealthily as ever crept forth the tiger of the snows.

At the head of the stony gulch in which the People camped was a tall rock rising up into the stars. This rock I reached and none there were that saw me go. Then did I scale it carefully, unto the top, where the stone was flat and smooth. There I stretched out so that I could watch the guards who watched the camp, without myself being seen by any.

For a long while naught betid, and I caught myself falling into a doze,

wherefrom I jerked awake, cursing the weakness of the flesh. To keep myself awake thenceafter, I closed my fingers into a fist about the sharp blade of my flint knife until the keen, whetted stone bit into my palm. The sting of the cut kept me wakeful, and whenever drowsiness came over me, I but clenched the knife tighter until the bite of the blade into my flesh stung me to wakefulness again.

And then, about the mid of night, just as the moon rose up over the far edge of the world to flood the Land of Silence with its sheen of light, I was witness to a strange and awful thing.

For the moon rose . . . and as it rose there rose as well a weird and distant *singing* . . . a faërie song, such as perchance the spirits hearken to in the country beyond the clouds . . . a thin and eerie song, seductive and languid, promising unheard-of pleasures, strange bliss, unholy raptures such as the flesh has seldom known . . .

As I watched, myself enrapt as they, the guards turned their heads to listen, and let fall their spears from nerveless hands, and turned to stride away into the desert. And I with them, no less ensorcelled than were they . . .

I was brought up short, with a stinging shock, at the brink of the huge stone whereon I had crouched. One step more and I would have toppled to the rock-strewn sands far below. Cold globules of sweat burst from my brow and my hands felt clammy as I realized how nearly had I come to succumbing to the same weird enchantment as had beguiled my fellow-tribesmen.

Thinking of their peril made me search the moonlit wastes for a glimpse of them. And there they were, striding like sleep-walkers out

into the east.

And then my heart froze. *For striding along in their wake was Athala, my beloved, as drugged in dreams as they!*

6. At Moon's-Rising

I KNEW NOT how it came to be that Athala was wakeful at this hour, and chanced to have heard the singing of that siren-song. Mayhap, sorrowing for her brother, she had not been able to sleep, and, tossing and turning wakefully, had heard the haunting music in the night.

But, whatever the why and how of it, there she was, stumbling along in the rear of the dreaming guards as they went blindly to meet their mysterious Doom.

I half-climbed, half-fell down the sheer side of the great rock until my feet crunched into high-strewn sand at its base. Then I ran after the sleep-walkers, no longer fearful of being seen. A few swift strides had brought me up to where Athala walked. I caught her by one arm and called her name, but she did not seem to hear me or to feel my touch, but pulled away and continued walking into the east, into the rising moon.

Again I caught up to her and seized her two arms in the iron grip of my hands and shook her, and called her name, striving to waken her from this tranced slumber. She woke not, but writhed and fought like a wildcat in my grip until she had torn free, whereupon she continued stumbling along, like one deep in dreams.

And so I followed close upon her heels, filled with a dreadful desire to see the thing that called to her in the night, the unseen singer of that weird, elfin song that lured men to

their death amidst the crimson sands, under the risen moon.

Ever and anon the dreamful spell wove itself about my own brain, till, benumbed, it sank towards slumber. But when that chanced I clenched my fist ever and again about the flint knife whose naked blade I clasped still in my fist.

As we drew further and further from the camp of the People, and nearer and nearer to the Singer of that uncanny song, I was forced to clench my fist again and again on that knife, now black with blood, tighter and tighter until the hot blood ran down my hand and dribbled from my fingers into the parched and silent sands.

But the bitter kiss of the blade drove the fogs of enchantment from my brain and kept me wakeful and wary.

Now we drew nigh unto the place of the ruins whereof my father had spoken. And when I saw the columns thrusting up as if to impale the round orb of the moon, I saw a weird and wondrous thing—

By the sunlight of day, my father had told us, the pillars of the ruin were like dully-polished stone, heavy and opaque as any other kind of rock.

But, by night, and the moonfire streaming *through* them, they were glittering shafts of scarlet crystal, with smoky and vaporish whorls moving slowly within them, coiling and uncoiling, and threaded through with glinting motes like fiery and evil stars.

And I bethought me, then and there, of the burning pillars that hold up the roof of hell in one of the dire myths related of old by Chonda the Teller-of-Tales, the fourth of our ancient chiefs, who was the very father of Zorm himself.

The Pillars of Hell! . . . aye, such,

indeed, they might well prove to be . . .

One by one, the ensorcelled guards stumbled like sleep-walkers, blank of face and empty of eye, into the smoky red glare of those crystal columns; and all the time that seductive faërie music sang in our ears its sweet and deathly song . . . and I, alone of we six, was able to resist the siren-call of that hellish singing!

Now the foremost of the guards came stumbling up to press his face against the cold glassy surface of the nearer of the glowing crystal columns.

As he did so there came coiling in slow and heavy whorls a dense vapor from the dry sands which were heaped about the base of the Pillars. A thick, oily vapor that flowed and coiled and glided like running fluid or slithering serpents. The tentacles rose to twine about him as he stood, spread-eagled against the lucence of the pillar—in whose glimmering depths, now, the uncanny witch-fires burned bright and ever brighter, till their crimson flames flared like the dawnward sun itself, and his form was silhouetted blackly against the scarlet blaze.

Then he shrieked.

And I stood, frozen and trembling, whimpering curses between gritted teeth, as the oily vapor coiled about him *and ate the leathern tunic from his body and the flesh from his bones and crumbled the very bones themselves into a powdery ash!*

Until there was nothing of the pitiful wretch left at all, but the flint-bladed knife he had worn at his waist and the necklace of smooth stones clasped about his throat. These dropped into the soft sands at the base of the column and sank from sight as the thick smoke-serpent sank back into the sands, replete.

And the coiling, smoky whorls within that Pillar churned violently; and the glinting motes blazed up like mad stars; and the singing of the Pillars rose to an unearthly pitch.

Guard after guard went stumbling forward to clasp the cold glassy column to his breast, as one crazed with some unholy lust, and to be consumed utterly, to a thin sifting of ash, as in an invisible bath of flames—and, may the Gods forgive me!—I stood by, rooted to the spot, like one frozen stiff with unbelieving horror, and did naught to save them.

And then it was Athala who glided on swaying feet into that cold, unholy embrace—

7. *The Madness of Jugrid*

THEN IT WAS as if the spell which had held me fixed to that spot as if rooted there—*snapped*.

I sprang forward, roaring. I was half-mad with terror, I am not ashamed to say it, for in my youth we were a simple tribe, ignorant and superstitious, our brains stuffed full of old wives' tales of night-devils and mist-demons and black spirits of the killing frost. Thus it was that the thick hair of my mane lifted from my scalp and my eyeballs nigh started from their sockets and my lips were drawn back in a tigerish snarl of berserk rage and I foamed at the mouth like a madman.

But the red murk of fury which rose roaring within my brain broke the chains of numb inaction which had held me ensorcelled, and I leaped forward like a charging cave-bear. One hand reached out to snatch Athala back from the brink of doom. And so terrific was the strength that rose within my maddened thews that I hurled the girl a dozen strides away

with a single thrust.

Then straight and true I hurled my long spear with its keen blade of beaten cooper against the column and its whirling witch-fires. It glanced away, not even scarring the tough crystal.

I ripped my flint knife from my waist, snarling like a mad wolf, the foam dripping from my bared teeth. Again and again, roaring with mingled rage and loathing, fury and terror, I drove my knife into the column until the blunted blade broke to flying shards.

Baffled, I slunk back, growling deep in my chest, my eyes glaring like coals under the tangle of my shaggy mane.

And then, in the red murk of my madness, I bethought me of the Axe, the great stone Axe of Zar, which I wore strapped across my broad young shoulders. With trembling, fumbling fingers I pawed and tore at the thongs that bound it, snapping and snarling. . . and now Athala, numb and bedazzled, came staggering to her feet again, and went stumbling into the evil embrace of that Pillar of Hell, an unnatural passion smiling in her face and gleaming from her dark eyes!

Flat against the slick crystal of the hellish column she pressed her lissom body, her warm white breasts flattened against the cold, lucent stone. I reached out and tore her away and struck her across the face with the back of my hand. Before the shock of that stinging buffet the panting lust faded from her eyes and the tender Athala of old peered forth therefrom again, bewildered and fearful. I shouted something at her, and never afterwards could I recall the words I spake; but she sank to her knees in the red sand and buried her sobbing face in her hands, slim shoulders

shaking as she wept.

The uncanny music sang in my ears, benumbing my brain, weaving its web of witchery to ensnare my soul. I howled aloud—like a maddened wolf, seeking to drown out that eerie song. And I wrapped the fingers of both hands about the long haft of the great Axe, and took my stand, and swung the Axe back over my shoulders. Then, with all the steely strength in arms and back and shoulders, I swung the whistling blade of Zar's Axe against the scarlet thing of singing crystal.

The music broke abruptly into a shrill keening, as of dread! For black cracks ran here and there through the shining stuff of the Pillar, and my blow had gouged out a jagged chunk of the glistening, lucent stone.

Again and again I swung the great Axe against the shuddering column of crumbling glass, and now it screamed and moaned, like the wailing of tortured women. Red fury possessed me utterly; I growled deep in my breast, and Athala tells that my eyes glared forth from the tangle of my wet locks like the red glare of a beast in the bloodlust of the kill.

Shard after shard I cut away, and ever the black and jagged cracks tore through the tottering column until it fell, smashed to shivering fragments, at my feet.

And as the broken column fell to bestrew the crimson sands with its glittering shards, Lo! the witch-fires died within it, and its wail fell to a keening, then a whimper, then—naught but silence.

But I fought on.

AND AFTER AN ETERNITY, my roaring berserker madness ebbed and my wits returned to me again. I found myself prone on the dry desert sands, every trembling and exhausted and aching limb bedewed with cold perspiration. My head was pillowed on the lap of the girl, Athala. Her warm tears were like rain on my face. But softer still were her sobbing kisses.

I came lurching and stumbling to my feet, swaying with weariness, feeling the pull and drag of strained and quivering sinews. My head swam with tiredness and my brain felt dull and numb and every inch of my body ached abominably.

But the four tall Pillars of Hell lay in shattered ruin amidst the sands, and already their slick and glassy substance was worn and pitted as they flaked away, crumbling to dust, no longer embued with the uncanny force of their devilish magic.

They would sing no more, those grisly relics of a forgotten race. No longer would they lure to their cold embrace the children of men.

Wearily I bent to retrieve the great Axe where it had fallen from my exhausted hands. Then, with one arm about the trembling shoulders of Athala, I turned my staggering feet towards the encampment of my people and the tent of the chief, my father; and I bore with me a tale of such strange and chilling horror that never would it fade from the memory of the People of the Dragon. Never, while the world lasts!

—LIN CARTER

WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS TO BE SELF-EVIDENT

Charles Sheffield is a British author now residing in this country, whose stories have already appeared in Galaxy magazine, among others, and who makes his debut here with a realistic story about classical times and a man very much not of his time . . .

CHARLES SHEFFIELD

Illustrated by Michael Nally & Dan Steffan

“SO WE NOW GROUP all the World into six classes of essence. First, and lowest, the rocks and earth; second, all plants; third, all animals; fourth, mankind, fifth, the corporeal spirits that abide in water and air; and sixth and highest, the pure spirits of the gods, who rarely assume earthly shapes.

“Now we can divide these groups further. First—”

“Cyrus! Hey, Cyrus!”

He peered through the arch to his left, then back to the podium. Luckily, the lecturer didn't seem to have heard the loud whisper. Cyrus waved his hand feebly, trying to banish the purple robe and grinning face without attracting attention. No good. Damon was beckoning, and all set to try again at higher volume. Damn the man! He put on his sandals and slipped silently out of the auditorium.

“What are you playing at, Damon? Don't you know Cambyses came all the way from Persis to give these talks? I want to hear him!”

“Wordy old fool. Who cares where he came from? It's no use to come

from the Tin Isles, even, if you talk rubbish when you get here . . .”

Cyrus sighed. As his hair turned grey, his own respect for age and wisdom grew, but Damon had all the impatience of youth and royalty.

“It's not rubbish. He's a great philosopher—and I want to hear him. What were you kicking up that fuss for—couldn't it wait a while?”

“No. You said I'd have a chance to win back that wager any time I wanted to. Well, I want it now. Come on, quick, let's go.”

Outside in the hot sun, he threaded the way quickly down the hill from the lecture hall, ignoring Cyrus' protests of age, lack of breath and arthritis, and stopped before the hanging barrel of the vintners.

“They're tapping the big tun of white wine, into the little barrels for shipping. I want to bet on it. I'll bet I can get nearer than you can on the number of little barrels it fills. Double or nothing—if you win, you get the other mare; if you lose, I get the first one back.”

Cyrus stood in the courtyard and

scratched at his beard. A wager was hard to resist, but there was something odd here. Damon's bets ran more to the number of teeth of a whore, or the color of a horse's droppings. He hesitated, squinting at and assessing the big tun and the little barrels.

"You've not been cheating, now, have you? No talking to the tellers?"

Damon's grin was suspiciously broad. "Haven't talked to a teller, haven't seen a measuring table. Now, what's your bet?"

"Never seen one like this tapped before?"

"Never."

"We-e-ll, all right then. I bet—six score."

"—And I bet—eight and a half score. Nearest is the winner. Come on, let's count. They'll be finished before dark."

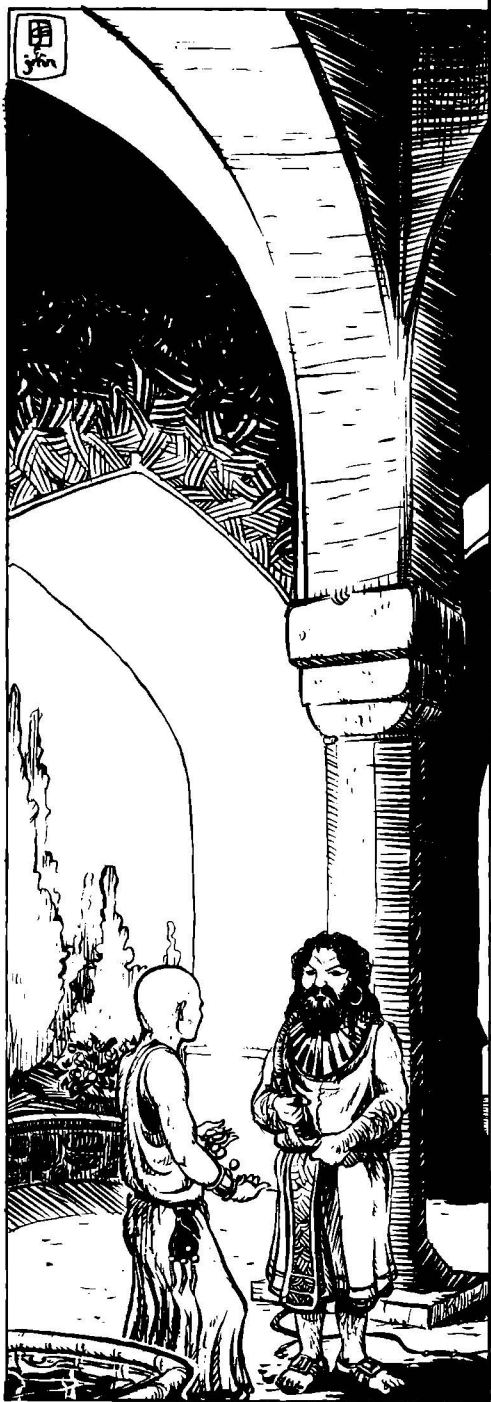
One hundred and seventy four barrels—and a lost mare—later, suspicion approached certainty. Cyrus sat on the warm marble bench in the forecourt and looked up at Damon's triumphant face.

"A bet's a bet. So, you won—now, tell me the secret."

Damon sat next to him and laid a brown hand on Cyrus' shoulder.

"It's not a secret really. You know One-Ear Afshar came back a month ago from a merchant trip to the Mid-World Sea? Well, he bought a slave in Alexandria, a big, hulking barbarian from the ends of the Earth. He got him cheap, because his old owner said he was a useless idiot who couldn't be relied on to watch a fire without letting it go out.

"He really is an idiot, too. I've talked to him. But he's possessed. Sometimes when you ask him something, you can see the spirit take him, and he's gone for a while. Then at last



he gets his body back.

"Anyway, I found out that this demon answers questions about *numbers*. I asked about the tun and the barrels this morning, and he gave me the answer—between eight and nine score. Wasn't really cheating, was it?"

"Not far off it." Cyrus looked down the hill to the blue, salty lake. "A devil who can calculate, eh? Now there's a new one. I've heard of devils who give a man the strength of ten, and even of devils who tell the future. But devils who calculate? Wait now, maybe there's an answer here. He saw in the future how many barrels they would get, and told you that. Maybe he answers number questions by seeing ahead."

"Maybe. Ask him if you like. He's been standing over by that well for a while, doing absolutely nothing." Damon raised his voice. "Hey, Melos. Come over here!"

The figure by the well was motionless for a long moment, before he looked around him.

"Here, over here on the bench."

Close up, he towered over them, much taller even than Damon. His hair was a pale, fine mop, and Cyrus saw that his eyes were not brown, but a cold blue.

"Yes, Lord?"

"Melos, how many barrels like this one in the great tun?"

"As I said, Lord, between eight and nine score." The words were strangely accented but grammatically perfect. A frown spread across the pale features and he looked puzzled. "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing wrong," Cyrus broke in. "Melos, I am sure that is not your original name. What were you called in your country?"

The reply was a broken mixture of

rough gutturals. Cyrus raised his eyebrows, then smiled.

"I think I'll have to call you Melos. I won't even try and pronounce the other.

"Melos, there is no problem. But suppose I had used, say, this drinking horn to empty the great tun. How many horns to empty it then?" He turned to his companion. "There, Damon, that should answer any question of seeing the future. No one will empty the vat with that."

The slave looked at the complex curved shape of the horn, and at the simple cylindrical barrel. He hesitated. "Lord, forgive me, but I cannot . . . unless . . ."

The face muscles slackened, the jaw dropped and all expression went from the eyes. The fair hair blew in the breeze over the empty mask of an idiot.

"There, see, Cyrus—possessed. I told you so. Now if you wait a minute, he'll be back."

Melos stood motionless. After a long pause, the mouth closed, the eyes focussed, and he said, "One moment, Lord."

He took the horn and small barrel over to the well, drew water and filled the barrel using the horn. Then he returned. "Between sixty-two and sixty-eight score, Lord."

Cyrus' eyes were alight with excitement. "Damon, do you know what he did—or I think he did? Well, never mind. Melos, before you were a slave, were you a teller and measurer?"

"No, Lord. A sailor."

"Then how did you know how many horns would be needed to empty the tun? Come, speak up, don't be afraid."

Melos hesitated. "I am not afraid, Lord. But I do not know how to ex-

plain. It is many things. It is measurement, and counting, and—other things for which I have no words.”

“See.” Damon nudged Cyrus. “Possessed, clear as crystal, just as I said.”

“No, Damon, there’s more to it than that. Damn it, I’ll have to talk to One-Ear Afshar, if I can.”

“Why don’t you? He’s just down the hill.”

“I’m not sure he’ll talk to me. It was before your time, and I don’t talk about it much, but it’s my doing that he’s called One-Ear. I was the one who caught him cheating on his weights. They lopped off an ear. Long ago, but he’s never forgiven me.

“I’ll talk to him anyway—in the morning.”

He looked back to Melos, who stood motionless and expressionless. “That’s all, Melos.”

“Yes, Lord.” The slave did not move or speak further as Cyrus and Damon went on down the hill towards the stables.

“**H**IS AN IDIOT all right—most of the time. What do you want with him, Cyrus?”

Afshar, spade-bearded and powerful, looked slantingly up. “Like him for a boy friend, maybe, would you? I don’t think Thais would be too fond of that idea. Still, he’d be a nice big armful, I’ll give you that.” He smiled, showing a graveyard of rotting teeth.

“Of course I don’t want him for that. Look, Afshar, you know my interest in philosophy and scholarship. Well, I think Melos is something more than you know.”

“You’ll never make a merchant, Cyrus. Show your interest and up goes the price. You want to buy him then, do you? And how much will you pay?”

“Forty pieces of gold—forty five

even.”

Afshar sucked a breath past the ruined teeth. “Would you, eh? Now that’s a lot of money. Why would you offer five times the value of an unskilled laborer? Know something I don’t know, perhaps?” He rubbed a smooth piece of quartz between his hands, then polished it on his robe. “Want to do me out of some money, do you?”

“Of course not, Afshar. I want to try an idea. I want to send Melos over to see old Darius, in Susa. I think there may be the makings of a philosopher in him. If so, he shouldn’t be a slave, he should be a freeman and a citizen.”

“A philosopher, now—in a barbarian slave.” Afshar crowed softly. “You’re a fool, Cyrus, and you always will be. There’s value in Melos, all right, but it’s not philosophy. Come outside with me and I’ll show you something.”

He led the way into the cluttered sunlit courtyard. He took the smooth shaped oval of quartz and held it above a heap of shavings on a marble table.

“Watch now, watch there.”

A bright spot appeared on the shavings. After a moment, a wisp of smoke; a moment later and the shavings were alight, burning pale in the sunlight.

“See, Cyrus, Melos made this when he was possessed. There’s his demon in the quartz, locked up, and he can trap the Sun.

“I’ll be selling sun fires now—pure and lucky, because there’s a piece of the Sun in them.” He looked slyly at Cyrus. “Think I’d sell you a slave who can do that, do you?”

“Afshar, I’ll pay you sixty pieces of gold.”

“Not for ten score pieces, not for twenty score.” He rubbed the red

stump of his right ear. "To you, Cyrus? Never. It's enough to know you want him. Good day to you, and I'll be pleased if you'll leave my courtyard."

He started back in, but paused at the door of the house. "Maybe I'll be kind to you, Cyrus. Melos will be yours—for nothing. The day I die, and not before. If you want to send him to Susa now, you may. It will cost you one gold piece for every day you rent him. I'll be here if you want to accept my offer. Now, go."

Leaving the courtyard, Cyrus passed the giant, silent figure of Melos, leaning against the outside wall.

"Melos." Again, the empty eyes came back from far away, before the reply.

"Yes, Lord?"

"Your Master showed me the quartz and said you put a devil in it. You told him that?"

The slave sighed. "No, Lord, there is no devil. It is in the shape of it alone, that brings together the sunlight. But Master prefers my devils to my words."

A gleam of humor showed in the pale eyes. "If the Master thought that shapes would sell better than devils, I think perhaps my words would be heeded more."

"And do you believe in gods and devils, Melos?"

"Of course, Lord. Many things cannot be explained without them. But many can. I would not waste a god or a devil on something that does not need it."

All the way back to his own house, Cyrus tried to make up his mind. A gold piece a day, for, say, thirty days in Susa. And at the end of it, what? If Darius' views agreed with Cyrus, that would be just the beginning. There

would be training, analysis, discussion. And at the end of *that*? Perhaps, a mind to show new visions. But perhaps nothing.

Thais felt his distance that night. Everything was physical, the mind elsewhere. Afterwards, little by little she teased out the story. When Melos' name was mentioned she nodded her dark head vigorously.

"Damon is right, Melos the slave is possessed. The other slaves in Afshar's house fear him. You know he drinks blood? Human and animals. One of Afshar's concubines has seen him do it."

"Thais, I think you're worse than Damon for collecting gossip." He laughed and lifted a heavy loop of scented hair from his bare chest. "Drinks blood, does he? Does he breathe the fire too?"

"Cyrus, don't joke about it. You know, Afshar's slaves say Melos likes to remain in the artificer's shop all night long. He sleeps very little and he keeps the others awake with his incantations. He is making spells and conjuring demons there. The others have heard them, hissing like snakes."

"Like snakes, eh? I'd like to know more about that, too. But Afshar isn't likely to invite me in to watch. If Melos is conjuring demons, I wonder why Afshar lets him. All he's interested in is increasing his store of gold."

When Thais was told about Afshar's proposed rate of one gold piece a day, her reaction was so violent that Cyrus dropped it at once. She shook with rage.

"So much money on a slave! Cyrus, I am a slave and I never ask for money. Already you pamper your slaves. Who else serves fresh fruit and meat to the rowers in the galleys, and who else allows them possessions and

women of their own? Why do you think of wasting money on that big barbarian oaf?"

"Thais, my dear, I think that 'big barbarian oaf' can already do things that I cannot do. If he could become a true philosopher, he should be a companion, not a slave, and he should rightfully have the finest gift that I can offer: the gift of freedom and the right of citizenship.

"Why do you think that my galleys, year after year, are faster than all the others? Because the rowers know that if they serve me well it can lead to their own freedom."

But at that point, Thais refused to speak to him at all until morning.

CYRUS' interest in Melos might have faded, little by little, but a week later Damon, nosy as ever, revived it. They had ridden (on the wagered mares, which by unspoken agreement they both had the right to ride) to the top of the dry rocky hill above the city, and were looking down at the lake below them. The air was very clear and the galleys far below looked like shiny narrow pointed slippers, with toothpick oars. Damon looked at them, then at Cyrus.

"You know, I suppose, that your friend Afshar is going into the galley business? I saw him a couple of days ago, waddling about the quay with Melos in tow. He's bought a big galley and now he's going about town saying his galley can beat the fastest."

"And that's mine, right? If he's using oarsmen the size of Melos, maybe he's right."

"He isn't. He's rounded up as miserable a set of spavined, knock-kneed, consumptive specimens as I've ever seen. They'll get tired pulling away from the jetty." Damon pushed his long dark hair back from his forehead

with a dusty forearm, and took a long pull from his wineskin. "But he's after you all right. I heard him say as much. No names, but he talked about the dreamers who go about with their heads full of philosophy and boast about their mediocre galleys."

Cyrus stiffened and sat upright on his horse. His galleys embodied part of his philosophy and were one of his few points of real pride.

"Well, I can settle that easily enough—a wager should scare him back to the rag trade. I'll look him up tomorrow and fix it."

Next day, Cyrus found Afshar by the quay, sniffing around the galleys. He looked at Cyrus' vessel disdainfully, and then at Cyrus, rolling a fat-sunk eye.

"All right for running pleasure orgies round the lake, I suppose. I wouldn't give much for its chances in a real race, though."

Cyrus reined his anger. "Afshar, I've won every galley race for the past eight years—as you would know, if you knew anything at all about galleys or racing. If you want to put money with your words, do so. If not, I think you should take lessons in silence."

"Oh, I think I might wager, Cyrus. Shall we say—Thais against Melos?"

"Don't be a fool, Afshar, you know I would never wager Thais."

