

Science Fantasy

No. 38

VOLUME 13

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Novelettes

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ENCOUNTER**

E. C. Tubb

**MAGIC
INGREDIENT**

William F. Temple

Short Stories

NOW : ZERO

J. G. Ballard

**WHO WAS
HERE ?**

Alan Barclay

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*Who shall say which is the authentic science—
that of the psychiatrist or the necromancer ?
But, pit one against the other—and both could
be right. Author Tubb returns to our pages
with an ingenious modern version of the
witchcraft theme.*

ENCHANTER'S ENCOUNTER

BY E. C. TUBB

I

Mark arrived late at the party. Two last-minute patients and an urgent call from a would-be suicide had thrown his schedule to hell so that when he arrived only a handful of people still sat in the big living room surrounded by the wreck of what had obviously been something to remember. Gloria would remember it later, that was certain. She and Bill were generous but generosity alone wasn't sufficient to clear up the mess. She squeezed his arm as he entered the flat.

"Mark ! Good to see you. I was beginning to worry in case you couldn't make it."

"I'm sorry." He made his apologies. "Is Sandra still here ?"

"Talking to Doctor Lefarge." She squeezed his arm again in warm understanding. "When's it to be, Mark?"

"Whenever I can persuade her that marrying me will compensate for all the tinsel she thinks she'll be missing if she does."

Mark accepted the drink Bill thrust into his hand. He sipped it. Bill had a good memory, the Martini and gin was just what he needed. The hum of conversation from the group in the corner washed over him, a blur of words without meaning, the conversation subdued as if they talked of things mysterious and secret. It broke off as Mark walked towards them.

"Mark!" Sandra rose, came towards him, offered her cheek for his kiss. She was very young, very lovely, her pale skin and thick black hair giving her the appearance of an Italian Madonna. "So glad you could make it, darling. Have you met the company?"

Mark stood, feeling a little foolish as Sandra made the introductions. As usual she gave him a title to which he had no right; he doubted if she would ever learn that a psychiatrist and a psychologist were not the same. The former required a medical degree he did not possess.

"Jim Taylor, he's an engineer," she rattled. "Sam Klien, advertising. Lorna Lambert, a medium. Ram Putah sells things from India and this," she ended triumphantly, "is Doctor Lefarge."

Mark disliked the man on sight.

He looked too much like Mephistopheles. Thin black hair hugged a narrow skull, sweeping down over a high forehead in an exaggerated widow's peak. Thick eyebrows had an upward slant. The moustache and beard were pointed, the face itself cadaverous. He was, thought Conway sourly, a poseur, his appearance owing more to artifice than nature.

"Doctor Conway?" His hand was slender and yet possessing a surprising strength.

"Not Doctor." As usual when Sandra had effected the introductions Mark had to explain himself. "I have no medical degree. Sandra is always making the same mistake."

"I understand." The eyes were deep-set, shadowed beneath the brows, pouched with dark circles. "I sometimes find that people make the same error. I am a Doctor of Philosophy." The eyes sharpened. "We have met before, Mr. Conway."

"I doubt it." Mark searched his memory. "No. I cannot say that we have."

"I assure you otherwise," said Lefarge. "Perhaps, before long, you will remember."

The group reformed, the others sitting like disciples at the feet of Lefarge, their drinks forgotten as they talked, their talk hinging on the one subject. It was a subject Mark found distasteful.

"I have yet to discover one single individual who has gained any benefit from the pursuit of esoteric knowledge," he said deliberately. "With all respect to the genuine mystics I feel that they have paid too high a price for their peace of mind."

"Such as?" Lefarge was interested.

"A withdrawal from reality. You must accept the world as it is. To try and escape from it has only one ending."

"To you then, the mystics are insane?"

"They are not normal. Abnormality is usually suspect."

"Isn't it necessary to first define 'normality'?" Ram Putah was gentle. Lefarge spoke before Mark could answer.

"There are many doors through which one may seek knowledge—it is not easy to determine which of those doors can yield the truth."

"And you, naturally, have discovered that door?"

If Lefarge caught the irony he didn't reveal it. He smiled, thin lips lifting from too-white, too-sharp teeth. "I think that I have, Mr. Conway."

"Diabolism, perhaps?"

Again the smile but there was no humour in it. Beside him Mark felt Sandra grip his arm as if warning him to be silent. The impression annoyed him, why was she so taken by this posturing fool?

"Diabolism, Mr. Conway? May I ask what has given you that impression?"

For a moment Mark was tempted to tell him. Lefarge wouldn't have been the first man to try and gain power by imitation. The legend of Faust had a lot to answer for. Too many weaklings, striving after some outward show of strength, tried to emulate the so-called Prince of Darkness.

"I have met those who have made similar claims," he said carefully. "Many of them have been my patients."

"I see." Reflection from the lighting made Lefarge's eyes glow as with an inner fire. "Tell me, Mr. Conway," he said quietly. "If you were a medical man and a patient came to you, badly injured from conducting amateur chemical experiments, would you deride chemistry?"

"Of course not." Mark recognised the trap. "The analogy isn't germane."

"Isn't it?" Lefarge shrugged. "There are many who would not agree with you. But, for your information, true knowledge does not lie through diabolism any more than medical healing lies through the medium of phlebotomy."

"Truth is a thing of many facets," said Mark. "Each seemingly different and yet each belonging to the whole. To claim that there is only one path to knowledge is to make a false statement."

"What is truth?" Ram Putah lifted his hands. "The things we see, the things we feel, are they truth or illusion? I can dismiss them by closing my eyes. Can they then be real?"

"If I were to take a knife and stab you with it, you would have few doubts."

"Only because I have yet to reach the pure state of knowledge in which I could deny the reality of your knife."

Mark shrugged. He had argued like this before and always it was the same. The feeling that he was chasing the moving rim of a circle, that the faster he ran the less progress he made. Long ago he had determined that, to argue against faith, was to argue against nature.

The drink in his hand had grown warm. He swallowed it, rose, crossed to where Gloria was standing beside the cocktail cabinet. Behind him the hum of conversation sounded as before, low, muted, secretive.

He mixed himself a drink, sipped then swallowed it, helped himself to another. Gloria touched his arm.

"Don't let it get you, Mark."

"I won't." He jerked his head towards the group. "Where did you find him? I didn't think that you went in for weirdies, Gloria."

"Sandra brought him." She took his empty glass, refilled it, passed it back. "It's nothing serious, Mark, you know how she is."

"I know." He swallowed half the drink. "Nothing normal is good enough for her. She's got to feel important,

the top-of-the heap and so she collects a gang of freaks and poseurs." He drained the glass. "Can't she realise that they're only using her?"

"She'll learn, Mark."

"Will she?"

He was bitter, angry, irritable and, he knew, a little selfish. Damn Lefarge for what he was and for what he pretended to be. Theatrical make-up and a smooth line of glib, ambiguous conversation and he had power over every neurotic who found life too tough and hoped to find an easy way to what they wanted.

"Don't blame Sandra." Gloria was concerned. Mark handed her his empty glass.

"I don't blame her. It's just that I'm in love with her."

"Then why don't you do something about it?"

"Sure, what? I've asked her to marry me—she says to wait. Should I kidnap her? Hypnotise her? Drug her? Damn it, Gloria, I want her more than anything I know but what's the good of my wanting her if she doesn't want me?"

"You're the psychologist, Mark, you tell me." She poured him a drink; it was almost pure gin. "You know, Mark," she said thoughtfully, "no woman likes to think that she's been made a fool of."

"So?"

"So you just telling her won't do any good at all. The more she thinks of you the less she'll want to admit that she's been wrong."

"Elementary psychology," he sneered, then immediately was sorry. "Forgive me," he apologised. "You're right, of course, but what can I do? Join up with that mob of self-eluders? I can't do it."

"No, I suppose not." Gloria glanced to where the group sat, heads close together, almost whispering their conversation. Bill was busy in the kitchen, probably making some coffee. Mark finished his drink. Gloria poured him another.

"Lefarge seemed to know you," she said. "Does he?"

"No."

"But—"

"It's just a gimmick," he said savagely. "Claim that you remember something the other man doesn't and you have him at a disadvantage. Either he thinks you're lying or he doubts his own memory. If there is no point in lying then he'll just doubt his memory."

"And Lefarge?"

"He's lying. I've never seen him before in my life." He stared at Gloria. "You think he isn't?"

"I don't know." She bit her lower lip. "It's just that, before you arrived, he announced your arrival and described you exactly. How could he have done that if he'd never seen you?"

"He knows Sandra, doesn't he?" Mark found himself trembling with rage. "She has a photograph of me—beside her bed."

"Mark!"

"Forget it!" He swallowed his drink. He felt a little giddy, he hadn't eaten and had been working under stress, the alcohol was taking quick effect.

Back in the group he found the conversation to be what he had suspected. He wasn't surprised, with a man like Lefarge, looking as he had taken pains to look, it was the obvious topic. Magic, witchcraft, the uttering of spells and the ritual surrounding the whole, stupid business.

"We were talking of the meaning of truth," said Lefarge as he joined the group. "If we assume that truth is the opinion held by the majority then magic is very real. There are even laws against it. Would there be laws against something which did not exist?"

"Possibly," said Mark. "The Law's an ass, remember?"

"Since the dawn of history people have believed in magic," pointed out Taylor. "How long have they believed in the other sciences?"

"For a long time people believed that the Sun went around the Earth. There must have been a hell of a lot of movement in space these past few years."

"You deride the true science," said Lorna, the medium. She closed her eyes as if wanting no part of the conversation.

"I deride only the things worthy of derision." Mark felt his anger mounting. It was more than a personal anger; fools like this did more harm than they knew. "Now, I suppose, you are going to say that witchcraft is also a thing to respect."

Lefarge raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, I know all about the sympathetic magic used to back witchcraft. Natives in Africa being hexed to death, stuff like that. All right, I'll grant you that. I'll admit that, in cultures

which believe in that power, that power seems to exist. But not in our culture. Never that."

"They burned witches in Lancaster," reminded Sandra.

"They burned dogs and hens too, were they witches? Fear caused that, fear and revulsion. Witches!" Mark's laugh sounded like a bark. "Filthy old women with their ridiculous ceremonies and their disgusting ingredients for their so-called charms. All the hog-wash of secret societies, the covens, the adepts, the initiates, all the rest of it. And all the time each has to cover up for the other. Do you get chemists talking of their work in guarded whispers and ambiguous statements? No, they come out with facts and can prove what they claim. Do witches? Ask and you get a lot of veiled nonsense."

"Would you give a child a pistol to play with? Would you teach them how to make nitro-glycerine?" Lefarge smiled as he posed the question. He was in full control of himself, the anger Mark had hoped to arouse had recoiled so that he was the one in a temper, not the other man.

"I expected that," he said bitterly. "Why don't you bring out the one about the Powers of Darkness? Or the dangers of the inexperienced toying with forces they do not understand?"

"Please, Mark!" Sandra was angry, he could tell that. "That has already been explained. You are only making yourself look foolish."

"I am?" He glanced at her, hating the way she looked at Lefarge. He looked at the others and hated them all. Anger burned within him like a flame.

"We were talking of witchcraft," he said deliberately. "And that leads us to spells. Do you believe in the power of a spell?"

"Naturally," said Lefarge calmly. "As much as you believe in the healing power of a medical prescription."

"You always have an answer, don't you?" Mark tried not to let his anger dull his intellect. It wasn't easy. Between himself and Lefarge seemed to exist one of those immediate antagonisms so that, no matter what the man did or said, to Mark it was suspect.

"Yes," said Lefarge. He was smiling. "I always have an answer—as you should well know."

"Why should I? We are strangers."

"Not strangers." The too-white, too-sharp teeth shone between the thin lips. "Certainly not strangers." He leaned forward, his eyes searching Mark's face. "Tell me, do you still not remember?"

"No," said Mark. "No—"

The eyes before him grew larger . . . larger . . . They seemed to float in a rising darkness so that he was only conscious of himself and the man facing him. And Lefarge seemed different. The theatricality of him seemed to have fallen away so that another face showed beyond. A thin wind arose singing in his ears and, as if from a far distance he heard screams and the shouts of fighting men.

He blinked and the scene was normal. Lefarge was only a man who tried to make himself impressive by his superficial appearance. The others were what they had always been, dupes for a stronger personality. He looked at the girl beside him. She was so warm, so lovely, so enamoured of the posturing fool with his theatrical airs.

And he thought of a way to end that infatuation.

"You believe in the power of spells," he said abruptly to Lefarge. "That and the rest of the nonsense you talk about. Very well, I offer you a challenge."

"Indeed?"

"Put your hex on me. When it fails admit yourself for the charlatan you are."

"Take it easy, Mark." Gloria stood behind him. "Let's not get personal about this."

"I'm sorry." Mark had to remember that he was a guest and that Lefarge was a guest also. The common rules of politeness dictated that he restrain his emotions. "But I just want this character to understand."

"You leave no doubt as to that." Lefarge glanced at Sandra, was there triumph in his eyes? "Are you quite certain you know what you propose?"

"Quite certain. Put up—or shut up. Do I make myself clear?"

"Quite clear." Lefarge was smiling and Mark wanted to hit him in the mouth.

Then Bill came in with the coffee and the tension was over.

II

He awoke with a headache and a vague sense that something was wrong. He groaned and sat upright, fumbling for cigarettes, inhaling the acrid smoke, sitting with his head between his hands as he waited for the pain to die away.

It didn't die. If anything it grew worse until he felt like beating his head against the wall to ease the throbbing in his skull. He rose to his feet, stumbled into the bathroom, filled the wash bowl with cold water and plunged his head into it. It helped but not enough. He straightened, water running down his face onto his bare chest. He filled a glass from the tap, found aspirin, swallowed a dozen. Blearily he looked at himself in the mirror.

Mark Conway, thirty-five years old, practising psychologist and disbeliever in all forms of magic stared back at him.

And something looked over his shoulder.

He turned so fast that he almost fell, the pain in his head flaring to a pitch so intense that he had to clutch at the bowl for support. There was nothing behind him. He turned, staring at every inch of the bathroom. Nothing but what he expected to see. He looked into the mirror again and fought the impression that, as he looked, something ducked down behind him.

Deliberately he began to wash and shave.

The party last night, he remembered that. He remembered other things too, Lefarge, Sandra's infatuation for the character, his own, ridiculous challenge. He paused as he thought about it, the toothbrush half-raised to his lips. Idly he wondered what Lefarge would do. Go through the motions he supposed, after all, what had he to lose? Perhaps he had already started? Well, if he had, so what?

So nothing except the impression that he was not alone grew stronger. Twice, while dressing, he thought he saw something in the wardrobe mirror. Three times he spun in a sudden, complete circle, his eyes searching for what was not there. On the way to the office he had to make an effort to stop from looking over his shoulder. Myra, his receptionist, looked at him strangely as he entered the office.

"Good morning, Mr. Conway." She looked at a point just over his right shoulder, blinked and refocussed her eyes.

"Anything wrong?"

"Why no, why do you ask?"

"You looked as if you saw a ghost." He picked up his opened mail, riffled it. "Did you?"

"Did I what, Mr. Conway?"

"Did you see anything when I came in. Anything unusual?"

"Of course not. Nothing at all."

He dropped his mail. It was the usual collection of bills, circulars and pathetic letters from people who wanted help but who only wanted it on their terms. He glanced at his watch; the first appointment was about due.

"Anything wrong, Mr. Conway?"

He looked at Myra. "What made you ask that?"

"No real reason." Her eyes drifted to a point over his right shoulder. "It's just that you look a little under the weather."

"Hangover." He rubbed his right eye. Something blurred the corner as if he were trying to see something just out of the range of his vision. He resisted the impulse to turn. "That and a touch of liver, probably. Forget it."

He went into the inner office.

Mark loved his work. He enjoyed the responsibility, the sense of achievement, the fact that each new case was a challenge to his knowledge and skill. With his hands, his voice, with hypnotism and suggestion, with gentleness and understanding, with drugs when he had to use them, administered by old Doctor Chandler down the hall, he fought to mend broken minds, restore shattered confidence, to tear down the walls of illusion and fantasy by which so many of his patients sought to hide themselves from reality.

His clientele was varied. He had his share of wealthy neurotics who imagined that it was smart to waste their time and his on endless analysis. He suffered them because they paid the bills and because they genuinely imagined they needed help. He gave them the psychological equivalent of the placbos Chandler prescribed for his own hypochondriacs.

But it was the other cases which made his work worth-while. The housewife who was on the verge of using the gas oven for purposes other than it was intended. The man who was afraid of his family. The child who wet the bed. The impotent male and the frigid female. The temporary amnesiac. The paranoiac. The manic depressive. The man who was afraid of spirits.

He sat and looked at Mark with scared, wild eyes. He was sullen, weary, defiant in a semi-shameful way. He expected to be laughed at, derided, mocked for what he could not help.

"They made me come," he said sullenly.

'They' were the magistrate and probationer of the court to which he had been taken after screaming abuse in a crowded church.

"I understand." Mark resisted the impulse to turn his head. The blur at the edge of his vision was growing annoying. "Now, how about telling me all about it?"

It was the old, familiar story. The voices echoing in the ears. The dreams. The mounting sense of fear because of what was happening. The final, desperate appeal to the priest to perform the rite of exorcism. The anger and abuse when the priest had refused. Mark had heard it, in one form or another, all before.

"Do you believe that I can help you?"

"They said you could." The man was still sullen.

"Do you believe that I can?" Mark radiated friendliness. Unless this poor creature believed in the power of the psychologist then they would both be wasting their time.

"You're not a priest," said the man suddenly. "How can you do anything?"

"I can exorcise your trouble."

"But if you're not a priest—?"

"They sent you to me," reminded Mark gently. "Would they have done that if I couldn't help you?"

The man reluctantly agreed. The power of Authority had been levelled against him; he had no further defence. A more intelligent man would have argued but then, a more intelligent man would have realised that the voices were only the product of his own brain, the 'spirits' things of his imagination.

It would take a long time and tremendous patience to convince him of that.

Sandra phoned late in the afternoon. "Mark! Are you all right?"

"Of course I am." He relaxed at the sound of her voice, feeling the warm pleasure which it always aroused. He caressed the handset as if it were a part of her. "Darling, will you marry me?"

"Please, Mark, I'm serious."

"And so am I."

"I'm worried about you." She did not, he noted, pursue the subject. "Did you have a good night?"

"I had a hell of a night." After leaving the party he had consoled himself with a bottle. He heard the catch of her breath and explained himself.

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing. No bogey-men, no deamons, no visitations. Did you expect anything different?"

"Are you sure, Mark?" Her voice was strained. "Are you sure that there isn't something you haven't told me?"

"Positive." He jerked his head in a reflex action; the blur at the edge of his sight more pronounced than ever. "Looks as if Lefarge's hex, whatever it is, is a wash-out. Maybe he didn't use fresh baby-fat or couldn't get any genuine virgin's blood."

"Please, Mark, don't talk like that."

"Why not?" He caught himself about to look over his shoulder. "What have I got to be respectful about? Lefarge's hocus-pocus doesn't impress me."

"He could be a dangerous man, Mark."

"Say's who?" He was jealous and he knew it. He forced himself to be calm. "Listen, darling, his theatrics may impress some people but I can see right through them. Results are want count. So far I haven't seen any and I won't see any. You can tell your tame wizard that he's wasting his time."

For a moment he thought that he had gone too far and cursed himself for being a fool. Surely he knew enough of the workings of the human mind to avoid causing anger and irritation? Sandra may be a mistaken idiot but that was only a part of her facade. What weakness, he wondered, caused her to chase after such a phoney as Lefarge? What did he have, what could he give, that Mark himself lacked?

And he loved her. God, how he loved her!

"Mark." He was surprised at the seriousness of her voice. "Mark, I want you to apologise to Lefarge."

"What?"

"Apologise to him. Please, Mark, do it for me."

"No, Sandra." He thought about it, his jealousy rising. "I can't do that."

"For me, Mark. Do it for me."

"So that I can be proved wrong?" He felt sick as he realised what she was asking. "Does Lefarge mean so much to you? Would you have me crawl to him, make myself look

small before everyone we know ? Damn it, Sandra, are you in love with him ?”

The silence grew, lengthened so that he began to think she had hung up. Then ; “ I’m afraid for you, Mark. So afraid.”

“ Answer my question ! Are you in love with him ?”

“ Take care, darling,” she whispered. “ Please take care.”

Then there was the click and hum of the broken connection and the empty line. Slowly he replaced the handset, fighting the jealousy within him, trying to rationalise it and knowing that it was a wasted effort.

Sandra ! In love with that fool !

He blinked, the blur at the edge of his vision irritating him by its presence. He blinked again, then jerked his head to the right.

He saw what was behind him.

Doctor Chandler removed the optometer, pushed it to one side, sat looking at Mark.

“ Want to tell me about it ?”

“ Nothing to tell.” Mark buttoned his shirt and knotted his tie. He was in the doctor’s surgery, the glistening instruments and neat cabinets giving the room a clinical appearance. He didn’t mind that. In this room he felt at home. It was a sane, organised, reassuring room. A room containing the fruits of logic and experience.

“ Nothing ?” Chandler raised shaggy eyebrows. “ Your yell could be heard all over the building. Then Myra rushes in here screaming that you’re dead. I find you in your office in a faint. You asked me to give you a check over and to test your eyes. And now you say that there’s nothing to tell.”

He was hurt. They had been friends for a long time, since Mark had taken office space down the corridor and had arranged with the medical man to administer the drugs and injections he was forbidden to by law.

“ Just overwork, I guess.” Mark donned his jacket. “ I went to a party last night and hit the bottle afterwards. Woke up with a raging headache and haven’t felt right all day. Guess I must have shouted as I fell.”

“ You guess ?”

“ I can’t remember just what happened,” said Mark honestly. “ I’ve been having a little trouble with my eyes, nothing much, but I thought I’d get you to look at them.”

Chandler grunted. He opened a drawer and took out a bottle and two glasses. He filled them both, passed one to Mark, picked up the other.

"To health," he said. Then ; "What are you afraid of, Mark ?"

"Me ? Afraid ?"

"You fainted. There's nothing physically wrong with you." Chandler sipped at his scotch. "I saw your face," he said casually. "What are you afraid of ?"

"Nothing."

"Don't lie to yourself. Every man has something he fears. Snakes, insects, insecurity, each of us has a buried fear." He looked at the liquid in his glass. "You looked to me like a man who had suddenly met it face to face."

"Yes." Mark felt sweat bead his forehead. He was beginning to remember. He wished that he could forget.

"You know your trade," said Chandler. "You don't want me prescribing for you. But one thing I will prescribe. Go home and go to bed and get some rest."

"A good idea." Mark finished the drink. He almost dropped the glass as something edged his vision. He left before Chandler could ask more awkward questions.

The something didn't go away. It remained with him, riding at the very edge of sight but this time Mark didn't swing his head round to see it full view. He had done that once and had seen what he wanted to forget.

Whisky could help him do that. He bought a bottle and took it up to his flat. The phone rang as he closed the door.

"Yes ?"

There was no answer. The line hummed with a cold silence and, after a while, there was a click and the familiar burring of an open line.

Thoughtfully Mark replaced the receiver.

III

Half-way through the bottle he began to grow cold.

It was an actual, physical coldness with goose-pimples rising on his skin and his teeth chattering within his head. He swallowed another glass of whisky, waited for it to warm his stomach and, when it didn't, rose and looked out of the window.

It was late, almost midnight, but it was summer and the few pedestrians on the street wore light clothes. He went to a cupboard and found an electric fire. He plugged it in and watched as the elements grew red. He held out his hands to the glowing bar. It was like holding his hands against ice.

