UNKNOWN Worlds

25c JUNE • 1942
FANTASY FICTION

SOLOMON'S STONE . . . . . by L. Sprague de Camp

The Astral World turned out to be quite a place. A place where every man had an Astral Self—and every Astral Self had all the qualities the owner on Earth imagined for himself. The super-sleuth of the Astral World *was* a super-dooper sleuth, the super-villain—was *something!*

TOMORROW . . . . . by Robert Arthur

The man bought a house, a regular House of Tomorrow. A house that was, in fact, *in* Tomorrow! When it was Sunday outside, it was Monday inside. Tuesday's paper was delivered Monday morning. Wednesday's racing results came over the radio Tuesday afternoon. It was a very remarkable sort of house—but also, in its way, deadly dangerous.

THE GHOST OF ME . . . by Anthony Boucher

If a man is murdered, it is said, his ghost haunts the scene. It is well known that ghosts have remarkable powers, too. But suppose a ghost makes a slight mistake and starts haunting the scene of the murder *before* the murderee is properly murdered?

THE IDOL OF THE FLIES . . . . by Jane Rice

Recommended as a brief tale about one of the most exquisitely nasty brats in literature—and of an idyllically perfect justice—

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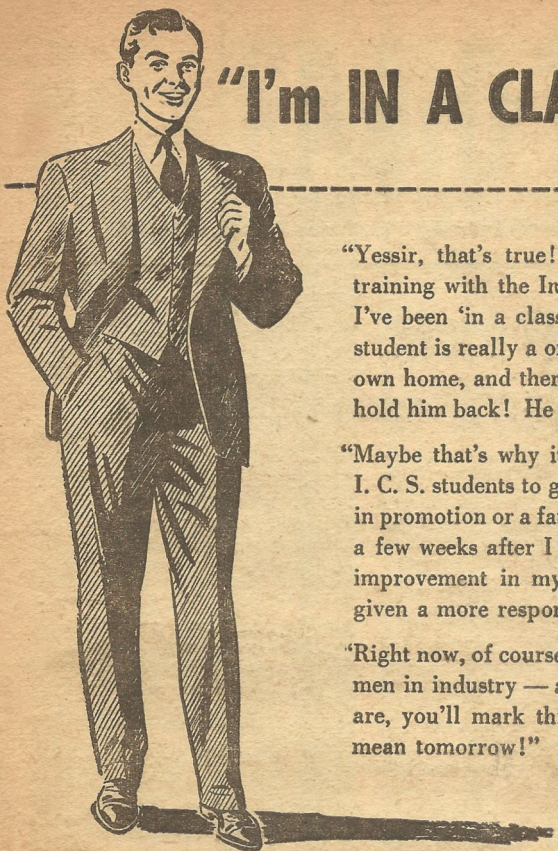

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UNKNOWN WORLDS

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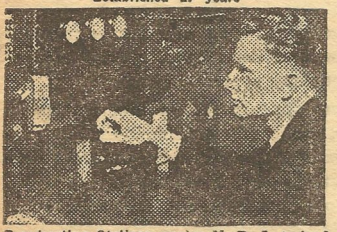

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OF THINGS BEYOND

The prediction of the future has always been a wonderful magnet for the money of men, whether the men be peasants or potentates. And the psychology of men is such that if they can see how the prediction works, understand the method used —even though they can't quite do it themselves— they'll fall for any gyp game.

The witch doctors of the savage tribes were pure mystics; they, like our dear friend Herr Schikelgruber, put their faith in their own mystic intuition. That method goes pretty well, particularly if the witch doctor employing it happens to be a shrewd old boy, with plenty of plain horse sense to make his vaguely worded prophecies ring the bell.

But it also requires, fundamentally, an audience that has no grounding and firm belief in the law of cause and effect, no conviction—even if unexpressed—in physical causes for physical results. The witch-doctor method of personal intuition tends to die out as civilization becomes more adult, more sophisticated. The next step up is the one that shifts the intuition back onto a god, with a priest acting as intermediary.