"Then I suppose it will have to be for money. How much?"

"You are the challenger, you name the sum."

"Then let us say—a thousand pieces of gold?"

Cyrus had the sinking feeling that he had been trapped. And yet, it seemed impossible that Damon could have so misjudged Afshar's crew. The wager was set. The preparations began.

FOUR DAYS before the race, Cyrus received an unusual deputation. Four green-robed priests arrived unannounced after dinner and requested a meeting. Following the usual ceremonial greetings and glass of wine, the senior priest began.

"Cyrus, we come to you as our city's most experienced traveller. You have seen more of the world than any of us. You have seen Rome, and Athens, and Egypt, and beyond." He paused and looked at his companions. There were nods of agreement. "We need your advice. There are currents running now in the city that must be stopped, and it is our duty to stop them.

"We will soon be holding a hearing. Unless the answers there are acceptable, Afshar will bear trial for sorcery."

He held up a hand, cutting off Cyrus' astonished response.

"For the actions of his slave, Melos. A Master is always responsible for his Slaves' actions. Now, what do you know of Melos, and the country of his birth?"

"Directly, nothing. I imagine he comes from somewhere north and west of the Mid-World Sea, even beyond the Tin Isles. He spoke of the movement of the ocean on the shore, at the Moon's command, and that I have seen myself, in the great ocean to the south, and also west beyond the Mid-World Sea.

"But Melos speaks also of flickering colored lights that fill the winter sky, and of summer days when the Sun never sets. I have never seen these things."

The priests nodded again. "He also says other things. He denies all knowledge of the giants and the tree-men who live in the North, and at the same time he tells other slaves of fish longer and broader than a gal-

ley, and of ice mountains that float in the sea.

"We believe that he is an instrument of demons, and the places he speaks of are not of this world. Cyrus, in your travels did you ever meet men who drink the blood of men and animals?"

"Never, but I've heard talk of it from the black people far along the great river of Egypt. Hearsay only, that was. But surely, this is hearsay of Melos, too?"

Shaking heads. "He has been seen to do it. We have witnesses, reliable witnesses."

"And have you asked for explanations from Afshar and Melos?"

"No. Afshar is behaving very secretly. The questions will come at the trial, twenty days from now. We want you to bear witness then of your own travels—what you have seen and have never seen in distant lands.

"Thank you now for the help you have given us already. Goodnight, and the gods' blessings."

Again, grave bows. They departed in a rustling of stiff robes. They left behind a troubled Cyrus. The wager and the galley race were suddenly less important.

"I DON'T KNOW how—to find out. Melos will—normally talk freely—about most things. But Afshar—ordered him to keep—quiet now and not—to talk to me."

Cyrus' speech came as a series of pained grunts while the slave's trained fingers probed, twisted and pummeled the muscles of his back. On the next table, also naked, Damon was enduring a similar torment from oil and a pumice scraper. He was muttering and groaning ruefully.

"Never again, Cyrus. Never again, I'm off spiced wine forever this time.

He's killing me here with those hot towels."

"Only way I know of—to get rid of—a bad hangover. You shouldn't—even feel it at—your age. Ahhh."

The sigh came as a great copper cauldron of very hot water was poured over his bare back.

"You'll be drunk—again next week—Damon—I know—it. Look, I want to ask you—a question. Does Melos have—a woman?"

Damon started to shake his head, then thought better of it. "You and Melos. You're obsessed with that slave. If I didn't know you well, I'd think you had eyes for him." He leered at Cyrus across the gap between the tables. "He doesn't have a regular woman, or a boy friend either. I don't know what's wrong with him, he's a complete man all right, not a eunuch. But he's just not very interested."

Damon was being slowly turned into a steaming mummy by swathes of scalding towels.

"If you're still keen to find out what's going on in Afshar's artificer's shop, though, I can tell you how to do that."

"Some of us draw the line at dressing up as a cleaning woman, Damon."

"Yes, and I'm one of them now. All that trouble I had getting into the house, then I found she had hair on her chest and smelled of rancid fat. It shows how keen I was at eighteen, I went through with it anyway."

"Now forget my wild youth. What I'm suggesting is nothing like that and it's dead easy. The roof of Khosro's house looks over Afshar's yard, and Khosro is a friend of mine. It's a long way off for a really close look but you probably don't need that. It'll have to be at night anyway, or Afshar could

see you from his upstairs window."

Cyrus sat up suddenly. "Tonight. I'll do it tonight."

Damon carefully lifted his head and shook it experimentally. "You know, I think I'll live. If you go, I'll come with you. Now, how about a small cup of wine here to complete the cure?"

Seen from above, the yard at night was a confused blur of dark metal shapes and flickering shadows from the forge. A large metal cylinder with its own fire inside it stood in the center of the yard. Melos moved round it like a fire giant, tapping, turning parts, and muttering to himself in a mixture of Greek and barbarian gutturals. Finally he seemed satisfied and turned another smaller wheel on the side of the metal container.

A steady, regular hissing began, like a thousand snakes. The yard became a darker haze of smoke, steam and flickering fire reflections. The central part of the cylinder began to turn, slowly and ponderously. Cyrus and Damon strained their eyes into the confusion and watched the speed increase steadily as the hissing rose in pitch.

That was all. After fifteen minutes Melos nodded in satisfaction and turned another wheel on the container. The turning slowed and the hissing decreased to a thread of noise. He removed part of the metal cylinder, carried it over to the forge and began to make a careful adjustment to its shape. Cyrus and Damon watched him for another hour and saw only a patient shaping at the forge, broken by long minutes of silence and thought.

"You stay here if you like, I've had enough," Damon said at last. "I couldn't make any sense out of all

that.'

"I'll stay a little longer. You go on and I'll wait, just in case."

"Tomorrow morning, then, at the harbor. I want to hear what you and One-Ear come up with as race terms. Think you'll win?"

"I'm more worried trying to think of any way that I could lose. I don't trust Afshar, he's got something up his sleeve. Anyway, tomorrow we should know."

The next day was still, cloudless and burning hot. Sitting on the harbor wall, Cyrus saw Damon's tall form striding towards him. In a hurry by the look of it. He spoke without the usual greetings.

"Something's funny all right. I've been looking at Afshar's galley. Is there any way he could somehow make you race over land?"

"Damon, please, try and sound rational, even if you're not."

"He's putting wheels on his galley, big ones. And he's moved out the rowers' benches near the back."

"I know the rules for the race as well as anybody. A land race is first ridiculous, second impossible. The galley would fall apart. He can use less rowers if he wants to, but he's not allowed any sort of sail."

Cyrus smiled at his worried friend.

"If he is up to something, we'll know at noon!"

Afshar was certainly pleased by something at mid-day. His face had a secret, superior look and his walk was self-assured and complacent. The greetings between the two men were cold and formal.

"Your choice, Afshar. Sprint, distance race, with or against the wind? What do you choose?"

"Distance race, I want. Wind or no wind. I don't care. We'll race for a fixed time, and the one ahead at the

end is the winner."

Cyrus caught Damon's look. Something fishy, it said; the one thing that Afshar can't stand with his crew of crocks is a test of endurance. He thought for a moment, then nodded to Afshar.

"Perfectly legal. And the duration? You have that choice too."

'Afshar paused for effect. "Shall we say—noon to midnight, with no change of rowers?"

The bystanders gasped. One third of that time was a long race. Cyrus frowned and bit his lip.

"You want to kill your rowers, Afshar? Remember, sails are forbidden. You think you have men who can row for half a day without rest? My men can probably do it, if they must—can yours?"

"No sails, Cyrus. Don't worry about my men, just have a thousand gold pieces ready for me two days from now."

His expression was immensely self-satisfied and smug as he turned and headed for the quay. Cyrus remained on the harbor wall, deep in thought. A catch, but what? A good look at Afshar's galley was in order.

At the jetty there was great activity. Standing aloof from it and yet somehow directing it was the tall figure of Melos. His usual remote manner had gone and in its place was a tremendous concentration on all details of the labor.

The rear benches were out. In their place stood the metal cylinder from the artificer's shop. Instead of the rear oars, giant wheels twenty feet in diameter had been fixed to the galley, their centers a few feet above the water line. Slaves from Afshar's household were loading cords of wood around the cylinder, between the front benches and in every spare

space in the galley. Long metal rods ran from the cylinder to the great paddle wheels.

Melos moved forward suddenly from his point of overlook. He moved in among the slaves, and an argument began. Damon, with a confirming glance at Cyrus, wandered unobtrusively over to the jetty. The argument focused around a large barrel, which Melos did not want on the galley. After a few moments, Afshar himself joined in and overruled Melos' objections. The barrel was hoisted on board. Demon sauntered back to Cyrus. He shrugged.

"Melos didn't want it on board. I don't know why, it's not so much weight. That's all the argument was about."

"What's in it?"

"I don't know. Wine for the rowers maybe—though there's more there than they need. There was some other talk between Afshar and Melos, but I couldn't get much out of it. All about demons.

"Afshar asked how the cylinder demon was feeling. Melos said something like, 'Master, there is no cylinder demon. It is the demons in the water that get the strength from the heat. They push to get away, and the hotter the fire, the stronger they become. I am afraid of the barrel because I do not know how strong they can be.'

"Then Afshar said 'The stronger the better. Put the barrel on board.' And that was that."

Cyrus looked grim. If he was right about Melos, the slave could do exceptional things. But these things made no sense. That night he spoke to Thais, hoping that explanation would bring enlightenment.

"You are sure that your rowers are fitter, stronger and keener than Af-

shar's?"

"I know it."

"Then you have nothing to fear. You cannot lose. All that pampering of your rowers will pay off tomorrow. What was the use of all that care and comfort if they cannot win for you when you need it?"

Cyrus rubbed his grey temples and smiled ruefully. "What good is it to say that I wish to be a philosopher, Thais, if I cannot behave philosophically? I'm a nervous fool, not a philosopher."

"If Melos is a philosopher, as you say, then I hope you are not one. I hear he does not care for man or woman."

"Jealous still? Has he no woman at all?"

"Only for release, not for love. I talk to the slaves of Afshar's house, you know. The women say that Melos is kind and he is gentle, but he has no soul. After it is done, his mind is gone far away. And as I have told you often, the lying together afterwards is the best part of all."

"I'd give a lot, Thais, to know just where Melos' mind goes afterwards. I'm sure he has some trick to help Afshar tomorrow but I cannot think what it can be. Come on, Thais, help me turn off my troubled thoughts."

THE RACE would follow the boundary of the lake, eastwards, and then turn past the floating markers back towards the city. Normally, one circuit was more than enough for a galley race, but this time it would be three or even four. The race would finish when the judges rang the great copper gong the second time. On a still evening, the sound carried miles across the water, and in any case the sound would be repeated on other gongs along the shore. Shielded oil

lamps had been tied to the route buoys to mark the path—a night race was very unusual.

Well before noon, Cyrus was ready. His rowers were rested, well-fed and confident. Afshar's galley, with six less rowers, was still a bustle of activity. Cyrus could see Afshar standing in the prow holding the overseer's whip, and Melos in the stern working near the metal cylinder. In the few minutes before the noon starting gong, the crowd fell silent. Across the water, Cyrus again heard the strange high pitched hissing from the cylinder and a churning noise like a great pump inside the galley.

The shadow of the stone spear in the city square turned steadily with the Sun towards the noon marker. At the starting gong, the oars bit the water and Cyrus' galley moved smoothly forward. Morale was high. The oars moved in perfect unison to the rhythm of the mallets on the wooden blocks.

Cyrus, confident that his galley would function perfectly without him, kept his attention on the other ship. A wood fire was blazing in the cylinder. Cyrus saw the grey smoke pouring up and the great wheels in the rear began to turn, threshing the salt water of the lake. The oarsmen of the other galley had been ragged at the start but were now settling into a reasonable stride. The pace picked up gradually until Afshar was holding a position a couple of hundred yards behind.

The sun stood high in the sky and seared the calm surface of the lake. Through the heat of the long afternoon, Cyrus tended to his rowers, wiping sponges of cold water over their sweating bodies and offering them fruit juices and bread dipped in red wine. He joked with them to

keep up their spirits. They all knew that the worst part was still to come, in the evening. They were holding their strength and their will for that time.

Afshar's galley held its position astern, belching out grey smoke and churning the clear water of the lake with the thresh of the great paddle wheels. It had lost no more ground. Cyrus could see the crowds of excited spectators on the shore as they finished the first complete circuit of the lake. Most people had wagered to see Cyrus much further ahead by the late afternoon.

The overseer leaned over to Cyrus and spoke softly, out of earshot of the rowers.

"Master, we cannot hold this rate until midnight. Soon after dark we must ease the pace."

"I know. But Afshar's rowers cannot keep it up either, they do not have the condition of our men."

"Master, look at their strike rate. It is much lower than ours."

Cyrus squinted through the sun's reflected glare at the other galley. In front of the paddle wheels the oars rose and fell at an even, almost a leisurely pace. Melos' device was having a big effect.

As sunset approached, it became clear that Afshar was gaining ground, little by little. When the galleys were a hundred yards apart Cyrus could pick out the tall figure of Melos, his pale hair blackened by smoke and ashes, working at the cylinder in the rear of the ship.

Cyrus had set up his strategy well before the race and it was almost time to use it. Shortly before sunset he slowed a fraction, just enough to let the other galley pass him. As it went by he could hear the excited shouts as the word went below decks to Af-

shar's rowers. His own oarsmen knew his plan and calmly waited the signal.

Afshar was a hundred paces ahead when Cyrus gestured to his overseer. The tempo of mallets on blocks picked up sharply, the sweeps flashed faster in the evening sunlight and the bow wave rose. Within minutes they had come level again with Afshar and were moving rapidly on past him. Cyrus was counting on a quick lead of a few hundred paces to break the spirit of Afshar's unseasoned oarsmen and destroy their performance.

As they moved past, there were more shouts and frantic activity on the other galley. Afshar himself was running aft in a panic, gesturing excitedly as the gap widened. There was no sign of an answering sprint from his rowers. Melos and Afshar stood in the stern, arguing violently about something.

As the light failed, Cyrus saw the big barrel being dragged to the rear of the galley. The fire in the cylinder began to blaze more brightly and the smoke from it darkened and hung black and dense over the surface of the lake. The great wheels turned faster, then faster yet. The vessel began to pick up speed and again to overhaul Cyrus.

The galleys drew parallel, and Cyrus could see the timbers of the other ship vibrating, groaning and twisting as it put on even more speed. Afshar stood directing activities. Through the deepening darkness it was clear that Melos was still arguing strongly with his Master. Cyrus saw Afshar draw back his arm and bring the long overseer's lash forward hard. Then it was too far and too dark to see anything clearly except the white fire in the metal cylinder. By its light, Cyrus thought he saw a pale form splash into the lake

from the stern of Afshar's galley and strike off towards the shore and the lights of the city.

Cyrus motioned to his own overseer to slacken the pace. If Afshar could hold that tremendous speed, then there was no way to catch him. The gap widened. The blaze ahead shrank slowly to a fierce point of light in the distance. The loud hissing came clearly across the water and the greasy smoke filled his nostrils.

Suddenly, the point of light ahead spread upwards like a white starburst, then was as quickly extinguished completely. A few seconds later a great thunderclap of sound spread over the lake. Cyrus strained his eyes ahead but could see no sign of Afshar's galley. Screams of fear and agony reached him across the dark water. He ordered double tempo for the oarsmen and they sped on into the darkness.

Where Afshar's galley had been they found only random fragments of wooden beams and floating oars. Clinging to these were five rowers, horribly burned and gasping with the pain of the salt water on their wounds.

The race was over. Cyrus ordered the injured made comfortable—though little could be done—and turned back to the city.

Waiting at the quay he found Damon, Thais and Melos. The latter had a deep purple weal of the lash across his left cheek and a fierce red burn on his right shoulder. He was naked, soaking wet and shivering in the cool night air like a sick horse.

"Damon, lend him a cloak. And Thais, bring some wine. Now Melos, what happened out there?"

Melos was in shock. He tried to speak but at first could find only his barbaric mother tongue. After a cup

of wine he at last managed to say, "The barrel of oil. It was too much. I knew the heat would be too great."

"But you did use it."

"I tried to stop it and he struck me with the whip. I know the power of the steam and I jumped into the water."

"You disobeyed your Master and fled. You know the penalty for that?"

"Yes, Lord."

"Well, Afshar is dead now. He was killed when the galley exploded. I suggest that you tell no one else what you have told me. Say you escaped by a lucky accident."

"Yes, Master."

It took a moment before the import of Melos' reply sank in. Master. Not Lord, the term of respect used from a slave, but Master, the term of ownership. Cyrus wondered again at the mind in the shocked, battered and fatigued body, that could accept the news of Afshar's death, re-evaluate Melos' own status and instantly give the appropriate reply.

Afshar was dead, and now Melos belonged to Cyrus. The night had been too terrible for him to feel any joy at the idea. And the next morning, the robed priests called on him and pointed out, apologetically, that he himself must now stand trial for the forbidden actions of his slave, Melos.

"I KNOW and I understand the charges. To answer them, I would like to present three people to speak on my behalf. First, Darius of Susa, known to you all for his wisdom and scholarship. Second, the slave Melos; and third, myself."

The seven priests were seated at the long sandalwood table in the temple hall of judgement. In front of them, at the trial table, stood Cyrus,

and behind him Darius and Melos. Darius of Susa was white bearded and frail and his brown domed head grew only a few wisps of white hair. But the dark eyes were bright and alert above the beaky nose and he looked keenly around him, at the blue tunicked guards and beyond them to the large silent audience in the body of the great hall.

The senior priest looked questioningly at Cyrus. "Darius is always welcome here. But Melos? You know well that a slave cannot give testimony about himself or others. His words can have no weight under our laws."

"I know this. I am asking for an exception for two reasons. First, I only recently became the owner of Melos and there are facts that he knows and I do not about this matter.

"Second, perhaps more important, were it not for this trial I would have made Melos a free man and applied for his citizenship two weeks ago. When this trial is over, if the accusations are shown unfounded, I will at once offer him his freedom. Thus, his present status is unusual."

After a brief discussion, the senior priest nodded. "We look for truth and justice, and the circumstances are indeed unusual. Melos may speak, but it will not form part of our written record.

"Who will speak first? Remember, we will question as we choose."

Cyrus bowed gravely. "I am ready to begin."

"Then proceed."

The hall fell completely silent.

"Sirs, my slave Melos is accused of conjuring demons, of being possessed by demons, of capturing demons and of performing forbidden and inhuman rites. But all these accusations stemmed from either the gossip of ignor-

ant and superstitious slaves, or from the sayings of Afshar himself.

"Evidence from the slaves is not admissible, and Afshar has passed beyond our questioning.

"I knew that I was not competent to evaluate Melos' condition or his knowledge of the forbidden arts, so two weeks ago I sent him to the Academy of Darius at Susa, for thorough examination. Yesterday, Darius and Melos returned here. I would like to ask Darius to tell you what he found."

As Cyrus stepped back, a questioning hand was raised in the row of priests.

"Before we hear from Darius, a question for our records."

Trouble. Cyrus recognized the emaciated form and shaved head of the priest. A member of Afshar's family, conscious of the fact that criticism of Afshar—even posthumous—would bring dishonor to the whole family.

"Of course we all know of Darius and his reputation. And we also know that you, Cyrus, are an old friend of his, and have supported his Academy, like a true patron of scholarship, with money and gifts."

The curled lip made the insult very clear behind the flowery words.

"I would like to ask you what instructions you gave to Darius when Melos was sent to him. And I would like to know what you have said to each other since his arrival yesterday."

"I gave no instructions to Darius, except to ask him to examine Melos as he chose, and thoroughly. For the rest, Darius and Melos arrived late last night. We have had no chance for discussion since that arrival. His report will be as new to me as it is to you."

The thin priest nodded grudging

acceptance. Darius came slowly to his feet and stood facing the line of priests.

"Cyrus sent one other thing to me with Melos; the list of charges against him. As you all know, the procedures for raising, containing, and banishing demons are complex, and they rest upon a base of knowledge of arcane ritual and great learning. So it seemed at first glance that a barbarian slave could not be a vessel for such skills. However, I kept an open mind.

"We tested Melos at Susa. He could not read or write, in our language or in any other. He had never heard of the Book of the Dead, the Book of Moones, the Agranas, or any other standard texts of necromancy and sorcery.

"We went further. He knows nothing of the great arts, of music, drama, sculpture, or poetry. He understands nothing of the calendar, of astrology, or of medicine. Nothing of pageantry, nothing of the martial arts. He has never even heard of the great philosophers."

Darius paused.

"One gift he does have, an ability to do calculations. Not too surprising, in one who was a sailor and navigator before his capture.

"As for his demonic possession. Melos—" he turned to face the slave; "—how long a line must be used to join the tops of two masts fifteen paces apart, if one is ten paces tall and the other eighteen?"

The jaw went slack and the face emptied. A stir of superstitious awe ran through the audience, but Melos recovered very quickly and answered: "Seventeen paces of line, Lord—plus a little for tying."

Darius turned again to the line of seated priests. "You see, Sirs. No possession, or idiocy. Concentration

while thinking hard. I see this often in many of the scholars at Susa.

"In summary, Melos is not qualified for necromancy or devil-raising—or indeed for any of the civilized occupations. He could not, in my opinion, conjure, contain or disperse demons. He lacks knowledge, training, and equipment. He is, in short, a barbarian slave and no wizard."

The speech, delivered with calm authority, had great effect. Even Afshar's relative was subdued. After a few moments, the chief priest replied.

"We accept your evaluations, Darius. There remain against Melos, however, grave charges that must be explored. We will question him directly on these."

He nodded to the skinny priest to proceed.

"Melos, you worked in Afshar's artificer's shop, correct?"

"Yes, Lord."

"Do you deny that you uttered incantations there? Answer carefully, and know that we have witnesses."

"Not incantations, Lord. Melos sighed. "I am fluent now in this language, as you hear. But I still use my native tongue for three things: for counting, praying, and cursing. Because the work in the artificer's shop was hard, complicated and sometimes dangerous, I'm afraid I did a good deal of all three."

A ripple of amusement ran through the audience. The thin priest frowned at the disturbance and went on. "But incantations or not, you engaged there in heathenish and forbidden rites. I refer to the drinking of blood."

That had the effect he wanted. A wave of revulsion now passed though the watching crowd. Melos remained calm.

"Not drinking, Lord. Tasting blood, and that only once and for a definite

purpose." He hesitated. "How shall I explain? You know, Lord, that the swords from Damascus exceed all others in the quality of their metal?"

The priest shifted uneasily in his seat. He did not care for the reversal of roles of questioner and questioned.

"I know that, Melos; it is well known."

"Then perhaps you know, Lord, how that fine temper is achieved?"

"I have heard—only heard, mark you—that the sword is heated to red heat, and then—" He stopped, reluctant to go on.

"—And then, Lord," picked up Melos, "it is plunged with suitable rituals into the body of a young male slave. Correct?"

"So it is said." The priest gave reluctant agreement. "But the rituals are pagan and they can have little effect."

"I agree, Lord. It is the combination of the heat and some property of the blood that causes the temper.

"I tasted the blood for only one reason. To try and determine which parts of its composition might cause the tempering effect. This may seem like a trivial occupation to you, Lord—but to a slave an alternative method of tempering is very desirable."

Again there was an appreciative laugh from the crowd. The priest's thin face darkened with anger. Before he could go on, Darius stepped forward again.

"If I may speak again, Sirs. In Susa we tempered a sword using the mixture of salts and warm animal blood that Melos described to us. It is here."

He held up to the audience and the priests a shining two-edged sword.

"In tests by the warriors in Susa, this weapon cut as well and took and held as fine an edge as the best from

Damascus."

"And you employed heathenish and pagan rituals?" snapped the angry priest.

"Yes. For one purpose only. As Melos guessed it, those rituals use fixed words spoken in a certain way during the tempering to fix the length of time that is needed in certain stages. The timing of the process is vital to the temper. Other words would do just as well—if they took the same time to utter."

The priest had lost the support of both the crowd and his fellow priests, but he fired one last shot.

"Melos, you deny demonic possession. But what about that devil's engine that led to Afshar's death in the galley? Where did the knowledge come from, if not from the world of devils?"

Melos smiled serenely. "From Alexandria, Lord. Afshar and I saw an engine using steam force there, soon after he bought me." He paused. "Alexandria may indeed be full of devils, Lord, but they behaved very like merchants to my eyes."

The laughter was now out of control. Pale with rage, the thin priest returned defeated to his seat. After a few minutes of discussion in private among the group of priests, Cyrus and Melos were declared free, cleared of all charges.

Cyrus was a popular figure. The city settled in to an evening of celebrations.

"I HAD a few bad minutes at the beginning, Darius, and I don't mind admitting it. I didn't know how the questions would go, or what you would say."

Cyrus was holding his own private celebration. In his banquet room, Darius, Cyrus and Damon reclined at ease, while Thais served them with

wine chilled with snow from the northern mountains.

Darius laughed. "We were lucky. Nearly everybody was on your side anyway. They fortunately asked just the right questions for us, and I told them the exact truth—but not the whole truth—about Melos."

"I was in the audience in the hall," said Damon, "and your statement sounded complete to me. What was missing from it?"

"Oh, a number of things. I said that when Melos came to Susa he could not read or write. That was true. I did not tell them that he can now read and write with ease. He learned in days. I did not say that he learns everything at a rate that I have never seen before, or that he seems to forget nothing.

"I did not tell them that he makes the mathematicians at Susa seem like children. That he computes areas and volumes using methods that no one yet understands. That geometry—especially the conic sections, which he had never seen before he came to Susa—filled him with such delight that he was sleepless for two nights, looking at all we know and adding discoveries of his own.

"By the way, he says that our constraint of straight edge and compass for constructions is rigid and nonsensical. Not too modest, our Melos.

"Shall I go on? There's plenty more. To the priests, these things would just be proof of demonic possession."

"Then Melos is a philosopher?" asked Cyrus, leaning forward eagerly.

Darius shook his head. "There's the paradox. No. Philosophy as we know it, the philosophy of the Greeks, of Socrates and Plato, do not interest him. His passion is all for the natural world. Lightning, the movements of the planets, the nature of light, the

nature of heat, these are the things that absorb him completely.

"Melos is not a philosopher. He is something new to my world, and I am very glad to see him free from the trial—to see both of you free."

Cyrus leaned back again in his couch. "For what you did for us today, Darius, I can never thank you sufficiently. Money could not be enough, I can never repay you."

Darius sipped his wine contentedly, a mischievous look on his old wrinkled face.