First the thing at the edge of his vision. Now the coldness. Lefarge ?

Mark wished he hadn't thought of the thing at the edge of his vision. He had been trying to forget, sitting with his back hard against the wall, drinking the whisky, letting his mind drift free. Good therapy, he told himself. Don't try to forget, you can never forget. Just don't try to remember. He had given that advice a thousand times. He wished that he could follow it.

He turned his head away from the blur at the edge of his vision. He closed his eyes and moved his head back towards the right. He opened his eyes and felt relief when he only saw the familiar blur. It was odd that he should feel relief. But it was better, far better, that the thing should remain a blur.

He shivered, not wholly from the cold.

He started at the knock on his door. For a moment he hesitated, wondering what new thing was about to happen to him then, as the knock was repeated, he rose, crossed the room and opened the door.

Ram Putah stood outside.

"Good evening, Mr. Conway." His English was faultless. "I must apologise for the lateness of the hour. May I enter?"

"Sure." Mark waited until the man had entered. He gestured with the glass in his hand. "Drink?"

"Thank you, no." The Indian gazed impassively at the electric fire. He turned, surveying the room. His eyes focussed on a spot just behind Mark's right shoulder. "Mr. Conway," he said abruptly. "I have come to warn you. Doctor Lefarge is a dangerous man."

"You too?" Mark swallowed his drink. "Warnings seem to be the order of things today. Perhaps you would tell me? Just how is that charlatan dangerous?"

"He is a man obsessed with the desire for power," said the Indian. "Such men are always dangerous." He glanced behind him, found a chair, sat down without invitation. "Mr. Conway, you are a psychologist. Do you under-rate the power of the human mind?"

"Of course not."

"Lefarge has a powerful mind."

"So?"

"I would not like to see a man such as yourself burn himself on the heat of flames he does not understand."

"Interesting." Mark helped himself to more whisky. The glass chattered against his teeth as he drank. It rattled as he set it down. The cold had grown to something more than just uncomfortable, he felt as if he were cased in ice. "Tell me, are you a friend of Lefarge?"

"No."

"So this warning isn't in the nature of a build-up? I mean, you aren't trying to scare me?"

"I am trying to warn you."

"Of what? Of spells, mumbo-jumbo, incantations, witches' brews? Are you trying to warn me of things which do not exist?" Mark paced the floor. He found it impossible to keep still, the cold was too intense for that. Automatically he turned towards the left, away from the blur in his vision.

"They exist, Mr. Conway, make no mistake about that. What you call magic is a very real thing. It would be foolish of you not to admit it."

"Are you trying to convert me?"

"Only to a realisation of your danger. You are in danger, Mr. Conway, and I think that you know it."

"From Lefarge's hex? Rubbish."

"Rubbish?" The Indian leaned forward, his eyes compelling. "Then tell me, Mr. Conway, why are you afraid of what stands behind you?"

The streets were deserted, the lights few and far between, the night wasted until close to dawn. Mark walked the pavement, hugging his overcoat around him, staring straight ahead. The blur in his sight was clearer now, as if whatever caused it walked more to his side than behind. The same thing he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror. The reason why he had fainted in the office. A hint of which Ram Putah had discerned with, so he had claimed, his mystic sight.

And the coolness was a physical agony.

Coldness and something following him he didn't dare think about. Had Lefarge caused this?

Could magic be responsible?

Ram Putah had said that it could. He had said much more than that, talking in his faultless English, making the ridiculous

seem commonplace. And, because he had no obvious axe to grind, he had lifted a mirror and shown Mark the things he had known but had always denied.

Magic was real.

But magic was what you chose to call it.

Utter a spell and close a switch and, lo ! the demons of light brought forth brilliance. Electric light to a modern man would have been magic to a bygone age. Mix a mess of sprouting mold, coat it on a wound, appeal to the spirits of healing—and penicillin would take care of the rest. Crush a toad and get a heart medicine, adrenaline, still used together with the digitalis contained in the foxglove, another witches' standby.

Magic—or a fumbling pharmacopoeia ?

Alchemists had mixed their brews to the accompaniment of spells—and from alchemy had risen chemistry.

Magicians drew pentagrams and twisted their voices to shout incomprehensible syllables.

Mathematicians drew involved equations which even they could not pronounce but they too had their own jargon. And, like the magicians, the mathematicians could not prove their results but, by their equations, calmly announced that they had altered the concept of creation.

Magic—or science ?

Science Mark could understand, could use and respect. Magic he had always derided as a thing of arrant superstition and wishful nonsense.

But not everyone was a scientist. A child could play with wires and tubes and never build a radio set. A man could mix chemicals and never find the combination he sought, the reaction he desired. They would be working with the right tools but with insufficient knowledge.

And a child could electrocute itself. A man blow himself to ruin. Should electronics and chemistry be derided because of that ?

Or because of failure to produce any results at all ?

The concrete was hard beneath his feet but Mark welcomed the hardness. It spoke of reality, of things he knew and understood.

Not like the coldness which chilled his blood.

The thing which lurked at the edge of his vision.

Had magic done that ?

Had science ?

He paused and looked up at the building before which he stood. Sandra lived on the third floor. Sandra whom he loved almost to distraction and who said that she loved him but probably loved Lefarge more. Sandra who believed in magic and who, in a way, was responsible for the coldness and the thing at which he dared not look.

The outer door was open, the night porter asleep. He crept past the man, wondering a little at his carelessness, then dismissing it as he climbed the stairs. He made no sound on the thick carpets, none as he walked down the corridor. He paused at the door of her flat, one hand reaching for the bell, then he drew back his hand and tried the door.

It was locked, he had expected that. He drew out his keys, found the one he sought and slipped it in the lock. Once, a long time ago, she had given him her key and he had mislaid it. When he had found it again he had slipped it on his ring meaning to return it. He had forgotten, some subconscious impulse urging him to keep it. The door opened silently inwards.

The hall was dark, the air heavy with the scent of incense. Her bedroom was to the right, gently he opened the door and stared at the empty bed. His eyes flickered to the bedside table, then back to the bed again. It was smooth, the pillow firm. A nightdress lay over the counterpane.

He found her in the room she called her study and which he had never entered. Painted tapestries lined the walls, a parody of an altar stood against one wall, chalk marks grimed the floor. The reek of incense was overpowering, the flickering light of ebon candles giving the only illumination.

In that flickering illumination Sandra looked like a corpse.

She wasn't dead. She lay outstretched on the floor, unconscious or asleep, he couldn't tell which. Heavy curtains masked the windows. He drew them, letting in the faint light of early dawn. The sashes resisted him at first then opened with a bang. Cold morning air caused the flames of the candles to waver, eddied about the room and cleared it of the heavy reek of incense and the tang of exotic drugs.

Mark stooped over the girl. She was thinly clad, the long, smooth lines of her body enhanced rather than hidden by the robes she wore. Her hair was dishevelled, the thick, black strands stark against the creamy whiteness of her skin. The eyes were closed, the lashes looking like black butterflies on her

cheeks. She was beautiful, so lovely that he felt a pain in his heart.

Deliberately he raised his hand and slapped her on the cheek.

"Sandra !"

She stirred, whimpering a little as the morning chill bit her flesh. Again he slapped her, the impact of his hand leaving ugly red blotches on the skin.

"Sandra ! Wake up !"

"Mark !" Her eyelids raised, her eyes stared at him, twin pools of darkness in which danced the fluttering light of the candles.

"Get up," he said harshly. "Get dressed."

"But, Mark—"

"Do as I say."

He lifted her to her feet and pushed her towards the door. Alone he stared about the room, feeling the icy numbness in his bones, conscious of the thing at the edge of his sight, feeling fear and disgust and a little pity as he noted what he saw.

Sandra was a witch.

Not a good one, perhaps, not a skilled practitioner at her chosen trade, but she had chosen to emulate the masters, had hidden herself away to perform the rituals, conduct the ceremonies, go through the motions. In this room she had debased herself, breathed the tainted air heavy with the reek of drugs until emotional hysteria coupled with the vitiated air had resulted in a state of coma in which she had dreamed dreams and experienced nightmares.

But to her those dreams would have taken on the aspect of real experiences. She would have gained a false sense of power, of intimate knowledge of things unguessed at by the normal world.

She was deluding herself, Mark knew that. She was the child trying to build the radio set with the components others had assured her would work, but she lacked the elementary knowledge of what she was trying to do.

She was the amateur chemist who could blind or burn herself—by accident.

She was the seeker after a path to power—and she dared not, for her own sanity, admit that the path she had chosen was anything but what she claimed it to be. But, believing in that path, her sanity was also in danger. For unless she gained concrete results then she would be forced to live in a world of illusion in order to justify herself.

Mark walked about the room. He picked up a withered bunch of twigs and herbs. He threw it down and examined a murky bottle half-filled with what seemed to be ink. He discarded it for an ornate dagger razor-edged and hilted with brass. He stared at it for a long moment then slipped it into his pocket.

He blew out the guttering candles and wiped his foot over the chalked diagrams on the floor. He extinguished the smouldering incense and opened wide the door so that the morning air could cleanse the room of its reek.

Sandra waited for him in the bedroom.

She had dressed and tidied her hair and even applied make-up so that her lips looked as if they had recently tasted blood. She sat on the edge of the bed, a cigarette smouldering between her fingers, her eyes staring at the floor. He put his hand beneath her chin, lifted her head, stared into her eyes.

"Why, Sandra?"

"I was trying to help you." Her voice was little more than a whisper. "I was summoning powers to guard you against—"

"Lefarge?"

She nodded.

"Thank you for your help." He was gentle. "But I didn't mean that. Why do this at all?"

She didn't answer that but he could guess. Lonely, without family or the security which a family could give, needing to feel wanted and important, chasing after the false glamour of being different. It was exciting to be a witch. It was novel and amusing and it set her up above her friends. It gave her a jargon to talk with others of similar professed beliefs.

And, on the face of it, it was such a harmless thing to do. Who, in this day and age, would take witchcraft seriously? Everyone knew how harmless it was.

Harmless?

He shivered to the cold numbing his bones and felt terror as the blur in his sight began to advance across his vision.

He blinked and the blur retreated until it remained a blur. He took her hands and held them and fastened her eyes with his own.

"You have known Lefarge for a long time, haven't you?"

"Yes, Mark, a long time."

"You have talked to him, told him about us, told him all about me?"

She nodded.

"Why did you give him my photograph?"

Her eyes darted to the empty frame on the bedside table. They held guilt when they returned. He tightened his grip on her hands.

"Didn't you know what power you were giving him?"

"He took it, Mark. He demanded it and I daren't refuse. He—"

"He threatened you with—something?" The pattern was plain. Profess a belief in the power of spells and the threat of a spell will terrify. Sandra believed in witchcraft and so had made herself a minion of Lefarge. But there had to be something else. He probed, questioned, used all his trained skill to determine what it was that he had to keep hidden. Lefarge must at one time, have given her proof of his power. It came as a shock to discover what that proof was.

"He made something for me." Like others before her Sandra found relief in confession. "He—" She pulled free her hands, rose, went to a small cabinet. She returned with something in her hands. "He made this."

It was a bundle of thin twigs bound at each end with twine sealed with wax. The twigs were wrapped around a variety of contents. A tie; a bloodstained rag, hair and fingernail clipping in transparent bags. He held it in his hands and looked at her. He knew what it was, he had written a paper on such things while at college, a psychological study on certain aspects of superstition.

It was a love charm.

Delicately he probed at the contents of the twig bundle. The tie he recognised; the handkerchief bore his monogram, his blood. He remembered when he had cut a finger and used it for a hasty bandage. Sandra had taken charge of it and promised to wash it for him. The hair? He could guess it was his. The clippings—Sandra had once given him a manicure.

But there was only a half tie. The handkerchief had been ripped down the centre.

"Lefarge made this for you? Why?"

"I wanted you," she said simply. "You didn't seem to want me so—"

"You had him make you a love charm," he said bitterly. "Did you honestly think that this was necessary? That it would work?"

"You love me," she said. "You asked me to marry you—after the charm was made."

"I would have done that in any case," he said dully. Then; "Why didn't you marry me when I asked?"

"Because—" She bit her lip, tears glistening in her eyes. "Oh, Mark, can't you understand?"

Holding the thing in his hands he could understand well enough. Burn the charm and the love it was supposed to generate would die with it. Sandra had gained what she wanted—or what she had imagined she wanted. Did she refuse to marry him for fear that he didn't really love her, that he was attracted to her only because of the charm?

Surely she was woman enough to be wanted for herself alone? Was the charm, the thing she believed holding him to her, the thing which also kept them apart?

Mark hoped it was.

He thrust the thing into his pocket and rose and looked down at her.

"Get your coat," he ordered. "Take me to Lefarge."

"But—"

"Take me to Lefarge."

IV

It was a long way through narrow streets and winding alleys to a small house with a lowering roof and a door heavily carved in mystic symbols. The dawn had strengthened as they walked, the city-bred birds greeting it as enthusiastically as their country cousins, and it was early day when they arrived. Mark stared at the house. Two windows flanked the door. Three windows ran below the low roof. All were closely shuttered.

"Sandra, do you have a key?"

"No. Shall I knock?"

"And warn Lefarge?" Mark shook his head. He stepped to one of the lower windows and tried to peer into the room. Thick curtains blocked his view. He took the dagger from his pocket and forced it beneath the sash. The wood was old and rotten, it yielded to the pressure of the steel. Mark strained, moved the dagger and strained again. The lock yielded with a sudden snap.

The room was small, smelling of must and damp, a library from the books which stacked the walls. Mark closed the window, drew the heavy curtains and, by the flame of his cigarette lighter, found his way to the door. Sandra, breathing unevenly, was at his side.

"Do you know where his workroom is? You know what I mean."

"Upstairs, I think." She caught his arm. "Mark, do you know what you're doing?"

"I'm doing what has to be done." He wasn't exaggerating. The cold was like a nagging toothache and the hateful blur at the edge of his vision had drawn his nerves to screaming pitch.

Sandra was afraid. He could tell it from the way in which she clutched his arm as they crept up the stairs. Her breathing was uneven and, when he gripped her hand, he found it moist and clammy with perspiration. Perhaps she had reason to be scared. She believed in a terminology he found ludicrous — but change the terminology . . .

He opened the door at the head of the stairs and stepped into the past.

The room was big, running the full length of the house, decorated and adorned with images and tapestries which must have known the smoke of sacrificial fires in long-dead ages. An altar stood at one end, pentagrams marked the floor, esoteric symbols filled one half of the room.

It reminded him of Sandra's study and yet, to this, her room had been a place of cleanliness and decency, of harmless amusement and childish pleasure. This room was vile. It reeked of animal waste and the smoke of pungent herbs. It stank of incense and burnt offerings. Things had been done in this room which no law, no matter how tolerant, would have permitted.

Mark turned from the ceremonial objects and concentrated on the other half of the room. It reminded him of an apothecary's laboratory more than anything else. Jars, boxes, containers, were filled with powdered herbs, seeds, mummified remains of unidentifiable creatures. Lefarge, Mark guessed, ran a prosperous business supplying the peculiar ingredients deemed essential to the proper observance of magical rites.

Mark hunted through the room then paused, baffled. What he looked for wasn't in this room at all, it must be somewhere else in the house.

The kitchen perhaps ?

He led the way downstairs, to the region at the back of the house where the kitchen should normally be.

Lefarge was waiting for them.

He looked just as Mark remembered. The same thin, black hair hugging his narrow skull, sweeping down over his forehead to an exaggerated widow's peak. The same beard and moustache. The same eyebrows, the deep-set eyes. He wore a dressing gown tight-belted around his waist. Embroidered slippers covered his feet. He was smoking a long, thin cigar.

"Sandra !" He made a little bow. "And Mr. Conway, how delightful."

"Is it ?"

"Of course." Lefarge knocked ash from his cigar. He glanced at Sandra. "I must confess that I had not expected this pleasure, my dear." His gaze moved towards Mark. "You, of course, I have been expecting for some time."

"Then you are not surprised."

"Naturally not. But this is no place for discussion. I suggest that we meet again this evening at the same place and with the same company as before."

"So that I can eat dirt and admit that I was wrong ?" Mark shook his head. "Sorry, but I can't do that."

"Indeed?" The tip of Lefarge's tongue delicately moistened the corners of his mouth. "You know, Mr. Conway, I hardly think that you have any choice in the matter." He examined the tip of his cigar. "Don't you think that it's getting rather cold ?"

Mark shivered. Damn, him, the man was right. He had been cold before but now it was getting worse. It took an effort to prevent the teeth from chattering in his head. Sandra noticed it and clutched his arm. He shook off her hand.

"I brought you here for a reason," he said harshly. "I want to show you just how stupid a belief in magic is." He looked at Lefarge. "All that equipment upstairs, do you believe that it is essential to gain concrete results ?"

Lefarge shrugged. He leaned against a large refrigerator in the corner of the kitchen. The smoke from his cigar veiled his face. From the uncurtained window came the sounds of a waking world.

"I'll put it another way. Would you say it was necessary for a radio engineer to utter an incantation each time he soldered a wire ?"

"The two things are not the same," protested Sandra. "Mark, you—"

"I refuse to be blinded by esoteric jargon." He did not look at her. "If a thing serves no useful purpose to achieve a result then that thing is simply window-dressing. Science is merely a method of dispensing with such window-dressing. Magic will remain nonsense until such time as any magical experiment can be repeated and the results predicted—and then it won't be magic it will be science."

"You are shivering, Mr. Conway. Do you still insist that magic is nonsense?"

"Yes, Lefarge, I do."

"And your vision, isn't there a little something you would rather not look at? Still nonsense, Mr. Conway?"

"You have done nothing I could not do myself, Lefarge. Our methods may differ but the results would be the same."

"Hypnotism?"

"That and drugs and suggestion. I could hex a man so thoroughly that he wouldn't know hot from cold, night from day. I could persuade him that he was blind to certain colours, feel pain which didn't exist and feel no pain at all no matter what was done to him. I could even make him doubt his very existence and give him illusions which would, literally, send him out of this world. Magic, Lefarge, or science?"

"You are a stubborn man, Mr. Conway. How far must I go before you are willing to admit that, in this world, there are things you do not understand?" Lefarge leaned forward, the cigar in his hand, his back against the refrigerator. "I could kill you, you know that."

"I know it."

"And still you deny the existence of my powers?"

"No. I only deny the existence of magic. I know exactly what you are doing and how you are doing it. I can break your hex, Lefarge, and I can do it without incantations, the mixing of witchbrews, the undergoing of ceremonies or the summoning of invisible powers. Those things are for deluded fools."

"Impossible!" Sweat shone on the high forehead. "My power is too great for such simple breaking. I have pledged myself to terrible powers and they will defend me." He actually believed every word he said. Mark listened to the desperate intensity of his voice and wondered just how close the man was to insanity. He put his hand into his pocket.

"You cannot break the spell which binds you," insisted Lefarge. "Only I can do that with the proper safeguards and precautions which must be used unless they are not to recoil."

"You are wrong." Slowly Mark drew his hand from his pocket. The light from the window splintered from the polished blade, the brazen hilt of the dagger. "Magic is what you choose to call it," he said gently. "I have come armed with my own magic of cold steel. Stand away from that refrigerator, Lefarge."

"No!"

"Stand away!" His patience was exhausted, the time for play-acting was over. Roughly Mark pushed him to one side. He opened the big, white-enameled door. He bared his teeth at what he saw within.

It was a flat board, painted, covered with lines, signs, symbols, none of which he understood. He lifted it out and set it on the table. Something moved sluggishly and his thumb crushed it to immediate ruin. He was sweating despite the waning cold. The blur left his sight.

"How did he know I was terrified of spiders?" He looked at Sandra. "Of course, you would have told him that." He looked down at the board.

His photograph stared back at him, rimed with frost, half covered by the shredded remains of a bloodstained handkerchief, the ruin of half a tie. Mingled with the shreds were strands of hair and nail clippings. About the photograph, resting on various symbols, were oddly shaped pieces of stone, the dried seed pod of some plant, some scraps he could not identify.

Lefarge's hex.

It had worked, Mark could not deny that. By some means, not magical because magic was only the name given to the inexplicable unknown, an affinity had been established between himself and this board. An affinity so close that he had felt the numbing cold induced by the refrigerator, had sensed the horror of the spider, glued by its legs, just to one side of his face.

The spider he had seen in tremendous magnification when Lefarge had passed it before the pictured face.

Sympathetic magic some people would have called it and yet Mark denied that it was magic at all.

It had nothing to do with demons, incantations, ceremony, the mixing of disgusting brews, the exhortation of wizards and witches. It had nothing to do with the supposed powers with unpronounceable names. It was no more magical than hypnotism or the dowsing for water. It was science, as yet a young and barely understood science but a science just the same.

It had to be science.

Mark had suffered from it and Mark did not, could not, believe in magic.

"You know what this is?" He looked at Sandra, ignoring Lefarge who stood, shaking with terror, against the empty refrigerator. "It is a key to something certain people are only now beginning to investigate. The relationship of certain signs seems to have a special significance. Not strange, really, when you consider a printed circuit in a radio set. What else is that but the relationship of certain signs? Would you call a radio set magical, Sandra?"

"No, Mark."

"Then why assume that this thing, because as yet we do not understand it, is magical?" He pointed towards Lefarge. "Look at him, your magician, your wizard. Look how he trembles. Would a man, claiming to control infinite power, be afraid of a painted board—if he could do what he claimed?"

Lefarge made a choking sound.

"Why are you afraid?" Mark stared him in the face. The deep-set eyes glared back at him, the thin lips worked and foam appeared at their corners. The man was almost insane with hate—or was it fear.

Mark smiled and, with slow deliberation, sliced off the pointed lower part of Lefarge's beard. He hesitated, the point of the dagger against the other's ear.

"Should I take some blood, Lefarge? I might need it for future needs, just as you anticipated a future need when you retained some of my blood and hair. Does Sandra mean so much to you that you had to impress her?" The point of the knife dug deeper, a spot of blood appeared, Mark wiped it away with the tuft of hair.

"Stay away from me, Lefarge," he warned. "If you don't I'll show you what real hexing means."

He stepped back, laughing, as Lefarge ran from the room. Upstairs the sound of a slammed door echoed hollowly through the building.

Alone he stared at Sandra.

"What are you going to do with it, Mark?" She nodded towards the board.

"Keep it. Study it. Try to figure out just what it does and how it works—without any ridiculous appealing to demons."

"It won't work, Mark."

"Perhaps not." He drew paper from his pocket, began to note down the exact positioning of the various objects. "A dowsing rod does not work for everyone, but dowsing still works. They even sell them as engineering equipment in order to locate underground pipes." He finished his scribbling, put away the paper. "Lefarge can prosecute me for its return if he likes. Somehow I don't think he will."

"No, Mark, he won't prosecute."

"Not with what he's got upstairs, he won't." He stretched, feeling comfortable for the first time since the party. It was good not to feel cold, to have a blur at the edge of his vision. Good to know that he had been right all along and that, thanks to hints given by Ram Putah, he had broken the hex.

He noticed Sandra's expression.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Mark. It's just that I—" She looked helplessly at him. "It's just that you haven't proved anything, not really. Nothing at all."

He should have known. All his experience should have told him but he, like a blind fool, had overlooked the obvious. He had tried to prove to her that there was no such thing as magic, that witchcraft didn't exist save as a pastime for fools.

And he had forgotten that she was a witch.

You can't tell a person that what they believe in is ridiculous. You can't take away something without offering something to take its place. Sandra had become a witch because of certain reasons and those reasons hadn't changed. She was still what she had always been. Now, perhaps she had lost her faith in Lefarge, but that was all. The big thing still remained, he had done nothing to shake her belief in that.