The witch doctor has acquired a sponsor, and can still use his horse sense and political acumen to make his prophecies show a pretty good batting average. Further, with a competent staff of acolytes, priestlings and hired spies, he can run a fair-to-middling Gallup poll to aid his second-hand intuition.

But still, though now the spiritual, and hence invisible, cause is supposed to produce the effect, there is none too good a basis for the prophet's sayings. The sophisticated, more cultured kings and nobles—where the heavy dough lies—don't really have any great faith in the modified witch doctor.

The witch doctor's intuition really hit the jackpot, though, when he hitched his wagon to a star. The full understanding of the witch doctor in the more highly developed cultures—Babylonian, Egyptian and Roman, for instance—is a really tough problem. The witch doctor had become a priest, and a real scientist; he'd advanced as much from the primitive tribal medicine man as his people had advanced beyond the nomad culture that produced his earliest brethren.

The priest-prophet of those higher cultures combined a genuine engineering and scientific knowledge with a half-digested, half-understood medical training, a good bit of perfectly sound psychology, an excellent training in practical politics, and some highly imaginative flub-dub and rigmarole that was useful in presenting his real knowledge.

It was the engineering and scientific knowledge that led them to the invention of astrology. It probably—almost certainly—started as a strictly scientific project. Centuries of observations of star positions had shown them that the stars moved in a regular, orderly, predictable way. It was the first absolutely *predictable* fact of nature discovered. The obvious question was: Could a correlation be found between the predictable and orderly, though complex, movement of the stars, and the still unpredictable movement of men? It would have taken at least two centuries to complete even a rough study of the correlation. Long before that length of time had elapsed, they would have discovered that it made the perfect "front" for their real operation; the prediction of political trends on the basis of keen judgment and a thoroughly competent spy system.

But the system appealed to people; it showed them an orderly, accurately predictable thing—the heavens—and it made absolutely accurate and authentic predictions of what was to happen there. The priest-astrologers were able to make some highly interesting predictions, with a very good percentage of hits. Astrology, evidently, worked —and worked well.

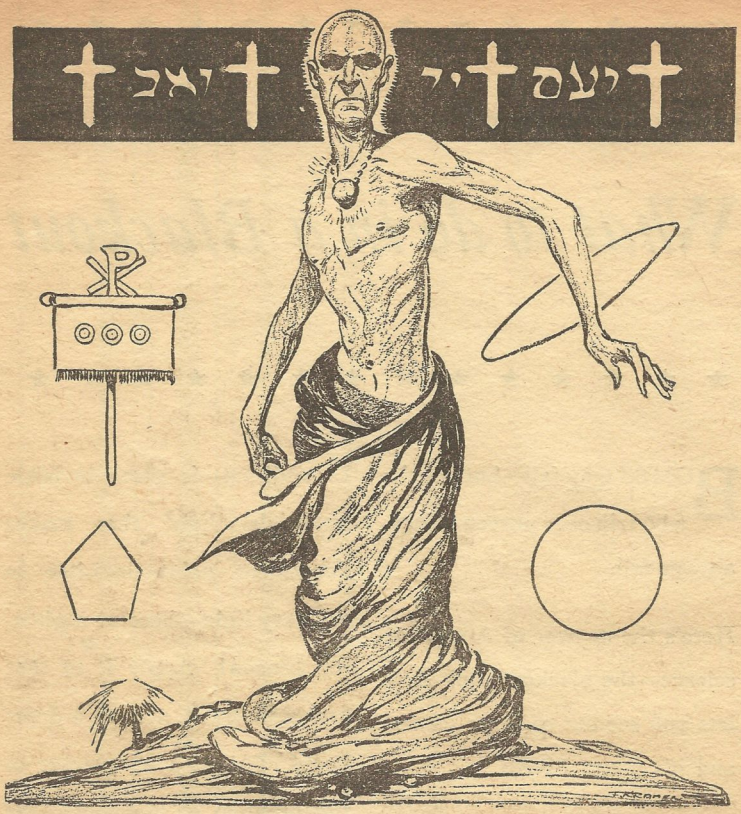
Astrologers, the old astrologers of Babylon, did some of the most fundamental and important scientific work of all time; they discovered, studied and developed the first example of order in nature. It was on the basis of their work that science, as an orderly, predictable business, came into being.