"Repay me, Cyrus? You've repaid me already. Think, now, I've been here many times these last ten years. What have I left behind in Susa that I have always brought with me before? There's a riddle for you."

"Darius, you know you never bring more than your clothes. There's no riddle because there's no answer."

The old man chuckled with pleasure. "Wrong, Cyrus. There is an answer—my reader! He has accompanied me these last ten years, since my eyes began to fail for close work."

"Now, thanks to your barbarian slave, I have this."

He pulled a smooth oval of quartz from his robe.

"Why, it's Afshar's firemaker!" said Damon.

"More than that. Look through it, and letters seem to be five times as big. Melos explained how it works to us, but I think it's fair to say that none of us understood him." He fondled the lens lovingly. "I have eyes again. Now, could we let a slave like that be impaled or crucified for demon-raising?"

"Slave!" Cyrus struck his brow. "I swore I'd free Melos the day of the trial. Thais, find him and bring him here."

The tall slave came in as calm as ever. Neither the ordeal of the trial or

the free-flowing wine after it seemed to have had any effect on him.

"Melos, I am ready to make good my promise. You will have your freedom, and I will apply for your citizenship tomorrow."

Cyrus watched the slave expectantly but no reply came.

"Melos, didn't you hear me? Have you no words of thanks?"

Still the slave hesitated, looking for a way. At last he said, "Pardon me, Master, but my words will offend you. Even so, I must tell you the truth.

"If you could give me freedom as I think of it; I would accept it gladly. But Master, what you have yourself is not freedom. To me, freedom is leisure. Leisure to think, simple food, a bed, shelter for my head.

"Master, from morning until night you are busy with a thousand responsibilities. This household, city government, law-making, your duties to your friends and to your slaves. I have seen these eat up your days and your nights.

"I am a slave. But when the given duties of the day are done, I can do as I choose. Even in Afshar's household, the most harried slave had four times the leisure that you have. To think, to eat, to sleep, to make love—but always, time of his own.

"Master, I do not want freedom as you have freedom. Let me remain a slave and serve you as a slave."

Melos stopped and stood motionless, the pale eyes troubled. There was a stunned and unbelieving silence in the firelit room. Cyrus felt disappointment and rage rising within him. Before he could release his anger on Melos, Darius put forward his hand between them.

"Melos has had his say. Before you answer him, I demand my right as an old man to have my say also." He

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TAR

And has a taste
worth changing to.

Regular: 5 mgs. "tar", 0.4 mgs. nicotine,
av. per cigarette, FTC Report Dec. 1976.



smiled. "It is often my lot to tell people things they know already, but bear with me.

"First, Cyrus, remember that philosophy—and all creative activity—is a lonely, time-consuming toil. I assure you that great thoughts are conceived only in private, and only after long and exhausting preparation. It is very difficult to combine the great responsibilities of household and government with deep research. Melos, I have said, is not a philosopher. But he is something else that requires the same total concentration of effort if it is to be successful. The responsibilities of freedom and citizenship would hinder him on his lonely journey.

"We scholars are a luxury, carried through the world on the shoulders of responsible and understanding people like you.

"Second, Cyrus, you have said you want to be a philosopher. What is a philosopher? You are one already. Philosophy is a view of life and of the world. Following the work of Melos is just one small part of that, and it is a philosopher's duty to see all the different parts of life in their correct perspective and live accordingly.

"Third, let me remind you of the old story of Ranos and the god Mitra. When Mitra was wounded and lost on Earth, Ranos helped him, cared for him and led him at last to the flame at the Gate of Heaven. Mitra went on through and assumed his godhood, but Ranos was mortal and could not enter. He remained in our world, to work, to suffer and at last to die a mortal.

"Mitra is a household god, and has his feast days. But it is Ranos that we hold closest in our hearts. We tell our children about him at night, and set him as the pattern we would like to see in our sons."

Darius leaned forward, his eyes bright in the flickering firelight.

"Consider this well before you answer. Would you be Ranos or Mitra?"

Cyrus was silent for a long time while the others looked on expectantly. Finally he shook his head and sighed.

"Darius, there is only one Darius." He raised his goblet to the old man. "I drink to you."

He smiled, but his eyes were full of sorrow. "We read that Socrates the Greek was irresistible in debate and reduced all his opponents to helplessness. It is clear that you are his disciple and inheritor of his skills.

"I had hoped to be Mitra, you are right. But if the gods have chosen to make me play Ranos, that is more than I have any right to expect or hope for."

He turned to the slave. "Melos, you will remain a slave, and I your Master. Now, I must give you your duties.

"You will go with Darius to Susa and remain with him. Your time will be your own. You will have no other duties, except to preserve the honor of my household by your works. Each year, you will come back here and hold symposia in this house for one month.

"Now go, Melos, with my blessing—and Melos—please, no weapons of war, and no more infernal machines!"

A wistful look came over the face of the slave. Now he was thoughtful. In the pale eyes glowed the memory of the great cylinder, the hissing steam, the moving metal bars, the churning wheels. Then the look faded and he too sighed. He walked forward and knelt at Cyrus' feet.

"Yes, Master."

—CHARLES SHEFFIELD

Jack Dann, fresh from his novella, "The Islands of Time" (last issue), makes a brief return with—

VISITORS

JACK DANN

Illustrated by Tony Gleeson

IT HAS BEEN exactly four hours and twenty-five minutes since Sandra left. I've been watching Saturday sports shows on television and watching the time. I dream that time is a ferris wheel and minutes are going around and around until the wheel stops and the hours get off to make room for more minutes.

At least Sandra was considerate enough to leave me on a Saturday: I would have Sunday to recuperate, and by Monday I would be fit for work.

"Darling," she had said as I paced back and forth in the living room, "this is something I have to do. I love you, but I've got to get this whole thing out of my system."

I nodded and contemplated smashing a table, but I paced and remained civilized while the world around me slowed down. I was the only moving object, a wooden robot stiffly pacing back and forth, trying to give motion to the world. Outside the window, it seemed that the birds were caught in midflight, their wings extended, tiny beaks open as if to screech and caw. But they would need time to make their noises. The breeze had died in the window, and it became very warm. Everything was silent, caught between Sandra's words.

"Perhaps, if you still want me, we can try again, when my mind is clear, when I'm sure of my love."

Those were the cutting words, but, of course, I was an observer and removed from whatever pain we were inflicting upon each other. Time had slowed down and my emotions had dried up. As she stood before me, tears welling in her eyes, I wondered what I would prepare to eat later.

"I'm sorry, Roger," she said. She stood stiffly, as she always did when she was trying to be decisive. She looked as if she was preparing to push through the wall. "I do love you."

"And I love you," I said, just wanting everything to be over, wanting the house for myself so I could throw my obligatory tantrum, talk to the walls, rail at the parakeet, cry in my beer, watch sports (which I hate) on television, and dream.

"Good-bye, Roger."

"Don't worry, Sandra. It will work out."

"I love you."

"I love you."

I'VE CHANGED the channel to an old Clark Gable movie. I must have slept for a half-hour. I'm still fuzzy. My shirt sticks to my back as if I had been perspiring molasses. I say

"Pretty Bird" to Sandra's parakeet in its cage in the corner of the room. It flaps its wings (having firm control over time) and ignores me.

There is a knock on the door.

As I get up to answer it, I remember a dream: I'm just fourteen and roller skating on a Saturday in the Reverie Rink in my home town. I'm skating with a dark haired girl who bears a striking resemblance to someone on the Mickey Mouse show. We skate together, doing fairly complex turns, weaving in and out, skating backwards. The rink is filled with the subtle wooshings and sushing of ball bearings and wooden wheels. I'm in love with the girl on television, but not the one I'm skating with. I feel trapped, like the silent pigeons caught in the air over the Court House, stopped by time just as I am. The prettiest girl in the rink likes me, even with my pimples, and I want to be left alone. The skating rink is like the ferris wheel, its minutes crowding together, becoming hours, days, years. I remember the girl's name: Brenda Gregory. Her eyes are dark and she has a cleft in her chin like Kirk Douglas.

I open the door, and there is a young lady with black curly hair, dark eyes, and a cleft in her chin.

"Hello," she says. "Can I come in?"

"Who are you?" I ask, although I know who she is.

"Why I'm Brenda Gregory. Don't you remember me? We were such good friends at school. Remember the skating rink in Easton? Well, anyway, I was just passing through, and I found out that you lived here, so I decided it would be nice to just drop in. . ."

It is only natural for me to put my arms around her and unbutton her starchy white suit from the back. She



pushes against me as if we are going to make love again after only a few distant days. Once, when we were fifteen and grinding against each other in the woods, I had asked her if I could 'touch' her breasts, and she had said 'no.'

"No," she says, as I cup her small breasts in my hands (as I know I'm expected to do).

We make love before the television. Her shrieks are louder than the Indians that are chasing Clark Gable.

"You are wonderful," she cries as our stomachs make sucking noises and I worry about dirtying the carpet.

As I climax, the parakeet says, "Pretty bird."

Later, I discover that Brenda is missing a toe.

IT HAS BEEN eight hours since Sandra has left. I've made supper (tuna fish and mayonnaise, the staple of every new bachelor) and cleaned the living room, fed the parakeet, draped the satin cover around his gilded cage, and watched more television.

But I'm tired of television. I try to read, but can't seem to concentrate on the words. Finally, the telephone rings.

I walk across the living room to the telephone stand beside the picture window. It is dark and foggy outside. The green street lamp in the street's center-mall looks out of focus and I imagine that it's a stick of phosphorescent cotton candy.

"Hello," I say.

"Hello, Roger. It's Sandra."

"I know," I say as I notice that all the cars have stopped dead in the street, their drivers frozen in their seats. I listen for comforting motor noises, but there is only Sandra's sibilant voice.

"I just called to see if you were all

right," Sandra says.

"Are you alone?" I ask. There is a silence on the line, then a muffling noise as she is probably cupping the receiver with her palm. After a pause she says, "No, Roger, I'm not alone. But I love you." There is shouting in the background.

I hang up the phone and against my will I say the magic words to myself: And I love *you*. Then I run to the bird cage and rip off the cover in anger and jealousy and hate: I imagine all the permutations of Sandra's lovemaking with this stranger. I'll throw the bird against the window, or perhaps squeeze out its life over the rug.

But the bird flaps about wildly, and I cannot do it. I cover the cage again and return to my chair: I imagine that the chair is the only safe place in the world.

There is a knock at the door which awakens me from a deep sleep. I listen to the knocking as I lie in bed, the silk sheets sticking to me like live things. Then the buzzer sounds.

I finally get up and answer the door. A tall woman with long red hair and a low cut purple evening gown is standing in the doorway. She is wearing a white mink stole and her right hand is buried in a white mink muff.

"Hello," she says. "Can I come in?"

"Who are you?" I ask, although I know who she is.

"Don't you remember me? I'm Brenda Gregory's best friend. We used to all skate together in the Reverie Rink. We were all in the same class. Brenda said she might stop over to visit you. I thought I might tag along, just for old times sake."

I remember that her name is Constance. "Brenda isn't here," I say.

"Well," says Constance, "are you going to invite me in? It's raining." It

begins to rain as she smiles, and I notice that the cars are stopped dead again in the street. The raindrops look like tiny shards of glass hanging in the rank night air.

Constance does not waste any time with social amenities. She lifts up her dress and I do it to her on the couch in front of the television. She insists that she can't have a vaginal orgasm.

"You are wonderful," says Constance when we are done.

"Why—you're still holding your mink muff." I say. I pull it away from her and discover that she has no right hand. Her lovely arm simply ends in a perfectly rounded stub.

"You're a pretty bird," says the parakeet from inside its covered cage. "Sandra loves the birdie."

ANOTHER VISITOR is pounding on the door. She will claim to be an old girlfriend, or a friend of an old girlfriend, or the wife of an old friend. But I am using myself up on these wraiths. I will have nothing left for my Sandra, should she return.

"Yes," I say as I open the door. It's a warm sunny day, not a cloud in the cerulean sky. A visitor with straight brown hair smiles and asks to come in.

So it goes on as it did before: I say hello and make love, say hello and make love. I drag each visitor into the bedroom where she can scream and yelp and tell me I'm wonderful.

"Yes," I say as I open the door. It happens a million times, and will happen a million more. I'm an observer once again. I remember the ferris wheel changing seconds into hours like one-armed bandits turning change into empty dreams. But time has stopped. The seconds are hanging in mid-air.

I HAVE DISCOVERED something interesting about the visitors. They all have something wrong with them, some deformity. But no matter how skillful they are in hiding and disguising their imperfections, I always find them out.

I WAIT for Sandra and hope the phone will ring and she will tell me she loves me. The visitors pound on the door. Some even manage to get inside the house on their own. I've checked to make sure that all the windows are latched and the doors securely locked. But can a screen keep out the flies?

My chair in front of the television is the only safe spot in the house. The moment I leave my chair to clean or make a snack, I find myself facing an old girlfriend. Lately I've been meeting strangers, women I dimly remember from old yearbooks and discarded girlie magazines.

Where are you, Sandra? I ask myself as I watch the sports on television and steel myself to the constant pounding on the door. Could it still be Saturday? I ask myself. Perhaps I'm caught in a never-ending succession of Saturdays.

I try to leave the house, but the girls won't let me. They all think I'm wonderful.

THE SATURDAYS PASS, one bleeding into the other like quartered animals on a butcher's block. I watch the same show, eat the same food, but soon I will have to get out. I must work, I must shop. My legs are beginning to feel numb from remaining in the same position. I'm afraid to leave my chair, although the phone rings several times a day. That is such an agony, for I know it must be Sandra calling. But I never reach her:

I'm always waylaid by an old girlfriend.

The parakeet has learned new words. At this rate, I think he will soon be able to construct his own sentences. He told me he loved me this morning.

It is very late. I sit before the television set and wait for Sandra. I hope against hope that she'll return. It's not so bad now, for the parakeet has learned enough words to hold a conversation.

"What should I do?" I ask him.

"About what?" he says.

"About all these visitors. I'm a prisoner in my own house."

"I think you've got it pretty good," he says. "You have all your dreams. That's what you always wanted."

"How do you know about my dreams?" I ask the parakeet.

"We have ways," he replies. "Birds are very smart."

"If you're so smart," I say, "then tell me what will be with Sandra."

"She is out getting laid," says the parakeet. "What more do you need to know? And while we're talking, why don't you call me by my proper name?"

"What's your proper name?" I ask.

"Henry will do."

"What about Sandra?" I insist.

"Soon, she'll come home."

"When?"

"When she's ready to come home, I'll tell you," says the parakeet. "In the meantime be a nice person and get me something to eat."

"How can I leave my chair?" I ask. "The visitors will not leave me alone."

"If you can get food for yourself, you can get something for me. Don't you think birds have to eat?"

But I remain where I am. When Sandra returns, he'll get fed.

"OKAY, Mr. Bigshot Provider, I predict that your wife will return soon." The bird waves his wings for effect. Lately he has become quite eloquent. Twice he has talked me out of killing him. He has become too smart. He realizes that my bloodlust for him could not be as great as my need to remain safely in my chair. There, I am at least protected from the visitors, if not from the constant babble of the bird. He insists that I call him Henry.

"So what makes you think I won't kill you now," I say to Henry. "Now that I know Sandra is coming back, I don't need you."

"You would not kill a sentient being," he says. "And what would you tell Sandra? She loves me. You don't want to begin your relationship on the wrong foot again, do you? So be a good person and get me something to eat."

I find him some food, lest he bumble in my ear forever, but once again I'm waylaid by a visitor. She is a total stranger.

And she, too, thinks I'm wonderful. So Henry loses a meal.

"I'VE COME HOME, darling," says my Sandra as she walks into the living room, her keys in her hand. Although I'm afraid to leave my chair, I rise and walk to the center of the room to meet her.

"Do you still want me?" she asks. She looks at the carpet.

"Yes," I say (I have practiced this conversation many times). "Let's forget the past and try again. We both made mistakes," I say to ease her guilt. I glance at Henry's cage. He is sitting on his wooden swing. He winks at me. I swear I will not kill him. In fact every day I'll feed him—if everything works out.

Sandra and I cry and hold hands and say everything I knew we would say.

We go to the bedroom, pull the blinds, close the curtains, undress, get into bed, cuddle under the new sheets. I tell her she is beautiful (even though I can't see her). She tells me I'm wonderful.

She is wonderful. We do it again and again and I forget about the visitors.

When we're finished making love she says, "I love you."

And I say, "I love *you*." But wonderful as everything is, something is wrong. Not now, I say to myself. Leave things alone. But I cannot: I have had too much practice sleuthing.

I feel something sharp against my

leg like a bird's claw. I resist an urge to feel Sandra's lower extremities with my hand. I've a suspicion that I might find feathers.

Upon the pretext of getting a glass of water, I leave the bedroom. I look for Henry, but he is not in his cage. I should have killed him, I tell myself, now that it is too late. The rest of the house is empty, except for Sandra. The cars are busily zooming by. Leaves are falling. Birds are singing. The neighbors are cutting their lawns. It is a typical Saturday.

Sandra calls to me from the bedroom: "I love *you*," she says.

But I won't listen. I'm watching the Saturday sports shows on television and watching the time.

—JACK DANN

Coming October 20th The Big (Jan.) AMAZING All-Star Issue

The Sleeping Beast, a novelet by A. BERTRAM CHANDLER—Fresh from "The Long Fall," (July, 1977) Captain Grimes and the Baroness—and Big Sister—are back in their newest thriller.

A Forbidden World, a Short novel by Dave Bischoff and Ted White—They'd been marooned on an unknown world, their only hope to find the spaceport that their lifeship's instruments indicated existed to the east.

A Handheld Primer, by Christopher Anvil

The Space Roc, by Robert F. Young

The Looking Glass Of The Law, by Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.

The King Is Dead: Long Live The Queen!, by Stephen Tall

The AMAZING INTERVIEW: Edmond Hamilton and Leigh Brackett, conducted by Darrell Schweitzer

Plus, our usual features

HARK! WAS THAT THE SQUEAL OF AN ANGRY THROAT?

AVRAM DAVIDSON

Avram Davidson's last appearance in these pages was "Bloody Man" (August, 1976). He returns with something totally different: a brief romp through the Greenwich Village of the 1950's, marked by the appearance there of someone who definitely had no business there. . .

Illustrated by Joe Staton

AT A TIME subsequently I was still living back east, we were so many of us then Living Back East, and I was still living on the seventh floor of a seven-floor walk-up in Greenwich Village. Edward lived down the hall: Fox-fire Edward. Fiduciary Debenture III lived downstairs. Gabriel Courland lived around the corner in the hay-loft of the Old De Witt Clinton Livery Stable, a location ideally suited and situate—he said—to pour boiling oil down upon unwelcome visitors: bill collectors, indignant fathers of daughters, people with Great Ideas For Stories ("All you got to do is write it down and we'll split the money, I'd do it myself if I had the time."), editors with deadlines, men come to turn off the electricity (the gas) (the water) (the whale-oil)—

"Doesn't it *smell* a little in here, Gabe?" asked Edward.

"It smells a *lot*—but look! Look!" here he'd point to the neat trap-door through which hay had once been hauled (and maybe smuggled bombazine and who knows what, poled up

Minetta Stream, midnights so long long ago). "You can pour boiling oil down on people!"

Edward gives me to understand that Gabe never actually *did* pour boiling oil or even *unboiling* oil, down on people; although occasionally, Edward said, G. would allow trickles of water to defoliate the importunate, as who? put it. Someone else.

Fiduciary Debenture III lived downstairs, and across the narrow street dwelt Wendell Garrett, in the parlor of a once-huge apartment deftly cut up and furnished by his Great-aunt Ella, relict of his Great-uncle Pat Garrett, yes! The very same Sheriff Pat Garrett Who; Aunt Ella was in the Canary Islands at the time, teaching (I understand) the two-step to the wives of the Spanish officials, to whom, in that not-exactly-then-in-the-beating-heart-of-things archipelago, it—the two-step—represented Modern Culture, if not Flaming Youth in Revolt, and one of the few (very few) occupations or occasions for which their husbands would let them

out of the patio.

"The Moors may have been driven out of Spain," Aunt Ella had said, or, rather, written; "but they haven't been driven out of the Spaniards. For God's sake, Wendell, see to it that Mary Teresa empties the pan under the ice-box."

Mary Teresa was the, so to speak, concierge, and refused to allow an electric, gas, or even kerosene fridge to be installed in her own kitchen: slightly larger than a commemorative stamp. This devotion to tradition was much appreciated by the sole remaining Iceman in The Village, whose clientèle by that time consisted of several fish markets and a dozen or so other ladies of the same age and model as Mary Teresa; the Iceman was related by ties of spiritual consanguinity to all the prominent mafiosi—a godfather to godfathers, so to speak—and this in turn enabled her to do as she liked and had been accustomed to do, in a manner which would be tolerated in no one else, no where else.

Wendell lived rent-free in the former parlor of the house in return for his acting as an Influence upon Mary Teresa and curbing in some few important particulars her turn of the century vigor.

When asked where he lived, he would say, bland as butter, "In a parlor house."

Round the corner in a decayed Federalist Row located behind an equally decayed non-Federalist row (Whig, perhaps, or, as Wendell once suggested, brushing himself, Free Soil), lived the retired Australian sanitary scientist and engineer called Humpty Dumpty. He had indeed once had a lot of cards printed:

Sir Humphrey Dunston
Remittance Man



Privies Done Cheap Retail and to the Trade

But, he had observed, these last phrases had been subject to most gross interpretations by members of one of the Village's non-ethnic minorities; so the only card still in evidence was tacked to his greasy front door. Humpty patronized the Iceman, too, Sangiacomo Bartoldi, but not for ice: Jockum retained the antique art of needling beer, an alchemy otherwise fallen into desuetude since the repeal of the 18th (or Noble Experiment) Amendment, and which—Humpty Dumpty said—alone could raise American lager to the kick of its Australian counterpart ("Bandicoot's Ballocks," or something like that).

If you stood on what had once been the Widow's Walk atop the only one of the Federalists which still had one, you could toss a rubber ball through the back window of the Death House and into the Muniments Room of Calvin M. Knox. This great granite sarcophagus of a building had once, it was said, carried across the front of it the advice that THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH: but only the last of those words remained. Mary Teresa, that repository of local arcane information, sometimes claimed that "The Patriot Boys" had torn off the others to hurl them at the Invalid Corps of the Union Army during what she termed "the Rebellion"—not, indeed, the entire Civil War, but that part of it fought thereabouts and called by others The Draft Riots. Not, of course, by Mary Teresa.

Nor, in fact, did she ever use the name Invalid Corps of the Union Army.

She called them "the Prodissint Bastids."

"I understand that this used to be a

House for Fallen Women," Fiduciary Debenture III had once said to Calvin Knox.

"Yes," said C. Knox, gloomily, "and if you're not careful, you're going to fall through the very same place in the floor, too. It quivers when my cat walks across it." It was in consequence of this statutory infirmity of part of the front floor that the back chamber was called the Muniments Room and was heaped high with pulp magazines in neat piles, each bearing some such style and label as (it might be) *Influences of Ned Buntline on Doc Savage*, or *Foreshadowings of Doc Savage in Ned Buntline*, or *Seabury Quinn Type Stories Not Written By Seabury Quinn*, and *J. Sheridan Le Fanu Plot Structures Exemplified in Spicy Detective Stories*.

And, as Mary Teresa so often put it, ecKt, ecKt, ecKt.

"I have reduced," C. Knox said, entirely without boastfulness, "the Basic Short Story to its essential salts."

The last, the very very last of the Hokey Pokey Women practised in the basement. Edward often patronized her.

Wendell at that time was devoting less time to writing fiction than to his great project of reconciling the Indo-European Exarchate with the Dravidian Rite of the Sanscrit Church (Lapsed Branch) in Exile. Bengali archimandrites in cruciform dhoties and deaconesses in the Proscribed Saffron Sari fluttered round about his doors like exotic butterflies—*could* chrisma-tion be administered in ghee?—*was* the bed of nails a legitimate form of penance?—their collective presence a great perturbation to Mary Teresa, who referred to the entire *kehilla* as Them Gypsies. The only thing which indeed prevented her taking her

broom to the lot of them was that a genuine Monsignor of the True Church as recognized by the Police Department had chanced by: whereat the whole ecclesia had knelt as one and collectively kissed his brogans.

"Ah well, nobody is all bad," was her philosophic comment, as she re-sheathed her besom and, clearing her nasal passages, skillfully swamped a fly in the gutter.

It was to this picturesque scene, as yet unstirred by Beat, Hippy, Freak, Funk, RadLib or LibRad influences (and, indeed, only still faintly tintured by the froth of the waves which once had beaten ceaselessly upon the Seacoasts of Bohemia) that there came one day clad only in his harness and his sword that strange brave man known, very simply, as John Carter of Mars.

SOME FEW of the readership may have figured out, all by themselves, that Fiduciary Debenture III (who lived downstairs) was not *really* named Fiduciary Debenture III. His *real* name was in fact A. Cicero Guggenhimer, Jr. He was not related to the *the* Guggenhimers. In fact I do not know, even, if there are, or were, any *the* Guggenhimers. The people who peddled lace, smolt copper, leisurely migrated between the State of Colorado, the US Senate, and the Venetian Litoral, now and then pausing to found an art museum or transport a monastery to a choicer location, are *Guggenheims*. With *ei*. Without *er*. However, A. Cicero's grandmother was the last surviving granddaughter of old John Jacob You-Know-Who, and she had left A.C. her half of Manhattan Island, plus the bed of the East River, which Yon Yockoob had bought cheap in between grifting furs from the Redskins and whisking

from the Knickerbockers (who had guffawed in Hudson Dutch when thinking how *they* were taking *him* in) those hay meadows and swamp-lots on which now stands *the* most valuable real estately in the world.

Bar none.

Hence the A.

As for the Cicero, he always claimed his grandmother got it out of a dream-book.

It may not be generally known that every, but I spit you not, *every* commercial vessel which plies or "stands" up and down the East River pays through the hawse-hole for the privilege: because if not, trolls will come up and *eat* them. Naturally, when you got this kind of money, no matter how tied up in trusts and annuities and danegeld it may be, estates mean nothing, penthouses mean nothing, fancy cars and yachts mean nothing; so naturally you come to live in Greenwich Village, where everything is so, well, Interesting.

People would snort when I told them that Edward and I lived on the seventh story of a seven story walk-up: but we did. On the ground floor was the Dante Alighieri Association, the door of which in those days opened only wide enough to admit one small man with well-shined shoes at a time: doubtless to discuss Canto II, or whichever. As to its subsequent career as a coffee-house, of this I know nothing, I say nothing, I've heard nothing, wild horses would drag nothing out of me, so don't even ask.