He could argue but arguments could work both ways. Altering the terminology didn't alter the fact. She believed in certain powers, ridiculous things like spells and enchantments, hexes and love charms . . .

He slapped his pocket, the thing was still there. He took it out and looked at it then smiled into her eyes.

"You believe in witchcraft," he said. "Very well. That means you must believe in the power of this charm. Correct?" She nodded.

"And if I burn it my love for you will vanish?"

Again she nodded.

"I want you to marry me, Sandra," he said deliberately. "I have asked you before and I ask you now and I will ask you again—when I have burned this."

"Mark! Please—"

"Do you honestly think I would do it if I wasn't sure?" He looked at her and felt the loveliness of her tear at his heart. He would never change. How could he ever change when she was so wonderful and he wanted her so much?

A gas cooker stood in the kitchen. He lit the main burner, waited a moment, then threw the charm into its centre. For a moment it held shape, the blue flame rising around the bundle of twigs, then the dry wood caught and burned with a leaping flame. In minutes the bundle was unrecognisable ash.

Mark turned off the gas and glanced at his watch. It was getting late, he had to get home, wash, shave, change and snatch some breakfast before getting to the office. He had little time.

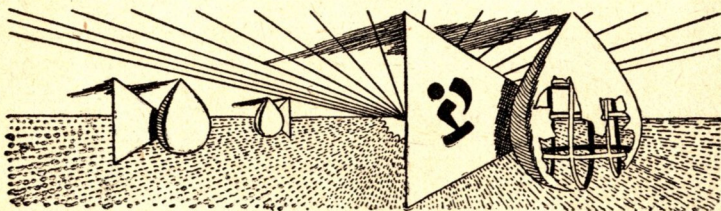
"Mark!"

He had forgotten Sandra. She stood looking at him, eyes wide with anticipation. A nice enough girl, good skin, fine hair, not a bad figure either. A nice girl as girls went. Spoiled, of course, but weren't they all?

She would make someone a good wife.

He glanced at his watch again and hastily left the building. A modern witch-doctor on a date to heal a soul.

—E. C. Tubb



The road to wealth and fame is paved with the names of men who literally "pulled themselves up by their bootstraps." What is the magic ingredient which assures their success? If any. Author Temple suggests several, all spelled differently but adding up to the same answer.

MAGIC INGREDIENT

BY WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

Self-made millionaires, I have noticed, almost unanimously have one thing in common besides their money. It is lack of education.

J. P. Morgan, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Frank Woolworth, Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford I . . . none of them went to a university and scarcely to school.

Therefore, instead of being cramped by an accepted system of ideas and behaviour, they each went their own way, developing their own ideas.

That's how characters are made.

So when I was asked to interview George Xavier Knight, I anticipated meeting a character. He was no university type either. In fact, I knew he was a foundling. But I knew little

else about him except that he had made his millions from KUM and was about to throw one of them away.

His address in *Who's Who* was Greystoke, Pelham Highbury, Herts. No telephone number was vouchsafed but that was to be expected. The very rich man likes to keep his line free for business, not as an unwilling ear to twenty importuning strangers a day.

I should have written for an appointment but delay was dangerous. The million might have gone down the drain before I'd had a chance to stake a claim.

So I drove out to Pelham Highbury without an appointment. "Boldness," said Goethe, "has genius, power, and magic in it." Besides, it might be good psychology. The bold—and Knight was certainly that—were apt to appreciate boldness in others.

Pelham Highbury, on my map, was half a dozen hyphens and a cross, meaning six houses and a church. I searched vainly for a mention of Greystoke. My map was old—presumably Knight had built Greystoke since the last cartographer ruled the last line on it. There were no mansions in the vicinity which he could have bought and re-christened.

It is surprising how rural Rural Herts has remained once one gets off the lines of ribbon development along the highways. I negotiated the dodgy lanes around the Ayots, where Bernard Shaw had sought inaccessibility, and went E.N.E. between rolling fields of mustard to an Ultima Thule where the lanes twisted so madly that every few minutes my car bonnet practically boxed the compass.

Well, I thought, giddily, if this is the sort of personal approach I have to make to get my hands on that million, no one can say I haven't earned it.

Eventually, I ran Pelham Highbury to earth. Greystoke was no mansion, new or old. Unbelievably, it was the smallest and dingiest of the six houses. The windows were so grimy that you couldn't tell whether the curtains were clean or not. The paintwork just wasn't any more.

So, I thought, he's the eccentric millionaire type. There was no telling whether that would make my task easier or harder.

No doorbell. I manipulated the knocker. It was stiff with rust and squeaked louder than it banged. But somebody heard. The door opened. A glum, forty-ish man stood there,

very spruce in black coat, pin-striped trousers, stiff white collar—like a lost or strayed stockbroker.

I presented my card. "I should like to see Mr. Knight, if he's in."

The man looked at me, at the card, back to me. "The point is," he said, in cold, cultured tones, "whether Mr. Knight would like to see you."

"Precisely."

"It depends upon what you wish to see him about."

"Precisely."

Silence. The silence of the polar wastes.

Then : "Well, what do you wish to see him about?"

"Money."

The temperature fell to sixty below.

"Money?"

"Money."

"Money?" A third voice entered the part-song. Cold too, but cultured, no. "What's all this harping on money?" asked George Xavier Knight, emerging from the gothic gloom of the hall. He snatched my card from the other man, read it aloud laboriously : "Doctor F. H. Frisby, Ph.D., B.Sc., F.R.A.S., University of Yorkborough. Place him, Valmont?"

"Cambridge," said Valmont. "St. John's, I think."

"Correct," I said.

Valmont looked momentarily less glum. "Professor Henry Higgins could have learned a few things from me."

Then I realised he'd placed me, not by my modest reputation, but by my accent.

Negligently, Knight dropped my card on the piece of sacking serving as a doormat. "Come in, Frisby."

I went in—to chaos, in the single big room on the ground floor. The place was like a slum in one of the "Mean Streets" of the Victorian East End. The furniture was gimcrack, wormeaten, save for one item : an antique refectory table, now used as a desk, piled with papers. Pails of garbage and slops stood around. The effect was like the inside of a dust-cart.

Knight watched me for my reaction. I betrayed none, but watched him watching. He seemed not to have washed or shaved for days and his uncut mop of hair was tangled and definitely off-white. He wore a greasy check shirt and his old grey flannel trousers were held up by a piece of string round his thick waist.

Suddenly, he said : " Think I'm a miser, don't you ? Like Hetty Green, with all her millions, dressing in rags, using old newspapers for underclothes, living in flop-houses, hoarding every dime. Think I'm mean, eh ? Look here."

He drew a roll of paper money from his pocket, peeled off a note. " A tenner, see ?" He tore it into small pieces and threw them away like confetti. They drifted to increase the litter on the floor.

" Your point is taken," I said. " But if you must throw money away, why not throw it in my direction—in one piece ?"

" Begging, Dr. Frisby ?"

" Yes. For my University. Also, in the wider sense, for mankind, for science."

" The way out," said Valmont, frostily, " is the way you came in."

" Shut up," said Knight. " He's come a long way to say his piece. Let him say it. Sit down, Frisby."

I sat down, gingerly, in a cane chair that creaked and swayed. Knight sat on the refectory table and stabbed his cigar out on its one polished surface. That, I saw, was not the first time. There was a pile of documents at his elbow, with a heavy bible surmounting it. He made an armrest of it.

I said : " According to the press, you propose spending a million pounds to send up an earth satellite advertising KUM in glowing—"

" Forget it. The Government slapped me down before I'd hardly stood up."

" Naturally. They would. I wish to suggest an alternative."

" Wish granted."

" Perhaps you remember an American millionaire, James Lick. He proposed spending a fortune on a gigantic statue of himself so that posterity would remember James Lick."

" Fool !" said Knight. " Who cares about posterity ?"

Damn it, I thought, inwardly, I'm not going to hook him with vanity. But I went on : " The University of California persuaded him that a better memorial would be a giant astronomical telescope bearing his name. Hence the renowned Lick Observatory, with the biggest refractor in the world at that time."

" You thrill me." Knight looked boredly at the dirty ceiling.

I said, almost defiantly : " The University of Yorkborough wishes to build the biggest radio-telescope in the world, of far greater scope than Jodrell Bank."

" Is Jodrell Bank paid for yet ?" asked Valmont, musingly. " I seem to remember nobody wanted to fork out for that. The Government considered obsolete bombers a better investment."

I ignored him. " It would become world-famous as the KUM Telescope, a lasting advertisement and a tribute to your work on behalf of mankind."

" My only work on behalf of mankind," said Knight, " is to milk it."

Valmont said : " They buried Lick in the brick base of his telescope. Does your proposal, Doctor, guarantee a similar mausoleum for Mr. Knight ?"

" If he insists . . . You seem to be a mine of information, Valmont."

" I employ him because he knows most of the things I don't," said Knight. " He's a university man, too. I also employ him to clean up all this mess when I'm through making it."

He indicated the surroundings. Slowly I turned my frown from him to Valmont.

" Quite true," said Valmont, unperturbed. " Mr. Knight has a strong streak of infantilism, which has to find expression sometimes. You see—"

" Skip the jargon," said Knight, harshly. " It's this way, Frisby. As a kid I was over-disciplined. The home I was stuck in went in for more bull than the Guards. Scrub, wash, polish, tidy . . . a dirty fingernail meant a day on bread and water. When I think of that bunch of neurotic so-and-sos . . . not fit to be in charge of kids . . . especially *hurt* kids, who'd been abandoned . . . Father Xavier was the worst of the lot. I was his special charge. He gave me his name and tried to save my soul—that way."

" So all this is just rebellion against all that ?"

" It gives me a relief you wouldn't understand unless you'd been through what I have. And, of course, you haven't—you plushy Cambridge boys never did." Knight's expression was savage. " The champion benefactor was one of you la-di-da birds. When *he* came, they scrubbed even the lining of our guts. I promised myself that one day I'd have the gentry cleaning up for *me*."

" Now I understand the reason for the hired help," I said, looking at Valmont. " And for his livery."

"I'd do anything for money," said Valmont, unabashed. "Like most people. Every man has his price. Mr. Knight pays high."

"I admit I wouldn't mind scrubbing the floor myself for that million," I said.

Knight looked at me and spat on the said floor. "You make me sick."

"It's all right for you," I said. "You can afford to be an idealist. That being so, about this telescope—"

"What good would it do?" asked Knight, brusquely. "Would it tell us whether Mars and Venus are inhabited?"

"I'm afraid not. It's not that kind of instrument."

"It can only detect a few million more galaxies," said Valmont. "It can't help us to reach them. Mr. Knight is interested only in enlarging his sales territory. He might be able to sell KUM to a white dwarf on Venus but he can hardly sell it to a white dwarf star."

"Aren't you curious about what sort of universe you live in?" I asked.

"I know what sort of universe I live in," said Knight. "It's a jungle. The apes which infest it are nice to get away from. That's why I live out here, where I don't see 'em, when I'm not having to live in hotels and aeroplanes."

"Be fair," I said. "The apes are trying to educate themselves. Seeking knowledge. This telescope, for instance. Think of the new facts—"

"The only fact worth knowing," said Knight, "is that capital invested at five per cent compound doubles itself in fourteen years. Go and tell that to your Board of Directors. Tell 'em to be patient—the first million is the hardest. But they're not getting a penny of it from me."

I saw the battle was lost, and stood up. "Very well, Mr. Knight. As a matter of interest, what *do* you intend to do with that million?"

"Exactly what I intended to do before—advertise KUM."

"Writ large," said Valmont, cryptically.

I stared at them. "Does it really need it?"

"What is KUM spelt backwards?" Knight counter-questioned.

"Er—MUK. Why? Oh, I see . . ."

"That was how I thought it was spelt, in those days. I didn't have Valmont to supply my missing education. I'm an

honest man, you see. Muck it is and muck I called it. The public will buy anything—*so long as it's advertised*. By the way, if you quote me I'll sue you and ruin you."

"Actually," I said, "I thought KUM was pretty good stuff. It's certainly expensive enough. It's been endorsed by the medical profession as the best known cure for rheumatism."

"It's the best known—in either sense," said Valmont. "And that's because of its Magic Ingredient."

"Oh, yes, the famous Magic Ingredient. Is it anything beyond the hoary old advertising myth?"

"It exists," said Knight, curtly. "Let's leave it at that. Goodbye, Dr. Frisby."

I paused at the door for a Parthian shot. "All the same, I think the million would be better disposed of in the form of donations to Homes for Foundlings."

I turned to go.

The bible at Knight's elbow was, I suspected, being used contemptuously only for a paper-weight. Knight proved it had another use—as a near-lethal missile. It nearly broke my neck, which was stiff for days afterwards. But I suppose I deserved it. It had been a stupid and malicious thing to say.

My lack of success in getting the money was nicely equalled by my lack of success in explaining to the Vice-Chancellor and some half-dozen members of the Council why I hadn't got the money.

"Clearly, you went the wrong way about it, Dr. Frisby," said the Vice-Chancellor, trying to spike me with a stare of concentrated disapproval. "I should have gone myself."

"I wish you had, sir," I said, with feeling. My neck still felt as though it had been wrung.

"I'll write to him," said the Vice-Chancellor, curtly, as though that would settle everything.

I thought: just another bit of scrap paper for Valmont to pick up. Doubtless it was, for I never heard that the Vice-Chancellor received any reply.

For some days I told myself that there was no reason at all to feel humiliated by the verdict of the bunch of dim snobs which constituted the Council. And that their reason for wanting the telescope was not mine, and despicable. But I still felt pretty low.

I didn't exactly soar when the daily papers told us all what Knight had decided to do with the million: to construct the

largest neon advertising sign in the world. He'd bought up an odd strip of wasteland not two miles from London Airport. It was a third of a mile long and a couple of hundred yards wide.

Here, writ large, as Valmont had said, in bright red letters formed of enormous banks of neon tubes, KUM was to re-affirm its existence to the skies.

It was no coincidence that the skies in those parts were thick with droning monsters carrying rich—and, it was to be hoped, rheumatically—people from New York, Paris, and the Blue Coast, the cream of the world's hypochondriacs. People who would become conditioned to remember that their first sight of the Lights of London would not be the thinly strung pearls of the Airport's runways, but one simple syllable, glowing like a warm and welcoming electric fire on a cold, dark night.

Knight knew his public. KUM was for those who could afford to pay. You couldn't get it over a chemist's counter, like aspirins. You got it from a KUM Clinic and you paid plenty. Or you got it through a doctor's prescription and the National Health Service—and the public paid plenty.

But no-one was robbed. KUM was a genuine wonder-worker.

At one time, Knight, under the banner of Knight's Universal Medicants, marketed a variety of panaceas. All rubbish, save for the cure for rheumatism. This zoomed far beyond the rest. Gradually Knight dropped the others, and K.U.M. became plain KUM, the killer of rheumatism. So ran the accepted story. I accepted it, too, concluding that Knight's MUK-in-reverse version was only a sardonic gag.

Time went by, as time did at the University, in slow repetitive weeks. Even the genteel dogfights were repetitive. The dons slung mud, pulled strings, slid knives into backs with the same ritual motions. The stale atmosphere of intrigue nauseated me.

I chucked a few brickbats myself, mostly at the collective target of the Council. There was something rotten in York-borough and that was where the worst smell was coming from. I began to know the pattern of the Vice-Chancellor's carpet intimately.

Into this murk there came one day an unexpected flash of gold. Twirly letters in gold leaf informed me that Mr. George X. Knight desired the pleasure of my company at a party to celebrate the switching on of the world's largest neon sign.

Perhaps his conscience nagged him for scoring with that bible. But I doubted it. I had no trouble with my own conscience over cutting my classes when the day came and catching the London train.

It was wet all the way, but wettest at the party. It was in full swing in the huge marquee Knight had had erected at the edge of the land-strip, and the place was awash with champagne. A band was playing at the foggy far end.

It was an exclusive party in the sense that it consisted of the sort of people who drank champagne exclusively. Apart from myself, of course. But I recognised Lord This and Lady That and even an odd—very—viscount. They didn't recognise me.

Presumably they were all KUM addicts.

They were not my sort of people, and I began to wonder why I had chosen to exchange the company of one set of snobs and bores for another. I saw Knight in the centre of a group. He didn't look like a tramp now. His evening dress was like a too-good-go-be-true tailor's ad in a glossy magazine. Some tonsorial artist had been at work on his hair: he had a snow-white, sweeping mane like Bertrand Russell.

He didn't see me, but Valmont did, and abandoned a couple of countesses (at least) to come and greet me. He had no pride and therefore was no snob. Perhaps it was the champagne, but he was almost cheerful.

"I'm glad you made it, Dr. Frisby," he said, gripping my hand.

I regarded him warily. "I don't know why I was asked or why I came or why the welcome is warmer than last time."

"After you'd gone, Mr. Knight decided you were an honest man like himself—and like me. And an honest man is a *rara avis*, believe me. Have you had a drink?"

"Not yet. Honestly."

"You've a long way to catch up," said Valmont, and snapped his fingers at a waiter. And he stayed with me, like a benevolent uncle, introducing me to living pages of Debrett.

I can't remember just when we drifted apart on the warm waves of the champagne sea. But I was alone when the band stopped and the drummer began a long, urgent roll. Drink-foolish, I stared up at the ceiling of the vast tent, fancying some trapeze artiste was about to try a triple somersault.

The roll ceased. A microphone-distorted voice blared: "My lords, ladies, and gentlemen, if you wish to see the great Switch On, please file quietly through the exit by the band."

An arm slid companionably through the crook of mine. My gaze fell from the empty ceiling to Knight at my side.

"Let's go together, Frisby," he said, amiably.

I peered glassily round at his other arm. It was all right. He had no concealed bibles.

"If you insist." My sibilants were as thick as a pugilist's ear.

He urged me forward. Debrett parted for us like the Red Sea for Moses. Outside there were awnings. Among them hirelings swarmed with giant umbrellas. The rain was falling heavily and gleaming like dancing silver railings under arc-lamps on rows of poles. Before it thinned away entirely in the wet darkness, the lamp-light also struck reflection from the margin of a frozen, ribbed sea of glass.

The great sign awaited its injection of bright red blood.

I'd had far too much. The gleaming surfaces drifted and tilted and made me feel queer. I had a sort of partial blackout and when it lifted I was standing on a platform. There was a panel before me with a single white button staring at me from it.

Knight was at my elbow, speaking into a public-address system. He was saying something about "... this distinguished scientist." And then: "This is the great moment, my friends. Dr. Frisby will now switch on."

To me he added, *sotto voce*: "Press the button, old man."

Dumbly, I jabbed. I hit it with the second shot. Then it was as though someone had lifted the lid off hell. The sea of glass became a much greater, eye-scorching sea of red fire.

"Oooh!" rose from the crowd.

* The underside of the low cloud layer flung back the crimson glow from heaven. It seemed to be raining blood.

I mumbled something to Knight about the Twilight of the Gods, and then we were besieged by a ring of impeccably dressed young men putting polite questions to us.

They were so well-mannered and so interested in my views on almost anything that I did my best to satisfy them.

When my hangover became tolerable, about lunchtime next day, I went through the daily papers in my hotel lounge and found the young men had been well satisfied. Under cross-heads like "The Professor Turns on the Lights" and "Scientist Slams Yorkborough University" I found the tit-bits I'd thrown them.

"The Council only wanted the telescope so that they could boast they'd outdone the Joneses of Manchester University . . . They didn't regard it as an instrument for the serious work crying out to be done, but as bauble to be shown off . . . Lilliputians with pigmy values . . . There's no basic difference between the way they would have spent the million and the way Mr. Knight has actually spent it. Merely a matter of advertising, in both cases. But Mr. Knight's advertising is at least open and honest, not hypocritical. Therefore he made better use of the money . . ."

I took another two aspirins. Fear of the consequences of what I had said conflicted with the relief of having said it. I picked at a fish lunch, left it, and went back north to face the music.

Far more than the necessary quorum of the Council awaited my execution. I looked at the mean and stupid faces of these domestic power politicians, and decided I couldn't live with them any more. With the decision, I felt my soul becoming gloriously my own again and could have laughed aloud with elation.

"Dr. Frisby, do you deny these newspaper reports?" asked the Vice-Chancellor, trying to assume the mien of Jove.

"No. But they don't do me full justice. I was sorry to say that in fear of the libel laws they omitted my comment that you were a cross between Machiavelli in his dotage and a pole-squatter. But don't let's debate the point. I resign, here and now, with a light heart, believe me."

So I made the dailies again, though the headings were smaller this time.

I had £160 in the bank, no job, no future, no home—and a clear conscience. I felt all right.

Came a telegram: **BOOTED OUT QUERY STOP GOOD STOP COME AND WORK FOR ME STOP CONTACT ME DORCHESTER PARK LANE KNIGHT.**

I felt even better, packed, and went back to London. I was beginning to feel like a regular commuter.

Knight had rented the pent-house apartment, often reserved for the film stars who were bigger than just film stars. Valmont, looking glum again, let me in.

"Hello, Valmont, I thought you'd still be tidying up after the big party. I'll bet they made a mess."

He answered, with no lightening of expression : " Those duties don't apply outside Greystoke."

Knight greeted me in dressing-gown and pyjamas, although it was time for afternoon tea. " Hello, Frisby, come about that job ?"

" Depends what it is. I'm certainly not going to trail round after you with a dust-pan, not for all the gold in Fort Knox."

" Too stiff-necked, eh ?"

" My neck's become a lot stiffer since you nearly broke it, Mr. Knight."

Knight grinned. " Don't worry. I don't mind hurting your neck, but I wouldn't try to hurt your pride. Valmont's different. He doesn't mind. He's quite happy to oblige."

" Then why doesn't he look happy ?"

" I read too much Schopenhauer when I was young," said Valmont, straight-faced. " My face got set this way. Take no notice. I'm bubbling with joy in my innermost heart."

A peculiar character. I should never fathom him.

" To tell the truth, Doctor," said Knight, " I had no particular job in mind for you. What would you like to do ?"

" Eat," I said.

Knight chuckled, and suddenly I liked him. " Do that, and just stick around for the time being. There must be some way to employ an honest man. I confess to a lack of experience of such situations."

Valmont said : " May I suggest that as Dr. Frisby has shown a real talent for handling the Press"—he paused, ironically—" he assists me as Press Relations Officer ?"

" You see, Frisby, Valmont knows all the answers," said Knight. " What do you think ?"

" It's a good answer."

" Right, then." Knight went into the fascinatingly sordid details of money. I had a job at a salary which would have made the Vice-Chancellor sick with envy.

Next Day, the Martians landed at London Airport.

And very soon I had to work hard for that salary. For, to begin with, the Martians wished to talk to nobody but Knight. Valmont and I had to handle the Press of the entire world, not to mention acting as go-betweens in respect of learned societies and, incidentally, the Government itself.

As the Martians were rather more than modest, few people saw them. By their wish, no photographs were allowed. The published sketches are confusing in their dissimilarity.

There were six Martians altogether, to all appearances. To all appearances . . . I met them first at the Dorchester. At Knight's suggestion they'd flown their space-craft from the Airport to Hyde Park and parked it just across the way from the Hotel.

Valmont phoned me at my Bloomsbury hotel. "Come here right away, Frisby—I'm going to need you."

"Is it true about the Martians—?"

"Yes. Can't go into details now. Look, there's a rabble of peasants and police jamming this area. But I've issued instructions. The police will get you through if you whisper the password."

"What is it?"

"Schiaparelli."

"Trust you to pick on a mouthful like that, Valmont. I'm leaving now."