Somehow, the fact that the science part of their work has split off into astronomy, a one-hundred-percent different and separate subject, has not affected the pursuit of astrology. It is almost certainly true that more people believe in astrology today than in any other century of history.

But most of that is due simply to the fact that there are so many more people in the world. The percentage of believers has fallen; the law of cause and effect, the understanding of the principle of a physical cause for physical effects, is gaining ground.

It's probably quite correct. But it isn't half as much fun as it is to completely ignore those unpleasant realities—

The Editor.



SOLOMON'S STONE

By L. Sprague de Camp

● **The Astral World turned out to be screwy, but interesting. There, whatever an Earth-dweller dreamed of being, his astral self was. A would-be super-dooper-sleuth was something Sherlock hoped to be. And there—because of the way of human nature—the Private commanded an army of buck generals!**

Illustrated by Kramer

When Montague Stark had explained what he was going to do, he added: "You understand, folks, I'm sure this won't work or I wouldn't try it." He looked up from where he squatted on the uncovered floor, drawing circles with a compass improvised from a pushpin, a piece of chalk, and a string. "If it did, we'd probably set the house on fire at least. Prosper, what's the trick for inscribing a pentagon in a circle?"

"Let me think," said Prosper Nash. He closed his eyes and mentally thumbed the pages of a plane geometry text that he had studied ten years

previously. At last he opined: "Lay off two-thirds of the radius along the arc, ten times running. That's not exact but it ought to do. He's not going to bring a steel tape along to measure your diagrams, is he?"

Stark laughed. "The pentacles in the grimoires are mostly pretty irregular, so ours ought to do." He set about ruling off a five-pointed star in the larger of the two circles. He added a number of astronomical symbols and Hebrew letters to the resulting figure, inscribed an equilateral triangle in the other circle, and put three small circles inside the triangle. "Alice, may I use your coffee table?"

"I'm not sure mother would like it—" said his hostess nervously.

"Aw come on, I won't hurt it!" Without waiting for further objections, Stark placed the low circular table at one end of the room, in line with the two large circles on the floor.

On the table he put a square of white artist's paper board on which was drawn another complex symbol: a pentagram with Hebrew letters, planetary symbols, keys, daggers, and other gadgets hither and thither about it. He set up a small brass tripod on the square of paper, and lit the incense in the little pot that dangled from the apex of the tripod, commenting: "This pentacle's supposed to be drawn on the skin of a ewe lamb sacrificed in the dark of the moon or something, but I figure a good clean drawing sheet ought to do. The reason those old birds killed their own lambs was to make sure of getting a sheet of genuine virgin parchment.

"Prosper, you light the candles. Bob, unwrap Gus and put him on the floor here. For gossakes be careful of him; the museum wants him back."

A rustle of paper heralded the unveiling of Gus, who was the skull of a Bannock Indian. Prosper Nash and Robert Lanby obeyed meekly. The uninhibited Stark had always had the psychological bulge on them, despite his short tubby unimpressiveness.

Prosper Nash often wondered why this should be, knowing that he surpassed Stark in stature and looks, especially now that his glossy-black mustache had come to full flower. Of course he could see why Bob Lanby should let Monty Stark dominate him; Nash had always considered Bob a twerp, especially since the blue-eyed but unresponsive Alice—

The candles shone out. Monty Stark got into his new bathrobe, blue with orange piping for Friday, the day of amusing or amorous experiments. Nash smiled a little as he thought that to Monty "amusing" and "amorous" were practically synonyms; to him they were distinct but not incompatible; to poor Alice and Bob they were apt to be violently antithetical—

Stark glanced toward the kitchen door, behind which Bill Averoff supposedly lurked, ready at the proper stage of the proceedings to pop out with a deep "Good evening, everybody!" and scare the living pants off all but Montague Allen Stark.