"Seven stories and no *elevator*?" people would exclaim, rolling eyes and clutching chests. "That's *got* to be illegal!"

"It does *got*," I would agree. "But it didn't used to *got*." Furthermore it was made of cast-iron and not wood,

and was not mouldering at all: it was indeed a tenement house, probably one of the last of the Old Law or the first of the New Law tenements, but it was a tenement h. in good condition, I should only be in half such good condition at the same age. I was younger in them days and had more than my memories, and thought nothing of charging up or down the full seven story mountain, heigh ho. Maurice with his Biblical beard used to pass by with his arms full of publications from the four or five quarters of the earth, the sales of which, such as they were, sustained him in scraps of food and the rents on the dozens if not scores of public coin lockers in which he stored the paper memorabilia of decades:

Eheu, Maurice, Maurice! Where are you now?

You were ahead of your time, as well as the wrong age and appearance, these were your only faults: had you lived today, had you been younger, were your beard not white nor your long locks, had you the proper academical affiliations, an academician of the academicians (they should plotz), or a friend or a protégé of a bevy of academicians and crit-ticks: see how fast the Guggenfutzes (they should plotz) would bestow upon you Foundlingship after Foundlingship, weevils should only eat their navels: may you, o contrare, O Rare Maurice, flourish in eternal life.

Amidst the Crash of Matter.

And the Wrack of Worlds.

G. (for Gabriel) Courland . . . the Moriarity Expert? That same. Whom else? G. Courland was then much exercised (if that is not too vigorous a word) in the matter of his trousers: yea cuffs? nea cuffs? He wanted no cuffs, his tailors wanted cuffs. "But they *trip* when you run fast," he

would explain. This cut neither ice nor worsted with Morris, Max, and Rocco. "So don't *run* fast," they said.

All very well for *them*: staid old cockers with their wild, wild youths behind them. Gabriel G. was at that time running (there! that *verb* again!) a sort of Consolation Service. For listless wives. And the energy displayed by (now and then, though only now and then) some of them husbands on learning All, would, if devoted on behalf of their wives, have left them (the wives) quite listful. And McCourland *ohn* a Consolation Service.

In Bleeker Street the Open Air Market how it flourished! Greens galore. Greens (as Butch Gyrene he put it) up the ass. Flowers in bloom, too. Nearby, the old-established markets; all the names ending in vowels. Wendell Garrett, scarlet vest well-filled, cap of maintenance on his audacious head, would stroll in and out, tweaking the poultry. "Have you any," this he would ask of the Sons of Sicily and the Abruzzi, you or me they would kill: "Have you any *guinea* fowl?"

Dandelion greens, fresh-made latticini, lovely reeky old pastafazool, no, had some other name, *cheese*, hm, mm, ah! Provalon! **Smekk**Mussels in icy pools with water always a drip-drip-drip-a-drip, pizza—you let the word pass you by without your lips trembling, your nostrils pirouetting and corvetting, your salivary glands drooling and your eyes rolling? You must be dead, *dead*. . .

Or else, for your sins and your bad karma, you have known nothing but *Protestant* pizza, may God help you. *Not* baked in a stone oven according to the Rules of the Council of Trent. *Not* with the filling so firmly bonded to the crust—and the crust brown and crisp and bubbly round the rim, Marón!, that wild horses could not part

filling from crust: *No!* What do you know of pizza, you with your heritage of Drive-ins, and Macdonalds, and the Methodist Church, pizza, you think *that* is pizza, that franchised flop, comes frozen, is thawed, is redone in an ordinary metal quick-a-buck oven, with the cheese from Baptist cows, the tomatoes by Mary Worth, the filling rolling back from off the crust limper than a deacon's dick: *this* you call *pizza*?

Marón.

As for the fruit bread for the Feast of St. Joseph—

"Whats a matta you no shame?" screamed Philomena Rappini, of the Fresh Home-Made Sausage Today Market. "Put A some clothes on! You some kine comuniss? Marón, I no look!" But between her fingers, plump and be-ringed, abaah, oh ho: she *did* look! And why not? So there he was, dark and well-thewed and imperially slim.

(Well-hung, too.)

"Your pardon, Matron, and a daughter to a Jeddak of Jeddaks I perceive you must be by your grace and slender high-arched feet: may I place my sword in pawn? A message to Ed Burroughs? Magnetic telegraph message to muh nevwew Ed Burroughs? Jest tell him it's Uncle John. John Cyarter.

"Of Mars."

As to how he had gotten here, *here*, I mean *there*, in The Village, across the countless leagues and aeons and ions of interstellar freezing space, who knows? Who knows, in fact, what song the sirens sang? Who gives a shit?

When one tired of the coffee-house scene in The Village, there was always The Museum. And by "The Museum" neither I nor any denizen of the Old Village Scene as it then ob-

tained meant one of the sundry establishments displaying genuine old art or artifacts or modern exempla of the Dribble, Splotch, Drool, or Ejaculate, School(s): no. We meant *The* Museum, there on Great Jones Street, *Barnum's* Museum. A mere shadow of itself, you say? May be. May have *been*. Old William Phineas Jr. himself was then alive, great-nephew to the Yankee Showman himself. Billy Finn. The most recently-painted sign was the one reading: *Veterans of the World War, one-Half Price*—and to this had been added by pen a new *s* after *War*, plus the words, in between lines, *And of the Korean Conflict*. These letters had a pronounced wobble, so indicative of the State of the Nation as well as of old Bill Barnum's hand not being quite so firm as it once was. Inside? Jumbo's hay-rack. A corset belonging to one of the Dolly Sisters. Anna Held's bath-tub plus one of her milk bills for same. Genuine rhinestone replica of the famed Bicycle Set which Diamond Jim had given Lillian Russell. William Jennings Bryans's hat. Calvin Coolidge's hat. Old Cool Cal. The oldest wombat in the world, right this way, folks.

And so on.

Across the street the incredible wooden Scotchman, no mere Indian being good enough, was the emblematic figure in front of the establishment of MENDEL MOSSMAN, SNUFF AND SEGARS, *also Plug, Cut-Plug, Apple Twist and Pigtail Twist*. Also (though not openly designated as such, of course), behind the third mahogany door with opaque crystal glass window from the left, an entrance to a station of the Secret Subway System.

Officially, no, it was not officially *called* the Secret Subway System,

officially it was called Wall Street, Pine Street, Bowling Green and Boulevard Line. The Boulevard, ask any old-timer in them days, was *upper* Broadway. Ask any one or more old-timer as to at what point "upper" Broadway begins; watch them flail at each other with their walking-sticks and ear-trumpets.

There is a Secret Station in the State Bank Notes Registry Room of the old Counting House (Where no state bank notes have been registered since about 1883, owing to a confiscatory Federal Tax on the process).

There is a Secret Station in the marble men's room of the *original* Yale Club.

There is one beneath Trinity Church and one behind the North River Office of the State Canal Authority and one next to the Proving Room (Muskets) of the Mercantile Zouaves and Armory.

There are a few others. Find out for yourself . . . if you can.

The fare is and has been and always will be, one silver dollar each way. Or. For a six-day ticket good for round trips, one half-eagle (a five dollar gold piece, to the ignorant).

The ticket agents are the color of those fungi which grow in the basements of old wood-and-stone houses on Benefit Street in Providence, Rhode Island and Providence Plantations. It is intimated that these agents once held offices of responsibility above grounds, but Blotted Their Copy Books.

One of them is named Crater.

Crater, if you just think about it a moment, is very much like Carter.

La Belle Belinda lived upstairs over Mossman's, which she insisted had the loveliest smell in the world.

And there are those who say that this distinction belonged to The Fair

Belinda herself.

The Sodality of the Decent Dress (a branch of the Legion of Utmost Purity) had just let out into the street after its monthly meeting at Our Lady of Leghorn, and was threatening to cut up rough with John Carter: just then Gabriel C., Wendell G., Edward and myself chanced by; we caught his arcane references at once—although, of course, we did not believe a word of them, still, it was a madness which we not only recognized but respected—and, under pretense of assisting the man to send his message, we spirited him away; after having first clothed his virility under Wendell's naval cloak.

We told the man that it had belonged to the Commanding Officer of the Confederate Ram *Pamunkey*. A faint mist of tears rose in his sparkling eyes, and his protests died away on his lips. His finely-chiseled lips.

"They're after me, boys, you know," he said, simply. "But they mustn't find me. Not twell I've obtained a replacement for the wore-out part of the oxygen machine. All Mars depends on that, you know."

Exchanging significant glances, we assured him that we did indeed know.

We further assured him that we would with despatch arrange for sleeping silks and furs; meanwhile he consented to doss down for a much-needed nap on Gabriel's Murphy bed (for once, not occupied by a listing wife). Edward agreed to stand by. Just In Case.

There we left him, his strong chest rhythmically rising and falling, and stepped down to the courtyard, where we exchanged a few more significant glances, also shaking our lips and pursing our heads. We were thus occupied when Mary Teresa passed by, holding Kevin Mathew Aloysius, her

great-grand-nephew, in a grip which would have baffled Houdini.

"Stop tellin them lies," she was adjuring him, "or yez'll born in Hell witt the Prodisssint Bastidds."

"No I won't either, because I'm still below the age of reason, nyaa, and anyway, I did *too* seen it, Aunty Mary T'resa, it was as tall as the second-floor window and it looked in at me but I made the sign of the cross, I blessed myself, so it went away," said Kevin Mathew Aloysius, rubbing some more snot on his sleeve.

Wendell, august and benevolent, asked, "What was it that you saw, my man?"

Kevin Mathew Aloysius looked at him, his eyes the same color as the

stuff bubbling from his nostrils. "A mawnster," he said. "A real mawnster, cross my heart and hope to die. It was green, Mister Garrett. And it had four arms. And tux growing out of its mouth."

Did some faint echo, some dim adumbration or vibration of this reach the sleeping man? Edward said some had. Edward said that the sleeping man stirred, half-roused himself, flung out an arm, and, before falling back into deep slumber, cried out:

"Hark! Was that the squeal of an angry thoat? Or the sound of a hunting banth in the hills? *Slave! My harness—and my sword!*"

—AVRAM DAVIDSON

ON SALE NOW IN YOUR LEADING S-F MAGAZINE, AMAZING SCIENCE FICTION (Oct.)

A WORLD OF ONE'S OWN, a complete NEW Short Novel by *DAVE BISHOFF & TED WHITE*—A Sequel to *BREAKING POINT* published in 1970—Of four offworlders, marooned on an alien planet.

Never So Lost . . . A COMPLETE NOVELLA, by *F.M. BUSBY*

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Shadow of a Snowstorm, by *JOHN SHIRLEY*

Time to Kill, by *ELINOR BUSBY*

Plus our features

Jack C. Haldeman II, whose stories appear more often in the pages of our companion magazine, AMAZING SCIENCE FICTION, returns to tell the story of—

THE END-OF-THE- WORLD-RAG

JACK C. HALDEMAN II

Illustrated by Richard Olsen

A GAME for children, the monster lives in paneled walls, bars, baseball stadiums and public houses of all descriptions across the country. He is imaginary tentacles, taking things away from people. He is imaginary teeth, devouring things that should be allowed to live. We who are still alive know his sting, have felt his bite. He dwells in the chambers of our hearts like a black disease. This is his story, our story; a true story, a fable for children of all ages. It is a story of how the world ended and why nobody cared.

The band was playing a slow song in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. Nobody in the room knew what it meant, the television announcer had not been specific. I was reading a newspaper account of a large black dog. I missed the girl. On a normal evening, she would be fixing us a cup of coffee. But she was gone, had been gone for months, so I suppose it was normal that she was not fixing a cup of coffee at that time. Still, it didn't feel normal, I wanted a cup of coffee, I wanted her near to me. I believe the word 'normal' had lost its meaning by that time. But that

didn't bring her back or fix my coffee. The dog was huge.

I believe it was 6:30. I don't remember the day or even the month. I am unsure of the year. I could tell the time because the second edition of the news had just started. The three network news programs came on in a row and we always started with Howard K. Smith and ended with Walter Cronkite. It was a pattern. It never varied. Unless the Phillies were playing, or maybe the Orioles, it was the only time we had the set on. Reception was bad and everything else was just too much trouble to tune in.

At this late date, what difference could it possibly make to pin down the day, the time? Things happen, it is over now, in our past. One time is just like another once it's passed. Everything is history, especially what's happening now. I drink my water. I eat my tasteless tubers.

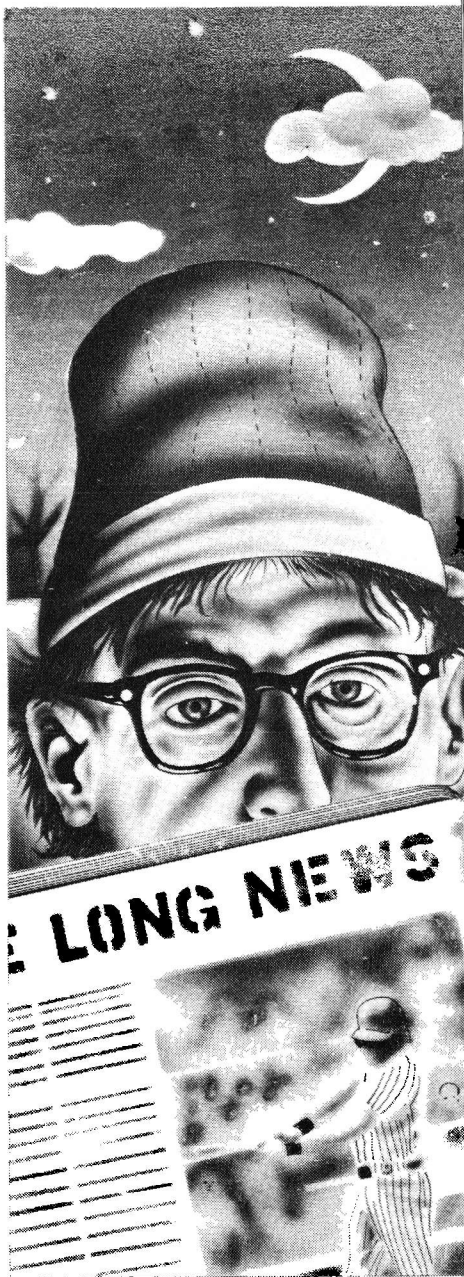
To put things in some sort of perspective, it *was* about 6:30 when I first noticed the monster. I wanted coffee, I wanted the girl. I wanted all the things that had, at one time or another, been taken from my life. I

suddenly felt like an empty file cabinet; someone had taken everything out, piece by piece, folder by folder. Everything was gone and I felt empty, hollow and that was when I first realized the monster had taken it all. That was when I read about the large black dog with the sad eyes. There was a picture of him in the paper, he was eating dried food from a make-shift bowl cut from the bottom of a bleach bottle. I felt I had seen the dog before. I felt I knew the bleach bottle. The television announcer shook his head and started talking about people who had been dead for years.

Of all the people who come and go in this house, there are only two I can really talk to. There is Bill, but he was playing his guitar in the kitchen that night. There is Doris, but she was quietly sewing something. I guess that's about all. There have been others, but they're all gone now. Many other people come and go and I no longer feel I can talk to them. I have learned that they only hurt me so when they come I sit in dark corners and interact as little as possible. About the only one I could tell about the monster was Bill, but he was busy and, as I found out later, he already knew all about it.

I have theories. Like all theories, they are based on certain assumptions which may or may not be true. But I also have certain *facts* to go by. I miss football games, they are no longer on TV.

There are other things I miss at odd times. I miss margarine (I had already missed butter), quiet rides and sunsets. I miss, oddly enough, quiz shows, though I never watched many of them. They have joined that great mass of things that are gone, things I was only marginally aware of, but



things that are no longer there. Doesn't anyone care but me and occasionally Bill?

There is nothing on television now but news, 24 hours a day. Even with seven stations it is not enough to carry all the news (at least what passes for news these days) so the papers are delivered five times a day. They grow larger every year. At times they reach the size of large telephone books. The local supplement is currently the size of a Baltimore directory. I tire of reading the news, though through some strange obsession I find I spend most of my time doing it. I miss sunny days at the beach with nothing to do, nothing to disturb me. I miss salt spray on my glasses.

The newspapers carry too much news. I have written several letters to the editor concerning that fact. They are all printed. They often spell my name wrong. It's not the quantity of news, you understand, it is only that all the news is bad. It concerns tragic things that happen to ordinary people. There is never any news of national affairs or the government. I can't remember if there is still a government. There is only news of ordinary people that are too much like myself for me to feel comfortable. The things that hurt them hurt me. There are often close ties between myself and the things that disturb them. This, in turn, disturbs me. I never feel comfortable reading the news and I read it all day long.

The newspapers used to carry a lot of this. 'Human interest', I believe they called it on their own ironic way. I still remember the way things used to be, though everything has changed and no one seems to care but me. I remember that in between the personal tragedies there was often news

of seemingly larger importance. I guess people learned, as I had always suspected, that these events of seemingly larger importance were trivial to most people; it seldom affected their lives. The really important things were personal; the loss of love, death of close people, the loss of a job, the changing of things that were. These were the really important events in people's lives. It didn't take long for the networks and the people who run those large presses to reach the same conclusion. I miss Henry Kissinger and the news of presidents and kings. I grow tired of the small, painful things the papers are filled with these days. Everything hurts too much.

These are all things the monster has brought to pass. There are others.

In the old days I used to fish a lot. Sometimes I even took bait along. I wasn't a lucky fisherman and was always startled whenever I caught a fish. I usually took them off the hook and let them go. If I was broke and hungry, I had to watch them die and cut them open. Then I would cook them and eat them, stay alive for another day. I always felt guilty. The tubers have taken away some of the guilt. I no longer have to kill to eat, to stay alive.

On most occasions I didn't have bait with me. It takes a really stupid fish to bite on a bare hook and in all the years I fished I only found one dumb enough to do that. I felt so sorry for him, felt so much kinship with him, that I let him go. I guess I wasn't broke or hungry that day.

I never fish anymore. I don't know if anyone fishes. I'm not sure there are any fish left. Many of the things that were once important to me are gone, perhaps even fish. Perhaps especially fish.

I used to sit on the dock at the end

of the road with my empty line and watch the sun go down. Many fishermen went out at dusk. They said the fish would bite more readily at that time of evening, but I knew better. It was the quiet and solitude that brought the people to the dock, to the end of the road, to the end of the world. The sun went down every night. The monster has large teeth.

Not that it matters any more.

I remember fucking, or making love, as it was sometimes called. It was a lot like fishing. I miss them both. I'm not sure anyone fucks anymore. I don't. I don't know anyone who does. There is nothing in the papers about it anymore. I think I remember what rape was. It had a lot to do with everything. We all grow older.

Not that it *ever* mattered.

I believe that someone in the house was divorced and had a small girl-child who visited him at irregular intervals. Occasionally I saw a smaller face walking around and at those times, the television was often tuned to cartoon shows and situation comedies. I generally didn't watch them because they had so little to do with real life, but sometimes on Saturday mornings I would find myself watching small animated creatures hurt each other on the cathode screen. It was a lot like looking into a mirror.

Sometimes on dark nights I even miss the Vietnam war. It wasn't much of a war, but for awhile it was the only one we had. It also had a lot to do with the monster. Oh, I don't actually miss the war (it was messy), what I miss are the good things that went with it. We marched for peace, we held demonstrations. We said a lot of words. We were thrown in jail for honorable causes. We felt good but the food was bad. I remember being

in jail once, but it was a long time ago. I can't seem to recall whether or not it had anything to do with the war. It could have been a false arrest. I have paid a lot of debts to society in one way or another, most of them for other people. But all the noble causes and noble words just fed the monster. He grew stronger.

The war ran down like a broken clock. The troops that were still alive came home and most of us thought that it was a very good thing indeed. How little we knew. The nation had grown tired of the war, weary of trying to handle every other nation's troubles. Even a country as great as the United States (as it was called in those days) could not absorb all the world's problems. Elections were held, speeches were made and somehow the mood of the nation shifted. It was time to pay attention to our own needs, wants, desires and problems. The nation was troubled.

Things started to get diffuse shortly after that. Who cared about Cambodia? Where actually was Thailand, and why wasn't it still called Siam? Was Guam one of ours or one of theirs? It was confusing. None of this really mattered. We salvaged our national conscience by importing war orphans by the thousands and housing them in deserted beer halls. Did they sleep on the pool tables? I forget. Like Beatle music or Paris fashions they were absorbed into the fabric of American life. They are much older now and nobody thinks about them.

I also quit thinking much about South America. All the countries had crazy shapes and funny names. They changed governments a lot. Lots of people lived down there and they all spoke foreign languages even though they called themselves 'Americans'.

They killed people in disputes over soccer games. Not thinking about them any more has saved me a lot of time.

Various countries in Eastern and Western Europe drifted away from me. They were a lot of trouble to think about, too. Austria bothered me a lot. There were too many Chinas, I couldn't keep them straight. Enemies became friends and friends became enemies at an alarming rate. I never really knew who my friends were at any given time. Korea had unpleasant memories. It was a whole lot easier not to think about these countries. They disappeared from the news and the thoughts of most people.

I'm sure they don't think much of us either.

We have records and a few books. We never play the records and seldom look at any part of the books except their spines. The records are old; we haven't bought any new ones in years, haven't felt like buying any in years. I seriously doubt that they are still being manufactured. Even after all these years, the stereo still works, a legacy from another life. Each of the records carry unpleasant memories, etched into them deeper than the grooves. We have assorted feelings that are attached to every song. All the songs are depressing, many written by an obscure drummer on the Johnny Carson show who went to Key West to die a long time ago. We never play the records, they make us sad. They make me sad, anyway. Bill doesn't talk too much about it anymore. I think the monster has gotten to him at last.

The books are only half there. Back in the old days, back before all the branching effects were apparent, Bill and I thought we could help people, reach out and touch them when they

needed something. We would tear pages from the books and send them to friends who lived in other cities and were having problems. It never helped any of them, it never helped us. The monster was already too strong. The books remain on our shelves, half eaten reminders of someone else's wisdom and feelings. They are useless. We never look at anything but their spines. I wrote some of the books. I never look at them either.

I miss go-cart tracks, skimming around in circles, inches off the ground with a throbbing motor in the small of my back. When I was young I could drink rotgut tequila and go around in asphalt circles all night. Yes, they were fun. I wonder what ever happened to them. They must be rusting somewhere. I remember there was a go-cart track just down the road. If I really wanted to, I could walk down and see if the carts are still there. I can't bring myself to do that. I don't feel like it. I'm curious, but only in an abstract way. The monster has bitten me too deeply.

All the people I ever loved have moved away from me. I sit and read newspaper accounts of tragic things that happen to people I don't know. It takes a lot of my time.

I miss the girl. I wonder about the dog.

The headlines on the early afternoon edition of the paper read: SARAH BROWN, AGE 42, FEELS THINGS ARE GOING BADLY. The headline is set, I believe, in 60 point type. It is followed by approximately 20 column inches of close packed, 8 point type explaining why Sarah is so unhappy. I have read the same story before. It concerned other people, but the facts were similar. Sarah was in the paper last week, too. She had

broken her arm and was unable to prepare a decent meal. Her teeth give her problems from time to time. It was a good article.

There was a time when I spent most of my life in the dark bars and cocktail lounges of expensive hotels. I occasionally frequented dirty bars in out of the way places where nobody knew me. I would play pool and get into fights over quarters and cans of beer. I could do it again. The bars are still there, but I imagine the hotels have all gone out of business. Nobody travels anymore.

The bars today have changed, they are always depressing. Nobody talks to anyone, even the bartenders are wrapped in silence. Sad old ladies sit quietly hunched over glasses of warm beer. I went to one three years ago last December. It was my birthday and I really wanted to do something different. I went by myself and talked to no one. The bar had three doors inside, marked 'men', 'ladies', and 'keep out'. There was a broken wagon wheel out front. The floor was littered with dead flies. I drank two beers and walked home. I haven't been out of the house since.

I believe that was where I saw the dog. It was foggy and as I walked home I noticed a man coming out of the fog towards me. He was on the other side of the road and was pushing an empty wheelbarrow. He stopped in front of a faded billboard to pet a large black dog. It could have been the same dog. Maybe not. All I can remember were the dog's sad eyes. The man was old. He could have been my brother. Maybe he was, I haven't seen my brother in years. He could look like that now. The wheelbarrow was empty, the dog's eyes had seen too many things.

I used to sit on sea walls and old

logs in sunny places with my red portable typewriter and write stories and books that said things that were important to me. It is no longer possible to communicate that way. It was hard even back then. You couldn't say things that people didn't want to hear. It is impossible now. They don't want to hear anything at all. Everyone has a tight cocoon of artificial invulnerability wrapped around them. The monster has seen to that.

I remember topless bars (I never went to one) and credit cards. Especially credit cards, small pieces of plastic that had something to do with money and a lot to do with debts and lifestyles. I remember one night, it might have been the night of the orphans, when I had just returned from a long trip. I had driven hours and miles to the far end of the sea for no other reason than to have painful things happen to me. I charged the gas on the credit card of a major oil company. I charged the motel room on the same card. I charged all the painful things away on a small, broken piece of plastic. I figured I would pay for it later. I eventually did, but that's another story. As I was watching the news on television that night, all drained, weary, sad, depressed and hurt, the president of that same major oil company came on the news and said cheerful things about recent profits in the oil industry. He made a lot of money off my pain. He smiled a lot. The monster dug hungry claws into my flesh that night. He had been working overtime.

Telephone bills were important once too. They were important about the same time and in the same way as credit cards were important. They both had a lot to do with money and pain. When things would get bad for me, I never had any money and there

were always people in far away cities that I needed to talk to. There were people in other cities who felt it necessary to call me. They usually said things that either hurt me or made me sad. The phone company charged me a flat rate. They made a lot of money off of the things that hurt me. Finally I got one phone call too many. I grabbed an ax and chopped the phone off the wall. It made a lot of small yellow pieces of plastic. It was not a good thing to do. The phone was not my property. It belonged to the phone company and they got very upset. They came by the house with a large policeman. The phone was listed in Bill's cat's name and he was held ultimately responsible. They took the cat away in handcuffs and he had to serve six months on a county road crew. He came back hungry, but he had a good tan.

Someone is always taking the cats away. I live with lots of them. I take care of them and feed them. I give them medication and provide warm laps for them to sit on late at night. None of them belong to me. They all belong to other people. I am only the temporary custodian of other people's pets, other people's problems. When it is convenient, these animals, like all the other things, will be taken from me. I try not to grow attached to them, but since the monster hasn't conquered me entirely, I fail. It is always painful.