I left, highly excited. Martians, by heaven! So there was an intelligent civilisation on Mars. Today was a date to remember. Two alien worlds were making contact and I had a ringside seat.

It took me nearly an hour of shoving to get from Marble Arch to my ringside seat. Over thousands of bobbing heads I glimpsed the big alien ship gleaming among the trees. In the hubbub, whispering was futile. I fought my way to the nearest constable and yelled in his ear: "Schiaparelli."

Red-faced, sweating, helmet awry, he nevertheless answered politely: "Excuse me, sir, but could you put it into English?"

It turned out that the password had reached him in the form of "Shy Umbrella." But he helped get me through.

In the pent-house Knight was conferring with the Martians behind locked doors. Valmont was waiting and put me in the picture.

Incredibly, the Martians had landed on Earth because they thought they had been invited. In their scoutships, they had made brief forays into our atmosphere many times before, but the impression they derived from us, from snatches of TV and radio transmissions, had frightened them.

We had surrounded planet Earth with an aura of threat, hate, violence, intolerance, deceit, conceit, and mere madness. We were neighbours not nice to know. The Martians had allowed that there must be a few individual exceptions, but when they landed they were adamant about one thing: they

didn't want to encounter any criminals or politicians, who to them were indistinguishable.

"Understandable," I said. "But who invited them?"

"Mr. Knight," said Valmont. "Unconsciously. The Martians had picked up some elementary English. Their vocabulary is equivalent to that of a child of seven. Their spelling is on the same level. It's phonetic. When the crew of this ship saw the single word KUM blaze out from the night-side of Earth—and it must be visible from far out in space—they thought it was a signal to them, an invitation, from one of the few intelligent and well-intentioned humans. They hesitated—and came."

I looked at him doubtfully.

"Really, that's it," he said.

The laughter exploded from me. Valmont even smiled himself.

"It's odd," he said, "but I've often noticed that events which are important and historic have a streak of the ridiculous in them. Remember Stanley and 'I presume'?"

"What kills me," I gasped, "is its beautiful irony. Knight kicks us astronomers and our wonder telescope down the front steps, spends the money on a vulgar sky-sign, and promptly proves there's life on Mars, which our telescope could never have done. I can't help picturing the expressions on the faces of my old University Council . . ."

Valmont waited till I'd sobered down, then said: "Get this clear, Frisby. You have a new job. Your allegiance now isn't to science or even necessarily to truth. It's to Mr. Knight and KUM. They must emerge from this with credit. The ridiculous accident story is out. Our line with the Press must be this: Mr. Knight is a great man, a far-sighted genius, and knew exactly what he was doing."

"Don't worry, I'm with you, Valmont. Most great scientific discoveries were the results of pure accident. Galvani and the frog's legs. Fleming and the fungus. But the public prefer to believe that great men know what they're doing. Great men prefer it too. Let's go. When do I get to meet the Martians?"

"Any moment now. I warn you—you'll find them queer. The streak of the ridiculous becomes evident again. It's as well they desire to be kept away from the public. Familiarity might breed contempt."

"Contempt—for the Martians, you mean?"

"Yes, Frisby. They could easily become a laughing stock. You know the temper of the public—and I know the Press."

Somewhere a door opened and Knight's voice called : "Valmont, where are you ? Is Frisby here yet ?"

"Here we go," said Valmont. I followed him along the passage. Knight stood at the door of the lounge. His expression said clearly : "Now I've shown you university-types a thing or two."

Aloud, he said : "Hello, Frisby, let me introduce you to your first Martian. His name's Nib."

"Nib ?" I caught Valmont's eye. It flickered a reminder of the element of the ridiculous. I walked into the lounge and a strange, thick atmosphere which made my head swim for a moment. I paused, while images of ancient pagodas and vivid green palms and tropical birds with Technicolor plumage flying over blue lakes fled through my mind.

I breathed hard, and the visions and the strange scent faded. It had been only momentary, like noticing the smell when you walk into a room where someone lately has smoked a cigar.

Six Martians were spaced about the large carpet. I had prepared myself for almost anything, so they didn't strike me as particularly outre. At least they were humanoid. Very thin, tall, and yet stooped—that was probably Earth's gravitation.

They kept their heads low, peeping at me from under their brows like shy children. Medium brown-skinned, long, wavy, sun-bleached hair, dreamy pale blue eyes. They all looked and were dressed alike—space-crew black overalls with a plenitude of pockets. No ornamentation. Clean-shaven. Big ears. Shiny black shoes. Long, thin fingers.

"Nib, this is Dr. Frisby. Frisby, meet Nib."

Knight waved his hand vaguely. I assumed he meant the nearest Martian, whom I addressed politely : "How do you do, Nib ?"

The Martian dropped his gaze altogether and made a sound between a whinny and girlish giggle. "I do very well, thank you," he answered, in a childish treble.

"Oh." I fumbled, then asked : "How many Martians are there altogether, living on Mars ?"

Nib regarded the carpet and made no answer. Perhaps he was reckoning slowly. Knight said : "I've just been telling him about the way businesses are run on Earth. The Martians have never known a capitalist system."

Nib said : " It is very in-ter-est-ing." He made four syllables of it, like a kid's comic. I realised I should have to keep to the-cat-sat-on-the-mat standard.

Knight resumed his business lecture, and Valmont and I moved on to other Martians. I said to one : " May I ask your name ?"

He regarded me shyly and said : " About forty millions."

I was nonplussed.

" My name is Nib," he added, helpfully.

" Oh, I see," I said, and didn't. " I thought Nib was the other gentleman, by the door."

He tittered like a schoolgirl, and piped : " Two hundred and five Martian years."

Valmont, who'd been talking to another of them, looked round, pricking up his ears. He looked at me. " That's equivalent to three hundred and eighty-five Earth years," he said. " And Nib is only middle-aged, at that. Makes Methuselah seem like a babe in arms, eh, Frisby ?"

I said, giddily : " I'm afraid I'm not with you. Nor with anybody, apparently."

" I just asked Nib his age," explained Valmont.

" For heaven's sake," I cried, " which one is Nib ?"

Valmont raised his eyebrows. " They all are. Didn't I explain that ?"

I wiped my forehead. " You didn't. I think you'd better."

Valmont took me aside. He said that quads, quins, and sextuplets were common among Martians. And they were always identical in the strictest sense. They shared the same mind, memory, and sensations. Their bodies appeared to be separate, but if one, say, barked his shin, they all felt the pain, like sympathetic twins. It was a matter of chance which mouth the resulting cry of pain came from.

" It's the same with verbal responses, as you're discovering," Valmont added. " But you'll get used to it. Nib is sextuplets, that's all. It could have been worse."

" Well, thanks," I said. " It's lucky I'm the adaptable type."

Knight came across to us. " Getting along all right ? It's a bit tricky at first. Nib is rather simple but very pleasant. Says he likes Earth and may stay here awhile. I'm thinking of setting him up in business."

"As Nib, Nib, Nib, Nib, Nib and Nib, Incorporated?" I muttered.

"But don't tell the Press that—yet," said Knight. "I hope you're gathering some useful material? I'll vet it before the first conference."

I remembered my job and my salary and braced myself to continue interviewing. "Nib," I said, desperately, seizing the attention of the nearest. "What are your views on Votes for Women? Incidentally, do you have one vote or six? . . ."

Knight was right. One became accustomed to it, but unscrambling the messages remained an exhausting business.

There was a further slight complication. The Martians had a habit which seemed, on the surface, like snuff-taking. Nib II, Nib IV, Nib V—whoever it was—would, every so often, stick his nose in a funnel-shaped gadget he carried in a pocket and inhale.

Then for a second or two his dreamy eyes became as glassy as blue beads. The other five parts of Nib became similarly affected. Then he was back with you again, answering questions you didn't ask.

Sometimes I got a whiff of the inhalant. It was the stuff I'd smelt on first entering the room. It caused similar mild delusions.

"That's heady stuff," I commented, after the Nib I was addressing dosed himself. "What is it?"

Gaze averted, he slipped the gadget into my hand. I sniffed cautiously at the funnel. My thumb less cautiously touched a stud in the handle, which moved. And—

I was a zephyr moving gently across a prairie of cornflower-blue grass. The grass-blades bowed in their thousands away from my countless invisible feet. Under a cloudless yellow sky I moved on, over horizon after horizon, and still the blades bowed towards the next horizon.

Until, after a century, the next horizon became an emerald sea, placid as a pond save for the tiny ripples caused by my passing.

Slowly, my energy left me. I subsided gradually into the sea, became part of it, then all of it, contained all the life therein, the rainbow fish, the undulating carpet-fish, the writhing sea-snake and the patient sea anemone, and ten-thousand varieties of living jewels and sudden sunbursts . . .

I was generations of undersea life moving through time.

I was time passing through generations.

I was evolution.

I was a reeling drunk, kicking the Martian gadget along the carpet with wayward feet. Knight and Valmont caught me at the point of collapse, braced me between them.

The grandiose visions fled faster than light. I snapped out of it.

"All right now, Frisby?" asked Knight.

"Yes, thanks," I said, clearer-headed than I'd been before.

"Another time I'll take more water with it."

"I tried it, too," said Valmont. "They call it 'Somo.' It's far more potent and less harmful than mescaline or L.S.D. An excellent substitute for smoking, I'd say. But to be taken strictly in a reclining position by us amateurs."

"Well, back to business now," said Knight, clapping me heartily on the shoulder.

I resumed terms with the here and now regretfully. I was only a fragment of living flesh and bone once more, instead of life itself. Out of hours, I must try Somo again.

The subsequent press conferences are in the files for all to see.

For a hectic week, Valmont and I hardly slept. I achieved an ambition and addressed the Royal Society. The Vice-Chancellor of Yorkborough University was an F.R.S. I spotted him there in the fourth row and delivered a few pertinent remarks to him—in a general way. But he knew who I meant. So did many of the Fellows. It may have been my wishful thinking, but his face seemed to alternate between red and green as often as a traffic light.

Every dog has his day. Revenge is sweet. And so on.

Faithfully Valmont and I fabricated the legend of Knight, the Great Healer now become also the Great Seer. By implication, the Council of Yorkborough University was a gang of old fogeys living in the past.

Then, at the end of the week, Nib announced suddenly that he would be returning to Mars soon.

Knight was shocked and terribly disappointed. "But, Nib, I'm working on plans to set you up in business here. You can't leave now."

"The smell is bad," said Nib.

"What?"

Nib explained haltingly through his multi-mouths that he regretted having to be so frank, but Earth's civilisation was full of smells repulsive to him.

"Figuratively—or physically?" cut in Valmont. But, of course, Nib didn't get that. He said it was like living in a sewer. Somo had kept him going so far, but his supply was running out and he couldn't bear existence without it.

Knight said: "Don't worry about that. Give me the formula. My laboratories will manufacture any amount of it for you."

Nib answered that, firstly, he didn't know the formula, and, secondly, he would need the authority of his superiors on Mars before it could be divulged.

"Radio them," said Knight. "Get the formula, get permission."

Nib said things didn't happen that fast on Mars. Martians lived far longer than humans and at a much more leisurely tempo. Any decision of that kind would need a full-dress debate lasting months, maybe years.

I was disappointed too. I regretted the time and energy spent in boosting KUM and its creator instead of worming more information about the Martian civilisation from the tongue-tied Nib.

For all his naivete, Nib was sensible of our dismay. It touched his conscience. Later, he tried to make some amends.

Knight had told him all about KUM, the wonder cure, and was delighted to learn that rheumatism was not unknown on Mars. Here, it seemed, was the promise of a whole new world market.

At some time in the course of his long life, it appeared that Nib himself had invented a little appliance to alleviate rheumatism. It worked fairly well. It was simple, like its name—the Spen. In a day he could produce working drawings and a materials list enabling the Spen to be manufactured on Earth.

"That's great," said Knight, benevolently. "You do that, Nib. It's just the thing to start a little business with. I'll lend you the capital to float your company. A firm of lawyers, with your power of attorney, can run it in your absence—"

"Par-don?" said Nib.

Knight kept his temper. He always displayed an untypical forbearance towards Hydra-headed Nib. Probably because the coming of Nib had shown the world that he, the once wretched outcast boy, was a truly great man.

He said: "I should like your people to appreciate our capitalist system—its spirit of adventure, its challenge to bring

out the best in a man. The best way to learn about it is to do things yourself. I want you to set up in business. Remember, I explained to you about business?"

He explained again, patiently.

I listened, amused. Nib said he didn't want to make a profit from his gadget. He meant it to be a gift to mankind.

Knight was pained. "But you don't *give* people anything. People never give *you* anything. Listen, son," he went on, paternally, "when you get to be as old as I am—"

"Nib is three hundred and eighty-five," put in Valmont, wooden-faced.

Knight ignored him and went on to explain how calculating, greedy, and selfish all other people were beneath the surface, and how you had to learn to look after Number One.

"And so be like them?" asked Nib, puzzled.

For a moment Knight was nonplussed. "No—you and I, we're different," he said vaguely.

"Then I give my Spen to you," said Nib, simply.

Knight blew his nose to gain respite, then said that for anyone to give anybody anything for free was to strike at the roots and principles of capitalism.

Valmont caught my eye and winked. I smiled. We both knew that Knight was really saying that only Knight could give, because only Knight was big enough to give.

The upshot was that the Spen Lamp was patented all over the world, and the Spen Lamp Company was founded on Knight's million pound loan—there was no public subscription. Knight wished the company to be owned solely by Nib, once the loan was re-paid.

The law firm of Simon and Pfkampst, under an irrevocable power of attorney, ran the show.

The Spen Lamp Company, of course, existed merely on paper when the time came for Nib to go. But it was expensive paper, heavy with red wax seals and legal phrases. All parts were signed, counter-signed, witnessed and sworn to.

"It's got to be watertight," said Knight. "After all, I'm getting on in years. I don't want any smart City Alecs chiselling Nib out of any piece of it when I'm gone."

When the last farewells came to be said, Knight was plainly moved.

A ten-foot hoarding had been erected around the spaceship in the park. Outside it was a further barrier of picked police

constables seemingly almost as tall. Inside, more police, a handful of top pressmen—and us. No photographers, no TV cameras, no politicians.

We watched the loading of the farewell gifts from Knight in his role of the Great Donor. The final one—it had to be levered up the gangway—was a massive crate of KUM.

“To remember me by,” said Knight, rather wistfully. “When shall I see you again, Nib?”

Simultaneously, although I noted detachedly what Knight was saying also, I glanced at my wrist-watch and asked the Nib nearest to me: “When are you taking off, Nib?”

Knight’s Nib answered vaguely: “Soon.”

And Knight’s face lit up.

My Nib answered, equally vaguely: “In a hundred years, more or less.” And whinnied with laughter.

Valmont, who heard as much as I, muttered: “The wires were crossed. You got the wrong answer, Frisby.”

“So did Knight,” I whispered. “But keep it quiet.”

Valmont growled “Damn!” And jerked his head warningly at me. I turned and saw Harding of the *Tribune* practically standing on my left heel. He nodded. “I heard—sorry.”

“You’ll be sorrier if you spread it abroad,” I whispered fiercely.

He shrugged. “My job is spreading news abroad.”

There were cries of “Stand back. Back as far as you can go.” Police began shepherding us all back, save for Knight. He was shaking hands six times, with Nib.

Then Nib filed into the spaceship’s entrance, and the gangway rose slowly and became an airtight door sealing that entrance. Knight walked back to join us.

Utterly soundlessly, the scout ship floated upwards, shining in the sun. Its black shadow dwindled on the uncut grass. The vast crowd outside the pale cheered.

The ship became a silver plate, then a new-minted half-crown, a sixpence, a dot which became lost in the azure reaches of the sky.

Knight rubbed an eye, then his nose. Harding, determined, almost grim, as though shutting his ears to some inward voice, went up to him. I started after him, but Valmont gripped my arm. “No point to starting a fracas, Frisby. The story will be all along the Street within an hour, anyway. You can’t gag Harding.”

"Confound the Press !" I said, bitterly.

"We can't—in our job," said Valmont, wryly.

"How do you feel, Mr. Knight, about never seeing Nib again ?" Harding's voice was as toneless as a robot's. It was as if he were but a medium and the spirit of duty was activating his vocal cords.

Knight took his hand from his nose. He looked coldly at the newspaperman. "Nib will be returning soon. He said so. If you missed that, you're not doing your job properly."

"I missed nothing," said Harding, levelly. "Nib won't be back for a century."

Then the argument began. It went on for days in the newspapers. The general opinion was that Knight was mistaken, but he clung stubbornly to that "Soon." He believed, against reason, what he wanted to believe.

The Spen Lamp Company began business and boomed immediately.

At first, Knight had been indulgent about the Spen Lamp. It was a toy Nib had made. Therefore, Knight regarded it fondly but not seriously.

When he first showed us Nib's drawing, he said : "You see, there's nothing in it. Just a little red lamp which can be plugged into any domestic lighting circuit. It's only the old infra-red ray treatment for rheumatism, on a weaker scale."

"It won't sell, then," said Valmont.

"Oh, yes, it will—quite well," said Knight. "I tell you again, advertising can sell anything. I've advised about the form of the hook. This time it'll be the Martian Magic Ingredient. The Spen filament, made from a formula hitherto known only to Martian Science. That'll fetch 'em."

It did. Because—it was true. There was something magical in the alloy contained in the filament. It emitted infra-red rays—and something else. That something else cured rheumatism quite as thoroughly as KUM and a deal quicker and cheaper.

And you didn't have to go to a clinic to get a Spen Lamp.

Anaemia attacked the KUM Empire. It weakened daily.

Knight fought to save it by coming to terms with the rival monster he had, Frankenstein-like, created. He wanted his million pound loan turned into share capital. Blandly, Simon and Pfkampst pointed out that it was a loan, and nothing but a loan. And that they would repay it with the stipulated

interest. Which they obviously would do soon out of the fabulous profits of the Company.

Knight had shut himself out forever by the legal barriers he himself had set up.

KUM went downhill fast. Came the day when the great red beacon by London Airport went out at dawn for the last time. In that morning's post I received a cheque for a quarter's salary in lieu of notice and a brief note from Knight : " Sorry, Doc, but I've had it. You did a good job. So did I—too good. Thanks, and good luck."

That shook me. For his sake as well as mine. I rang the Dorchester and learned that Mr. Knight had relinquished the pent-house apartment on the previous evening, leaving no forwarding address. They suggested he might be found at his private address.

I set out in my car on another hunt for the elusive village of Pelham Highbury, and found it. The little house was still dingy and unpainted. The rusty knocker still squeaked.

Valmont, still dressed like a stockbroker, opened the door. His eyes widened a little. " Hardly expected you, Frisby. But come in."

I went in. George Xavier Knight was sitting in the rickety cane chair smoking a cigar. His mane of white hair hadn't been tamed that day and there was stubble on his chin.

He looked up, surprised. " What brings you here, Doc ? Wasn't the cheque any good ?"

" I don't know. I tore it up. I've saved enough to rub along on for a bit."

He studied me silently. Then he reached out and stubbed out the cigar savagely on the refectory table. " It would have bounced, anyway," he growled. " I'm in the red."

He threw the cigar butt on the floor at Valmont's feet and looked at him challengingly. Without a word, Valmont stooped, picked it up, dropped it in an ashtray. Knight blinked, looked away, brushed his hair back wearily with his hand.

He said : " I repeat, what brings you here, Frisby ? Have you come to gloat ? Makes you feel bigger to see the boss in the gutter, eh ?"

I sighed. " I only came to do what little I can to help. You once told me to stick around. I'm sticking around."

Knight seemed to sink deeper into the ancient chair and into his own thoughts. I looked across his huddled figure at Valmont. "I'll give you a hand to clear up."

Valmont nodded but said nothing until we were tipping some of the rubbish in a bin at the back of the house. Then he said: "Really, why did you come?"

"I'm sorry for the old buzzard. Also grateful to him. Admit it—you are, too. Else you wouldn't be here."

Valmont shook his head, with the ghost of a smile. "You've got me wrong, Frisby. I'm not a sentimentalist, like you. I'm one of the common herd Mr. Knight told Nib about—activated solely by self-interest."

"Nonsense," I said. "There's nothing for you here. Knight's finished. He has no future."

Valmont placed the lid on the bin and leant on it reflectively. "I'm staying with Mr. Knight because he has the Magic Ingredient: the one attribute which guarantees success in life—it beats brains, ability, birth and breeding every time."

"And what's that?"

"Luck, Frisby. Pure luck."

"He certainly wasn't lucky as a kid. He was dealt a filthy hand."

"I mean luck concerning money. The Midas Touch. Life has a way of compensating. You have one sort of luck, or another sort. Napoleon always chose his generals from men who were lucky on the battlefield, not from those who were top of their grade at the Academy. Where money's concerned, Mr. Knight is my mascot, my lucky piece. Take my advice—stay with us."

"I'm staying anyway, Valmont, for as long as I can. But not for your reasons."

When we went back in the house, Knight was standing at the front door, scanning the sky. Presently he slammed the door, shuffled to the cane chair, slumped back in it.

"They were right," he said, and sighed. "Nib won't be back for a hundred years."

"At least," said Valmont. "He may have been referring to Martian years. In that case, it'll be a hundred and eighty-eight years."

"Yes," said Knight, heavily, "I've considered that . . . Do you know, the Spen Company is well on the way to making a million quid clear profit this year, *after* they've paid me off?"

"Really?" I said.

"Yes. And that's how they look like going on. A couple of million profit a year. Untaxed. As Nib is not a resident of Earth, he's not subject to the tax laws of any country in the world . . . They'll probably invest one million and plough the other back in the business. Think of it. A single million invested at a moderate rate will have become twenty-five thousand million in a century's time. And they'll be investing at least one new additional million every year. Snowballing year after year. Plus the business itself. D'you know what that means?"

"Well—" I began.

"It means that when Nib comes back, he'll own the Earth!" Knight looked up into my eyes and I saw the depths of wretchedness in his. "See what I've done? I've given the whole world to the Martians. On a plate. George Xavier Knight, the greatest philanthropist ever known! Every government will be yelling for my blood when they realise what's going to happen. It won't be long now. 'Traitor!' they'll scream. 'You've given us all in bondage to the Martians.'"

"I'm sure it won't come to that, Mr. Knight," I said, soothingly, privately wondering if it could.

"I've always tried to be an honest man," he said, brokenly.

He held his head in his hands. I regarded him with pity. In his childhood, society had been hostile to him. He had fought back, conquered society, forced respect from it. Now he'd slipped and fallen. Society had turned its back on him. But soon society would turn and rend him far more savagely than ever before.

So far as I could see, there wasn't a thing he could do about it. Millionaires have become bankrupt, and risen to be millionaires again. But who would back the man who gave away the Earth?

I would, I told myself, and felt angry for him. I glared at Valmont. My expression said plainly, if wordlessly: "Look at him you fool! And you prattle about his good luck!"

Valmont smiled and shook his head. "Wait and see," he mouthed.

I waited a month, then another month. It was a queer sort of existence in the small house. Valmont remained reserved, and with all the bounce gone out of him Knight was poor

company. It was as though his main-spring had broken. He brooded all the time. My main occupation was keeping the place clean and parleying with the Official Receiver's minions. They sniffed contemptuously at the ruin of a house and let Knight keep it.

And then one evening Nib came back.

The scout ship sped silently across the fields from the heart of a Crome sunset. I saw it first and ran in, shouting. It landed in the meadow beyond the garden.

It had come, we learned later, from Hyde Park, having been re-directed. That trip proved one thing, at least : Nib was no fool when it came to map-reading.

"God, I was right, after all !" cried Knight, hurrying down the garden with Valmont and myself flanking him. "He *did* mean soon !"