At this moment, however, Bill was writing a note:

Dear Mr. Stark:

I just looked out the window and seen a fare alongside of my hack. I been waiting longer than I expected and I can't afford to pass up the good fares you get on Haloeen so I got to go. I am sorry.

Yours truly, William Averoff.

Being a fundamentally honest man, Averoff placed on the note the dollar bill that Stark had given him for his part in the performance, weighted note and bill with the salt shaker, and stole out the service entrance of Alice Woodson's apartment.

When he arrived at the street level, the prospective fare had vanished. Averoff settled into his taxicab and opened the Western pulp that he kept on the front seat. His hero, Arizona Blake, was just shooting his way out of the fourth gambling hell when another fare arrived.

Bill Averoff cast a regretful glance up toward the windows of Miss Woodson's apartment—good-looking dame, but snooty—and drove off. He knew and liked the three boys he had brought across town from their Y, and would have been glad to be the one to drive them home later. But you had to live.

Meanwhile Montague Stark continued his essay into amateur sorcery, unaware that his star actor had departed. He placed the box containing Godiva, the toad, in the center of the circle of evocation. Occasional faint thumps and slight movements of the box implied that Godiva had not yet become reconciled to her close quarters.

The room by now reeked with the mixture of agalloch and storax burning in the censer on the coffee table; the two candles on the periphery of the circle of evocation sent up slow stalactites of gray smoke.

Stark pinned to the front of his bathrobe a diamond pin in the form of a Star of David, borrowed from the young daughter of a Jewish friend, and hung a copper medal around his neck. He put on his head a homemade diadem of twisted copper wire, and picked up his brother-in-law's little cross-hilted cadet sword.

"Ready?" he asked.

Alice Woodson put out the light.

Stark cocked his head to read from the typed sheet in his left hand by the doubtful light of the candles. The appellation started off with a long sentence in Hebrew which nobody, Stark included, understood.

His three hearers leaned forward, tense with the

synthetic excitement that is conjured up by spook movies and Halloween stunts. Prosper Nash reflected that probably everybody had suppressed desires to be and do strange things, but that Monty Stark was the only person he knew who went ahead and did something about it.

Monty had wanted to be an archaeologist and had ended up as a high school teacher of history. Still, when he acquired a hobby like this craze for magic, he went into it wholeheartedly, which was no doubt why he had so much fun. He, Prosper Nash, sometimes day-dreamed of himself as a dashing cavalier instead of a competent but unglamorous C. P. A. with a good memory for detail. But there didn't seem to be much he could do toward realizing *that* fancy, nearsighted as he was—

Monty Stark ended his Hebrew and started in on his Latin, his voice rising a little. The air was unpleasantly thick.

Nash wondered about the suppressed desires of the other two. Little Bob Lanby displayed none except to be a depressingly good boy and a good chess player. And, as an afterthought, to marry Alice. The cool Alice, he supposed, would like to be a nun.

Stark at last got to the English, or at least to a passage containing some English words. His voice rose higher and louder: "Hemen-Etan! Hemen-Etan! Hemen-Etan! El Ati Titeip Aozia Hyn Teu Minosel Achadon vai vaa Eie Aaa Eie Exe A El El El A Hi! Hau! Hau! Hau! Hau! Va! Va! Va! Va! Chavajoth! Aie Saraie, aie Saraie, aie Saraie! By Elohim, Archima, Rabur, Batbas over Abrac, flowing down, coming from above Aheor upon Aberer Chavajoth! Chavajoth! Chavajoth! I command thee, Bechard, by the Key of Solomon and the great name Shemhamphoras! By Adonai Elohim, Adonai Jehova, Adonai Sabaoth, Metraton On Alga Adonai Mathon, the Pythonic Word, the Mystery of the Salamander, the Assembly of Sylphs, the Grotto of Gnomes, the demons of the heaven of Gad, Almousin, Gibor, Jehoshua, Evam, Zariatnatmik: Come, Bechard! Come, Bechard! Come, Bechard!"