There is some dispute as to whether the actual physical presence of the monster began in Florida or Kentucky, but I won't get into that. It is a fact of questionable importance. It is a life form, perhaps a death form. It is alien. It is everywhere now. Everything else is unimportant.

I miss my daughter. It may surprise you to know that I was married once.

It was a long time ago. I was married in a county courthouse in Rockville, Maryland and divorced in another county courthouse in Clearwater, Florida. A lot of things happened between these two visits to county courthouses. Ten years passed. People don't get married anymore. My daughter lived with me for awhile. She grew up under the shadow that covers the land like oily, rancid peanut butter. When she was grown, at least partially so, she left. She is trying to find other things in other places. I know she won't find them and it depresses me. The things she'll find will corrupt and destroy her. She was such a nice person, too. I was sorry to see her go.

I remember the Oklahoma Volunteers and heartaches spilled between friends over cans of beer and evaporating vodka bottles. I even miss the bad times. They were better than no times at all.

Watergate was the next outward sign of the monster. I don't imagine you're old enough to remember anything about Watergate. It was the name of an apartment complex in a city up the road called Washington. Some important people did very bad things there and were caught at it. Even after everybody knew that these people had done bad things, they continued to disavow their actions. They plotted ways to deny their guilt. They fooled no one but themselves. They didn't even fool themselves very long. It was on television every day. The papers were full of news. It affected people in high places. It saturated people with immense problems of a national nature. The news about it was long and drawn out, it lasted several years. We grew very tired of it. Like trying to worry about wars in hot countries, it became too much of

a burden. Some papers printed Watergate news in special detachable sections so it could be easily ignored. The front pages of these papers were full of local events and contained nothing of national or universal importance. It was the first of many steps for the noble newspaper industry, that vigilant watchdog of our personal freedom.

Our front yard is littered with abandoned automobiles. One is mine, the red convertible. Nobody drives anywhere these days; I doubt that gasoline is still being produced. The cars were left here by misguided people who, at one time or another, wandered by this house with hopes of escaping the monster. It was a futile gesture, but they tried anyway. The cars cover the yard like rusting, broken dreams.

One car, the flashy roadster, belonged to a performer in a local underwater attraction. She was a mermaid and sometimes played other parts. It has a broken transmission. The girl broke down shortly afterwards. Neither has been fixed. Over to one side of the yard there is a grey Volvo of uncertain vintage, sagging on springs weakened by past abuse. It seems to flinch everytime I walk by although nobody has done anything bad to it in years. It sits next to a maroon Corvair, abandoned early in life.

The house is situated on the edge of a pine grove and several vehicles of larger dimensions rest just on the other side of the trees. There are three vans, outfitted as campers, and a rusting school bus. At one time people lived inside them, but I believe they have long since moved on. I'm not completely sure of that. I haven't checked in years.

Most of the cars were abandoned

during the great migration. Unemployment had risen to over 80% by that time and many discouraged people hit the road in search of other things. They found other things, but they were seldom any improvement. I considered them refugees, victims of the then undefined monster. They lived in rough camps, drifted south in the winter and north in the summer. Many were lost along the way, many were hurt by unsympathetic people. They tried to be happy and only fooled themselves with temporary things. I was powerless to help them.

Like sand in a gigantic sieve, many of these people drifted southward to settle. Key West, Galveston and San Diego were prime areas for the new refugees. They slept in cars, on beaches, in forests and deserted buildings. There were too many of them. There was no work, there was no money. There was only the monster and the monster eventually provided its own form of destructive welfare.

It fed the refugees, and that was the worst thing that could have happened to them. It feeds us now, too. It feeds everyone and in turn it feeds off of us. It takes things away from us; things like hope, initiative and love. It also took baseball trading cards, bubble gum and Grand Prix races, but these were all secondary effects. Shadows, so to speak, of the real monster.

During the early stages of the great migration, I traveled to one of these camps in order to find a friend who had cast her lot with these people. I cared about her. I had questions to ask her. I also had questions only I could answer. It was a foolish thing to do. The camps held no answers at all; the girl was lost in shadows. I was very depressed; the trip turned out

badly. I learned a few things and my belief in the monster was strengthened.

I was so drunk and depressed that I seemed to fit in with the rest of the refugees. I believe they thought I lived there. For some obscure reason one of them asked me if I had any poetry for a wedding that was to take place that evening. I happened to have a collection of Carl Sandburg poems with me. I had brought them to show the girl. I found an appropriate poem and tore it out, gave it to them. They invited me to the wedding at the edge of the sea at sundown. I took my beer and a flower.

All the men wore ties. They didn't wear shirts, but they all wore ties. Everyone was drinking beer. I wondered where they got so many ties. The groom arrived in a red van. He was wearing a pair of cut off jeans and an engineer's hat. He was drinking Schlitz. I put my flower in his hair. They read the poem, stumbling on the words, missing the inflections. I don't believe they were used to reading. They romped in the water. The minister was drinking Budweiser and smoking a joint. Everybody laughed. It was a sham. The bride was drinking a local beer.

After the wedding the entire party adjourned to the rest rooms. They had consumed a lot of beer. Someone started playing an electric guitar inside the men's room. Everybody danced. In a fit of depression I tore all the pages out of the poetry book and left it for other weddings, divorces and funerals. I'm sure they made good use of it.

I turned my back on the refugee camp. I never went back. I never saw the girl again and all I can remember is the tears in my eyes.

Later I had occasion to go to a di-

vorce in a town down the road. The lawyers sat around and talked about hurricanes and fishing. The man was represented by a paper bag propped up at one end of the long, polished table. Someone had drawn a smile on the paper bag. It seemed appropriate. No one asked the bag any questions, though I was asked how long I had known it. I answered as best I could. Afterwards, we all went to a baseball game. The home team lost, but they didn't make any errors. The paper bag had four hot dogs and looked distracted from the third inning on.

All the little rituals of life; marriages, bar mitzvahs, divorces, christening ceremonies and such, dissolved into parodies of themselves. They became meaningless. They are no longer performed, even in the most civilized of places.

Eventually all formal organizations and social services disintegrated. It didn't take long once it started.

The army had long since abandoned the draft system and at first volunteers flocked to it in order to have someone else run their lives, take the responsibility for their actions. Even this became too much of a burden and most of them just quit, staying where they were, wandering aimlessly off, waiting for someone to take care of their physical needs while they dissolved underneath their cloak of personal tragedies. It was a national trend. The officials panicked, started to throw the offenders in jail until it became apparent that there were just too many. They tried to rebuild the army, but by then it was obvious to even the Pentagon that there was just no need, no desire.

Social organizations cracked under the strain. There were too many people to take care of. The system wasn't built to handle such a burden.

Checks were lost in the mail, food was diverted to the wrong people. By this time, nearly the entire country was on some form of public assistance. Strictly speaking, there wasn't any public left. It was only a matter of time.

The Legal Aid system was one of the first to go under. Their offices were crammed from the beginning. Everyone needed help. You needed a number to get service, just like the meat counter in a grocery store. Sometimes you had to wait days. It was always very orderly, everyone was crushed by things beyond their control. They sat quietly on hard folding chairs, sometimes they sobbed to themselves, sometimes they rocked back and forth, eyes blank, warding off invisible demons. Often when they were called all they could do was sit at the desk and sigh. The service was provided by dedicated people and although they tried hard, they too eventually buckled under the strain. They had their own problems.

About this time we had a fire in the woods near our house. I called the fire department and they wouldn't do anything. They said they couldn't put out the fire unless it involved a house or place of business. I mentioned the animals in the woods and they were indifferent. Fires were natural, even man-made ones. I got the distinct impression that they wouldn't answer a fire call unless it involved the residence of someone who worked for the fire house, or perhaps that of a locally prominent individual. I called the forestry service. They were aware of the fire but couldn't do anything without State approval. The State hadn't approved any fire fighting action in years. They seldom even answered their phone. I should have guessed. A heavy rain eventually put

the fire out, but not before it had destroyed several hundred acres.

A few months previous to the fire I had noticed that bird's nests were disappearing. They were huge osprey nests, many over ten feet wide. They had been there for years. They had survived hurricanes. Overnight they were gone. The local forest ranger shrugged. The Audubon Society was unconcerned. The ospreys are gone now, they never came back. The only birds I ever see are vultures circling the sky or roosting in the crooks of dead trees.

Once the songs of various marsh birds would wake me as I slept in my hammock on the porch. I would lie there in the still air and watch the sun burn off the morning ground fog. If it was cold, I'd get up and chop some wood. I would draw water from the pump on the side of the house. I sleep in dark rooms now, the birds no longer sing. I have forgotten how to work the pump.

I have forgotten how to do a great many things. I am not alone. Many of the things I used to do seem so trivial now. I stopped them and soon I forgot how to do them at all. Some of them were things I enjoyed. I used to know how to play the guitar. I was a fair basketball player, even had two years of semi-pro ball in a small southern town. It's all gone now. Bill assures me he has forgotten how to paint. We both feel vaguely sad about that (he was a good painter) but are somewhat relieved to see that it is apparently a universal effect.

During the last stages of the great migration a lot of the physical problems were solved by the first concrete manifestation of the monster. Food and water were provided. It is still being provided. Every morning the delivery of the first paper of the day

is accompanied by a jug of water and a few small tubers. They look like potatoes, but don't have to be cooked to eat. They are tasteless, but filling. We are never hungry.

In cold climates, heat is provided along with the food. I have heard of people up north freezing to death because they forgot or did not care to turn on the heat. I am not surprised. There are people down here who just stop eating. Food and water pile up on their doorsteps next to their papers. They die, the monster doesn't notice and the food and water just keep stacking up. I believe the monster has lost the ability to tell the living from the dead. I have that problem myself these days.

There were twelve suicides on television this week. Not reported suicides, but on-the-air suicides of reporters. I don't know why they bother. After the novelty of the first one, they aren't very interesting anymore. Yet I can't really blame them. There are a lot of suicides these days and I guess if you are a television announcer, it is the natural place to do it. Still, it does interrupt the programming. There are continual replacements.

People are always going on television to talk of their harrowing experiences. Everyone has had a lot of bad things happen to them. We enjoy hearing people talk of these experiences. They are seldom trivial, almost always emotionally crippling. They concern tragedies of a private and

personal nature. We participate vicariously and are glad these things are happening to someone else.

We seldom realize that similar things are happening to us.

I often wonder how the television stations and newspapers keep functioning. Everything else has broken down in the last few years, including most of the people I know. Nothing gets fixed. Nobody wants to fix things, or perhaps, like water pumps, they have forgotten how. We adjust. We live without many of the things we liked in order to keep a stable existence. It is somewhat uncomfortable, but functional in its own way.

We have all withdrawn. It is, I hope, the final stage of the monster. We no longer interact with other people. We hold our hurts and fears tightly to our chests and push everything and everybody else away. It is universal, everyone does this. We did it on a national level and now we do this on an individual level. Many things have been lost, but we still survive.

I grow old. Everyone grows old. There are no children. Even if there were children, no one would love them. We are too involved with our own problems.

There are only the children's tales, the monster's games. He has build a jail without walls, he has killed a world. There are no tears left to fall, there is no one left to care.

—JACK C. HALDEMAN II

JAMES SALLIS

Jim Sallis, whose "La Fin d'Une Monde (Interieure)" appeared in our June issue, returns with a short-short which can be read as science fiction or as fantasy, depending on how you look at—

JACKSON

JACKSON has become a monster.

His mouth is twisted—frozen—into a terrible rictus of a grin. One eye dribbles yellow pus. He limps; a hand is withered.

There is something wrong with the recon unit.

Jackson limps around the ship pushing buttons at random or sits for hours talking to the computer. He is trying to go somewhere else. He is trying to convince the computer to turn back.

This morning he starts it again:

"We can't do it, Daniels. Take pain and war down there to them, things they've never known before. I won't let you spoil what they have. *They* won't let you. They'll blast you out of space. And I'll laugh. God, I'll laugh!"

Jackson means the dream he had in the deep coming out. You aren't supposed to dream in the deep. Jackson did. It was the dream of a perfect, innocent people. A people without evil, sickness, death, a people, as the theologians would say, before The Fall. Jackson insists it was not a dream, but telepathy. It is all he has talked about since he came through the recon unit, a few hours after I did.

Together we are now responsible for the three hundred others waiting. But I worry about the recon unit. I came through all right, but Jackson is . . . warped. In more than body.

"They are beautiful, I tell you, Daniels. More beautiful than anything you've ever seen. And they came to me and spoke. Ministered to me. I opened my eyes. They were hovering around me. So beautiful."

It is 08:14. I have prepared breakfast (which Jackson refused to eat), recycled the utensils, and tended to the regular morning chores. It will not be long now. Jackson is reading false coordinates into the computer. This is part of his plan: to confuse the computer and abort the mission.

"We must turn back, Daniels. We *must!* We can't take them this legacy of corruption and horror."

But for me there is nothing more horrible now than Jackson. He was a good man before he cracked. I wonder how much is due to the body he's been given in the thaw. I have checked and re-checked the recon unit and can find nothing wrong. But I am reluctant to bring the others through, once we touch down. If they all come through like Jackson A colony of madmen is not what Control had in mind. We, who may be Earth's last hope. While behind us, fish crawl out of the clotted seas and the temperature soars. And respiratory therapists minister to those few left.

I have radioed Control about Jackson but will of course receive no
(Cont. on page 118)

A TRICK OF THE TAIL

Willis Baxter and his beautiful she-demon are back—this time faced with a challenge to their very existence!

MICHAEL F. X. MILHAUS

Illustrated by Michael Nally

“THAT’S IT,” the skinny young male passenger in the back seat of the vw said, pointing, a nervous tremor in his voice. “That’s Rudy Narmer’s place. The party’s already started.”

The ’72 vw had stopped in front of an old house shrouded by ancient leafy oaks. The driver, a thirtyish fellow, switched off the engine and put out its lights with a brisk slam of the heel of his hand on the out-thrust knob.

Night sat softly on the woodsy suburban neighborhood in which the house, a modern gothic memory of slower dreamier times, was situated. The house was all muffed up in ivy through which mere patches of brick and wood could be vaguely seen. Belying this air of antiquity were lights shimmering dimly through partially curtained windows and muffled but wild music throbbing from one section of the house and hanging in the summer-cool night air.

“You’re sure,” the driver said, “this Narmer guy’s the reason?”

The young man shook his head up and down emphatically, his smile hidden in the darkness. “Yes, Professor Baxter. It’s the stuff he passes around at his parties that does it.”

“Speaking of which,” said the beautiful young lady demon sitting

beside the driver, “how about a couple of tokes of Colombian before we check all this out?” She picked a perfectly rolled joint out of the air—but carefully so that the backseat passenger would not see the magic; only a select group of people at Powhattan University knew that this well-formed and apparently fourteen-year-old bit of jailbait, hight Anathae, was a demon conjured from Other Regions by Professor Willis Baxter as a result of having had one too many at a faculty party.¹

“No, uh, I’m doing all right,” said the youth.

“Ana,” said Willis in a kind but firm voice, “this is not exactly the best time to be getting high.”

Not that Willis smoked marijuana anyway, despite Anathae’s infrequent urgings. While from his ivory tower he had noted that use of the drug had caused no apparent harm to his students, he nonetheless shied away from its use himself. He had even made something of a joke of it: He wouldn’t want other teachers using it during classes, and he had to provide

1. A select group at old P.U. and, of course, *you*, Dear Reader. Cf. “A Personal Demon”, “In A Pig’s Eye”, and other stories too humorous to mention.

something in the way of moral leadership. "That way," he had quipped, "I retain control of all my faculties."

Anathae tossed her tawny red hair back, careful not to reveal the two little horns which perched slightly below her hairline, hidden by the way she had combed her long locks. "Okay, okay," she said, shrugging shapely shoulders. "Just trying to cheer up this dreadful atmosphere, Willis. Gee, you'd think we were going to a wake or something, instead of a party!"

"It's not a fun party, Ana," Willis said.

The grad student in the back seat said, "You don't know what it's doing to some of my friends—coming to this place, freaking on Rudy's stuff. That's why I volunteered to cooperate with Professor Baxter on this, even thought it might be dangerous for me." On this last note, his voice dropped to a whine. "I want my friends back the way they were—they've really gone through some heavy changes lately."

"I didn't give Anathae the entire story, Neal," Willis explained to the younger man. Staring ahead at the group of cars parked along the street and in the driveway, Willis added, "It's like this, Ana. I told you that I wanted you to help me check out this character, Rudy Narmer."

"He's from Turkey," Neal interrupted. "That's where he gets his drugs."

"Right," Willis said. "And these drugs seem to be messing up a lot of my students at Powhattan—a couple, like Neal here, are in a graduate seminar of mine. They seem totally out of things now—no interest in their studies. You should have seen the results of the last exam I gave!"

Willis could not help but recall the incredulity with which he had read



the papers they had turned in: 'Define courtly love' answered with 'Making love in court'; 'Discuss Siegfried' alternatively with 'A German salute' and 'A breakfast food made with matzoh'; and 'Give two interpretations of the love potion in *Tristan*' answered by 'Powdered rhino horn; Spanish fly'. Until Neal Barski had shown up with a better explanation, Willis had wondered if it had suddenly become fashionable not to pass his course.

Anathae said, "And you're pinning the blame to the drugs this guy's been dealing? Never heard of any drugs like *that*."

Neal laughed humorlessly. "Sure. You think you've heard of drugs, but Rudy's stuff is different from any of them. It does stuff you wouldn't believe."

"Like?" Anathae asked.

"I did it once," Neal said, shifting uncomfortably. "But the others've been doing it every night since Rudy came. That's why they haven't studied—why they don't *want* to study. Anyway, it's not just the drugs—it's Rudy. He has a strange effect on a lot of people, and the drug seems to intensify it. You can just *feel* his presence in a room—charismatic, you know, but sort of sinister, too."

There was a moment of dark silence. Anathae, looking back and forth at the two men, suddenly stuck her thumbs in both ears, wriggled her fingers and yelled, "Boo!"

Both men jumped.

Anathae giggled. "You see—the two of you are just too keyed up. Maybe you're right about this Narmer guy and maybe you're wrong. But relax—you're not going to get anything out of anyone if you're all keyed up. People will sense it and tune you out."

"Yeah," said Neal Barski, sucking in

some fresh air, "she's right."

"We have to be cool," Willis acknowledged, "observant."

Willis sought to adopt the proper mein, something somewhere between Humphrey Bogart in *The Big Sleep* and Basil Rathbone in *Hound of the Baskervilles*. He refrained from either checking to see if he had his gun or pulling down the brim of his peaked cap, however, and clicked open the door. He put a foot on the pavement, stepping out calmly, coolly, observantly, then clunked his head smartly on the top of the door opening.

"Ouch, damn, ouch!"

He heard Neal Barski snickering in the back seat.

Anathae, out on the other side of the vw, asked, "What happened?"

"Nothing," Willis said, grasping his head, "nothing." What, he asked himself, would Philip Marlowe have done? Or Sherlock Holmes?

They made their way to the front door of the Narmer residence without further incident. Willis paused outside the entrance and glanced at Anathae. "Do I look all right?" he asked. "I just don't feel natural in this tie-dyed tee shirt. And these jeans are all faded and—"

"It'll do, won't it, Neal?"

Neal nodded, gesturing toward his own casual outfit. "If you wore anything formal, Professor Baxter, you'd look like an elephant in church."

Willis sighed and rubbed his aching head. He had to admit that Anathae looked rather good in the loosely-tied halter and hip-hugging jeans. Yes, he rather envied those jeans at the moment. There was just enough about her figure left to the imagination that one imagined everything about her. And her magic—to Willis, at least—made her all the more alluring, mysterious.

Willis thought for a moment about just calling the whole thing off, forgetting this business, letting his students do what the hell they wanted to do. He could go back to his apartment with Anathae and lose the day's tensions and headaches in her arms.

But no, he had responsibilities. He had a duty to his students as a teacher, and he braced himself to perform it. After all, he told himself, what more could be involved than meeting this Narmer guy, getting a look at his drugs and what they did to people, and having Anathae take a look at what was going on inside the guy's head? Depending on what was motivating him, they could then decide whether it was worthwhile to talk sense and get him to lay off Powhattan U and its students, or to have Anathae use her magic powers to discourage him.

Willis rang the doorbell, which was almost drowned in the steady throb of music. A throb, Willis noted, which was more than echoed in his head.

After a moment, the screen door opened slightly and a tall dark young man slipped through and stood on the step before them. Even in the dim yellow light from inside the house, Willis could see that this was no ordinary young man. He was perhaps twenty-four or -five, with olive skin and blue-black hair, and his steely blue eyes held a kind of intense stare. Perhaps because he had been thinking of movie stars earlier, Willis could not help but think of Omar Sharif.

The voice, which was deep and slightly accented, however, made him think of Topol. "Hello, Neal. We haven't seen you in a while. Who are your friends?" The young man's smile was warm, friendly, even disarming, but he looked at Willis suspiciously before turning to Anathae. Then his

eyes seemed to soften and his voice became even more suave. "I'd remember *you* if I'd seen you before."

Willis could almost feel Anathae step up her sexual presence, either to match this guy's or to impress him. Willis hoped it was the latter; there wasn't much he—or almost any other male—could do to match this fellow's obvious sexual attractiveness.

"Hi, Rudy," said Neal calmly. "This is Willis Baxter, a pretty hip professor at the Pow How. And his ward, Anathae—"

"Ana," the girl said breathily, her eyes wide, pupils large even in the light. "Please—just Ana."

"Oh," said Rudy, obviously very taken, "but Anathae is such a, well, such a *charming* name. An exotic breeze of a name really, redolent of sensual perfumes and mysterious musics. Can't I be allowed to call you Anathae? It feels so good in my mouth." That mouth curled up in an even broader smile that would steam the pants off most women, and had no little effect on Anathae, obviously.

Good in your mouth, huh? thought Willis, fisting a hand behind his back. *I have something right here I'd like to put in your mouth.* But he held himself in check; Anathae had her little games, there was no doubt of that, and she was playing one right now. Had this Rudy Narmer right where she wanted him.

That must be the case, Willis told himself. She couldn't really have the hots for this, this *dope dealer*. This handsome, sophisticated, Omar Sharif-looking, Topol-talking, friendly, smiling dope dealer.

Could she?

"*Entrez,*" invited Rudy, eyes half lidded and focussed on Anathae's loosely wrapped figure. "Tonight's party is holding forth quite nicely in

the den, mainly. Everyone's very much into music at the moment. It would be a notable pleasure to enjoy it with two new people."

The inside of the house was an interior decorator's delight, fitted with only the most modern of furniture, paintings, lamps and rugs—clean, neat, perfectly arranged.

"I'm very much a man of the moment, a creature of now," explained Rudy, alluding to the entirety of the house with a single graceful gesture. "Tell me, Anathae, does it suit your taste?"

"Oh, yes," said Anathae. "Definitely."

"Good. I take pleasure principally in the pleasure of others. But the entire house is not done up in the style you see now. The den, as you'll soon observe, is modern in different ways." So saying, he effortlessly swung open a door in front of them.

Loud music pulsed through—churning electric guitars stitched tightly with a smooth mellotron backing, grounded with thick base and delicate drumming.

"Italian group," Narmer commented. He nodded his head to the complex rhythms. "Lovely stuff."

The large room which was the den had a twilight effect, brought about by the absence of electric lighting and the presence of candles. In the obviously comfortable antique furniture lounged various students of Powhatan, some twenty strong; some Willis recognized—some he did not. Here and there on the baroque wallpaper were weird and fantastic works of art, and an almost palpable cloud of smoke hovered over everything—clear enough to see through, yet dense enough to be plainly discerned as smoke. Conversations buzzed mildly below the music and through

the smoke, barely audible.

Willis had to admit that the atmosphere was most intriguing.

"Drinks?" asked Narmer, obviously well practiced as the gracious host. "I've got the full run, so don't balk at anything."

"Pepsi," said Neal.

"Yoo-Hoo?" asked Anathae. Narmer smiled and nodded.

"Rum and coke," said Willis absently, looking about for his students.

"Certainly. Make yourselves comfortable and I'll be back in a flash." Narmer turned and strode gracefully from the room.

"Goodness," said Anathae, hugging Willis' arm, "he *seems* nice enough, doesn't he, Will?"

Willis made a grumbling sound in his throat, then bent over to whisper in her ear, "Have you looked inside his head yet?"

Anathae looked nonplussed for a second, then smiled with a touch of a blush on her cheek. "Sorry," she said. "I, uh, forgot."

"What?" asked Neal.

"Nothing," Willis said.

Neal plopped down into an empty chair and Willis eyed the group of people playing cards in one corner of the room. Two were in his Chaucer seminar: Linda Weinstein and Rich Schwartz. Willis asked Neal who the other two were.

"Oh—one's Dan Stuffing; the other's Dave Cardinal. All four of 'em are heavy into Narmer's stuff—'powder blue', they call it. They mix it with their drinks—tasteless. And they've been into doing strange things lately."

"Playing cards is strange?" Anathae asked.

"They're playing 'Broken Hearts'—a variation of Hearts in which the winner gets to whip the others. Liter-

ally.”

“Bleech!” said Willis.

“Well, they don’t actually draw blood or anything. It’s all very ritualistic. But it’s pretty strange, anyway.”

“I’ll say,” Willis said.

Willis watched in amazement as a young girl in the middle of the room opened a large bag of potato chips and set to work eating until, in record time, the bag was empty. With hardly a pause for breath and without wasted motion, she ripped open a package of Oreos and began treating them in like fashion.

“Don’t get freaked by Laura,” Neal said, indicating the girl. “She’s on powder blue too. It affects everyone differently. She’ll go on like this for maybe four or five hours, but when she comes down she won’t eat hardly anything at all.”

Willis nodded, but noted the tone of disgust in Neal’s voice. *He doesn’t believe what he’s saying*, Willis thought. *He knows this girl’s turning into a glutton, but he won’t come out and say it. Wonder why?*

Suddenly, above the sound of the music, someone screamed “Duck!”

Willis ducked, and everyone laughed at him.

“Don’t worry, Professor Baxter,” Neal said with a grin, “that’s just Dan. Dan’s into a duck trip. I just hope he doesn’t get too freaked—”

Cards flew up above the corner table, then fluttered down over the head of one of the players, who stood up. “Ducks on the wall!” Dan said loudly, holding a hand to the side of his face and pointing with the other toward a bare wall. “Ducks on the ceiling! Ducks everywhere! I gotta get outa here!”

“Uh-oh,” said Neal, “Dan’s done too much blue. I hope he doesn’t

create a scene. Rudy doesn’t like it when someone does that.”

Dan Stuffing was a large, rotund, friendly-looking fellow—a giant teddy bear. He turned around and walked—no, waddled, like a duck—toward the center of the room, quacking to himself.