We all met up in the meadow. It was Nib, all right—all six of him—but not quite the same Nib. He seemed taller because he held himself more erectly. His eyes were clearer and no longer avoided our gaze. He moved with more snap, and when he spoke his voice was deeper and stronger. There were no more nervous giggles.

"I have come," he said, "for more KUM."

When we remained speechless, he explained that he had been instructed by his superiors to obtain from Knight the formula of KUM. The Martian chemists had failed to analyse it completely because there was some organic matter in it which was quite foreign to Mars.

Knight said, solemnly : "Yes, that is the Magic Ingredient."

"Found only here on Earth," added Valmont, equally solemnly, waving his hand to indicate here on Earth. Then he went still, gazing down among the feet of Nib. And suddenly turned his head away and smothered an uncharacteristic laugh.

I was puzzled. I stared at Nib's manifold feet, also, but saw nothing particularly funny.

Nib said : "We do not ask you to give. We know it is wrong to give. We shall bar-gain."

"I'm very glad that you have begun to understand our business methods, Nib," said Knight. "Come into the house and we'll talk it over."

They came and talked it over. Valmont and I heard some of it, but not all, because we were busy preparing for a meal for nine. Knight said the Magic Ingredient came from a rare and delicate Earth plant which grew only in certain places where

there was a certain condition of atmosphere. Such atmospheric conditions—which included humidity—almost certainly didn't exist anywhere on Mars, and couldn't be produced artificially.

"But," he said, "I can undertake to supply you with any quantity you need—provided we can reach an agreement."

Eventually they came to an agreement. Nib retired to his bunks in the spaceship for the night. We three continued to sit in the shabby room, smoking Knight's cigars and talking.

"It's funny how things turn out," Knight mused. "When I concocted KUM, I certainly wasn't thinking of injecting virility into Martians. Poor Nib, like all the Martians, came of feeble stock. Milksops, really—indeed, plain cowards. Scared of everybody and everything. Scared even of space-travel, which is why they didn't go in for it very much. Escapists, hiding themselves in clouds of Somo. Yet—I liked Nib as he was. Felt protective towards him. It's too soon to tell yet, but I fear I may not like him quite so much, soaked in KUM and with a few hairs on his chest."

He paused. Then added: "Maybe because of that I shan't feel quite so bad about making such a hard bargain."

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "After all, the Spen Lamp Company meant little to him. He might have signed it over to you, in any case."

"Quite," said Knight. "He hadn't come to do a deal about that. The Somo formula was his bargaining counter."

"You got that, too?" I asked, surprised.

Knight chuckled. "Yes. The Spen Lamp and Somo—both. Just for the Magic Ingredient." He caught Valmont's eye, and Valmont chuckled, too, and said: "I nearly gave it away when I saw Nib was standing on fat clusters of lovely golden dandelions."

Knight saw my raised eyebrows and said indulgently: "The Magic Ingredient is simply dried and powdered dandelion root, Doc."

"I see," I said, "Spelt LUK."

It was Knight's turn to frown puzzledly. "What's that?"

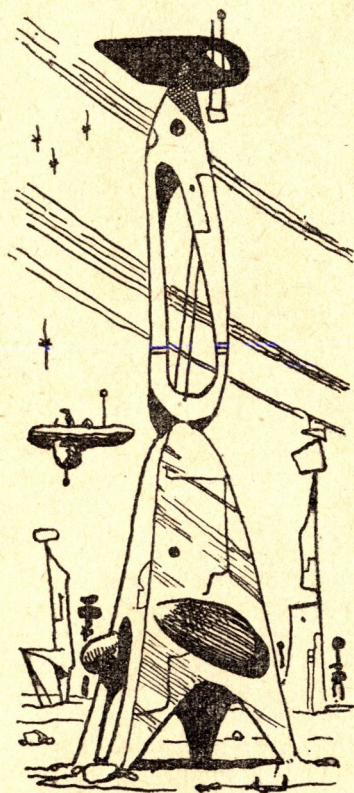
"Just a little joke," I said, grinning at Valmont.

Knight began to talk about the exploitation of Somo on Earth, fostering the Somo habit, and so forth. His imagination roamed on, crossing the frontiers of the fantastic. "We'll buy up gasworks. All that old piping is still serviceable. Somo on tap, all over the country. Somo parties in sealed rooms . . ."

I sat listening, watching him. An ageing uncouth man, ill-educated, blind to art or poetry or the wonders of this universe, talking of his dreams of business. The intellectuals and the scientists also had visions and talked of them. But the records of history show that they were seldom the first to contact in reality the unknown continents beyond the seas. It was the common trader who found the way.

The pattern was only repeating itself now across the seas of space.

—William F. Temple



Here is another fascinating Ballard incursion into the realms of fantasy. His earlier "Prima Belladonna," you may remember, hit the American "Year's Best S-F Stories 1956" and pulled more review comments than the rest of the stories in that particular collection.

NOW : ZERO

BY J. G. BALLARD

You ask : how did I discover this insane and fantastic power? Like Dr. Faust, was it bestowed upon me by the Devil himself, in exchange for the deeds to my soul ? Did I, perhaps, acquire it with some strange talismaniac object—idol's eye-piece or monkey's paw—unearthed in an ancient chest or bequeathed by a dying mariner ? Or, again, did I stumble upon it myself while researching into the obscenities of the Eleusian Mysteries and the Black Mass, suddenly perceiving its full horror and magnitude through clouds of sulphurous smoke and incense ?

None of these. In fact, the power revealed itself to me quite accidentally, during the commonplaces of the everyday round, appearing unobtrusively at my finger-tips like a talent for

embroidery. Indeed, its appearance was so unheralded, so gradual, that at first I failed to recognise it at all.

But again you ask : why should I tell you this, describe the incredible and hitherto unsuspected sources of my power, freely catalogue the names of my victims, the date and exact manner of their quietus ? Am I so mad as to be positively eager for justice—arraignment, the black cap, and the hangman leaping onto my shoulders like Quasimodo, ringing the death-bell from my throat ?

No, (consummate irony !) it is the strange nature of my power that I have nothing to fear from broadcasting its secret to all who will listen. I am the power's servant, and in describing it now I still serve it, carrying it faithfully, as you shall see, to its final conclusion.

However, to begin.

Rankin, my immediate superior at the Everlasting Insurance company, became the hapless instrument of the fate which was first to reveal power to me.

I loathed Rankin. He was bumptious and assertive, innately vulgar, and owed his position solely to an unpleasant cunning and his persistent refusal to recommend me to the directorate for promotion. He had consolidated his position as department manager by marrying a daughter of one of the directors (a dismal harridan, I may add) and was consequently unassailable. Our relationship was based on mutual contempt, but whereas I was prepared to accept my role, confident that my own qualities would ultimately recommend themselves to the directors, Rankin deliberately took advantage of his seniority, seizing every opportunity to offend and denigrate me.

He would systematically undermine my authority over the secretarial staff, who were tacitly under my control, by appointing others at random to the position. He would give me long-term projects of little significance to work on, so segregating me from the rest of the office. Above all, he sought to antagonise me by his personal mannerisms. He would sing, hum, sit uninvited on my desk as he made small talk with the typists, then call me into his office and keep me waiting pointlessly at his shoulder as he read silently through an entire file.

Although I controlled myself, my abomination of Rankin grew remorselessly. I would leave the office seething with

anger at his viciousness, sit in the train home with my newspaper opened but my eyes blinded by rage. My evenings and weekends would be ruined, wastelands of anger and futile bitterness.

Inevitably, thoughts of revenge grew, particularly as I suspected that Rankin was passing unfavourable reports of my work to the directors. Satisfactory revenge, however, was hard to achieve. Finally I decided upon a course I depised, driven to it by desperation : the anonymous letter—not to the directors, for the source would have been too easily discovered, but to Rankin and his wife.

My first letters, the familiar indictments of infidelity, I never posted. They seemed naive, inadequate, too obviously the handiwork of a paranoic with a grudge. I locked them away in a small steel box, later re-drafted them, striking out the staler crudities and trying to substitute something more subtle, a hint of perversion and obscenity, that would plunge deeper barbs of suspicion into the reader's mind.

It was while composing the letter to Mrs. Rankin, itemising in an old note-book the more despicable of her husband's qualities, that I discovered the curious relief afforded by the exercise of composition, by the formal statement, in the minatory language of the anonymous letter (which is, certainly, a specialised branch of literature, with its own classical rules and permitted devices) of the viciousness and depravity of the letter's subject and the terrifying nemesis awaiting him. Of course, this catharsis is familiar to those regularly able to recount unpleasant experiences to priest, friend or wife, but to me, who lived a solitary, friendless life, its discovery was especially poignant.

Over the next few days I made a point each evening on my return home of writing out a short indictment of Rankin's iniquities, analysing his motives, and even anticipating the slights and abuses of the next day. These I would cast in the form of narrative, allowing myself a fair degree of license, introducing imaginary situations and dialogues that served to highlight Rankin's atrocious behaviour and my own stoical forbearance.

The compensation was welcome, for simultaneously Rankin's campaign against me increased. He became openly abusive, criticised my work before junior members of the staff,

even threatened to report me to the directors. One afternoon he drove me to such a frenzy that I barely restrained myself from assaulting him. I hurried home, unlocked my writing box and sought relief in my diaries. I wrote page after page, re-enacting in my narrative the day's events, then reaching forward to our final collision the following morning, culminating in an accident that intervened to save me from dismissal.

My last lines were :

. . . Shortly after 2 o'clock the next afternoon, spying from his usual position on the 7th floor stairway for any employees returning late from lunch, Rankin suddenly lost his balance, toppled over the rail and fell to his death in the entrance hall below.

As I wrote this fictitious scene it seemed scant justice, but little did I realize that a weapon of enormous power had been placed gently between my fingers.

Coming back to the office after lunch the next day I was surprised to find a small crowd gathered outside the entrance, a police car and ambulance pulled up by the curb. As I pushed forward up the steps several policemen emerged from the building, clearing the way for two orderlies carrying a stretcher across which a sheet had been drawn, revealing the outlines of a human form. The face was concealed, and I gathered from conversation around me that someone had died. Two of the directors appeared, their faces shocked and drawn.

"Who is it?" I asked one of the office boys who were hanging around breathlessly.

"Mr. Rankin," he whispered. He pointed up the stairwell. "He slipped over the railing on the 7th floor, fell straight down, completely smashed one of those big tiles outside the lift . . ."

He gabbled on, but I turned away, numbed and shaken by the sheer physical violence that hung in the air. The ambulance drove off, the crowd dispersed, the directors returned, exchanging expressions of grief and astonishment with other members of the staff, the janitors took away their mops and buckets, leaving behind them a damp red patch and the shattered tile.

Within an hour I had recovered. Sitting in front of Rankin's empty office, watching the typists hover helplessly around his desk, apparently unconvinced that their master would

never return, my heart began to warm and sing. I became transformed, a load which had threatened to break me had been removed from my back, my mind relaxed, the tensions and bitterness dissipated. Rankin had gone, finally and irrevocably. The era of injustice had ended.

I contributed generously to the memorial fund which made the rounds of the office ; I attended the funeral, gloating inwardly as the coffin was bundled into the sod, joining fulsomely in the expressions of regret. I readied myself to occupy Rankin's desk, my rightful inheritance.

My surprise a few days later can easily be imagined when Carter, a younger man of far less experience and generally accepted as my junior, was promoted to fill Rankin's place. At first I was merely baffled, quite unable to grasp the tortuous logic that could so offend all laws of precedence and merit. I assumed that Rankin had done his work of denigrating me only too well.

However, I accepted the rebuff, offered Carter my loyalty and assisted his reorganisation of the office.

Superficially these changes were minor. But later I realized that they were far more calculating than at first seemed, and transferred the bulk of power within the office to Carter's hands, leaving me with the routine work, the files of which never left the department or passed to the directors. I saw too that over the previous year Carter had been carefully familiarising himself with all aspects of my job and was taking credit for work I had done during Rankin's tenure of office.

Finally I challenged Carter openly, but far from being evasive he simply emphasised my subordinate role. From then on he ignored my attempts at a rapprochement and did all he could to antagonise me.

The final insult came when Jacobson joined the office to fill Carter's former place and was officially designated Carter's deputy.

That evening I brought down the steel box in which I kept record of Rankin's persecutions and began to describe all that I was beginning to suffer at the hands of Carter.

During a pause the last entry in the Rankin diary caught my eye :

. . . Rankin suddenly lost his balance, toppled over the rail and fell to his death in the entrance hall below.

The words seemed to be alive, they had strangely vibrant overtones. Not only were they a remarkably accurate forecast of Rankin's fate, but they had a distinctly magnetic and compulsive power that separated them sharply from the rest of the entries. Somewhere within my mind a voice, vast and sombre, slowly intoned them.

On a sudden impulse I turned the page, found a clean sheet and wrote :

The next afternoon Carter died in a street accident outside the office.

What childish game was I playing ? I was forced to smile at myself, as primitive and irrational as a Haitian witch doctor transfixing a clay image of his enemy.

I was sitting in the office the following day when the squeal of tyres in the street below riveted me to my chair. Traffic stopped abruptly and there was a sudden hubbub followed by silence. Only Carter's office overlooked the street ; he had gone out half an hour earlier so we pressed past his desk and leaned out through the window.

A car had skidded sharply across the pavement and a group of ten or a dozen men were lifting it carefully back onto the roadway. It was undamaged but what appeared to be oil was leaking sluggishly into the gutter. Then we saw the body of a man outstretched beneath the car, his arms and head twisted awkwardly.

The colour of his suit was oddly familiar.

Two minutes later we knew it was Carter.

That night I destroyed my notebook and all records I had made about Rankin's behaviour. Was it coincidence, or in some way had I willed his death, and in the same way Carter's? Impossible—no conceivable connection could exist between the diaries and the two deaths, the pencil marks on the sheets of paper were arbitrary curved lines of graphite, representing ideas which existed only in my mind.

But the solution to my doubts and speculations was too obvious to be avoided.

I locked the door, turned a fresh page of the note-book and cast round for a suitable subject. I picked up my evening paper. A young man had just been reprieved from the death penalty for the murder of an old woman. His face stared from a photograph : coarse, glowering, conscienceless.

I wrote :

Frank Taylor died the next day in Pentonville Prison.

The scandal created by Taylor's death almost brought about the resignations of both the Home Secretary and the Prison Commissioners. During the next few days violent charges were levelled in all directions by the newspapers, and it finally transpired that Taylor had been brutally beaten to death by his warders. I carefully read the evidence and findings of the tribunal of enquiry when they were published, hoping that they might throw some light on the extraordinary and malevolent agency which linked the statements in my diaries with the inevitable deaths on the subsequent day.

However, as I feared, they suggested nothing. Meanwhile I sat quietly in my office, automatically carrying out my work, obeying Jacobson's instructions without comment, my mind elsewhere, trying to grasp the identity and import of the power bestowed on me.

Still unconvinced, I decided on a final test, in which I would give precisely detailed instructions, to rule out once and for all any possibility of coincidence.

Conveniently, Jacobson offered himself as my subject.

So, the door locked securely behind me, I wrote with trembling fingers, fearful lest the pencil wrench itself from me and plunge into my heart :

Jacobson died at 2-43 p.m. the next day after slashing his wrists with a razor blade in the second cubicle from the left in the men's washroom on the third floor.

I sealed the notebook into an envelope, locked it into the box and lay awake through a sleepless night, the words echoing in my ears, glowing before my eyes like jewels of Hell.

After Jacobson's death—exactly according to my instructions—the staff of the department were given a week's holiday (in part to keep them away from curious newspapermen, who were beginning to scent a story, and also because the directors believed that Jacobson had been morbidly influenced by the deaths of Rankin and Carter). During those seven days I chafed impatiently to return to work. My whole attitude to the power had undergone a considerable change. Having to my own satisfaction verified its existence, if not its source, my mind turned again towards the future. Gaining confidence,

I realized that if I had been bequeathed the power it was my obligation to restrain any fears and make use of it. I reminded myself that I might be merely the tool of some greater force.

Alternatively, was the diary no more than a mirror which revealed the future, was I in some fantastic way twenty-four hours ahead of time when I described the deaths, simply a recorder of events that had already taken place?

These questions exercised my mind ceaselessly.

On my return to work I found that many members of the staff had resigned, their places being filled only with difficulty, news of the three deaths, particularly Jacobson's suicide, having reached the newspapers. The directors' appreciation of those senior members of the staff who remained with the firm I was able to turn to good account in consolidating my position. At last I took over command of the department—but this was no more than my due, and my eyes were now set upon a directorship.

All too literally, I would step into dead men's shoes.

Briefly, my strategy was to precipitate a crisis in the affairs of the firm which would force the board to appoint new executive directors from the ranks of the department managers. I therefore waited until a week before the next meeting of the board, and then wrote out four slips of paper, one for each of the executive directors. Once a director I should be in a position to propel myself rapidly to the chairmanship of the board, by appointing my own candidates to vacancies as they successively appeared. As chairman I should automatically find a seat on the board of the parent company, there to repeat the process, with whatever variations necessary. As soon as real power came within my orbit my rise to absolute national, and ultimately global, supremacy would be swift and irreversible.

If this seems naively ambitious, remember that I had as yet failed to appreciate the real dimensions and purpose of the power, and still thought in the categories of my own narrow world and background.

A week later, as the sentences on the four directors simultaneously expired, I sat calmly in my office, reflecting upon the brevity of human life, waiting for the inevitable summons to the board. Understandably, the news of their deaths, in a succession of motor-car accidents, brought general consternation upon the office, of which I was able to take advantage by retaining the only cool head.

To my amazement the next day I, with the rest of the staff, received a month's pay in lieu of notice. Completely flabbergasted—at first I feared that I had been discovered—I protested volubly to the chairman, but was assured that although everything I had done was deeply appreciated, the firm was nonetheless no longer able to support itself as a viable unit and was going into enforced liquidation.

A farce indeed ! So a grotesque justice had been done. As I left the office for the last time that morning I realized that in future I must use my power ruthlessly. Hesitation, the exercise of scruple, the calculation of niceties—these merely made me all the more vulnerable to the inconstancies and barbarities of fate. Henceforth I would be brutal, merciless, bold. Also, I must not delay. The power might wane, leave me defenceless, even less fortunately placed than before it revealed itself.

My first task was to establish the power's limits. During the next week I carried out a series of experiments to assess its capacity, working my way progressively up the scale of assassination.

It happened that my lodgings were positioned some two or three hundred feet below one of the principal airlines into the city. For years I had suffered the nerve-shattering roar of airliners flying in overhead at two-minute intervals, shaking the walls and ceiling, destroying thought. I took down my notebooks. Here was a convenient opportunity to couple research with redress.

You wonder : did I feel no qualms of conscience for the 75 victims who hurtled to their deaths across the evening sky twenty-four hours later, no sympathy for their relatives, no doubts as to the wisdom of wielding my power indiscriminately ?

I answer : No ! Far from being indiscriminate I was carrying out an experiment vital to the furtherance of my power.

I decided on a bolder course. I had been born in Stretchford, a mean industrial slum that had done its best to cripple my spirit and body. At last it could justify itself by testing the efficacy of the power over a wide area.

In my notebook I wrote the short flat statement :

Every inhabitant of Stretchford died at noon the next day.

Early the following morning I went out and bought a radio, sat by it patiently all day, waiting for the inevitable interruption of the afternoon programmes by the first horrified reports of the vast Midland holocaust.

Nothing, however, was reported ! I was astonished, the orientations of my mind disrupted, its very sanity threatened. Had my power dissipated itself, vanishing as quickly and unexpectedly as it had appeared ?

Or were the authorities deliberately suppressing all mention of the cataclysm, fearful of national hysteria ?

I immediately took the train to Stretchford.

At the station I tactfully made enquiries, was assured that the city was firmly in existence. Were my informants, though, part of the government's conspiracy of silence, was it aware that a monstrous agency was at work, and was somehow hoping to trap it ?

But the city was inviolate, its streets filled with traffic, the smoke of countless factories drifting across the blackened rooftops.

I returned late that evening, only to find my landlady importuning me for my rent. I managed to postpone her demands for a day, promptly unlocked my diary and passed sentence upon her, praying that the power had not entirely deserted me.

The sweet relief I experienced the next morning when she was discovered at the foot of the basement staircase, claimed by a sudden stroke, can well be imagined.

So my power still existed !

During the succeeding weeks its principal features disclosed themselves. Firstly, I discovered that it operated only within the bounds of feasibility. Theoretically the simultaneous deaths of the entire population of Stretchford might have been effected by the coincident explosions of several hydrogen bombs, but as this event was itself apparently impossible (hollow, indeed, are the boastings of our militarist leaders) the command was never carried out.

Secondly, the power entirely confined itself to the passage of the sentence of death. I attempted to control or forecast the motions of the stock market, the results of horse races, the behaviour of my employers at my new job—all to no avail.

As for the sources of the power, these never revealed themselves. I could only conclude that I was merely the agent, the willing clerk, of some macabre nemesis struck like an arc between the point of my pencil and the vellum of my diaries.

Sometimes it seemed to me that the brief entries I made were cross-sections through the narrative of some vast book of the dead existing in another dimension, and that as I made them my handwriting overlapped that of a greater scribe's along the narrow pencilled line where our respective planes of time crossed each other, instantly drawing from the eternal banks of death a final statement of account onto some victim within the tangible world around me.

The diaries I kept securely sealed within a large steel safe and all entries were made with the utmost care and secrecy, to prevent any suspicion linking me with the mounting catalogue of deaths and disasters. The majority of these were effected solely for purposes of experiment and brought me little or no personal gain.

It was therefore all the more surprising when I discovered that the police had begun to keep me under sporadic observation.

I first noticed this when I saw my landlady's successor in surreptitious conversation with the local constable, pointing up the stairs to my room and making head-tapping motions, presumably to indicate my telepathic and mesmeric talents. Later, a man whom I can now identify as a plainclothes detective stopped me in the street on some flimsy pretext and started a wandering conversation about the weather, obviously designed to elicit information.

No charges were ever laid against me, but subsequently my employers also began to watch me in a curious manner. I therefore assumed that the possession of the power had invested me with a distinct and visible aura, and it was this that stimulated curiosity.

As this aura became detectable by greater and greater numbers of people—it would be noticed in bus queues and cafes—and the first oblique, and for some puzzling reason, amused references to it were made openly by members of the public, I knew that the power's period of utility was ending. No longer would I be able to exercise it without fear of detection. I should have to destroy the diary, sell the safe

which so long had held its secret, probably even refrain from ever thinking about the power lest this alone generate the aura.

To be forced to lose the power, when I was only on the threshold of its potential, seemed a cruel turn of fate. For reasons which still remained closed to me, I had managed to penetrate behind the veil of commonplaces and familiarity which masks the inner world of the timeless and the preternatural. Must the power, and the vision it revealed, be lost forever?

This question ran through my mind as I looked for the last time through my diary. It was almost full now, and I reflected that it formed one of the most extraordinary texts, if unpublished, in the history of literature. Here, indeed, was established the primacy of the pen over the sword!

Savouring this thought, I suddenly had an inspiration of remarkable force and brilliance. I had stumbled upon an ingenious but simple method of preserving the power in its most impersonal and lethal form without having to wield it myself and itemise my victims' names.

This was my scheme: I would write and have published an apparently fictional story in conventional narrative in which I would describe, with complete frankness, my discovery of the power and its subsequent history. I would detail precisely the names of my victims, the mode of their deaths, the growth of my diary and the succession of experiments I carried out. I would be scrupulously honest, holding nothing back whatsoever. In conclusion I would tell of my decision to abandon the power and publish a full and dispassionate account of all that had happened.

Accordingly, after a considerable labour, the story was written and published in a magazine of wide circulation.

You show surprise? I agree; as such I should merely have been signing my own death warrant in indelible ink and delivering myself straight to the gallows. However, I omitted a single feature of the story: its denouement, or surprise ending, the twist in its tail. Like all respectable stories, this one too had its twist, indeed one so violent as to throw the earth itself out of its orbit. This was precisely what it was designed to do.

For the twist in this story was that it contained my last command to the power, my final sentence of death.

Upon whom ? Who else, but upon the story's reader !

Ingenious, certainly, you willingly admit. As long as issues of the magazine remain in circulation (and their proximity to victims of this extraordinary plague guarantees that) the power will continue its task of annihilation. Its author alone will remain unmolested, for no court will hear evidence at second-hand, and who will live to give it at first-hand ?

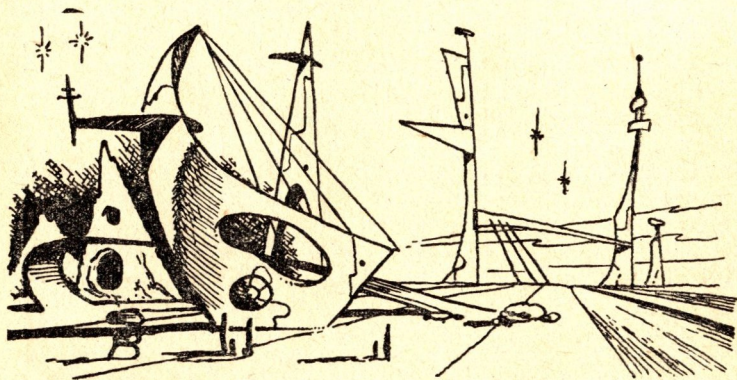
But where, you ask, was the story published, fearful that you may inadvertently buy the magazine and read it.

I answer : Here ! It is the story that lies before you now. Savour it well, its finis is your own. As you read these last few lines you will be overwhelmed by horror and revulsion, then by fear and panic. Your heart seizes, its pulse falling . . . your mind clouds . . . your life ebbs . . . you are sinking, within a few seconds you will join eternity . . . three . . . two . . . one . . .

Now !

Zero.

—J. G. Ballard



Alan Barclay's contribution to this issue is one that could well be termed lightly facetious. It will particularly appeal to college students who have a penchant for 'rags'—at that, the idea behind the story is one which some enterprising student body may well use to good effect.

WHO WAS HERE ?

BY ALAN BARCLAY

Over coffees in the snack-bar they decided to cut the eleven-fifteen lecture, all except Foster, who was instructed to attend, to keep notes and to forge their initials on the attendance list. They walked round to the back of the College and wedged themselves into Phantom III.

Phantom III had once upon a time, twenty-three years ago or thereabouts, been an Austin Seven. It now had a squarish rather rough-cut aluminium two-seater body, rudimentary mudguards and other items attached here and there.

There were four of them. Joe, who owned, managed, maintained and drove Phantom III, and who was believed even to sleep beside it at night ; the Bem, president of the College Interplanetary Society ; Liz (sometimes called Skinny) who was a female, and Gerry Baxter. Liz was nearly eighteen. She had an urchin cut and was taking mathematics. She was extra-

ordinarily good at mathematics. She was, in addition, a very beautiful girl, or would be in about two years' time, although her friends who were also about eighteen, had not noticed it yet. She usually said very little. What she thought, no-one troubled to enquire . . . yet. Her day would come, probably their final year.

They got into the two-seater, Joe in the driving seat, the Bem alongside, Liz who did not occupy much room, perched on his knee, and Gerry sitting on top of the back seat. Joe let in the clutch and Phantom III leapt snorting into the traffic.

They proceeded out of town. Joe concentrated on his driving, scowling and muttering to himself. When Gerry or Bem asked him, whether he planned to go round, under, or over the bus in front, he never even grunted. They went about twelve miles out of town and then turned up a steep rutted lane.

"Stop here." Gerry ordered. Joe jerked the car to a halt. They all scrambled out.

"Coming, Joe?" Gerry asked.

"Can't," he said. "Gotta clean the plugs."

Without paying any further attention to Joe, the other three, led by Gerry, began to climb up the sides of the hill, winding in and out among the gorse bushes. They reached the top of a ridge.

"There it is." Gerry pointed.

They were looking down on an airfield. It was a smallish old airfield, evidently not in regular use nowadays and having at one end a number of large black hangars. There were at this moment two large long-range transport aircraft parked on the tarmac strip in front of the hangars. To one side of the hangars there stood a tall slim silver object. In shape it was like a pencil, but a pencil so gigantic that it towered above the hangar and higher than the trees.

Gerry produced a pair of binoculars and examined this object. Then he handed them to the Bem.

The Bem did not waste much time in the inspection.

"I've seen the design drawings," he said unenthusiastically.

"It's O.K. It'll get there."

"And back, I hope." Gerry added.

"Well," the Bem conceded, "since its going to have your brother in it . . . O.K. I hope so."

"I didn't know it was going to take off from here." Liz commented.

"Don't be a dope." Gerry told her. "The bits and pieces have been flown in here from the factories. They're putting them all together to see if they fit. When they're satisfied, they'll separate it into sections and fly it to Woomera." He took his field glasses from the Bem, and began to study the area carefully.

"Yes," he said to himself, "I can see how we can do it. The press is being shown over it day after tomorrow, first thing in the morning, so we'd better do the job tomorrow night. O.K.?"

"O.K." the Bem agreed. "I can't see it's all that important, though."

Gerry looked at him with contempt.

"Those fellows that went to Russia from that American University—I can't remember its name—they got theirs on the walls of the Kremlin. We've simply got to do better than that. It's a question of prestige."

"Someone else has got an interest in your brother's rocket," the Bem said in a dramatic whisper. "There's a fellow among the bushes just behind us who's looking at it through binoculars too. Probably a Russian spy."

"Probably a creature from outer space, checking up on the progress being made by us humans." Gerry uttered this bit of sarcasm good-humouredly. He also uttered it in a clear carrying voice loud enough for the person under discussion to hear most of it.

It worried the fellow in the bushes considerably. Especially as he *was* a creature from outer space.

Gerry spent the next ten minutes gauging distances, estimating heights and noting land-marks. Then : "Come along, fellows," he ordered.

"There's the creature from outer space," the Bem said, as they went back down the slope. The creature was smallish and plump and wore a natty gent's suiting and a curly-brimmed trilby hat, and resembled in every respect a middle-aged cost-accountant in some textile firm. He looked as if he grew dahlias in his leisure.

They overtook and passed him. They were scarcely aware of him, being occupied with more important thoughts ; Gerry with his plans, the Bem with the construction of a letter he meant to write to the editor of *Science Fantasy* magazine, and Liz with—well, no-one knew what Liz thought about ; perhaps

being a mathematician she thought about Fourier Series, or perhaps being a woman she thought about clothes.

"Good afternoon," said the little man as they went past.

"Aft'noon," they muttered in reply.

He looked at their retreating backs worriedly. Gerry's was a tall, straight back—the back of a born leader. The Bem was almost square. Liz was small and thin. He noticed that she had nice legs. Though he came from outer space, his instincts were those of a normal human male. He was not, of course, entirely convinced that they had spotted him ; he recognised that it might have been some sort of joke. But if they had spotted him, what on earth or in space had given him away ? And what were they going to do about it, anyway ?

Back down the hill they found Joe with his head under the bonnet, scowling at the distributor which he held in his hand.

"Put the pieces back and take us in to Tech," Gerry ordered.

"I haven't got the ignition right yet," Joe muttered.

"So long as it'll progress, we're not complaining. Get weaving."

Joe began to screw things together. Gerry looked around and saw another car some distance down the lane.

"That wasn't here when we arrived," he said.

"It belongs to a small tubby city-type sort of gent. He walked up the hill just after you."

"We saw him. We've just decided he's a creature from outer space, spying on us humans."

"Very likely," Joe agreed, without interest. "Or perhaps a pal of the Bem."

"Nice little car he's got . . . perhaps it's got a super-duper atomic motor under the bonnet."

"It's got a rotten little four cylinder O.H.V. engine under the bonnet." Joe told them. "I've just looked at it. The man who designed it should be in jail for getting money under false pretences. I don't think its springs are any good either."

"Better than no springs at all, like this crate of yours. Tell you what, Joe, why don't you jack up the horn and run a proper car underneath ?"

Joe began to flush round the ears. Nothing in the world ever stirred him except insults to his car.

"Come on, Joe, take us back to Tech." Gerry urged. "I've got a lot of organising to do before tomorrow."

The next evening at about ten o'clock Phantom III once again bounced and jolted up the lane. It contained the same crew as before and carried in addition several lengths of post, each about five feet long. Two other men followed behind the car on a motor scooter.

They untied the poles from the car, and dragged some coils of rope and tins of paint from the boot.

"We don't want you, Liz," Gerry told her, so she curled up in the car. Everyone knew that nothing would induce Joe to leave his car, so they did not bother to speak to him. They all set off up the hill among the gorse.

Joe might have got in beside Liz. Probably she would have made no objection if he had put his arm round her. Instead, however, he fastened an inspection lamp to his forehead, crawled underneath the car, and began to do things to the universal joint.

The others went up the hill to the point where they had made their reconnaissance the previous day.

"Right," Gerry said sharply, "do your stuff."

The operation had been carefully rehearsed. The five lengths of post were socketed together, making a stout pole about twenty-five feet high. One end of this was planted on the ground near the fence. Ropes were attached to the other end.

"O.K., chaps." Gerry said crisply, "Lift."

With two men on each rope, spread well apart, and pulling steadily, the end of the pole began to lift. Gerry gripped the top when it was six feet off the ground, and was hoisted in the air. When he was well aloft, the team moved round so that the top swung round over the wire fence. Gerry swung his feet clear as he passed over, slid down a third rope, and landed on the other side of the fence.

"Get yourselves out of sight, fellows," he ordered. "I'll be back in about an hour. I'll whistle."

His team lowered the pole, coiled up the ropes, and retired among the gorse bushes. Gerry strode briskly out across the immense dark plain that was the airfield, carrying two large tins of Wheatley's Rock-hard plastic emulsion paint, and a big brush.

To navigate accurately across an entirely featureless flat expanse of field in complete darkness—for naturally Gerry had chosen a moonless period—is not a particularly easy task, but he had studied this problem in advance. He took a

compass bearing and found that his direction lay towards a tall pine tree whose tip could be seen against the star-lit sky.

He walked carefully forward, counting his steps. Presently the towering nose of the rocket could be seen against the sky. At this point he made a wide circuit to avoid the guard's Nissen hut, and came up to the rocket at the other side.

The rocket was surrounded and enclosed by a complex frame of scaffolding which comprised horizontal and vertical members about ten foot apart, and diagonal bracing.

Without hesitation Gerry began to climb upwards, with the paint tins slung over his back. Very soon he was a hundred feet in the air. Anyone but a boy of that age would have been panting with the exertion, and scared out of his wits by the pit of blackness beneath him. Gerry was still breathing gently, and too intent on his job to be worried.

When he thought he was far enough up, he tied his paint tins to the scaffolding, opened them with a knife blade, and got to work with his brush.

He worked steadily downwards, holding on to the steelwork with one hand, and leaning inwards towards the curved polished flank on the rocket.

A little before Gerry's arrival at the rocket, Mr. Rowbotham had got there too. Mr. Rowbotham was the person—the being—who had been so accurately labelled by Gerry and his friends as the creature from outer space. Mr. Rowbotham had his own very special methods for surmounting twelve-foot wire fences and for climbing scaffolding. While Gerry was at work outside, Mr. Rowbotham was busy inside doing something that was really quite harmless. He was taking photographs. He was using an ordinary, man-made camera, though indeed a very good one for which he had paid over a hundred pounds. It contained, however, a special sort of film and he was using infra red light to make his exposures.

Having finished his job inside the rocket, he pushed open the heavy round manhole in the side of the ship and peeked cautiously out. Looking straight downwards, he saw nothing to give him alarm, but looking to one side, he nearly fainted with fright. No more than five yards away, some distance below, and round the curve of the hull to the left was Gerry. As he looked it seemed to him that the boy glanced straight in his direction.

He drew back. He pulled the manhole to. There was no cry, no indication that Gerry had seen him. He waited, quiet

as a mouse, for half an hour. When he peeped out again, no one was to be seen. He began to feel slightly less worried.

Gerry misjudged his direction on the return journey and hit the boundary fence about a hundred yards too far north, and had to make his way along it to his crossing point.

The moon had risen by this time. It was a crescent moon only, but gave sufficient light for him to get a glimpse of the small plump figure of the man from outer space scuttling away among the gorse bushes. Like all true leaders of men, however, Gerry made a practice of concentrating on one problem at a time. His job at the moment was to get back over the fence without starting an alarm, so he merely filed this observation in his mind for future consideration.

Joe was still underneath the car when they got back. Liz was curled up inside.

"C'mon, Joe," Gerry said, kicking the behind which protruded.

"That small car with the little man in it went past a minute ago." Liz said. "You know . . . the man from outer space."

Gerry, his current job finished, was now able to give his mind to this problem.

"I must say there's something queer about that feller," he admitted. "All joking apart, I wonder whether he is a spy, or a reporter? Here, you two . . ." he gestured to the pair on the motor scooter, "get down after that car. It's a little blue Austin. Get its number and the driver's address if you can."

The scooter team fastened on their helmets and buzzed off. They overtook Mr. Rowbotham without difficulty and followed him to his home, which was a small semi-detached in the suburbs.

Since they made no attempt to avoid his notice, Mr. Rowbotham became aware before he reached home that he was being followed. Peering between the leaves of the aspidistra which stood by the window of his front sitting-room he saw the scooter team stop outside his house. One of the amateur sleuths actually flashed on a torch to read the number on his gatepost.

When they buzzed off down the road, they left behind a really worried little creature from outer space.

Gerry's operation was, up to a point, a complete success.

When reporters, scientists and visiting technologists walked out of the Headquarters building next morning nothing of an

unexpected nature was seen on or about the rocket at first, but when they walked around to the other side they observed that a brief statement had been painted in brilliant white letters a yard high down the side of the rocket. The statement said : "TECH WAS HERE."

Photographs of this appeared in two papers that evening, and the customary stream of comment, part amused, part indignant, was emitted in the next few days. The College received a congratulatory telegram from the president of the Students' Union of the University of Saratoga, and another from a Soviet University, which had apparently completely misunderstood the intention behind the message, approving the students' courageous stand against capitalist war-mongering gangsters and fascist maniacs.

The final result was, however, a considerable disappointment to Gerry. He had used the very best quality rock-hard paint, which he had been assured was completely irremovable. His hope had been to see the announcement carried first of all to Woomers, and thence out to the Moon. In actual fact, it was removed within the space of half-an-hour with a sand-blast.

In addition, he got himself into a certain amount of trouble with his brother. Gerry was a big man in the College, president of the Students' Union, respected by his fellows, admired by the girl students, even well-thought of by the lecturers and professors. But by his brother he was regarded as a pain in the neck.

"I suppose I'd be wasting time telling a spotty-faced adolescent like you that this sort of thing is just silly," his brother said. "All I can do is hope you grow out of it and that you will eventually blush with shame every time you remember such youthful follies. But I want you tell me whether the oaf who painted that sign actually went inside the ship."

"It's never been my habit to tell tales," Gerry replied sternly, standing very erect and looking grim.

"Heaven give me strength," his brother prayed. "Listen, mug . . . I'm not trying to trap your idiot pals ; I'm not going to report anything to the police ; in fact, I'm absolutely and utterly bored with your childish games. But me and three good friends of mine are going to try to land on the Moon in that piece of iron piping, and we're naturally anxious to know that it's in good shape for the trip. We think the joker with the paint brush went inside. Can you find out if he did ?"

"What makes you think he did?" Gerry asked cautiously.

"The evidence is very small—perhaps it's just an illusion. The manhole's closed from outside by a recessed handle. It fastens in two stages. You swing it round so far, without much effort, then you must give a pretty hard jerk to close it the last half inch. Well, the electronics wizard says he jerked it quite shut the night before, and found it not completely shut the next morning. It's not much. It might just be this chap's imagination. We certainly would never have given it a second thought if it hadn't been for this adolescent brushwork. Incidentally, nothing's been disturbed inside."

"I can reassure you about this," Gerry told him. "The fellow with the paint brush wasn't within yards of the manhole."

"You're sure?"

"Perfectly sure."

"I see," he brother nodded. "So it was you, eh? I told the Security Officer it probably was you or one of your idiot pals. You're quite sure you didn't even grip the handle by chance as you swung past?"

"Quite sure. I wasn't within yards of it."

"Very well. I never really thought there was anything to this scare, anyway. It's all a matter of a quarter of an inch of movement and the handle could quite possibly have yielded back that much, even if the electronics bloke didn't dream it all."

Gerry got up to go.

"That's all there is to it, then?" he asked.

"That's all. You can clear off back to Tech now and get some lecture hours in for a change. And if ever you feel an urge to use paint and a brush again just remind yourself the garage badly needs doing over."

Gerry went off to College, glad to be out of his brother's sight. He admired him immensely but always felt very schoolboyish in his presence. As his distance from his brother increased, so he regained his former stature. By the time he was going up the steps of the College, he felt himself to be once more the famous Gerry Baxter, leader of men.

He began to think about his brother's questions. It will be remembered that he had not spotted Mr. Rowbotham peeping out of the rocket, but he had seen him scuttling about in its vicinity.

"Did those two fellows find out where that fellow lives?" he asked the Bem.

"Which fellow?"

"The fellow you've been calling the man from outer space."

"I believe so," the Bem replied.

"Good. Get that address and tell Joe we want him and his crate."

"When?"

"This afternoon. I guess we can cut Lab. Fix that somebody signs our signatures."

"Old Towser tore up the attendance list last week when he found there were twelve names on the list and only five men doing Lab."

"That means there'll be more attending today, and Towser can't count beyond six. And you might get one of the swots who did attend, to complain about the torn-up list."

Mr. Rowbotham heard the car stop outside his house and watched them troop up his garden path. He was worried, but not so worried as he would have been had it been a police car. Also he noticed that the girl was with them, which seemed to mean that they did not regard him as a dangerous monster. He thought he might just manage to talk himself out of this spot of trouble.

"Come in, boys," he invited, opening his door.

They shuffled their way into his lounge, which looked out on a pleasant garden, well-tended.

"I'm sure you'd like some beer, eh?" he asked, trying to be jolly. "I'll fetch it from the fridge."

"What d'you do next, big Chief?" the Bem asked.

To tell the truth, Gerry was not quite sure. If he asked whether the fellow had been tampering with the rocket and the latter said 'No,' that would just about bring the interview to an end.

"Just tell him you know he's a thing from outer space," Liz suggested.

"Shut up, you clot." Gerry howled.

But Mr. Rowbotham had heard. He came in carrying a tray of glasses and some bottles.

"This is lager," he explained. "I do hope you like lager . . . So you've found me out, eh? You know I don't belong to this earth . . . I must say I'm at a loss to know how you spotted me. I can't think what mistake I've made." He began to open

the bottles and to pour out the beer. Since his attention was thus directed downwards, he missed the series of expressions that passed over the mobile faces of his young visitors.

"Here you are, lady, and gentlemen," he said. "How did you find me out?"

"Let's leave that for the time being," Gerry said. He spoke in a tense voice which he managed with difficulty to keep steady. "We want to know first of all what damage you did to the ship?"

Mr. Rowbotham leaned back in his chair, crossed his plump legs and took a long sip of beer.

"Beer is one of the things that makes a visit to this planet of yours worth while . . . No, I did no damage at all to your rocket ship . . . Just took some photographs."

After that they just sat and stared at him.

"Well?" he asked encouragingly, "what next? I bet you're afraid I might sizzle you with a heat ray or something. Believe me, I won't. I'd get into serious trouble with my boss if I resorted to that sort of thing. Besides, I'm not cut out for rough stuff. On the other hand, my young friends, I don't really see what you can do to me. I think you'd find it a bit difficult to prove that I've come from another planet. My background's pretty well check-proof. Arrived here from Poland twenty years ago. Born in Poznan, and prove that's faked if you can."

"But . . . you must be different . . . different blood . . . different interior arrangements."

"Two hearts," Liz contributed brightly.

Mr. Rowbotham chuckled. "You're wrong, you know. I'm just exactly like you. I've even been a blood donor a couple of times. You see, I'm really human, though I was born on another planet. My great-grandparents were scooped off this planet by a survey ship about two hundred years ago."

"Kidnapped?"

"No, I don't think that's fair. They were emigrants to America. Their ship was sinking. They were rescued, that's all. There's human population on my planet that goes back to neolithic times."

"They're slaves, you mean?"

"By no means. The original natives are different. Very different. But the two sorts get along together all right. We humans are the men of action. The others are a bit on the contemplative dreamy side."

"So you're a traitor, eh?" Gerry demanded.

"Traitor, my dear young fellow? Traitor to what? I'm not English you know. I'm a native of my own planet and I'm here to keep an eye on your technological development. By the way, have some more beer."

"What is your planet?" Liz asked.

"Well, we humans call it Earth, you know. The name got tagged on many generations ago."

"Where is it—I mean what sun does it belong to? Arcturus or Algol or Betelgeuse?"

"None of these," Mr. Rowbotham confessed, a little ashamedly. "As a matter of fact, our sun is listed in 'The Apparent Places of Fundamental Stars' as 29 H Camelopardi."

"Dear me!" Liz said mildly. "In the s-f stories it's always Arcturus or Centaurus."

"Well, boys," Mr. Rowbotham asked. "What do you mean to do about it? I warn you, you'll have a bit of a job getting people to believe you. And what laws have I broken anyway?"

"Yes," Gerry agreed. "You've got something there. As a matter of fact, we haven't anything against you, just so long as you've not been doing any damage to that rocket. My brother's making an attempt to touch down on the Moon in it in three months' time."

"I assure you, I did no damage," the little man insisted. "As a matter of fact, we're rather keeping an eye on this one. It's a pretty good job, is that rocket. You people seem to have got all the bugs ironed out. With a bit of luck your brother ought to be able to get there."

"Good," Gerry said. "Well, as I said we've got no real quarrel with you. We'd like to think this thing over."

"Fair enough," Mr. Rowbotham agreed, "Have some more beer."

Gerry lay awake most of the night thinking it over, or at least that's what he said next morning, but in actual fact, being young and carefree he was probably not awake for more than ten minutes, after which he had a brainwave in his sleep, and woke to find it in the forefront of his mind in the morning, all fresh and quivering and gorgeous.

"Come one, Joe," he ordered. "Let's go and visit the creature from outer space. I gotta perfect peach of an idea."

Mr. Rowbotham welcomed them with more beer.

"What can I do for you, boys?" he asked.

"I reckon when we get to the Moon, we'll find traces of you folks," Gerry began. "That's really why you're so interested in this rocket."

"True enough," Mr. Rowbotham admitted. "We've been using the Moon as a staging post for our big ships for generations. There's plenty of traces."

"So when us humans get there, you'll be discovered; your gaff will be blown; you'll have had your chips?"

"Nothing can be done to prevent our existence becoming known to you; I don't know whether I would agree that we will have had our chips. At any rate our committee is already discussing ways and means of making official contact with your governments. We want to avoid being taken for monsters, or creating a panic among you."

"That's what I thought," Gerry nodded. "So here's my proposition. It depends on the fact that a radio beacon has already been landed by remote control in one of the craters to guide my brother's ship down. This is what I want in return for keeping my mouth closed . . ."