But then he espied Willis Baxter, and his eyes lit up. “Donald!” he cried happily. “There you are, Donald! I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Dan waddled excitedly toward Willis, coming to a stop just before crashing into him. He began to speak in breathy spurts. “Oh, wow, Donald, really glad to see you. Walt died ten years ago, and they’re really messing up your image.”

Willis started to say something, stopped, and before he could get anything out Dan was talking hurriedly onward. “I was just speaking to Mickey at the Seven Dwarfs’ cottage the other day, and he was saying that he hasn’t seen you for years and years, and for all he knew you were shanghaied by the Chinese to make Peking Duck. And oh wow, it’s just great to see you again, man—duck, I mean. Huey, Dewey, and Louie are going to be very pleased . . .

“Say, Donald, you recognize your old Uncle Scrooge, don’t you? Yeah, me. Hey Donald, where’s your sailor suit? And how come you’re wearing pants, eh? And—”

Abruptly, Dan halted, looked over Willis’ shoulder, and froze.

Willis turned to follow his gaze.

Rudy Narmer stood in the doorway, eyes aflame; Willis had never seen such an intense, sinister stare from the eyes of a human before.

Shivers marched down his spine. Very cold shivers.

“Dan,” said Narmer in a cool,

steady, commanding voice. "Dan, this is not Donald Duck. This is my very special guest, Professor Willis Baxter. There is no need to trouble him, Dan."

"Uh, sure, Rudy," said Dan in a soft voice. He looked up at Willis pleadingly. "Spare change?"

A bit befuddled, Willis absently reached down and pulled a quarter out of his pocket and dropped it into Dan's pudgy out-stretched hand.

"Hey, duck—man, I mean—thanks!" Dan turned and walked slowly to join the game of Hearts.

"I apologize for Daniel," said Narmer, his eyes cooling down considerably. "He gets a bit enthusiastic, and therefore rather annoying, about his illusions at times. If you'll excuse me, I've got your drinks on a tray, which I'll bring along in just one second." And again he was gone.

And Anathae was staring wistfully, it seemed, after him.

Willis wondered idly what had brought Narmer back to the room without the drinks just when Dan Stuffing was going into his act. Willis put a hand on Anathae's hip and again whispered in her ear. "Have you taken a peek at what's going on in Narmer's mind yet?"

Anathae looked perplexed again, and then a little annoyed. "I'll get to it," she said. Turning to Neal she asked, "How come Dan asked for spare change? He doesn't look like he's exactly starving."

"He's not," said Neal with an inappropriate smile, as if he were really talking about something else. "Dan's the son of one of the richest men in the state. He's got a huge allowance. But he's also on this great miser trip. Getting very bad. That's why he fancies himself Scrooge McDuck. You should only see him when he's

Ebenezer Scrooge, not to mention his King Midas thing. With that, he just goes around touching things, and giggling to himself."

"I'm really not sure if I'm going to be able to handle this evening," Willis said, looking to Anathae for support. But Anathae's eyes had gone back to staring at the door through which Rudy Narmer had left the room. What the devil was *wrong* with her?

"You're not thinking of leaving?" Neal asked, seeming truly upset. "It would spoil—I mean, you know, what we've planned, and all . . ."

"No," Willis said, waving an assuring hand distractedly at Neal, "no." Thinking half about Anathae and half about what Neal had said about Dan, Willis asked "And do all the people on this powder blue stuff act like tightwad ducks?"

"Uh-uh. No more than it makes 'em all scoff down cookies and potato chips. Like I said before, it affects each individual differently—you know; you've seen what it's done to Linda and Rich."

Yes, Willis acknowledged to himself, quite true.

Linda Weinstein had been one of his most serious, studious pupils. Once quite reserved and given to wearing sedate modest clothing, shy and soft spoken, she had become a brazen temptress, flirting outrageously even with Willis when she showed up for class. And when he had called her in to discuss her recent poor performance in the class, for no reason at all she had started to unbutton his shirt and tell him she would "do anything—anything at all!" to get a good grade.

And Rich Schwartz! Rich, at the beginning of the semester, had been clean shaven, sharply dressed, alert

and nimble witted; now he wore his hair long and shaggy and unruly, had an unkempt beard and a straggly moustache. He slept during class all the time. His clothing not only looked slept in; Willis knew it *was* slept in.

Two promising students, turned into extreme parodies of faults previously hidden to the point of inversion deep within themselves. A complete and puzzling mystery—until Neal Barski had come to explain how these changes could be attributed to a strange drug called powder blue and an even stranger man named Rudy Narmer.

As the name entered Willis' thoughts, the man himself popped into the room bearing a tray of drinks.

"Sorry about the delay, my friends," Narmer said as they each helped themselves to their respective glasses, "but I think you will enjoy the drinks. Please do make yourselves comfortable, if you have not already done so. We are not very formal at these affairs. We just get together to enjoy one another's company, listen to some music, and do some drugs. Speaking of which,"—he slipped a hand into the large right pocket of his bright yellow lounging robe, which he must have just donned, plucked out a marijuana cigarette, fitted it into his mouth, produced a Cricket lighter from the other pocket, lit the joint and puffed—"how about a hit?"

Narmer offered the cigarette to Willis who took it, pretended to draw on it, then passed it to Neal. Willis let the smoke he'd sucked into his mouth go a few seconds later, hoping to convince Narmer that he was inhaling the stuff. Finding the taste of the smoke mildly unpleasant, he took a large gulp of his rum and coke—which seemed to be mostly rum. All the better; he much preferred booze to

other sorts of intoxicants.²

Then, looking around, he found an empty chair and sat down on it. Across from the chair was a couch; Narmer seated himself on this, and Anathae sat down beside him.

"I take it you do not entirely approve of drugs, Mr.—Professor?—Professor Baxter," said Rudy mildly, not really looking at Willis. Rather, he regarded Anathae with a gaze which, if one were of a mind to describe it with understatement, one might dub 'desirous'. "I am happy to see, however, that your lovely ward seems to take the delight which cannabis affords to those who savor it properly."

"I indulge only when it seems socially expected of me," Willis admitted.

Blast the man! If Rudy Narmer's eyes were hands, Anathae's clothes would be peeled off by now!

"Drugs, Professor Baxter," Narmer continued in his offhand manner, "properly used, are merely utensils to a greater, more far-reaching consciousness. They are not ends in themselves. It is the mind—indeed more—the *essence* of the individual using the drugs that is important, not the mere effect of the drug."

Narmer took a long drag off the joint, inhaled deeply, casually gazed about at his on-going party, then blew a stream of smoke that rose slowly into the greater cloud of smoke hovering over everything. He said, "Just as that cloud of smoke connects the physical bodies of my friends and myself intangibly, so does the *effect* of the smoke connect our minds and essences. With greater drugs, it is even more so. There is a oneness developed between individuals which is

2. *Ibid.*

invaluable in this lonely, solitary existence. Don't you find that so, dear girl?"

He gazed fondly at Anathae, a smooth smile saying so much more. He brushed her forearm with his forefinger. "Contact, whatever its form, is very important, is it not?"

Anathae seemed entranced.

What's happening here? Willis wondered, feeling troubled. What was this clown doing with *his* demon?

The fury slipped upon him slowly; things seemed to take on a green shade. And while jealousy seized Willis, so did a sudden numbness. He felt as though all his consciousness had been gathered in a tight furious little ball somewhere behind his eyes—and the arms, legs and body that surrounded it were somehow not his own. He could call upon them to perform some service, and they would turn to him as to a stranger and ask, "Who are you to tell me what to do?"

Come to think of it, *who was he?*

He watched, feeling very detached, as Narmer slowly began to scratch Anathae's bare shoulder. The handsome young man seemed utterly alien, unearthly, yet encompassing the whole atmosphere with his presence. His hand flowed naturally down to Anathae's breast.

Abruptly, Willis realized why his students had turned to Rudy Narmer, and with the realization came the sensation of relaxation. It was all so simple, so obvious. Rudy Narmer was not only handsome and well off, he was as fascinating and marvelous an individual as any human could ever hope to be—the most dynamic, magical, charismatic, interesting . . . yes, Rudy Narmer was almost God-like. Except even that comparison was a disservice to Rudy.

Narmer leaned over, whispered

something in Anathae's ear. The demongirl nodded slowly, her eyes far away. Narmer rose, extended a hand, helped her to her feet. Together, arm in arm, they drifted out of the room.

The little ball of Willis' consciousness was at war with itself. On the one hand, everything seemed perfectly normal and as it should be. Rudy and Anathae obviously liked each other, and Willis felt complimented and happy to please both of them by letting them both please each other. But on the other hand, he was in a murderous, jealous rage.

His left hand said, "How wonderful that the two of them should find each other through me." His right hand said, "Oh how I'd love to grab his throat and tear it out." His right foot said, "Savor the beauty of this moment; consider with bliss how two people that you love also love each other." His left foot said, "Let me strap on a steel spike to gouge in his groin, his kidneys, his eyes, drawing rich red blood, slashing veins and ripping out entrails."

His eyes, his ears, his blood vessels and internal organs argued with each other, sending contradictory messages to his brain, as he sat on the couch stupefied. The jealousy and the acceptance battled each other, changing positions, attacking, then defending against attack. They gripped each other in sure fingers, strong hands, rippling sinews; they duelled. They hurled grenades; they dropped atomic bombs—all in his brain. His own augmented rage rather than what Narmer had intended proved to be the stronger of the two.

Willis jumped to his feet and cried out, "Narmer, you lay off that girl!"

He would have bolted after them, except that he was jumped from behind, pulled down to the floor. His

head hit hard and consciousness swirled away, only to slowly drift back again. When it did, he felt quite normal, except that his head hurt, and that his arm and legs were numb because four of the students who had been attending the party were now sitting on them, pinning him to the floor.

Willis, though his vision was blurred, recognized them: Rich Schwartz, Linda Weinstein, Dave Cardinal, and Dan Stuffing. The Broken Hearts players.

"Neal!" Willis cried. "Neal! Help!" He tried to struggle, but the four students had no problem keeping him fast to the floor.

Then, as he looked up at the druged expressions on their faces, it all came to him: avarice, lust, sloth. Dan, Linda, Rich. All basic sins. And Willis himself—he'd been furious with jealousy. Envy!

Narmer had put powder blue in their drinks!

But it had partially backfired, working on Willis' natural reaction to Narmer's attentions to Anathae. The direction Narmer had wanted the drug to take him, and the direction Willis had been inclined to take had been at cross purposes—so the two had cancelled each other out.

And Willis was all right now. Normal, if having four strong (and in some cases, heavy) college students sitting on his arms and legs was normal.

"Neal!" he cried again. And then he saw that Neal Barski's skinny frame was leaning over him, hands on hips, and Neal was smiling; the smile turned lopsided into a leer.

"Sorry, Professor Baxter," he said, without sounding a bit sorry, "but I seem to get quite a kick out of this sort of thing since I've found The

Way." His eyes glazed over and his hands reached out to gesture in the empty air, as if to form his meanings there. "It's really great. Taking truths, shading them and shifting them, balancing them all in such a way that they hide truths from seekers of truth—bending reality to unreality and making unreality the master. Ha ha! *Really* great!"

Deceit! Another mortal sin.

"Why, Neal? Why?"

Neal shrugged as his eyes lost their glaze and focussed on Willis. "Rudy told me to do it, so I did. I, we, don't ask Rudy questions. When we do our thing on our own, it's not as much fun as when we've let Rudy do our thinking for us. Like now. Wow, what ecstasy!"

Dan Stuffing tightened his grip on Willis' arm. "Sorry, Donald," he said. And for what little comfort it was worth to Willis, the big fellow did sound as if he were sorry. He started to pull Willis up. "But we gotta take care of you."

They stood him up, holding him tight.

A medallion Rich had been wearing under his sloppy tee shirt had slipped out in the process and he let go with one hand to put it back inside. But not before Willis had caught a glimpse of it—a goat's head, one of the symbols of Satanism.

And suddenly much that had been unclear became clear. No mere drug could have such an effect on Anathae. If the understanding taking form inside Willis' head were true, it would explain why she had never been able to look inside Narmer's thoughts, why she had been so helpless under his gaze.

"Linda, Neal, Dave, Dan! Don't you realize? Narmer's an agent of evil! He's a *demon*!"

"Evil?" said Linda, the perplexity coming to her eyes in sharp contrast to the sophmoric smile she had worn all evening. "No! Rudy is love."

"We're not going to do anything evil to you, Professor Baxter," spoke up Rich. "We're just going to give you some more powder blue. You're too full of hate, Professor. You need some of the love drug."

Willis could see that there was no point in trying to argue with any of them. What he needed, he realized, was a weapon, some way to exploit their weakness.

"Rich," he said suddenly, his mind racing, "why are you putting so much effort into holding me? Others here are much stronger, holding me much better. And you know that I know how fruitless it would be to try to escape."

Rich, all at once a little cross-eyed and slack mouthed at the thought Willis had expressed, nodded. He did not release his grip, but it slackened noticeably. Linda was also holding that hand, yet she did not resist when Willis slipped it under her blouse and cupped her breast; she closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

Turning his gaze to Stuffing, he said loudly, "Dan! Look out! The ducks are at your feet! They're after the money in your boots!"

Dan let go of Willis' other arm and jumped back across the floor, fright welling up in his eyes.

Now only Neal held Willis in a firm grip. It was but the work of a second to disentangle his other hand from Linda's blouse and jerk free of Rich's grasp.

"Hey Neal," Willis said, "your shoelace is not untied."

Neal looked down at his sandals, perplexed. Willis, who was not very strong but nonetheless stronger than

the slim student, hit him on his long nose with a fist. Barski let go of Willis' hand and clasped his nose, which began to bleed profusely.

Had he been quicker on the think, Willis could have maneuvered himself into a better position, but even though he was now freed from the four students' grasps, several others were still between him and the exit Narmer and Anathae had taken. The four were shaken and confused, but the others would take him easily if he rushed in their direction.

Knowing that his (and Anathae's) only hope lay in his escape, Willis turned and fled.

A hallway, a kitchen, then another hallway seemed to fly past him. Excited shouts behind him told him that the pursuit had begun, and he cast about desperately for an escape route. When he saw the open window he didn't think, he just jumped straight through it. He ripped his tie-dyed tee shirt on a bush, and landed heavily on the ground. He scrambled up instantly and charged straight into the bole of an oak tree.

Dazed, he picked himself up again and staggered forward to where his car should be. Tripping, puffing, he finally reached the edge of the lawn where he could see his Volkswagen.

Willis looked behind himself and saw his pursuers boiling out of the doorway and scattering after him. He fumbled his keys out and made the final dash to his car, opened the door and was just getting in when the first pursuer pushed through the hedge.

"He went thataway!" Willis yelled, pointing down the street. The guy nodded, said "Thank you," and turned around.

He halted suddenly, angrily, and pivoted. But by then Willis was in the car, had the engine revved and was in

first gear.

Eight more pursuers spilled out onto the street; no exit there. They began to run toward him. Willis popped the clutch, spun the wheel hard, gunned the engine and in a split second was racing along the grass and sidewalk, spinning divots up from the grass. He came alongside the driveway, turned out onto the open road and left the students screaming behind him.

This was a night, he knew, that was going to feed his paranoid feelings about students for years to come.

He had to think. He had to figure out some way to rescue Anathae.

Willis glanced into his rearview mirror to see if anyone followed. He didn't see any cars behind him, but he saw the shadow of Rudy Narmer in his back seat!

When he turned to look, the back seat was empty. When he turned his attention back to the road, he saw that he was going through a red light—and a large Greyhound bus was blaring its horn and coming down right on top of him from the left. Panicked but galvanized into action, Willis tromped down hard on the accelerator and felt as much as saw the big bus, its brakes screeching, whiz by inches behind him.

He kept on going. He had to think and act in such a way as to secure Anathae's release as soon as possible. And staying to explain to the bus driver, and possibly the police, didn't fit in with these plans. Besides, what could he say? 'Sorry officer, you see, I thought I had this demon in my car'?

No, that would never do; it would only complicate an already complex situation.

Willis checked his rearview mirror again and gulped. This time it was not merely a shadow that he saw; he

could distinctly see the features of Narmer's face.

"What is it you want?" Willis snapped.

"What I'll eventually get, Professor Baxter," Narmer said smoothly, "what I'll eventually get. But for now, a bit of rational discussion will suffice." Narmer's voice had an odd hollow quality about it, as if he were talking from inside a tin drum.

"I'm listening," Willis said. *Not that I have any choice*, he thought.

"You have escaped me for the moment, Professor, but for the moment only. You know Anathae's powers. It should be obvious from what has transpired that mine are even greater than hers. Were my presence not required here at the moment, I could as easily transport my body into the back seat of your car as this apparition you see in your rear-view mirror."

So. Something unnamed 'required' Narmer's presence. Anathae? It could be that Narmer feared to leave his residence until he had her completely under his sway. That seemed to jibe with what little Willis understood about one demon's power over another.

Willis said, "So?"

"Unimpressed? So be it; underrate me, I don't care. It'll just make it that much easier for me when I can turn my full attention to capturing you. You are but a minor thorn. After all, it was Anathae I was after, and in that I was successful."

"I'd wondered about that," Willis said, noting that his own voice remained remarkably firm and steady. "Your motivation, I mean."

The face in the mirror smiled. "Trying to pump me for information, Professor? Well, all right; I don't mind telling you. At first it was simply that I knew another demon was nearby.

Quite simply, she could have been quite a bit more than a thorn in my side, so I stayed hidden until I found out what she was and what she was do—”

Abruptly, Willis turned a corner and the face in the mirror disappeared; the voice stopped as if he had turned off the radio.

Willis continued on for a couple of blocks before the face reappeared, still smiling. “Ah, there you are,” Narmer said. “Don’t do that, Professor. You’ve no idea how difficult it is to accomplish this projection.”

“Far be it from me to do anything to make your life more difficult, Narmer,” Willis said sarcastically.

“I said there were two reasons,” Narmer went on, ignoring Willis’ comment. “Actually Anathae is quite lovely, as you yourself know. I’ve grown tired of human women; I need someone of my own kind. It’s unfortunate that Anathae should want to resist me, but being stronger I will bend her to my will, and it will be as if she wanted me. And really, there’s nothing you can do about it, although it would amuse me no end to see you try.”

“That’s me,” Willis said, “nothing but a clown, a buffoon, somebody for you to toy with. Only you know what, Narmer? You’re the one who seems to be going to all this trouble to talk to me with this ‘projection’. If I’m not more than a thorn or a bug to be stamped out, why do you bother?”

“Like all mortals, you’re a fool, Baxter. I’d thought to offer you your life. Quite frankly, if you put your foot to the floor and kept going til sunrise, you’d be beyond easy reach and I’d let you live. Why not? Anathae would be mine and you would be far enough away that it would be more bothersome to go after

you than not. Surely you understand. Would you stop making love to chase a gnat, no matter how much it had bothered you, after it had left your house?”

“I’m not a fool, Narmer,” Willis said, “and I wouldn’t buy my life at that price. And even if I did, I wouldn’t trust you.”

“Then I’ll hear from you again. Very well, let me get on to my real reason for visiting you this way. It’s a simple warning—don’t try—”

Willis swung his vw sharply into a driveway, slammed on his brakes, threw it into reverse and burned rubber backing across the street (narrowly missing a car that had been half a block behind him when he’d turned into the driveway). He veered slightly again to back into the mouth of an alley he had seen.

Narmer’s face was no longer in the mirror.

Willis kept backing through the alley, knocking over occasional unseen but noisy trashcans, until he reached a street that ran parallel to the one he had first been travelling. He turned the vw and headed back in the direction from which he had come, turned sharply left again at the first corner, floored it for ten blocks, turned right, then left into yet another alley, and finally left again.

The face still had not reappeared in the mirror.

Willis stuck out his tongue and gave his rearview mirror a resounding Bronx cheer. “Stick that in your hookah and smoke it!”

Then he felt truly juvenile. He’d given in to the impulse to “shake” Narmer because he was tired of Narmer having both the upper hand and the last word. He’d had to play the hero, but now he realized that if he’d only held himself in check

Narmer might have said or done something inadvertently that Willis could use against him.

For right now, Willis Baxter knew precisely what kind of hero he felt like: Theseus without an Adriadne.

IT WAS the first time Willis had ever yearned for the sight of Larry Hawthorne's corpulent face.

Willis had spent some time driving around aimlessly, telling himself that he was doing a fine job of 'losing' any students who may have tried to follow him ('If I'm lost, they must be'). He discovered he was on Idylwood Avenue, and a familiar-looking highrise apartment house loomed ahead. He had known he would need help; his subconscious had answered the question "Who?"

He had thought about calling the police but had dropped the idea. He didn't have to say a word about demons—he could complain about a wild drug party or claim that a young girl had been dragged into Narmer's place kicking and screaming. But Narmer, with his charm and smooth talk, could probably convince the police that black was white or green or brown or maroon or any combination of the above. And if he couldn't, his magic could.

Willis pounded on the door of Larry Hawthorne's 12th-floor apartment.

Had the students tried to follow him in their cars?

He pounded again, harder.

Were they even now searching the streets of the city, looking for him or his car? Or had they already sighted him? And if so, when would they spring their trap? At least he hadn't gone back to his own apartment, one of the first places they could be

counted on to look.

Was that the elevator door opening? Willis swivelled his head, at the same time bringing his fist once more against the door.

Larry Hawthorne opened the door and got the knock square in the mouth.

"Ummph!" said Hawthorne, stumbling backward away from the door. He backed into a chair, the arm of which hit him neatly behind the knees, which caused him to topple into the seat. "Arrrrgh!" he said, as the chair, in reaction to the momentum he had imparted to it, rose up on two legs under him and carried him down with a resounding *whump* to the floor, knocking the wind out of him.

"Christ, Larry," said Willis, horrified, but not so upset to forget to dash in, then slam and bolt the door behind him. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

Hawthorne worked his mouth but only wheezes issued forth.

"Listen, Larry, I'm in big trouble." Willis gestured wildly with his arms and Hawthorne cringed back. "What? Oh no. No, I've not come to 'get' you, to resume our—misunderstanding. That was just a klutzy mistake. No—" he pointed to the outside, "there are students after me."

"It-must-have-been-that-exam-you-gave Baxter," gasped Hawthorne, recovering his composure somewhat. "If I were them, I'd be after you too."

"You don't understand," said Willis. "These students are under the influence of a demon!"

Hawthorne had shifted his bulky frame into a more comfortable position so that he could pay better attention to what was being said. At the mention of the word 'demon' his eyebrows shot up. "You got Anathae

mad at you?"³

"No, not Ana. Another demon—a very *evil* demon. Are you okay?"

Hawthorne felt his jaw as though assuring himself that it was still there. "Yeah, I guess so. You ever think of becoming a prize fighter? You may have missed your calling." Then he looked up at Willis. "Is that possible—another demon? I thought Anathæ was the last one who could be called from Down There."

"So did I," Willis said. "But evidently I was wrong."

Willis helped Hawthorne to his feet and then picked up the chair. When they had both seated themselves, Willis launched into his story, telling all

3. How does Professor Larry Hawthorne know about Anathæ? What is his relationship *vis a vis* Willis Baxter? Why did Willis come to him for help, and what sort of help might he be able to provide? These and other important questions will not be answered in this footnote. No, dear Reader, they will not, though in days gone by when you have found your curiosity piqued you have found herein a virtual mountain of further material for your eclairsissement. But not now. Why is this? It is because of the executive clout of the Editor of this publication, Mr. Theodore White. He has informed me, through a red-pencilled marginal note, that in a recent poll, Milhaus footnotes received fewer votes than the title, volume number, and publishing information printed sideways on the contents page. Well, enow. Your humble Author is humbler yet; he considers himself a realist who knows which side his pitiful crust of bread is margarine on. It seems at the Temple of Popularity a paen of praise to the lowly footnote is regarded as unseemly. Return, oh Reader, to the narrative; you have read this Author's last footnote. Henceforth, the Reader will have to figure out the stories for himself!

that had happened up to his escape, hardly pausing for breath.

When Willis finished Hawthorne said nothing. The big man sat with his chin on his fist, thinking. Then he started to ponder aloud. "The thing that bothers me is that if anyone should know what conditions prevail in Hell, it should be Anathæ. And she assured you that she was the only demon who could still be summoned."

"That's right," Willis said. "De la Farte's Theory was true. Down through the ages all the demons, except Anathæ because she was an obscure demon, have been summoned by more than one magician or sorcerer at one time. Since demons can't be at two places at one time, and since there was no way to put a waiting magician on 'hold'—well, the ritual for summoning a demon required the magician to consign the demon to Hell forever if he failed to come when summoned."

Hawthorne said, "So doesn't that mean that this Narmer character can't be a demon?"

Willis thought for a long time before answering. "No, Narmer's a demon, he acknowledged as much when he said he wanted Anathæ because she was 'one of his own kind'. Even though Anathæ said—"

"What?" Hawthorne asked.

"Narmer's a demon who never went back. Of course! Somehow Narmer was summoned by a sorcerer or a magician who was careless, and Narmer's never been back. The consignment of a demon's soul to Hell forever only takes effect if the demon is in Hell or if he returns to it."

Hawthorne yawned. "Sorry," he said looking at his watch. "You're not boring me, but it's one a.m. You might be right—it's a good enough

theory." The big man got up from his chair and stretched. "You know I can't help you with any magic, but I'll tell you what. I'll make some coffee, and then we'll both see if we can hit the books. If we can find this Narmer's true name, maybe you can do something."

HAWTHORNE'S demonological library was not as big as Willis's, but it was quite large. And although they confined themselves to Mediterranean countries—"He said he was Turkish, and while his accent and features fit, who knows?"—by four a.m. the pile of discarded volumes stood quite high: *Solomon in Egypt*, *The Hittite Conspiracy*, *Daemons of Greece*, *Gods of Asia Minor*, *Demons and Spirits on the Continent*, *The Road to Antioch*, etc., etc. The words were blurring on the pages, while between them, the two men had consumed enough coffee to fill a waterbed.

Willis continued to read, scowl, and turn pages as if it had become something of a ritual. His eyes felt like marbles resting in their sockets, and seeing had become an obligation instead of a natural function; he hardly noticed that day had dawned.

Hawthorne sat in a comfortable chair, a volume in his hand, resting his eyes. "Hey, wait a minute, Baxter," he said.

Willis turned his bloodshot eyes away from the book at which he scowled and gave Hawthorne his attention. "Huh?"

"You said something about drugs?"

"Right," Willis acknowledged. "Narmer uses this stuff called powder blue. Makes the kids subservient to his huge, powerful ego, and emphasizes a mortal sin in each of them."