There had been a number of expeditions round the Moon, and two previous disastrous attempts to land there. This one, however, had been very carefully prepared and thoroughly planned and there was a very general feeling of optimism about it. People felt that this was the one that was going to get right there.

A beamed television link-up had been arranged between the ship and the polar satellite, and given favourable conditions it was hoped that via the latter a large proportion of humanity would be able to see the approach and landing and also—most thrilling and significant event of all—the actual first step by any human being onto the surface of the Moon.

This turned out to be one of those very fortunate undertakings, in which everything goes so smoothly and so well that people begin to get forebodings of very special disasters to come later. The rocket took off according to plan, coasted outwards almost exactly on course, and having turned tail-about, followed the radio beam down onto the surface of the Moon just like a skilled acrobat sliding down a rope.

Television reception was quite outstanding, enabling millions of excited viewers to share the thrill.

Half an hour after the rocket touched down, the crew had finished their programme of checks and adjustments, and the cloud of fine dust had settled outside the ship. The television hook-up switched to the interior of the rocket showing the crew of three, crowded rather closely together in the air-lock, checking their pressure suits and equipment. One of the three began to un-dog the manhole. He pushed against it, and it began to swing ponderously aside. The television camera, looking over the helmeted heads of the crew, gave viewers their first authentic close-up picture of the surface of the Moon. What they saw was the floor of the crater, almost flat and extending forward for a distance of three miles or so, to the foot of the mountains which formed the crater wall. Then the camera slid forward on a telescopic arm, and so obtained a wider view of powdered pumice floor, incredibly towering cliffs, blue black sky, and the greenish crescent of earth itself over to the right.

It was a unique picture. An unforgettable moment.

The interest and excitement of the moment was raised to a pitch almost unbearable by the fact that on the cliff walls opposite, in letters about fifty yards high which seemed to have been stroked on with a brush of flame were the words :—

TECH WAS HERE.

—Alan Barclay

 * **'Gone Away—No known address'** *

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STUDIES IN SCIENCE FICTION

Edgar Allan Poe wielded a tremendous power over the embryo science fiction field of one hundred years ago, and doubtless influenced many of the masters who were to follow in his footsteps. This month's article is essentially concerned with his works rather than the man.

4. Edgar Allan Poe

By Sam Moskowitz

That science fiction would develop and eventually grow into an important literary force was inevitable as scientific invention and technology began to make gargantuan strides during the early part of the nineteenth century. The mood of the period reflected the pride of Man in his progress and the fascination which the newly created marvels exercised over him took the form of an overwhelming curiosity as to where all this would lead and what was to come next.

Edgar Allan Poe, with his supremely logical and brilliant mind, became the leading proponent of the science fiction tale in the first half of the nineteenth century. The literature owes to his influence an enduring debt, quite on a par with the recognition accorded him for his contributions to detective and mystery fiction.

Basically, Poe's science fiction stories were divided into two major categories. The first, including such tales as *Ms. Found*

in a Bottle, *Descent into the Maelstrom* and *A Tale of Ragged Mountain* are artistic science fiction in which the mood or effect is primary and the scientific rationality serves merely to strengthen the aesthetic aspect.

In the other group, examples of which as *Mellonta Tauta*, *Hans Phaall—A Tale* and *The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade*, the idea he wished to convey was paramount and the style was modulated to provide an atmospheric background which would remain unobtrusive, and not take the spotlight from the scientific concepts he was intent on dramatizing in the most effective possible way.

Poe's greatest reputation and certainly the bulk of his most magnificent tales and poems have been built around themes stressing psychological horror. It is not surprising, therefore, that many readers tend to think of him as a supernatural horror story writer, with a decided penchant for ghosts.

They forget that not a single Poe story ever contained a legitimate ghost and the few angels which occasionally crop up, merely play the role of sardonic storytellers. Poe abhorred mysticism in almost any form, including the notion of a deity in religion. If he was not an atheist, his published statements, taken at their most conservative, reveal a militant agnostic.

His classic tales of terror, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Black Cat* and *William Wilson*, are actually coolly based on abnormal psychology and contain many elements which the modern writer, inspired by Sigmund Freud, mines for rich literary ore. Poe, through his own tormenting problems, knew that the ultimate damnation lay in the distortions of a man's own inner consciousness and not in any supernatural event.

That he was sceptical of anything at odds with cold, dispassionate logic was made abundantly clear by his brilliant expose of Johann Nepomuk Maelzel, a German, visiting America, who brought with him an elaborate mechanism which he claimed could play chess automatically. This device had duped Europeans since its invention by Baron Kempelen of Hungary in 1769. The machine would play a chess game with any individual. It was not infallible, and at times it would even lose a game. But what angered Poe was the fact that its showman Maelzel claimed that the entire operation was automatic.

With nothing to go on except the manner in which the game was conducted, Poe, in his remarkable essay. *Maelzel's Chess-Player*, published in the April, 1836 issue of *The Southern Literary Messenger*, successfully exposed the machine as a fraud, manipulated by a concealed man. In that essay we get a clear picture of the superlatively logical mind that conceived C. Auguste Dupin, forerunner of Sherlock Holmes and cleverly constructed and unraveled cryptograms in the popular tale of lost treasure, *The Gold Bug*.

His brilliance in that respect demonstrates that there was nothing inconsistent about his writing spine-chillers on the one hand and legitimate science fiction on the other. That his epics of fear had, for the most part, a greater literary impact was more accidental than otherwise, for Poe might have achieved a fame as a philosopher or mathematician without writing a single line of imaginative fiction.

But the writing of science fiction did not merely occupy a youthful phase of Poe's writing career, to be later set aside for more "mature" subject matter, as was the case with H. G. Wells. Originally, Poe attempted to make his reputation as a poet, seriously turning to prose in 1832 when five of his short stories, including his very first, *Metzengerstein*, appeared in *The Philadelphia Saturday Courier*.

His first published science fiction story was *Ms. Found in a Bottle* which won a fifty-dollar first prize in a contest sponsored by *The Baltimore Saturday Visitor*, appearing in the issue of that periodical for October 12, 1833. From that time until his death in 1849, which year he published *Von Kempelen and his Discovery* and *Mellonta Tauta*, science fiction tales were a regular part of his literary production.

Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, Jan. 19, 1809, son of an English actress, Elizabeth Arnold Hopkins, and an Irish actor, David Poe. There was a brother and sister, and all three of the children had to be supported by the mother when the father deserted while Edgar was still an infant.

When Mrs. Poe died in Richmond, Virginia, in 1811, the children were adopted by well-to-do families of that city. Edgar was given a home by a successful merchant, John Allan, from whom he received his middle name.

Poe received good elementary schooling and was then sent to the University of Virginia where immoderate gambling eventually resulted in his removal. Admission to West Point,

obtained through the influence of his father, ended in his being court-martialed for neglect of duty. Upon leaving the U.S. Military Academy, in the spring of 1831, he redoubled his efforts to get his poetry published and began the first of his many short stories.

The Baltimore Saturday Visitor prize for *Ms. Found in a Bottle* brought him immediate gratifying recognition. The judges of the contest, J. H. B. Latrobe, John P. Kennedy and Dr. James H. Miller, in letters and records they have left behind, were perfectly aware that they had discovered a writer of extraordinary talent. Latrobe, in later describing the reactions of the judges during the reading of six of Poe's short stories submitted to the contest under the heading of *Folio Club Tales*, said ; "There was genius in everything they listened to ; there was no uncertain grammar, no feeble phraseology, no ill-placed punctuation, no worn truisms, no strong thought elaborated into weakness. Logic and imagination were combined in rare consistency . . . There was no analysis of complicated facts—an unravelling of circumstantial knowledge that charmed . . . a pure classic diction that delighted all three."

After the reading, there was a considerable discussion as to whether to select *Ms. Found in a Bottle* or *A Descent into Maelstrom* as the winner. *Ms. Found in a Bottle* is the story of an old-time freighter blasted apart by a sudden tropical storm and slowly sinking. "At a terrific height directly above us, and upon the very verge of the precipitous descent, hovered a gigantic ship of perhaps four thousand tons. Although upreared upon the summit of a wave more than a hundred times her own altitude, her apparent size still exceeded that of any ship of the line or East Indiaman in existence."

The ghostly ship collides with the wreckage and the impact throws the narrator to safety on her deck. The mystery vessel is manned by a crew of incredibly ancient mariners, who pay scant attention to the new arrival. Though in almost the final stages of senility, the Captain and the crew appear to be attempting to thwart some inescapable doom.

It soon becomes evident that the vessel is inexorably drawn across the seas by a powerful current or undertow. This river of the sea races like "a tide which, howling and shrieking by the white ice, thunders on to the southward with a velocity like the headlong dashing of a cataract . . ." Rushing through

"stupendous ramparts of ice, towering away into the desolate sky, and looking like the walls of the universe . . ." the ship is sucked into a whirlpool of waters rushing toward the centre of the earth.

While the atmosphere of the story owes a debt to the legend of the Flying Dutchman, the ending seems to have been inspired by a theory circulated by Captain John Cleves Symmes of Hamilton, Ohio in 1818. Symmes believed that the earth was hollow and that there were openings at both poles. He even estimated the size of the entrances to be four thousand miles in diameter at the north pole and six thousand at the south. Each opening, he claimed, was enclosed in a circle of ice.

A work of science fiction titled *Symzonia* and credited to Captain Adam Seaborn (possibly a pseudonym of Symmes), appeared in 1820, based on Symmes theory and involved strange animals, a lost civilization and much adventure at the Earth's centre.

That Poe was acquainted with the concept of the hollow earth may be drawn from the postscript to *Ms. Found in a Bottle*, which referred to his having become familiar "with the maps of Mercator, in which the ocean is represented as rushing, by four mouths, into the (northern) Polar Gulf, to be absorbed into the bowels of the earth; the pole itself being represented by a black rock, towering to a prodigious height."

It has been pointed out that *Ms. Found in a Bottle* reads like the prelude to a longer story dealing with the Earth's centre. Similar observations have been made concerning *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*, which might conceivably have become a tale of a hollow earth, with an ending very similar to *Descent into Maelstrom*. Poe's mention of the Earth's north pole as convex in appearance in *Hans Phaall—A Tale*, affords further substantiation that he was familiar with Symmes' theories.

Poe hovered on the brink of new adventures many times and always drew back. All of the tales which seem to have something in common with Symmes, are in a real fashion, unfinished. The impression, in each of them, is that for reasons best known to himself, the author preferred to leave the story hanging.

Perhaps the most imaginative of Poe's science fiction stories, *Hans Phaall—A Tale*, was in the process of creation at the very time when *Ms. Found in a Bottle* was published. Thrilled by

the selection of his story as a Prize winner, Poe called upon the three judges individually to thank them.

The account of his visit to Latrobe is recorded : " I asked him whether he was then occupied with any literary labour. He replied that he was then engaged on *A Voyage to the Moon*, and at once went into a somewhat learned disquisition upon the laws of gravity, the height of the earth's atmosphere, and capacities of balloons . . . presently, speaking in the first person, he began the voyage . . . leaving the earth and becoming more and more animated, he described his sensations as he climbed higher and higher . . . where the moon's attraction overcame that of the earth, there was a sudden *bouleversement* of the car and great confusion among the tenants.

"By the time the speaker had become so excited, spoke so rapidly, gesticulating much, that when the turn upside-down took place, and he clapped his hands and stamped with his foot by way of emphasis, I was carried along with him . . ."

That Poe was extraordinarily enthusiastic about the writing of his " moon " story is undeniable. His preoccupation with science fiction was not a literary accident. Neither was it an outgrowth of financial necessity. It was undeniably what he wanted to write.

A very good case has been made for *A Voyage to the Moon* by Joseph Atterley, published in 1827, as one of the prime movers in arousing Poe's interest in writing a moon story. It seems that Joseph Atterley was actually a pen name of Professor George Tucker, chairman of the Faculty of the University of Virginia, which Poe attended in 1826. Tucker's novel is of historical interest on another count, since it is one of the earliest stories using what has come to be known as anti-matter, or in science fiction terminology, " contraterrene matter," as a means of space navigation.

To accomplish his space voyage Poe used a balloon. Despite this, the story was far from being unscientific. He paved the way for the use of the balloon, by presenting the theory that the Sun's atmosphere extended beyond Venus into the orbit of the Earth in a somewhat attenuated form. As theoretical evidence, he offered the shortening intervals between the arrival of Encke's comet, which could not be satisfactorily explained by the science of his day, but which he surmised might be due to the fact that there was more resistance to movement in space than was commonly supposed.

The narrative itself is documentary. It compares favourably with *Destination Moon*, the moving picture made from Robert A. Heinlein's script, which graphically describes the mechanics of space flight in a completely realistic and believable fashion.

At the very end of his tale, Poe abruptly turns facetious and intimates that the entire thing is a hoax, but not before a city of "ugly little people" is discovered on the moon. The impression is strongly conveyed that the story was never truly finished and was quickly tidied up to facilitate a sale. Nevertheless, it is in the main deadly serious, scientific and well done.

Hans Phaall—A Tale, appeared in *The Southern Literary Messenger* for June, 1835, only a few months before another moon story which was destined to create a national sensation. *The New York Sun*, during the months of August and September, 1835, carried what it claimed to be a completely authenticated news story titled *Discoveries in the Moon Lately Made at the Cape of Good Hope*.

This story, which today is known as *The Moon Hoax*, was perpetrated by Richard Adams Locke and purported to be the discoveries made by Sir John Herschel at his observatory on Cape Hope with the aid of a newly constructed telescope. The readers were completely taken in and other papers, including the *Journal of Commerce*, reprinted the account. The excitement reached such proportions, that the author, fearing unforeseen and unpleasant reactions when the hoax was finally discovered, voluntarily confessed before he could be exposed.

Poe was furious, largely because he believed the idea had been lifted from his own moon story. In a letter, dated Sept. 11, 1835, to his Baltimore benefactor, John P. Kennedy (one of the judges who had awarded first prize to *Ms. Found in a Bottle*), he wrote: "Have you seen the 'Discoveries in the Moon?' Do you not think it altogether suggested by Hans Phaall? It is very singular, but when I first proposed writing a tale concerning the Moon, the idea of *Telescopic discoveries* suggested itself to me—but I afterwards abandoned it. I had however spoken of it freely, and from many little incidents and apparently trivial remarks in those *Discoveries* I am convinced that the idea was stolen from myself."

When *Hans Phaall* was later incorporated into book form, Poe added a footnote pointing out that his story enjoyed prior appearance to *The Moon Hoax*. In his footnote, he mentioned that New York papers had reprinted his story side by side with

Locke's to ascertain if they were written by the same person. Though he refers to the "very celebrated and very beautiful 'Moon Story'" by Locke, in a review which he wrote shortly after the appearance of the hoax, he figuratively cut the story to shreds both scientifically and artistically.

There is speculation that the real cause of Poe's anger stemmed from the fact that he planned a sequel to *Hans Phaall*. Possibly that was the motive behind the abrupt ending of the Poe story and Locke's hoax destroyed his opportunity to add to it.

The longest story Poe ever wrote, actually a novel in length, was *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, originally serialized in a magazine edited by Poe, *The Southern Literary Messenger*, Jan.-Feb., 1837, and later completed for hard cover publication.

Commencing as a blood-curdling tale of adventure on the high seas, the story becomes a science fiction tale as a lost race is discovered on islands near the south pole. The sequence of events closely follows those of Seaborn's *Symzonia* and the tale becomes more fantastic as it evolves, with the discovery of hitherto unknown aquatic creatures and water which is "veined" and peculiarly alive.

As the ill-fated ship journeys closer, the area near the South Pole seems to warm up, strange white creatures go drifting by, a peculiar ash falls continually from the sky and in the distance can be dimly seen through the vapour a "limitless cataract, rolling silently into the sea from some immense and far-distant rampart in the heaven. The gigantic curtain ranged along the whole extent of the southern horizon. It emitted no sound."

Overhead "gigantic and pallidly white birds flew continuously now from beyond the veil, and their scream was the eternal *Tekeli-li* . . . there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin was of the perfect whiteness of the snow."

There the story ends and what might have come next has fascinated readers for over a century, none more so than Jules Verne, who wrote a sequel, *Sphinx of the Icefields*, and H. P. Lovecraft, who in a sense also wrote a sequel in *At The Mountains of Madness*. Lovecraft's novel of the exploration of an advanced and ancient civilization beneath the ice of the antarctic ends, as did Poe's, with "the repetition of a single, mad word of all too obvious source: "*Tekeli-li* . . . *Tekeli-li*!"

Poe's *The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion*, first published in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* for December, 1838, is of singular literary significance. A comet, passing through the earth's atmosphere, alters its chemistry so that all life perishes. This being the case, the story is necessarily told by two spirits in the hereafter. But the fact that the earth had never before been wiped out in fiction, in quite this astronomical and scientifically sound a manner, cannot be minimized.

It is a striking commentary upon the attitude of publishers towards native authors in Poe's time that one of his most powerful short stories, the gripping *Descent Into the Maelstrom*, which we know to have been in manuscript form as early as 1833, had to go begging until 1841, when *Graham's Lady's and Gentlemen's Magazine* for May of that year published it. Dramatic poetry in prose, this tale moves along with the speed of a modern thriller, recounting the adventures of two brothers, fishing off Norway, who are sucked down into an immense whirlpool off the coast.

They descend for many miles, accompanied by myriads of objects which the maelstrom has also captured. The tale is powerfully related, with scrupulous attention to scientific accuracy. Through the use of known natural principles, one of the brothers saves himself and returns to the surface, while the other perishes.

Those who have read *Twenty Thousand Leagues Beneath the Sea* by Jules Verne must certainly have recognised *Descent into Maelstrom* as the genesis of a similar incident in which Captain Nemo and his marvellous submarine, The Nautilus, steer into virtually the same maelstrom off the coast of Norway.

A Tale of the Ragged Mountains, appearing first in *Godey's Lady's Book* for April, 1844, has, strangely enough, not been one of the author's frequently reprinted stories, though it certainly ranks among his better works. Under the effects of hypnotism and morphine, the protagonist, while strolling through the Ragged Mountains, which Poe knew well, since they were only a short distance from the University of Virginia which he attended, suddenly finds himself transmitted into the past and becomes involved in a battle between the British and the Natives of old India.

Though there is an element of the contrived, the tale is cleverly told and the writing is sheer delight.

At almost the same time, April 13, 1844, *The New York Sun* published a sensational extra with headlines that read :

"ASTOUNDING NEWS! BY EXPRESS VIA NORFOLK! THE ATLANTIC CROSSED IN THREE DAYS! SIGNAL TRIUMPH OF MR. MONCK MASON'S FLYING MACHINE!!!!"

The same Poe who had shredded Richard Adams Locke for his moon hoax, had descended to an almost identical trick which was to become known as *The Balloon Hoax*. Poe was determined to give the readers of the *Sun* their money's worth. The technical construction of the balloon was described in a faultless scientific manner. A reprint of the balloon's journal was published along with interpolations by one of the feminine passengers, Mrs. Ainsworth. For a brief time the hoax was believed, brought Poe a few dollars and focussed the public spotlight upon him and his brand of craftsmanship. Since the Atlantic was not to be traversed by a gas-filled flying machine for one hundred years after the appearance of Poe's story, we can readily see that this fabrication qualified as science fiction when it appeared.

Hypnotism or mesmerism, was, in Poe's time, of as questionable a nature as flying saucers are today. Reputable scientists frequently looked upon it as a form of quackery. Though few were more sceptical of the existence of anything of an occult or mystical nature than Poe, he evidently was fascinated by the possibilities of hypnotism, because he utilized it as a device in many of his stories. *Mesmeric Revelation*, when it appeared in *Columbian Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine* for August, 1844, used a hypnotized man as a means of projecting Poe's views on the nature of God and the universe, including the concept of the "Universal Mind" (all elements in the universe combined into a thinking whole), which later formed one of the primary tenets of Olaf Stapledon's philosophical fantasy, *The Star Maker*.

The theme of hypnotism was employed again in *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*, which appeared in *The American Review* for December, 1845. Therein, an experiment is conducted to see how long hypnotism may prolong the life of a dying man. Though the body dies, through post hypnotic suggestion, the unfortunate Mr. Valdemar, who is the subject of the experiment, continues to communicate. When after seven months the "dead" man is snapped out of his hypnotic trance, his body dissolves into "a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity." As a work of fiction this

is a much more effective scientific horror tale than its predecessor, *Mesmeric Revelation*.

Though he was preoccupied with mesmerism, Poe had by no means discarded his interest in the more physical sciences. *The Thousand and Second Tale of Scheherazade* purported to be the further adventures of the *Arabian Nights*, and related the real fate of the marvellous fabricator, Scheherazade. Not satisfied with her past triumphs, Scheherazade continues the adventures of Sinbad, who now encounters giant ocean-going steamships with thousands of passengers and every conceivable luxury aboard, railroad trains, wireless telegraphy, calculating machines, chess-playing robots, teletypes, printing presses, methods of converting baser metals into gold, ultra violet rays, galvanic batteries, electricity, photography, the astronomical tricks of light and other modern miracles. The king, Scheherazade's husband, had been perfectly willing to believe all the previous relatively reasonable adventures of Sinbad, but now he feels certain that Scheherazade is pulling his leg and not even being very subtle about it, so he has her choked to death. This story was introduced to the public by *Godey's Lady's Book* in its issue for Feb., 1848.

The year of his death, 1849, found Poe still very much occupied with the writing of science fiction. *Mellonta Tauta* appeared in *Godey's Lady's Book* for Feb., 1849. The story was laid in the year 2848 and told in the form of a letter written by a lady to a friend while taking a trans-Atlantic trip on a powered passenger balloon, travelling at the rate of 100 miles per hour. Some of the marvels of that future date included telegraph wires floating on the surface of the ocean and railroad trains travelling 300 miles per hour on fifty foot gauge tracks. Creatures on the moon and their civilization are observed through telescopes and the story ends with antiquarians excavating on the site of old New York a plaque for a monument in memory of George Washington upon the anniversary of the surrender of Lord Cornwallis. No one is quite sure who these gentlemen were and just what was implied by the surrender of Cornwallis.

Poe, in this story presents his concept of a finite universe, so balanced that it revolves around a common centre of gravity.

Mellonta Tauta appears to have been written to create interest in a new theory of the universe propounded by Poe in

his controversial essay *Eureka, a Prose Poem*, first published in book form by George Putnam in 1848. This non-fiction work was the basis of a number of dramatic lectures delivered by Poe and he believed it to be his supreme masterpiece. Literary researchers and critics alike have either ignored it or viewed it askance. Some feel it represents the product of a mind no longer rational, others contended that it indicated intellectual strength and the grasp of advanced theories which have since received acceptance, while a third school maintains that the ideas should be ignored and that it should be considered on its literary merits alone as a prose poem.

One of the theories in *Eureka* is the concept that all matter sprang from nothing and that there is a process resembling that of "continuous creation" of matter. Another is that there is an equitable irradiation of matter through a 'limited' space and that the number of stars and their extent is finite, not infinite.

Poe also believed that matter is attracted to matter and not to one common point in the universe and therefore that gravitation indicated a tendency of all things to return into their original unity: that the universe began from nothing and would return to nothing.

That further matter is only attraction and repulsion: "a finally consolidated globe of globes, being but *one* particle, would be without attraction, i.e., gravitation; the existence of such a globe presupposes the expulsion of the sperative either which we know to exist between the particles as at present diffused:—thus the final globe would be matter without attraction and repulsion: but these *are* matter:—then the final globe would be matter without matter:—i.e., no matter at all:—it must disappear. Thus Unity is *nothingness*."

The last science fiction story of Poe's to see print was *Von Kempelen and His Discovery*, presented in *The Flag of Our Union* for April 14, 1849, involving the successful transmutation of lead into gold by the title character.

The full range of Poe's influence upon the science fiction field is incalculable, but his greatest contribution to the advancement of the genre was the precept that every departure from norm must be logically explained *scientifically*. This made it easy for the reader to attain a willing-suspension-of-disbelief and accept the unusual.

The greatest names in the history of the field owe a profound debt to his method : " that everything must be scientifically logical " and in some cases an even stronger one to his inspired techniques of narration.

The details of Poe's tortured life would not be believable or acceptable in fiction. The bouts with alcohol and drugs as a temporary respite from his plights, the strange circumstances of the marriage to his 13 year old, tubercular cousin and his own grevous personality faults, conceal a man who was essentially a hard-working, willing, self-sacrificing writer and husband.

The night of his death, Oct. 7, 1849, in Baltimore at the age of 40, it is reported that the corridors of the hospital rang for hours with his cries of "Reynolds! Reynolds! Oh, Reynolds!" Reynolds was a man interested in Antarctic exploration who was thought to have influenced the writing of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Truly, this time Poe was being carried by a relentless current toward a roaring cataract which poured ceaselessly into a fathomless chasm, while white figures hovered nearby and the screams of " tekeli-li tekeli-li !" achieved their ultimate meaning.

Did the shrouded human figure that rose before him at the last bear his salvation or his eternal damnation ?

Thanks for the courtesy extended by the staff of The Poe House in Philadelphia, whose exhibits and elaboration on Poe's motivations helped the writer attain the proper perspective on the man.

—Sam Moskowitz

STUDIES IN SCIENCE FICTION

Previous articles in this series have been :—

The Sons of Frankenstein	No. 34
Arthur Conan Doyle	No. 36
H. G. Wells	No. 37

Stories by Robert Silverberg are appearing less frequently than they used—much of his output is now in fields other than fantasy and science fiction—nevertheless there is still the occasional rare gem to remind us that he still remembers his first love.

THE WARM MAN

BY ROBERT SILVERBERG

No one was ever quite sure just when Mr. Hallinan came to live in New Brewster. Lonny Dewitt, who ought to know, testified that Mr. Hallinan died on December 3, at 3.30 in the afternoon, but as for the day of his arrival no one could be nearly so precise.

It was simply that one day there was no one living in the unoccupied split-level on Melon Hill, and then the next *he* was there, seemingly having grown out of the woodwork during the night, ready and willing to spread his cheer and warmth throughout the whole of the small suburban community.

Daisy Moncrieff, New Brewster's ineffable hostess, was responsible for making the first overtures toward Mr. Hallinan. It was two days after she had first observed lights on the Melon Hill place that she decided the time had come to scrutinize the newcomers, to determine their place in New Brewster society. Donning a light wrap, for it was a coolish October day, she left her house in early forenoon and went on foot down Copperbeech Road to the Melon Hill turnoff, and then climbed the sloping hill till she reached the split-level.

The name was already on the mailbox : *Davis Hallinan*. That probably meant they'd been living there a good deal longer than just two days, thought Mrs. Moncrieff ; perhaps they'd be insulted by the tardiness of the invitation ? She shrugged and used the door-knocker.

A tall man in early middle age appeared, smiling benignly. Mrs. Moncrieff was thus the first recipient of the uncanny warmth that Davis Hallinan was to radiate throughout New Brewster before his strange death. His eyes were deep and solemn, with warm lights shining in them ; his hair was a dignified grey-white mane.

" Good morning," he said. His voice was deep, mellow.

" Good morning. I'm Mrs. Moncrieff—*Daisy Moncrieff*, from the big house down on Copperbeech Road. You must be Mr. Hallinan. May I come in ?"

" Ah—please, no, Mrs. Moncrieff. The place is still a chaos. Would you mind staying on the porch ?"

He closed the door behind him—Mrs. Moncrieff later claimed that she had a fleeting view of the interior and saw unpainted walls and dust-covered bare floors—and drew one of the rusty porch chairs for her.

" Is your wife at home, Mr. Hallinan ?"

" There's just me, I'm afraid. I live alone."

" Oh." Mrs. Moncrieff, discomfited, managed a grin none the less. In New Brewster *everyone* was married ; the idea of a bachelor or a widower coming to settle there was strange, disconcerting . . . and just a little pleasant, she added, surprised at herself.

" My purpose in coming was to invite you to meet some of your new neighbours tonight—if you're free, that is. I'm having a cocktail party at my place about six, with dinner at seven. We'd be so happy if you came !"

His eyes twinkled gaily. " Certainly, Mrs. Moncrieff. I'm looking forward to it already."

The *ne plus ultra* of New Brewster society was impatiently assembled at the Moncrieff home shortly after six, waiting to meet Mr. Hallinan, but it was not until 6.15 that he arrived. By then, thanks to Daisy Moncrieff's fearsome skill as a hostess, everyone present was equipped with a drink and with a set of speculations about the mysterious bachelor on the hill.

"I'm sure he must be a writer," said Martha Weede to liverish Dudley Heyer. "Daisy says he's tall and distinguished and just *radiates* personality. He's probably here only for a few months—just long enough to get to know us all, and then he'll write a novel about us."

"Hmm. Yes," Heyer said. He was an advertising executive who commuted to Madison Avenue every morning; he had an ulcer, and was acutely conscious of his role as a stereotype. "Yes, then he'll write a sizzling novel exposing suburban decadence, or a series of acid sketches for *The New Yorker*. I know the type."

Lys Erwin, looking desirable and just a bit disheveled after her third martini in thirty minutes drifted by in time to overhear that. "You're *always* conscious of *types*, aren't you, darling? You and your grey flannel suit?"

Heyer fixed her with a baleful stare but found himself, as usual, unable to make an appropriate retort. He turned away, smiled hello at quiet little Harold and Jane Dewitt, whom he pitied somewhat (their son Lonny, age 9, was a shy, sensitive child, a total misfit among his playmates) and confronted the bar, weighing the probability of a night of acute agony against the immediate desirability of a Manhattan.

But at that moment Daisy Moncrieff reappeared with Mr. Hallinan in tow, and conversation ceased abruptly throughout the parlour while the assembled guests stared at the newcomer. An instant later, conscious of their collective *faux pas*, the group began to chat again, and Daisy moved among her guests, introducing her prize.

"Dudley, this is Mr. Davis Hallinan, I want you to meet Dudley Heyer, one of the most talented men in New Brewster."

"Indeed? What do you do, Mr. Heyer?"

"I'm in advertising. But don't let them fool you; it doesn't take any talent at all. Just brass, nothing else. The desire to delude the public, and delude 'em good. But how about you? What line are you in?"

Mr. Hallinan ignored the question. "I've always thought advertising was a richly creative field, Mr. Heyer. But, of course, I've never really known at first hand—"

"Well, I have. And it's everything they say it is." Heyer felt his face reddening, as if he had had a drink or two. He was becoming talkative, and found Hallinan's presence oddly soothing. Leaning close to the newcomer, Heyer said, "Just between you and me, Hallinan, I'd give my whole bank account for chance to stay home and *write*. Just write. I want to do a novel. But I don't have the guts; that's my trouble. I know that come Friday there's a \$350 check waiting on my desk, and I don't dare give that up. So I keep writing my novel up here in my head, and it keeps eating me away down here in my gut. *Eating*." He paused, conscious that he had said too much and that his eyes were glittering beadily.

Hallinan wore a benign smile. "It's always sad to see talent hidden, Mr. Heyer. I wish you well."

Daisy Moncrieff appeared then, hooked an arm through Hallinan's, and led him away. Heyer, alone, stared down at the textured grey broadloom.

Now why did I tell him all that? he wondered. A minute after meeting Hallinan, he had unburdened his deepest woe to him—something he had not confided in anyone else in New Brewster, including his wife.

And yet—it had been a sort of catharsis, Heyer thought. Hallinan had calmly soaked up all his grief and inner agony, and left Heyer feeling drained and purified and warm.

Catharsis? Or a blood-letting? Heyer shrugged, then grinned and made his way to the bar to pour himself a Manhattan.

As usual, Lys and Leslie Erwin were at opposite ends of the parlour. Mrs. Moncrieff found Lys more easily, and introduced her to Mr. Hallinan.

Lys faced him unsteadily, and on a sudden impulse hitched her neckline higher. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Hallinan. I'd like you to meet my husband Leslie. *Leslie!* Come here, please?"

Leslie Erwin approached. He was twenty years older than his wife, and was generally known to wear the finest pair of horns in New Brewster—a magnificent spread of antlers that grew a new point or two almost every week.

"Les, this is Mr. Hallinan. Mr. Hallinan, meet my husband Leslie."

Mr. Hallinan bowed courteously to both of them. "Happy to make your acquaintance."

"The same," Erwin said. "If you'll excuse me, now—"

"The louse," said Lys Erwin, when her husband had returned to his station at the bar. "He'd sooner cut his throat than spend two minutes next to me in public." She glared bitterly at Hallinan. "I don't deserve that kind of thing, do I?"

Mr. Hallinan frowned sympathetically. "Have you any children, Mrs. Erwin?"

"Hah! He'd never give me any—not with *my* reputation! You'll have to pardon me; I'm a little drunk."

"I understand, Mrs. Erwin."

"I know. Funny, but I hardly know you and I like you. You seem to *understand*. Really, I mean." She took his cuff hesitantly. "Just from looking at you, I can tell you're not judging me like all the others. I'm not really *bad*, am I? It's just that I get so *bored*, Mr. Hallinan."

"Boredom is a great curse," Mr. Hallinan observed.

"Damn right it is! And Leslie's no help—always reading his newspapers and talking to his brokers! But I can't help myself, believe me." She looked around wildly. "They're going to start talking about us in a minute, Mr. Hallinan. Every time I talk to someone new they start whispering. But *promise me something—*"

"If I can."

"Someday—someday soon—let's get together? I want to *talk* to you. God, I want to talk to someone—someone who understands why I'm the way I am. Will you?"

"Of course, Mrs. Erwin. Soon." Gently he detached her hand from his sleeve, held it tenderly for a moment, and released it. She smiled hopefully at him. He nodded.

"And now I must meet some of the other guests. A pleasure, Mrs. Erwin."

He drifted away, leaving Lys weaving shakily in the middle of the parlour. She drew in a deep breath and lowered her décolletage again.

At least there's one decent man in this town, now, she thought. There was something *good* about Hallinan—good, and kind, and understanding.

Understanding. That's what I need. She wondered if she could manage to pay a visit to the house on Melon Hill tomorrow afternoon without arousing too much scandal.

Lys turned and saw thin faced Aiken Muir staring at her slyly, with a clear-cut invitation on his face. She met his glance with a frigid, wordless *go to hell*.

Mr. Hallinan moved on, on through the party. And, gradually, the pattern of the party began to form. It took shape like a fine mosaic. By the time the cocktail hour was over and dinner was ready, an intricate, complex structure of interacting thoughts and responses had been built.

Mr. Hallinan, always drinkless, glided deftly from one New Brewsterite to the next, engaging each in conversation, drawing a few basic facts about the other's personality, smiling politely, moving on. Not until after he moved on did the person come to a dual realization : that Mr. Hallinan had said quite little, really, and that he had instilled a feeling of warmth and security in the other during their brief talk.

And thus while Mr. Hallinan learned from Martha Weede of her paralyzing envy of her husband's intelligence and of her fear of his scorn, Lys Erwin was able to remark to Dudley Heyer that Mr. Hallinan was a remarkably kind and understanding person. And Heyer, who had never been known to speak a kind word of anyone, for once agreed.

And later, while Mr. Hallinan was extracting from Leslie Erwin some of the pain his wife's manifold infidelities caused him, Martha Weede could tell Lys Erwin, "He's so gentle—why, he's almost like a saint !"

And while little Harold Dewitt poured out his fear that his silent 9-year-old son Lonny was in some way subnormal, Leslie Erwin, with a jaunty grin, remarked to Daisy Moncrieff, "That man must be a psychiatrist. Lord, he knows how to talk to a person. Inside of two minutes he had me telling him all my troubles. I feel better for it, too."

Mrs. Moncrieff nodded. "I know what you mean. This morning, when I went up to his place to invite him here, we talked a little while on his proch."

"Well," Erwin said, "if he's a psychiatrist he'll find plenty of business here. There isn't a person here riding around without a private monkey on his back. Take Heyer, over there—he didn't get that ulcer from happiness. That scatter-brain Martha Weede, too—married to a Columbia professor

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who can't imagine what to talk to her about. And my wife Lys is a very confused person too, of course."

"We all have our problems," Mrs. Moncrieff sighed. "But I feel much better since I spoke with Mr. Hallinan. Yes : *much* better."

Mr. Hallinan was now talking with Paul Jambell, the architect. Jambell, whose pretty young wife was in Springfield Hospital slowly dying of cancer. Mrs. Moncrieff could well imagine what Jambell and Mr. Hallinan were talking about.

Or rather, what Jambell was talking about—for Mr. Hallinan, she realized, did very little talking himself. But he was such a *wonderful* listener ! She felt a pleasant glow, not entirely due to the cocktails. It was good to have someone like Mr. Hallinan in New Brewster, she thought. A man of his tact and dignity and warmth would be a definite asset.

When Lys Erwin woke—alone, for a change—the following morning, some of the past night's curious calmness had deserted her.

I have to talk to Mr. Hallinan, she thought.

She had resisted two implied and one overt attempts at seduction the night before, had come home, had managed even to be polite to her husband. And Leslie had been polite to her. It was most unusual.

"That Hallinan," he had said. "He's quite a guy."

"You talked to him too ?"

"Yeah. Told him a lot. Too much, maybe. But I feel better for it."

"Odd," she said. "So do I. He's a strange one, isn't he ? Wandering around that party, soaking up everyone's aches. He must have had half the neuroses in New Brewster unloaded on his back last night."

"Didn't seem to depress him, though. More he talked to people, more cheerful and affable he got. And us, too. You look more relaxed than you've been in a month, Lys."

"*I feel* more relaxed. As if all the roughness and ugliness in me was drawn out."

And that was how it had felt the next morning, too. Lys woke, blinked, looked at the empty bed across the room. Leslie was long since gone, on his way to the city. She knew she had to talk to Hallinan again. She hadn't got rid of it all. There was still some poison left inside her, something cold and chunky that would melt before Mr. Hallinan's warmth.

She dressed, impatiently brewed some coffee, and left the house. Down Copperbeech Road, past the Moncrieff house where Daisy and her stuffy husband Fred were busily emptying the ashtrays of the night before, down to Melon Hill and up the gentle slope to the split-level at the top.

Mr. Hallinan came to the door in a blue checked dressing gown. He looked slightly seedy, almost overhung, Lys thought. His dark eyes had puffy lids and a light stubble sprinkled his cheeks.

"Yes, Mrs. Erwin?"

"Oh—good morning, Mr. Hallinan. I—I came to see you. I hope I didn't disturb you—that is—"

Continued on Page 110

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"Quite all right, Mrs. Erwin." Instantly she was at ease. "But I'm afraid I'm really extremely tired after last night, and I fear I shouldn't be very good company just now."

"But you said you'd talk to me alone today. And—oh, there's so much more I want to tell you!"

A shadow of feeling—*pain? fear?* Lys wondered—crossed his face. "No," he said hastily. "No more—not just yet. I'll have to rest today. Would you mind coming back—well, say Wednesday?"

"Certainly, Mr. Hallinan. I wouldn't want to disturb you."

She turned away and started down the hill, thinking: *he had too much of our troubles last night. He soaked them all up like a sponge, and today he's going to digest them—*

Oh, what am I thinking?

She reached the foot of the hill, brushed a couple of tears from her eyes, and walked home rapidly, feeling the October chill whistling around her.

And so the pattern of life in New Brewster developed. For the six weeks before his death, Mr. Hallinan was a fixture at any important community gathering, always dressed impeccably, always ready with his cheerful smile, always uncannily able to draw forth whatever secret hungers and terrors lurked in his neighbours' souls.

And invariably Mr. Hallinan would be unapproachable the day after these gatherings, would mildly but firmly turn away any callers. What he did, alone in the house on Melon Hill, no one knew. As the days passed, it occurred to all that no one knew much of anything about Mr. Hallinan. He knew *them* all right, knew the one night of adultery twenty years before that still racked Daisy Moncrieff, knew the acid pain that seared Dudley Heyer, the cold envy glittering in Martha Weede, the frustration and loneliness of Lys Erwin, her husband's shy anger at his own cuckoldry—he knew these things and many more, but none of them knew more of him than his name.

Still, he warmed their lives and took from them the burden of their griefs. If he chose to keep his own life hidden, they said, that was his privilege.

He took walks every day, through still-wooded New Brewster, and would wave and smile to the children, who would wave and smile back. Occasionally he would stop, chat

with a sulking child, then move on, tall, erect, walking with a jaunty stride.

He was never known to set foot in either of New Brewster's two churches. Once Lora Harker, a mainstay of the New Brewster Presbyterian Church, took him to task for this at a dull dinner party given by the Weedes.

But Mr. Hallinan smiled mildly and said, "Some of us feel the need. Others do not."

And that ended the discussion.

Toward the end of November a few members of the community experienced an abrupt reversal of their feelings about Mr. Hallinan—weary, perhaps, of his constant empathy for their woes. The change in spirit was spearheaded by Dudley Heyer, Carl Weede, and several of the other men.

"I'm getting not to trust that guy," Heyer said. He knocked dottle vehemently from his pipe. "Always hanging around soaking up gossip, pulling out dirt—and what the hell for? What does *he* get out of it?"

Continued on Page 112

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Studies In Science Fiction :—

5. THE MARVELLOUS A. MERRITT

"Maybe he's practising to be a saint," Carl Weede remarked quietly. "Self-abnegation. The Buddhist Eightfold Path."

"The women all swear by him," said Leslie Erwin. "Lys hasn't been the same since he came here."

"I'll say she hasn't," said Aiken Muir wryly, and all of the men, even Erwin, laughed, getting the sharp thrust.

"All I know is I'm tired of having a father-confessor in our midst," Heyer said. "I think he's got a motive back of all his goody-goody warmness. When he's through pumping us he's going to write a book that'll put New Brewster on the map but good."

"You always suspect people of writing books," Muir said. "*Oh, that mine enemy would write a book . . . !*"

"Well, whatever his motives I'm getting annoyed. And that's why he hasn't been invited to the party we're giving on Monday night." Heyer glared at Fred Moncrieff as if expecting some dispute. "I've spoken to my wife about it, and she agrees. Just this once, dear Mr. Halliman stays home."

It was strangely cold at the Heyers' party that Monday night. The usual people were there, all but Mr. Hallinan. The party was not a success. Some, unaware that Mr. Hallinan had not been invited, waited expectantly for the chance to talk to him, and managed to leave early when they discovered he was not to be there.

"We should have invited him," Ruth Heyer said after the last guest had left.

Heyer shook his head. "No. I'm glad we didn't."

"But that poor man, all alone on the hill while the bunch of us were here, cut off from us. You don't think he'll get insulted, do you? I mean, and cut us from now on?"

"I don't care," Heyer said, scowling.

His attitude of mistrust toward Mr. Hallinan spread through the community. First the Muirs, then the Harkers, failed to invite him to gatherings of theirs. He still took his usual afternoon walks, and those who met him observed a slightly strained expression on his face, though he still smiled gently and chatted easily enough, and made no bitter comments.

And on December 3, a Wednesday, Roy Heyer, age 10, and Philip Moncrieff, age 9, set upon Lonny Dewitt, age 9, just outside the New Brewster Public School, just before Mr. Hallinan turned down the school lane on his stroll.

Lonny was a strange, silent boy, the despair of his parents and the bane of his classmates. He kept to himself, said little, nudged into corners and stayed there. People clucked their tongues when they saw him in the street.

Roy Heyer and Philip Moncrieff made up their minds they were going to make Lonny Dewitt say something, or else.

It was *or else*. They pummeled him and kicked him for a few minutes ; then, seeing Mr. Hallinan approaching, they ran, leaving him weeping silently on the flag-stone steps outside the empty school.

Lonny looked up as the tall man drew near.

"They've been hitting you, haven't they? I see them running away now."

Lonny continued to cry. He was thinking, *There's something funny about this man. But he wants to help me. He wants to be kind to me.*

"You're Lonny Dewitt, I think. Why are you crying? Come, Lonny, stop crying! They didn't hurt you that much."

They didn't, Lonny said silently. *I like to cry.*

Mr. Hallinan was smiling cheerfully. "Tell me all about it. Something's bothering you, isn't it? Something big, that makes you feel all lumpy and sad inside. Tell me about it, Lonny, and maybe it'll go away." He took the boy's small cold hands in his own, and squeezed them.

"Don't want to talk," Lonny said.

"But I'm a friend. I want to help you."

Lonny peered close and saw suddenly that the tall man told the truth. He wanted to help Lonny. More than that: he *had* to help Lonny. Desperately. He was pleading. "Tell me what's troubling you," Mr. Hallinan said again.

OK, Lonny thought. *I'll tell you.*

And he lifted the floodgates. Nine years of repression and torment came rolling out in one roaring burst.

I'm alone and they hate me because I do things in my head and they never understood and they think I'm queer and they hate me I see them looking funny at me and they think funny things about me because I want to talk to them with my mind and they can only hear words and I hate them hate them hate hate hate—

Lonny stopped suddenly. He had let it all out, and now he felt better, cleansed of the poison he'd been carrying in him for years. But Mr. Hallinan looked funny. He was pale and white-faced, and he was staggering.

In alarm, Lonny extended his mind to the tall man. And got :

Too much. Much too much. Should never have gone near the boy. But the older ones wouldn't let me.

Irony : the compulsive empath overloaded and burned out by a compulsive sender who'd been bottled up.

. . . like grabbing a high-voltage wire . . .

. . . he was a sender, I was a receiver, but he was too strong . . .

And four last bitter words : *I . . . was . . . a . . . leech . . .*

"Please, Mr. Hallinan," Lonny said out loud. "Don't get sick. I want to tell you some more. Please, Mr. Hallinan."

Silence.

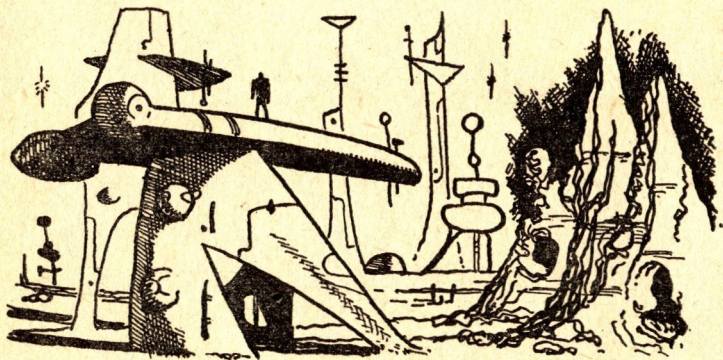
Lonny picked up a final lingering wordlessness, and knew he had found and lost the first one like himself. Mr. Hallinan's eyes closed and he fell forward on his face in the street. Lonny realized that it was over, that he and the people of New Brewster would never talk to Mr. Hallinan again. But just to make sure he bent and took Mr. Hallinan's limp wrist.

He let go quickly. The wrist was like a lump of ice. *Cold—* burning cold. Lonnie stared at the dead man for a moment or two.

"Why, it's dear Mr. Hallinan," a female voice said. "Is he—"

And feeling the loneliness return, Lonny began to cry softly again.

—Robert Silverberg



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