"Drugs. I'm so stupid I could kill

myself. You ever hear of the Shastis?"

"Of course."

"The Shastis were a clan of demons. They worked their spells on the minds of humans, with drugs. Operated in Turkey around the eighth century. And very, very clever."

"Yes," Willis said, "that might be it."

Hawthorne chewed on his lower lip. "For your sake, I hope he's only a minor one; the major ones were some kind of hairy. I could tell you a story about what a Shasti did to a Sultan through his Harem that would make your short hairs fall out."

"Major or minor, I've got to deal with him."

"Well," Hawthorne rose and placed the book he'd been reading face down, pages open, on a nearby table. "If he's a Shasti, I think I can get a peg on him." He pulled a huge volume from his bookshelf. "I've got a complete history on 'em. Characteristics, names, everything."

Hawthorne placed the ornate, musty book on a desk and began slowly paging through it. "Hmm," he said every once in a while, punctuated alternatively with "Nope" and further pagings. About three quarters of the way through he became absorbed in the reading. He looked up at Willis. "I've got it."

"Are you sure? If you're wrong, you'll never see me, or Ana, again."

His ex-enemy smiled. "A few months ago, Baxter, and I'd have been tempted. But no, I'm sure. First, he's the only one who uses this particular kind of demon drug—the translation from the Turkish is 'blue powder'. Eh? Second, says here he's got a very powerful ego, very vain, likes the attention of *young* people. Feeds off them, likes them around. Right? Other stuff too—dashing ap-

pearance; his mother was a succubus."

Willis nodded soberly. "Yeah, that would have to be him."

"He's also one of the big ones," Hawthorne said. "There's an account here—well, a magician claimed he had complete mastery over this demon. Rose from rags to riches; lived in a castle, all that. And then he went quite mad—fits in with your theory, doesn't it?"

Willis sighed. "Give me his true name, Larry."

"Right," said Hawthorne. And he told him.

WILLIS drove the Volks toward his apartment house, then eased the car to a stop less than half a block from the single entrance to his garden apartment. Two students were lounging around out front—two students from the party. But they had apparently watched for him all night, and now they slept—or almost slept.

Got to make it, Willis thought, fixing his latch key firmly in his hand. He did not believe he would make it; his stomach revolted at the thought of a twenty yard dash and then perhaps a scuffle with two heavy-set boys who would consider no holds barred. But this was no time for indecision.

"Gaahh!" Willis yelled charging from the Volks toward the front walk of his apartment. He ran with his shoulder forward, reminiscent of basic training at Fort Dix.

"Gaah!" He threw himself past the two boys, who jumped to their feet, only half awake.

Their eyes bulged in astonishment as Willis lumbered past, threw open the outer door of the building and rushed up the half-flight of stairs.

"Hey," one boy yelled, pulling his long blond hair from his eyes. "Hey, it's Baxter! Get him, Bo!"

Willis pushed his key into the lock and twisted. The door shuddered for a moment, as if it knew time was of the essence and it must, therefore, consider the matter before conceding to open. But the door gave way and Willis fell in, slamming it shut behind him.

There were muffled shouts in the hallway and fists thudded on the door.

"Come out, Baxter! You have to come out sometime!"

Willis stood up shakily and yelled. "Get Narmer! Get Narmer and I'll be here waiting for him!"

There was the sound of discussion in the hallway and then even that died away.

Narmer would come. There was no doubt in Willis Baxter's mind—Narmer was too proud a being to let a challenge go unheeded for very long.

So Willis, despite being fatigued from the long night, pulled all the furniture off the rug onto the parquet at the edges of the livingroom; the TV was the hardest because of its heavy hardwood cabinet. He rolled up the rug, then the soft brown pad with about two years worth of dirt and paperclips, and on the underside of the pad he very carefully drew an 'X' with a piece of chalk, then a large pentagram around it. He replaced the pad and the rug, rearranged his furniture so that both of the chairs in the livingroom were inside the pentagram.

Then he made some coffee, hoping that his fatigue had not caused him to overlook anything. *Because if I have*, he thought gloomily, *not only will I die and Anathae be his slave, but a terrible evil will remain loose in the world.*

He drew the shades and lit candles for the atmosphere he wanted for incantation. The old grandfather clock ticked away seconds, chimed off the

half hours. It was getting on toward noon, the nadir of the demon's power, which would be to Willis' advantage; he needed every edge he could get.

Willis tensed. Something was happening.

Although it was broad daylight, the shades kept the apartment dim; the candles beside him cast shadows on the wall. As Willis peered into the shadows, he could see glimpses of whirling smoke holding glitters of bright light.

There was a gushing of strong wind, the smell of sulfur and brimstone, and a brief, almost blinding flash of light. And out of the shadows into the fullness of the gutter and flicker of candlelight stepped Rudy Narmer.

He wore a floor-length black gown marked with strange and arcane symbols. The robe was open in front and Narmer was naked beneath. Willis could plainly see his hooves, larger than Anathae's, rougher, with thick black hair rising up to his calves. There was also a vague hint of a tail through the finely muscled thighs. Also quite apparent now were Narmer's horns—big, thick things curling out of his forehead, which, Willis realized, would require illusion to hide in Narmer's human guise. Below the horns were flashing eyes and a distinct smile.

"Ah, Professor Baxter," boomed the night-throated voice, reverberating with authority and power. "So happy to see you so comfortably awaiting your finish. So happy, so very gratified." Hands on hips, widening the opening of his robe to his superb physique, the demon chuckled—a chuckle which came from the depths of his diaphragm, from the depths of evil.

"You seem quite sure of yourself,

Narmer," said Willis, fighting hard to keep the quaver out of his voice. "Perhaps you don't realize that many of us humans, such as myself for example, have just as much knowledge of magic as you do."

A bluff, of course. Willis knew some minor magic, had even summoned Anathae from Hell. But it took a magical being to perform magic with true power—a being like Ana, or Narmer.

The chuckle deepened into a rumbling laugh devoid of human feeling or hope. "You propose a match of skills, human? A battle of wits, power, knowledge?" Narmer threw back his thick curls, placed a finger to his chin and considered. "Yes. Yes, that would amuse me highly. Ana has been telling me how you raised her up, not once but twice, from Down Under. Basic parlor magic, of course, and most hilarious. Most hilarious indeed. You may not think so, Professor, but you lead a very funny life. A shame it shall end with so little humor."

"I see it all now," Willis said. "You're going to bore me to death with empty words—quite humorless, I agree."

A twist of the lips, a scowl. "You have no idea, I assure you Professor, what I intend to do to you. You, who had the nerve to resist my beautiful powder, you who had the gall to resist the ecstasies of serving me."

"Oh, I have ideas, Rudy. I don't expect anything original from you—poke out my eyes with red-hot knives, skin me with a dull pen knife, hang me on my own entrails. Nothing with any imagination."

The scowl became a frown. Narmer pointed a long, sharp nail toward the floor. "My Master below likes to keep souls, while I—" he swept over to one of the candles, put his thumb and

forefinger together onto the wick and plunged the room into deeper shadow, "—I like to snuff them out."

"Which is what you're doing to those poor kids—slowly snuffing out their minds with that drug of yours. Why do you fool around with drugs when you obviously have more powerful, forthright magic?"

"Ah, curiosity. I like that." Narmer's smile returned. "That's what's admirable about humans—their questing minds, their brief flashes of inspiration which raise their minds far beyond what even we demons can achieve. But there you have it, the answer to your questions. This facet of the human mind makes me envious, and gives me greater satisfaction when I snuff one out."

"Quenching your light will give me no such pleasure. You shirked off my drug; you did not want me as your leader; you did not grant your mind or soul willingly, as did your students. But I will destroy you anyway. You know too much. It's therefore necessary. Although you alone have no hope of dealing with me, you might band together with others who might."

"Like Anathae?"

"Anathae?" He snickered—a soulless laugh through bared fangs. Narmer's eyes lit with glee as he began twirling around, once, twice, his robe billowing out behind him. He abruptly halted his pivotings and thrust his right arm out perpendicular to the line of his body, his robe draping curtainlike down to the floor. "You place too much respect and confidence in the meager powers of your she-imp, Baxter. You obviously don't realize the pecking order of the demonic power structure. Females are invariably less powerful than males. No, Anathae was simplicity itself to deal with—easier than you, I regret

to say. Observe."

He lowered his robed arm, and where emptiness had once been stood Anathae.

She was as naked as she had been when Willis had first midwived her from Hell's womb—a perfect collection of human female curves and demonic sultriness that added to a total far beyond the sum of its parts. Willis' pulse throbbed faster, but he shivered to look into her eyes now because they mirrored a soul no longer his, a heart that had a new master.

The new master chuckled. "Shall I have her perform a few tricks for you, Professor?"

"That—" Willis' tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. "That won't be necessary."

"What would you have of me, Rudy?" asked Anathae, unheeding, in a monotone so bereft of inflection that it did not sound like Anathae at all.

"A little dance, I think," Narmer said. He gestured with his hands and suddenly held a violin and bow; he began to play a spritely Irish air to which Anathae began to move, prancing about the room quite mindlessly. "You see, Professor Baxter—a puppet to the strings of my spells." Narmer stopped the music and Anathae halted in midstride.

"Now Professor," continued the demon, "you mentioned something of a battle of skills, wits, power. Are you certain you wouldn't like something a little less painful for yourself in the way of a demise?"

"No. I'm willing to have it out with you in a gentlemanly fight."

"But good sir," Narmer said with a grin, "I am neither gentle nor a man. Still, the notion of battle intrigues me. Very well, a battle it shall be."

"Good," said Willis. "I'll sit here. If you'll just take the chair opposite me, we'll just see which of us is the more

powerful."

Rudy Narmer shook back his dark locks proudly and advanced to the chair. "I do think you are making a—" He halted.

Damn it, thought Willis. Why's he stopping? He's got to sit in that chair or—

Narmer regarded the old chair before him, cocked his head toward Willis and grinned. "Very clever, Professor. I commend you; very clever indeed. You almost had me, but this is a first—a pentagram chalked under the rug, all the chairs placed over the sign that would send me plummeting back to Hell. Most ingenious."

How did he know? Willis wondered. It's almost as if he could—

"—*read your mind?*" enjoined Narmer's thoughts in Willis' head. "But I can, Professor. Anathae could, and I've already told you that my powers are the equal of hers and more. Really, I'm disappointed that you overlooked that."

Willis sank slowly and tiredly onto the arm of the chair he had chosen for himself. All was lost now, and all because of his fatigue-induced stupidity! He wanted to hit himself for being that dumb, but he had the feeling that Narmer would do more than that. Yes, all was lost.

Narmer frowned deeply. "A second," he said. "If you expected this to work, then you must know my true name." His bottomless-pit eyes seemed to sparkle with anger. "And I do not like humans knowing my true name. *I do not care for that at all!*"

A quick gesture from Narmer, and Willis suddenly found himself floating upside down in the air.

Willis did not even try to mutter a defensive spell; he knew Narmer's magic was too strong. But struggling, squirming, battling valiantly, he shouted, "I don't blame you, Narmer!

I wouldn't like anyone to know if I had a Turkish name that translated 'Dungheap of a Camel', either!"

The demon flushed with fury. "I shall rip that fact out of your skull along with your brain, human filth!"

"Better than camel filth, Narmer!" Willis shouted back, grabbing onto his chair and attempting to pull himself down out of the air. But his hands were ripped from their hold and he was hurtled against the wall. He slipped down heavily onto the floor, groaning with pain.

Narmer remained motionless beside the chair. Only his face moved, writhing with anger.

If I could only push him into the chair, thought Willis. With all his remaining strength and despite the pain that clanged in his head he scrambled to his feet and launched himself toward Narmer, who simply raised a hand, causing Willis to smash into an invisible wall. Willis staggered back, crumpled, then sprawled, dazed.

"Be still," Narmer said, beginning complicated gestures of his fingers and arms, "while I manufacture the instrument of your grisly death!"

The gestures were augmented by brief spurts of strange-language spells. Grappling to his feet, Willis was halted by the wonder and horror of what was beginning to appear in the air behind Narmer.

Gobs of translucent muck began to form, suspended in mid-room. They spun, moved together, collected into one large gob that suddenly began to take on colors: mauve, slime green, blood red. Glitters began to twinkle at its center as this glob, this amoeba-like thing, began to pseudopod itself, to stream parts of itself outward. These pseudopods glimmered, glowed, then hardened into suckered tentacles tipped with

razor-gleaming claws. The center of the thing transformed into a body for the tentacles, a body which was mostly mouth. This dreadful maw was crammed to overflowing with spike-like teeth and yet found room for a horrible purple tongue that dripped goeey phlegm. Above the mouth were huge bulging eyes, eyes that gleamed evilly in the dimness, eyes which had seen and enjoyed seeing things of unspeakable evil. And incredibly, its obscene lips widened, and widened further yet; the tongue lolled out of the way allowing a view of the Hell-beast's lower throat. No, not a throat—a void. A starless black void, in which—*my God!*—human skulls and human bones floated.

Were those wails that Willis heard? Screams of tormented, damned human souls?

Fear twisted Willis' viscera, bent his mind almost out of shape. The mouth of the foul misshapen monster clamped shut, cutting off the incredible sight, but pushing out such a terrible rotting stench that Willis thought he might faint.

Narmer folded his arms and looked back over his shoulder at the thing he had conjured up. "Gracious," he said mildly, "I've been reading too much Lovecraft. Ah well, 'twill suffice!"

He raised a hand, drawing the thing closer. He indicated with gestures—for the thing had no ears—that Willis was to be its prey. and slowly, ponderously, the monster began to move through the air.

"Really, Rudy, don't you think your friend needs some Scope?" said a girlish voice.

Startled, Narmer turned slightly. Standing beside him, without a trace of stupor, was Anathae—who promptly bopped him in the mouth with her petite fist.

Narmer grunted with surprise.

"Anathae. How—"

"What's this male chauvinist demon shit about you being better than me?" she interrupted. "Sure, you've got more power. But you're not as smart. Now you've got more than poor Willis to contend with—you've got me." And with that, she kneed him sharply in the groin.

At first Narmer reacted as a man might, dealt a similar blow, doubling over with pain. But then he jumped back a few steps and threw off his robe, standing in his full splendid nakedness, and shook his curly head as if to shake off a blow. Offhandedly, he batted away a fireball which Anathae had seemingly pulled from nowhere and hurled at him.

Then Narmer stood tall; he seemed to grow. His barbed tail was very long, and it stood straight up over his head with his anger.

"Admittedly you fooled me. I thought perhaps your subjugation was a mite too easy. But now, Anathae," Narmer said, growing taller yet and more menacing—he stepped back to hurl a potent spell—"we will see who's smarter. *Thanos—aiieee!*"

This last was not part of Narmer's spell, but a cry of pain. It was difficult to say whether the demon's tail, when he stepped back, had been thrust into the toothy maw of the advancing hell-horror, or whether the horror had advanced upon Narmer's tail. Either way, the result was the same.

The monster chomped down, and its evil eye lit up with a glee that could only be called devilish. It let out a sound like a thousand starving cats feasting on a just-discovered whale.

Narmer yelped with pain. "Not me, dumbshit! Not me—*him!*"

But the ecstatic beast, besides having no ears, had closed its eyes with its joy and continued to suck the tail

in, pulling Narmer off his feet. It sucked in his tail, dear Reader, much as you or I might a piece of spaghetti (not in a good restaurant, of course).

Narmer wriggled about, quite confused, but turning to look up saw that the thing was about to begin munching upon the base of his tail. The captive demon screamed a few words, waved his hand desperately, and the monster vanished in a puff of green smoke.

Rudy Narmer plunged downward—directly into the waiting arms of one of the chairs.

Willis had recovered his senses enough to shout out Narmer's true name and part of the binding spell. "*Deve Gÿbrelik! Ubele-Canet-Minen.*"

"My tail!" cried Narmer, feeling the bloody stump behind him; agony was plain on his features. "My beautiful tail!"

"Don't worry about your tail, Rudy," Anathae said, moving over beside Willis and gloating. "We've got your *ass!*"

"What?" bellowed the demon. Narmer shot up out of, then bounced back into, the chair as though he had hit a brick wall. He let out a hideous bellow, and tried again with the exact same results.

"*Teryae . . .*" continued Willis.

"All right. All right, I give up. But don't send me back. I'll make it up to you. Just don't send—"

"*Exconae chanet . . .*"

Willis continued his slow, measured chant.

"Anathae," the demon whose real name was Deve Gÿbrelik pleaded, "talk to him. Listen, surely *you* understand. The, uh, Boss is mad at me. Very mad. That's why I turned on that magician those hundreds of years back. Please!"

"*. . . Isnel . . .*" continued Willis.

"Look, I just can't go back. I can't. You've no idea what the Boss will do to me. What can I say? I'll do *anything* to keep from going back." His smooth handsome features were imploring, his voice plaintive and begging.

I don't know what the Boss will do to you, Willis thought, hoping the demon was reading his mind, *and I don't care. Go to Hell, camel dung-heap!*

And Willis, pointing his finger at the demon, his voice steady, said "*. . . Canet!*"

Deve Gÿbrelik turned to black, lighting-shot smoke, and billowed away.

WILLIS BAXTER sat up from their bed slowly, so as not to awaken Anathae. He reached for his shorts, found them and put them on. He grabbed a pack of cigarettes from the nightstand, shook one loose, and lit it.

After the battle, they had both been very tired. Not *that* tired, but very tired. In bed, Anathae had told him that she had never really been under the other's power completely, that she had suspected something was amiss the second time she'd inexplicably 'forgotten' to read Narmer's mind, and so had been somewhat prepared. She had only waited for the right opportunity, which showed itself when Narmer's power was occupied with the monster and with Willis.

And none of this had disturbed him, then. They had made each other even more tired. Then they had slept. *And now what?* Willis asked himself.

For he knew that while she had waited for the opportunity, she had had to submit to everything, or her subterfuge would not have worked. And the picture in his mind of Anathae's lithe softness in bed with Narmer's sinewy muscled body was

not a pleasant one. Certainly it was no help to Willis' peace of mind that Narmer was not only better physically endowed but probably a more skilled lover to boot.

The easy way out of this dilemma, he knew, would be to adopt the method of the ostrich—stick his head in the sand and tell himself that it had never happened. (It was possible that Narmer hadn't had the time to do anything with Anathae. See, it was easy to do.)

"But not very likely," Willis whispered to himself.

What were his feelings? How did it affect him? How did it affect her? How did it affect them? What were her feelings?

Willis looked down and saw that Anathae was sleeping peacefully, nude as always, her face nestled in her pillow. He had a momentary battle with himself trying to decide whether she was more lovely asleep

Jackson (Cont. from page 95)

answer. Still, they should know. Even thirty-eight years from now, when the message will arrive. Perhaps, somehow, they can prevent this happening again. If anyone is left.

I am checking the recon unit again—inexplicably, resistance is low in one of the circuits—when Jackson comes up behind me.

"We can't, Daniels. Don't you understand, we can't."

I tell him to calm down, that he is a sick man. I have tried to give him Thorazine.

"They won't let us. They'll blast us out of space. And I'll laugh. God, how I'll laugh! That you wouldn't listen, wouldn't ever listen."

And now we have a go. The go-lights blink on, relays click, the viewport covers retract. In a few moments we will have visual contact.

or awake, then decided to call it a draw.

Had she enjoyed it? Did it matter if she had? He had to be very certain about his feelings, for with Anathae there could be no pretenses.

Then Willis laughed silently to and at himself. True, he had a lot of questions that would require honest thought and honest searching of his emotions before he could find the answers, but one of them was *not* 'do I still love her?'

He took a last drag off the cigarette, put it out, climbed into bed. He pulled a strand of her hair from her cheek and she stirred, but when he did not do anything more she continued to sleep.

I love her, he thought. *That's what matters. And that's really the only important thing.*

And with that assuring thought, he had no trouble getting back to sleep.

—MICHAEL F. X. MILHAUS

Jackson sits at his console. His hands do the necessary things but he still reads false co-ordinates into the computer. And then with a shrug resigns.

"A-453, 0-291, check," Jackson says.

"Readout."

The computer throws a series of co-ordinates onto the screens before us. Jackson reads them back in, closes switches. He has been well trained; that training has now taken over.

"A-248, 0-451," Jackson says.

And together we raise our heads to the port.

A small red point of light hangs in the center. Growing larger each moment.

"There it is," Jackson says.

He is laughing.

—JAMES SALLIS-
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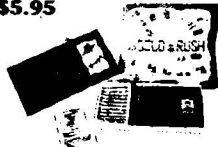
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eral. In good fiction, whatever its type, the action in the story grows out of the conflicts inherent in the situation and the characters, and the resolution also flows organically from the nature of the situation and characters. In bad fiction the action is arbitrary, the plot imposed upon the characters by the author, and the resolution occurs because the author—in the role of God, or *Deus ex machina*—has willed it to occur.

There has been a lot of bad science fiction written and published, of course (and it would appear from his own admission that Rogers has added another volume to that list)—according to Sturgeon's Law, at least 90% of all the science fiction ever published falls into this category.

But, and equally important, Sturgeon's Law (90% of everything is crap) applies as well to non-science fiction. When we point to something as an example of what we mean when we say "science fiction," we point to a work of which we are proud—one of the "good" 10%. Unfortunately, when a mundane critic of stf (or Rogers' post-grad friends) points to an example of what he means by "science fiction," it is almost always something from the lower 90%.

Clearly Rogers' friends' definition of science fiction does not apply to either, say, Ursula LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* or Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War*. Nor does it apply to the work of most serious authors of science fiction. These people would actively resent being accused of bailing out their protagonists by changing the rules in midstory.

Where, then, does this notion spring from?

It springs from the general culture in which we live.

Today science fiction has been "assimilated" by the mainstream culture. Nowhere is this more obvious than the success of a film like *Star Wars*—this year's *Jaws*, a runaway boxoffice hit.

But that which makes science fic-

tion unique and valuable—that for which we prize science fiction—has been lost in the shuffle.

It's been a long, drawn-out process which has taken over two generations to reach the present point. One can trace it back to the publication, in *AMAZING STORIES*, in the late twenties, of the first Buck Rogers story, and the subsequent use of Buck Rogers in the comic strip of the same name. One can trace it through Flash Gordon—both the original Alex Raymond comic strip (beautifully drawn, ineptly written) and the movie serials (ineptly written, ineptly acted, ineptly produced)—and Superman (the product of two young science fiction fans who daydreamed their character in high school classes).

Science fiction—or what passes for it in the public mind; call it "sci-fi"—entered our culture at the bottom. The vast majority of the body of work which we call science fiction and which has accumulated over the past fifty years has been steadfastly and completely ignored by the general culture, to say nothing of the literary mainstream. But the gadgets, the hardware, the gimmicks and the vocabulary—that is now totally assimilated. Ask any nine year old who reads comic books or watches TV, and he or she can tell you all about time travel, alternate universes, alien monsters, other dimensions, and faster-than-light travel. The "ray gun" has been with us since the middle thirties, the first visible spinoff of Buck Rogers' success.

On the one hand this easy acceptance of "futuristic" ideas and such once-boggling concepts as time-travel has facilitated public acceptance of "sci-fi" on the mass-consumer level. On the other hand, it has almost totally devalued these same concepts. When, in a *Superman* or *Flash* or *Green Lantern* comic, the protagonist gets curious about "what's going on today" in the future, he zooms to whatever "future" his author had in

mind the same way you or I might take an elevator to the upper floor of any skyscraper. No matter that "the future" is not—as nearly as we can tell—a fixed place and situation, no matter that with easy access to time-travel we could visit the same future date from *any* point in the (its) past, perhaps doing so on several different occasions so that several versions of the same person (differentiated in age-experience only) might exist simultaneously at that point. These are "difficult" concepts—they involve paradoxes and puzzles and force us to *think*. Anything approaching rational thought on such subjects is carefully avoided by the purveyors of comic books and other mass-entertainments. Instead science fiction is treated as "sci-fi"—it is treated in exactly the schlock fashion that Michael Rogers' friends complained about.

Or, to put it another way, science fiction can become assimilated by our mass culture only by losing its fundamental honesty, only by becoming a bag of tricks by which the author of mass entertainments can constantly redefine his protagonists' environments when needed. I call this kind of shoddy cheating via science fiction's emasculated gimmicks "si-fi." So, oddly enough, does the mass media.

MEDIA HYPE BITES SF: And that leads us, only a bit indirectly, to George Lucas' *Star Wars*.

I confess that George Lucas confuses me. His *American Graffiti* was a genuine classic and the touches of surreality (the woman in the Thunderbird) only enhanced the basic honesty of what he had to say and how he said it.

Star Wars is fundamentally dishonest, through and through. It's hard to believe its wooden characters came from the same mind that created the archetypical teenagers of *American Graffiti*. The book, *Star Wars*, published by Del Rey/Ballantine Books (and serialized in

Washington D.C.'s daily *Star*), carries nowhere within its pages any credit for its anonymous author (who probably prefers it that way) and masquerades as the work of Lucas himself. None of your "novelization based on the screenplay by" nonsense for Lucas—he'd have you believe he wrote the book himself. Dishonest.

I reviewed the movie for Washington's *The Unicorn Times*, the area's entertainment paper. I was not kind to it. I pointed out that lurking under its technologically impressive surface was a bad movie, ineptly conceived and badly acted. I identified *Star Wars* for what it so obviously is: "sci-fi."

I don't propose to rehash my indictments here, but the movie is a compendium of everything we ever laughed at in bad stf movies, from *Rocketship XM* onward: sounds of explosions in space (and spaceships making noises as they zip past each other), arrant stupidities like the line, "It took me twelve parsecs to get here" (you'd think Lucas might at least check out a dictionary), and a plot which depends for its resolution on the absolute stupidity of the evil rulers of the galaxy rather than any intelligence on the part of the Good Guys.

But the movie is a *success!* Further, it has been as big a success in the sf fan community as it has been with the public. After my review appeared I was greeted by friends and acquaintances with this remark, "You're absolutely right about *Star Wars*, Ted, but I still liked it."

My response has been, "But it could have been *just as good*—" for which read "enjoyable"—"without the stupidities." As nearly as I can tell, most of those who like *Star Wars* like it *in spite* of its cardboard characters and coincidental plot. They like it because it *looks good*.

As I recall, this is why most people liked *2001*, with its glaring flaws of motivation and logic. Can it be that

Lucas has hit on something fundamental? Could it be that most people when they watch a movie experience it wholly in present-time, with only fleeting memories of what has already transpired? Can it be that our population is so anti-rational that it prefers moment-to-moment titillation to continuity? Surface flash to substance?

I'd be a lot more willing to believe that, cynical as I am, if not for the fact that Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* is the other big box-office smash of the season. And Allen is an artist whose works have continuity and substance, and—more important—fundamental human insight.

Lucas had that too—in *American Graffiti*. Did he lose it? Or did he simply regard it as inappropriate for science fiction? I suspect the latter.

Maybe he shares the attitudes of Michael Rogers' post-grad friends.

A RELATED NOTE: After my review of *Star Wars* was published, and in subsequent discussions with friends on the subject, it occurred to me that there already existed a property which, properly filmed, would be to *Star Wars* as *Star Wars* is to *Flash Gordon*: *Warp*.

Warp is a play which was produced a few seasons back for a brief run in New York and a slightly longer run here in Washington, D.C.

Like *Star Wars*, *Warp* is based on pop "sci-fi", and while *Star Wars* draws most of its inspiration from the Saturday afternoon movie serials of the forties and early fifties, *Warp* draws its primarily from the Stan Lee Marvel comics of the early sixties.

Their difference lies in the fact that *Warp* has substance. Beginning with a hapless human from here and now who is drawn into the intrigues of the future where he finds himself to be Lord Cumilus, *Warp* treks across countless dimensions, deals with escalating menaces, and ultimately faces the basic questions of metaphysics: What is God? Where is

the Ultimate Truth to be found? *Warp* is witty, sharp, fast-moving, and above all fun.

As far as I know *Warp* has not been in production for several years. (The play was conceived as three separate plays, *Warp I*, *Warp II* and *Warp III*, to be seen on subsequent nights, and each ups the ante on the preceding part(s). This may have been too cumbersome for most audiences.) But surely it is due for a revival and it might make an excellent movie in the right hands.

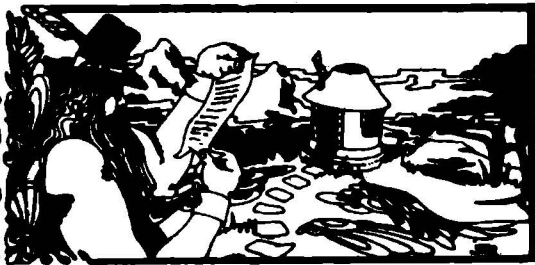
RADIO NOTES: My copies of the September issue of this magazine (mailed to me at the same time that subscribers' copies are mailed) arrived here on Friday, July 8th. By coincidence, that was the day I did my first radio show. Now, by "first radio show" I don't mean the first radio program I've ever been on (that occurred many years ago), nor do I mean my first appearance on the station as a deejay of progressive music; the 8th marked the debut of my own weekly program on WGTB-FM (90.1 in the Washington area). The *Dr. Progresso Show* runs from 3pm to 6pm, Fridays, and marks the culmination of those activities I described here in the September issue.

As I was settling myself into the squeaky chair in front of the board and cuing up my first disc I was told that the station, a non-profit university-owned station, had just received an Arbitron Rating of 1.8, indicating an audience of listeners of around 60,000—and putting the station ahead of two of the area's commercial rock FM stations. That didn't make me any less nervous about goofs on my premier show, but it did impress me. Think of that: 60,000 people in the D.C.-area alone. Three times the number of people who buy this magazine each issue throughout the nation and worldwide (or world-narrow. . .).

There's a lesson there, somewhere.

—TED WHITE

... According to You



Letters intended for publication should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of each sheet, and addressed to *According to You*, Box 409, Falls Church, Va. 22046.

Dear Ted:

I should like to correct two small factual errors appearing in your pages. One (suggested by Mr. Beetz's letter in the June, 1977 issue) was in my own article on Tolkien in the November, 1976 issue. I said that Tolkien had been wounded in the First World War. According to Daniel Grotta-Kurska's biography, *J.R.R. Tolkien, Architect of Middle Earth*, Tolkien was not wounded. Having survived the battle of the Somme, he came down with a near-fatal attack of trench fever and, when he recovered, was assigned to non-combatant duties thereafter.

The other is in my colleague Carter's otherwise flattering article about me in the June, 1977 issue. He says that my friends John D. Clark and I "both tried out for the fencing team in college, and both failed to make the grade." Clark's memory seems to have slipped a cog. He and I were both designated "alternates" (second-stringers) and I was called upon to fence in one intercollegiate meet. As I recall, I did about average. I wasn't very good, but then neither was anybody else; collegiate fencing was just getting started in Southern California.

L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP
Villanova, Pa. 19085

Dear Ted White,

I'd like to cudgel you with a couple of cavils about the June issue, if I may. . . the first cavil has to do with Fritz Leiber's review of Colin Wilson's *The Space Vampires*. One might call it an offhand mention more correctly. Its briefness, however, is not necessarily its fault; rather, it is the impressions and assumptions Mr. Leiber conveys about Mr. Wilson and his work that needs correcting. In such a short space Mr. Leiber does manage to mention three (out of more than thirty) significant books by Wilson and "various novels about mass-murderers". *The Strength To Dream*, which discusses writers from Lovecraft to Beckett to Tolkien to Sartre, is noted solely as the book in which Mr. Wilson said "Lovecraft had the imagination of a mass-murderer". Well, Mr. Leiber. . . that's sort of true, but it's not *exactly* true. He did say, page 2, that Lovecraft was "sick" and that his closest affinity was to the Dusseldorf murderer, Peter Kurten—because both men shared certain inner traits, being in common "totally withdrawn", having "rejected reality" and having "lost all sense of health that would make a normal man turn back half way". Later, page 3, Wilson says of Lovecraft: "Like Kurten, he wanted to horrify the world; fortunately, he chose a less direct means of doing it than the German mass-killer." Not necessarily flattering, true, and the less so, I would imagine, the more one admired Love-

craft. Now, for the record, Mr. Wilson retracted many of his statements about Lovecraft and ameliorated others. Mr. Wilson's concern, of course, had been to demonstrate that certain inner states of the psyche, such as the creative urge or drive, may manifest themselves in varied ways. Indeed, the individuals he defines as "Outsiders" are characterized, in part, by the fact that the inner drive has become so powerful that it *must* manifest. These are powerful ideas, particularly as Mr. Wilson expounds them and relates their implications to the individual, but I fear they are essentially lost to your readership through Mr. Leiber's negligence. Instead, in a form of self-inflicted ghettoization, the important fact noted about *Strength To Dream* is that therein Mr. Wilson said Mr. Lovecraft had the imagination of a mass-murderer.

Wilson is, by his own admission, obsessed with the paradoxical nature of freedom. The paradox that we have a mind or consciousness capable of seemingly infinite expansion and application and yet we are usually content to keep it narrowly focused on the road immediately in front of us. This freedom to expand, or escape, if you will, is *always* present, while man's awareness of it hardly ever is. This is a theme that runs consistently through more than thirty books to this date. Mr. Wilson's *ideas* have never varied, though he has employed nearly every literary form from the detective novel, to literary criticism, to drama, to science fiction, in their expression. It is an impressive display, both of single-mindedness and variety of expression, and it has resulted in the creation of one of the most significant bodies of writings of any contemporary author. It does not do, as Mr. Leiber does, to say that Wilson's writings fall into phases of "beatnik philosopher", "various novels about mass-murderers" and now "science fiction".

I have never caviled with Mr. Leiber before, but, in my opinion, this sort of outlook, based on underlying assumptions, is restrictive. We live in a very large mental house, and we should all take pains to at least explore some of the other rooms and, ideally, even to go outside once in a while for a nice, refreshing walk. But, this review of *The Space Vampires* is closet vision, at best.

Mr. Lin Carter, in his article about de Camp, "Quixote With A Pen", commits a related error. Where Leiber chopped down a tree to a twig, Mr. Carter has tried to raise a tree (a nice one, true, bearing edible fruit) into a Giant Sequoia. Comparisons to Voltaire, Rabelais, Aristophanes and Swift are fine—if they can be substantiated.

The common problem, then, is one of background assumptions and viewpoints. At best, Mr. Leiber simply assumed his fantasy and science-fiction readers had no wider interests. Now, what with all the name-dropping Mr. Carter engages in, I don't suppose the same criticism would apply. However, Mr. Carter does assume that his readers share his own assumptions, beliefs, and *opinions* about the world. If he wants to insist that Richard Burton acted in "what seems to observers as a heroic manner because of inner weaknesses, compulsions, or desperate needs to over-compensate for what they dread is cowardice or less than complete masculinity", I suppose he is free to, but I wish he would not act like that is the only possible interpretation (de Camp, himself, in an earlier FANTASTIC article had the perspicacity to label Burton an omniscient).

Perhaps a more glaring case is that in which Mr. Carter says: "De Camp has no delusions, or, if he has them at all, he has only those few which *men need in order to permit their existence to continue in the face of the ultimate futility of all existence.*" (Italics mine) "Men need. . . delusions. . . ultimate

futility. . . all existence." Really, Mr. Carter, you're liable to break some furniture in your office swinging such words and notions around. Men *have* delusions, yes, Buddha's life testified that he does not *need* them. Ultimate futility? Why not penultimate? *All* existence? Is the Sun *futile*? Gravity? Light? Air? Come, come, Mr's. Leibler and Carter! A little more thought!

DENNIS STACY
130 East Craig #4
San Antonio, Texas 78212

Dear Ted,

The June issue of FANTASTIC was in general a good issue. I hope we can see more of Marvin Kaye's material. I also hope Barry Malzberg will not retire more than now. Malzberg is a darn good writer no matter the kind of shit that has been thrown at him from various quarters (best not named for fear of advertising the idiot in question). The most saddening part of the entire issue was the circulation figures, while it is small consolation to see that AMAZING was the only zine to register an increase in sales in 1976, one will have to keep one's fingers crossed as far as FANTASTIC's fate is concerned.

James Sallis' story was especially frustrating to me, and the plot has nothing to do with it. What bugs me is the pedantic use of a foreign language, in this case French (my mother-language by the way). Sallis uses French words or locutions in seven different spots in his story, in three occasions there is a flagrant mistake; in another, there is a poor choice of words. Quite an average. For openers, in the title one should strike the "e"s at the end of both "Une" and "intérieure", thus keeping both in agreement with the word they qualify: "monde", a rule that suffers no exception. If you will now bear with me, I will tell you that in "s'arret" the accent that figures on top of the "a" should be above the middle

"e"; of no great help since the expression itself is grammatically wrong. It should read "s'arrêter", and I don't think that coherent use of the proper tense is nose picking. "Creux" does not have an accent. "Femme-objet" should replace "femme-chose". By the way, the word "spa", as used in the first column of page 66, strikes me as some weird transformation of the expression: "n'est-ce pas". Mr. Sallis is obviously not proficient enough with the French language to indulge in that sort of messing around. I strongly suggest that he try Swahili or Nepalese or anything that will not be read by anyone knowing the language.

ALAIN CHABOT
5, Hilden Dr., #204
Halifax, N.S., Canada.
B3R 1K1

Dear Ted:

I don't believe I've written a "fan letter" since my first fandom days.

But your tale of woe makes it a necessity for me to write this letter I've put off so long to tell you how much I enjoy what you've done for FANTASTIC in making it as close to *Unknown* as any mag has been since the great one's end.

What originally prompted me to write was Marvin Kaye's "Umbrella" series and particularly the one in the June, 1977 issue, where (as I wrote the author) he pulled off a miracle. I wrote Kaye in my long missive this early paragraph:

"I'm flabbergasted!

"I've just finished reading unique prose duplicating Victorian style, an outstanding new Sherlock Holmes adventure based on an unrecorded case, a sure classic fantasy tale, clever twists on old themes, an added episode of Draculain lore, and a bit of fun with my favorite Dickens character, Pickwick! In short, man, you're a genius for accomplishing all this in "The Flight of the Umbrella."

Ted, I don't think you mentioned

in introducing Kaye in the 1st Fillmore—Gad!—story in 1976 that he is a widely published fact and fiction author in varied fields by big name hard-cover firms. He's a young Asimov.

Considering that he was *not* a writer but a *drama* major from Penn State when he came to work for the publication where I was an editor (circulation 5,000,000 readers, 1,500,000 sold weekly, gaining more fans since 1882), Kaye has come a long, long way since he left Central Pa. for NYC.

I hope your mag continues because it is truly tops. Get Latham to do more funny Thorne Smith takeoffs; Mz. Tuttle's *Weird Tales* yarn, Robert F. Young's marvelous ERB spoof, Malzburg's variation on John Collier's "His Monkey Wife"—why go on? All the fiction was great in its own way and your features, always outstanding, were top-rung this time. (Love those old pulp phrases).

I've been a fantasy fan since the 1930's. (Published one of the 1st fantasy pocket book series, The Bizarre Series, back then which sold worldwide by mail.) I've seen many mags come and go—all the fantasy mags you mentioned. I've been lucky in living in a dozen towns and cities where your twin mags are sold. Here in Key West, I bought 4 copies of the current FANTASTIC and got another fan—the wife of the ex-editor of one of Chicago's biggest papers—to get a copy too. Total—I got you five sales right there.

Up home all my dealers, the distributor's own store, plus the large and small cigar store type stands, group the mags by category. Fantasy and sf mags go quickly. Of course I've often lived in college towns (my Pa. city has 2 colleges; there is one here plus big military installations). But what I'm getting at is that the *dealers* & *distributors* do give them a play. One of the biggest book and mag stores in KW has shelves of our mags

and books. A head clerk told me if they quit selling *them*, they'd go out of business! I realize this must be unique from what you say, and your circulation statement proves what you say. Why don't all readers subscribe, get other readers to do so, talk up the mags? Use the old Gernsback sales pitch.

I'm down here until summer when I go back to 434 Sheridan St., Williamsport, Pa., 17701, where I'm slowly getting rid of my huge collection. Stuart Schieff has put out one catalog of my stuff already and sold all stuff; now working on No. 2. Although my *WT*, *Unknowns*, etc are sold, I still have a file of FANTASTIC and F&SF. They fill my quota of modern fantasy just fine. Believe me, being an editor before retiring (was given 6 months to live 8 years ago until I started on Vit, E!—then painted my house roof in 3 months), I know what it's like to wonder if anyone appreciates one's efforts. We do, Ted!

RICHARD A. FRANK
1526 Catherine St.
Key West, Fl. 33040

Dear Sir:

You put together a great issue this time. Some things were (in my opinion) duds, but the things that were interesting were *very* interesting.

I thought that the best story of the issue was your story, "Vengeance is Mine." It was a good statement about politics and religion in the space age.

The next best story was "The Earth Books" by Robert F. Young. It was a good satire of Edgar Rice Burroughs. I pass over the details, except for one: why wasn't the story mentioned on the title page?

The third best story (by the way, these were all close) was Marvin Kaye's "The Flight of the Umbrella." I didn't like the original "The Incredible Umbrella" with all the irritating poetry here and there. But this one

held my interest with its storyline woven in with the Sherlock Holmes storyline. To quote something I read in *F & SF* a while ago, "There is some hope of more work like this from (insert your own author). Will all of you please clap your hands as hard as you can?"

Now for the story that was a turkey. Barry N. Malzberg's story is, granted, about love—with a beagle. Is this the story that people like to read? It was well written, but not the story you would expect to find in the pages of *FANTASTIC* or any other *SF* magazine.

Another turkey, not as bad this time. "La Fin D'Une Monde (interieure) (from the collected love poems of Adolf Hitler)" was supposed to be read closely. I tried to read it closely, but I still couldn't make any sense out of it. But it was nice to find out that The New Wave still exists in a way.

I liked your editorial. But there was one thing about *F & Sf* that I thought I should mention. I'm sure that I bought *F & SF* (the June 1974 issue) in the Washington area before the 1974 Worldcon. I was passing through Washington on a vacation at the time, and all I can remember is that I bought the July 1974 issue of *Galaxy* at the same time, and I bought it in a building next to the Kennedy Center.

It's good to find out that Arkham House had issued the final two volumes of *Selected Letters* by H. P. Lovecraft. While their price puts them out of my range, it's nice to know who Lovecraft wrote to, and when. Frank Belknap Long's book on Lovecraft also got a good comment on Frank Belknap Long's missing anecdotes about Lovecraft. I think there were more about Lovecraft and Long in the Lovecraft biography. And, according to the introduction in the same biography, L. Sprague de Camp interviewed Long in the course of his research. Perhaps these should be published.

Speaking of L. Sprague de Camp... I found the *Literary Swordsman and Sorcerers* column about de Camp interesting, and an excellent example of taking an accepted idea and turning it inside out. By the way, how many people has he done in his column in *FANTASTIC*? Lovecraft, Howard, Tolkien, T. H. White, and Morris are the only ones I directly know about. Who else? Dunsany, probably, and a lot of others, I would guess.

ROBERT NOWALL
6 Martin Road
Poughkeepsie, NY 12601

Sprague de Camp has covered the following authors for us in his Literary Swordsman & Sorcerers: Robert E. Howard (June, 1971), H. P. Lovecraft (August & October, 1971), Dunsany (February, 1972), Clark Ashton Smith (October, 1972), Fletcher Pratt (December, 1972), William Morris (September, 1974), E. R. Eddison (November, 1974), L. Ron Hubbard (August, 1975) and J. R. R. Tolkien (November, 1976). Although Sprague has taken a break for the time being there remains the possibility that he can be coaxed into additions to this series in the future. (Copies of back issues can be purchased from the Publisher for \$1.00 a copy.)—TW

Dear Ted,

Lumley has done it again! "How Kank Thad Returned to Bhur-Esh" was a splendid follow-up to "Tharquest and the Lamia Orbiquita." It's a rare occasion when a story makes me laugh so much, as this one did, but the Northman's caustic courtroom comments had me rolling. Damn it, Lumley, why do you always have to kill off your cool barbarian character at the end of each story? And after seducing us poor innocuous readers into thinking that these stoic brutes have emerged triumphant over whatever evil forces they were pitted against! No matter, I'm looking for-

ward to more stories in this cycle. Maybe one of these days Lumley will collect all these tales into one big paperback anthology. Now wouldn't *that* be great!

By the way, Ted, sure Tharquest was killed by the lamia, but didn't you ever hear of *prequels*?

Phil Latham's "Miracle Elixir" was another treat. This kind of unpretentious writing, solid characterization, and originality of thought is supposed to be extinct, right? Thank God I'm wrong. What an ending! You don't read many shocking shock endings nowadays, but this one was a genuine surprise!

"Vengeance Is Mine" was not the brightest light to emerge over the sf horizon, but it was an entertaining little fantasy nonetheless. It was adequate, worlds away from the *Phoenix Prime* stuff of the mid-sixties. That book's become a cult item, y'know, and copies of it bearing that wretched Frazetta cover are running ridiculous prices at shlock used-paperback stores.

The rest of the stories this issue can be easily forgotten, and should be.

"Sangre", while not being as so-called controversial as "Stone Circle" or "Mrs. T", both of which I haven't read, was still a disappointment. To begin with we have another incarnation of the current reverse chauvinism featuring man deifying a woman, licking her high-heeled boots, no less. All of this was just a preamble to what was little more than a droll vampire fantasy. "Kin to Kaspar Hauser", which appeared in the April 1977 *Galaxy*, was a much more intriguing story for its psychological ramifications and tacit layers of characterization.

It may be shameful, gross, and cruel of me to say this, but I've seen Barry N. Malzberg's picture, and he looks like the type of man who would write something like "The Man Who Married a Beagle."

Marvin Kaye's Umbrella fantasy left me cold. After perusing it and decid-

ing I would not read it, I made a similar notation about Harold Shea. Because if the prose (which was given to exploring the most minute boring detail and was cursed with that terribly dull Victorian-like staidness) is any indication of the other Gilbert & Sullivan type fantasies, then who needs the stuff?

You telegraphed yet another story for us, Ted. James Sallis's big cerebral masterpiece, the delicately-crafted tale we were supposed to read so closely, was to me low and vile crud of the most self-indulgent degree, the nadir of that indefatigable auctorial ill, writers' masturbation. But then, maybe I'm just a stupid slob that doesn't know True Art when I sees it. I don't care. I thought this story bit.

"Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined. . ." Yeah, anodda one a dose New-Wave hacks trying to pollute our precious bodily fluids with yet another godawful relic from 1942, refurbished as supposedly new and provocative stuff. Maybe Russel Bates is the next decade's Delaney, I don't know. And since I can't stand *this* decade's Delaney. . .

Well, I'm not all spit and firewater. I mean, Stephen Fabian turned out two great illos and one moody, eerie cover painting that would have looked great on *Dracula Lives* rather than the shit they *did* use by him. (Deluded fans, it's Olson that uses the stipple, *not* Fabian!)

C.G. Futch's letter annoyed me. What's wrong with good solid s/s when it's done well, as was "Black Moonlight" and "Tharquest?" So Felimand sings. . . La Dee Dah! I have to admit, though, that Futch did raise a few good points on just how hackneyed the whole heroic fantasy genre is becoming. His derisive summation of the genre's *one-plot* was pretty correct, more or less, but that only strengthens the need for new practitioners with brighter ideas and the need for writers like Carter to stick around and keep our teeth grit-

ted and our hearts racing. Futch, I'm surprised you don't come from Oakland.

DENNIS DALEY
5214 W. Crystal Ave
Chicago, Ill 60651

I'd be happier to get Phoenix Prime (and its sequels) back into print—or even to see a royalty statement on its last edition. As for both Kaye and Shea, I think you're doing each a disservice, and owe it to yourself to at least try the Harold Shea fantasies—none of which concern themselves with Gilbert & Sullivan. . . —TW

Dear Mr. White:

I read your editorial in the latest issue of FANTASTIC where you make a reader appeal to save the magazine. I'm very sorry it's come to this—such measures show that the planning at the top is bankrupt and it is at the top where any venture must be saved. That's capitalism: The inefficient fail because they deserve to fail.

I'm not writing this as a put-down: I don't believe in pointless slams. Indeed all lovers of fantasy will regret the loss of FANTASTIC even if they never read it, for the sad difficulty it mirrors for their favorite genre. FANTASTIC is the only real fantasy prozine in the USA. Without it we'll have nothing but the relatively high-priced and erratic semi-pros and fanzines to supply our needs; its not a hopeful senario.

Yet for all this I have not liked FANTASTIC and cannot recall the last time I put money down for it. There's no malice here—it's simply been a bad product. Being very familiar with active fandom I do not believe that the lack of interest on the part of the readership is responsible for the imminent death of a quarter-century running publication. A good product of horror/s&s/fantasy would sell; the failure must lie in yourself and your highest staff members.

For one thing FANTASTIC is physi-

cally a shoddy-looking product. Its form is bad, its design and aesthetics is amateurish, its artwork is inexcusibly bad (there is no pro competitor to siphon off the best artists and I know how many talented people exist in fandom who would love nothing better to get into FANTASTIC, but they have been turned away in the curtest manner) and the presentation is weak (why are you people addicted to the vertical half-page for illustrations?) The covers alone come off like rainy Sunday afternoons.

There may be some good stuff printed in FANTASTIC, if the design didn't make the zine hard to read—but of this I have my doubts. Either the editors are guilty of cronyism or of unforgivable bad taste. The same authors appear endlessly and some of them, like Lin Carter, have no talent. They consitute an oddball group of pros who crank out fantasy because they can't sell anything else or are mainstream sf writers who sometimes go slumming and do fantasy—and it shows. Your reputation is notorious for being indifferent, even cold, to young talent. They have to make a big name somewhere else before ever FANTASTIC would handle them. How long did it take for Karl Edward Wagner to get into the select club? Where is the best of the semi-pro (artists who have long been of pro-quality but have been kept in obscurity by the nature of the market): David. C. Smith, Richard L. Tierney and G. Arthur Rahman. They're doing great things while Avram Davidson is putting your readers to sleep.

And above all this FANTASTIC seems demoralized and demoralizing. It shows no enthusiasm. It shows no joy in the genre of fantasy. It would seem you fellows think the whole business is an unpleasant job that has to be done.

I'd buy FANTASTIC if it was done well. It's dying anyway so why not take bold action with design, writers and art? And if Conan is the only

thing that sells, buy time with Conan pastiches. Fans want a good pro magazine and writers want a first rate market which is receptive, imaginative and sympathetic. That magazine might just as well be yours.

A. C. CLINTON
Hotel Brown
301 1st Ave. SW
Rochester, MN 55901

I could get steamed up by your totally negative review of this magazine, but you gave yourself away, A.C., with your admission that you "cannot recall the last time (you) put money down" for a copy. Other portions of your letter betray a similar ignorance of both the actual contents and the policies of FANTASTIC. Although we work with an extremely small staff, a very limited budget, and in less than ideal circumstances, the one thing we bring to this magazine is a love for fantasy and a strong concern for its survival. And, although I am limited in the nature of the package (dictated by economics—the economics of production and the economics of payment to artists), I don't believe it justifies your out-of-hand condemnation. Many of our artists are the best in the field; moreover a good number of them (Fabian and Olsen the most recent) are former fans. (Due to production problems, our artists have to be easily accessible to either our Publisher, in New York City, or to me, in the Washington, D.C. area; for this reason I've had to turn away a number of talented artists, but I've encouraged and used an equal number.) Your attack on the authors who have appeared here over the past few years is totally uncalled for and unjustified. (Authors whom you condemn as having "no talent" like Lin Carter, do have their own

following—from whom I suspect you'll hear.) "Your reputation is notorious for being indifferent, even cold, to young talent." This is totally false: I have developed more new authors than any other science fiction/fantasy magazine editor in this decade. Indeed, my magazines have the reputation for being more hospitable to "young talent" than the others (although the cynics see this as a function of our low rates of payment). Where are the authors you're pushing? Well, they're not submitting stories to us, for one thing. . . To sum up, then, if your criticisms were true then they should be borne out by a contrast with the commercial success of FANTASTIC under its previous publisher, Ziff-Davis (who provided a very different package and group of authors—including, at one point, both Ursula K. LeGuin and Roger Zelazny). However, FANTASTIC has been a commercial failure throughout most of its twenty-five year publishing history, barely holding on for some of that time and running heavily into the red in the last several years of its publication by Z-D—and this despite a number of shifts in editorial policy under Z-D, ranging from making FANTASTIC into AMAZING's mirror image to making it a "wish-fulfilment fantasy" magazine. No, the sad fact of the matter is that magazines like FANTASTIC are published despite the capitalistic ethic you espouse, simply because we know that the need exists for it and because we want to try to fulfill that need. Obviously we don't meet your needs—although I suspect that if you ever actually read past the editorials of the copies you borrow you might change your opinion somewhat—but I guess that's a problem we'll have to learn to live with—
TW

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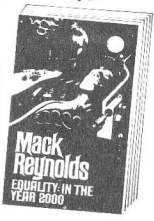
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