"Good evening!"

Stark, Nash, Lanby and Alice Woodson all jumped at the words and at the appearance in the "trap"—the circle-and-pentagram figure between the circle of evocation, on which Stark stood, and the coffee-table altar—of a figure. Then they relaxed; Nash and Lanby thought they recognized Bill Averoff's deep tones. Alice thought it was just another of Monty's gags—

"Swell, Bill," said Montague Stark; then, voice changing a little toward puzzlement: "But—where'd you get the costume?"

"Costume?"

There was an uncomfortable silence with the realization that the voice was not Averoff's after all.

Alice Woodson, who was nearest to the light switch, snapped the top light on. She waited a good twenty seconds before screaming.

The visitor was not only not a New York hacky, but was rather evidently not human at all, though its shape and size were those of a man. It cast no shadow and wore no garments, unless what appeared to be its skin was actually a tight one-piece green rubber coverall. No zipper, however, could be discerned. The pupils of its eyes, instead of pits of blackness as with people, were apertures through which inner light winked out into the room.

"Well?"

"You're—not—Bill—Averoff," said Stark at last in a small, still voice.

"No, I regret. Why should I be? I am Bechard. You called me, did you not, gentleman?"

"I—suppose I did."

"Then," said the apparition stiffly, "I am yours to com— No, wait!" It slowly turned its head this way and that, surveying the room and the various props that Stark had set out: the altar, Gus and Godiva, and so forth.

Its regard came to rest on the pentacle on which it stood. As it looked down it apparently realized its lack of shadow, for a shadow appeared at once. "Regret," it muttered.

Then it glared back at Stark, and said in a new, harsh tone: "Did you not know, gentleman, that we of the Gothic Sept are not commanded by the pentagram?"

"N-n-no."

"It is so, I regret. We are not commanded by it, though we must respect it. Demons of the Apollinian Sept are commanded by the pentagram, as those of the Magian Sept are by the hexagram and those of the Sinic by the diskelion."

Prosper Nash had held his breath as long as he could. He now let it out with a *whoof* and broke in: "What *are* you commanded by, then?"

The thing's rubbery mouth widened into a black slit wherein no teeth were visible. "Ha-ha," it growled earnestly. "For me to tell you would be funny, would it not, gentlemen? Almost as funny as invoking Bechard the Hail-maker to perform buffooneries for your frivolous amusement. I regret, but we Bechards are demons of intelligence. Let us settle our business before any of you mundane souls conceive more clevernesses. You, sir, the sorcerer who does not know his pentacles—what are your name and station?"

"What d'you wanna know for?" asked Stark quickly, a drop of sweat glistening on his forehead.

"To determine," replied Bechard blandly, "whose mundane body I shall possess."

"You mean we're gonna be possessed by devils?"

"Demons, not devils. And only one. Come now, gentleman, your profession?"

"Teacher," gulped Stark. "But look here—"

"You?" the demon turned to Lanby.

"I . . . I'm a clerk at the Y. M. C. A.—"

"Exorcism! You are a regular churchgoer?"

"Well . . . yes—"

"I do not want you. Regret the strain of leading your regular life would be too severe. You with the mustache and glasses?"

"Accountant," said Prosper Nash. "Say, don't you think you ought to tell us more? What's it like to be possessed? Do you go nuts?"

"Not at all," said Bechard. "What an idea! You must be thinking of the crude old days before we were organized. Today we demons know how to handle a mundane body so that even its best friends never guess. Probably at least one of your friends is possessed without your knowing it. The young lady?"

"I take care of my mother," said Alice.

Bechard was silent, then said: "I choose the teacher—"

"But," cried Nash, "if you take Monty's body, what happens to *him?*"

Bechard smiled his toothless facial gesture. "His mundane soul, displaced from his mundane body, will naturally be forced up to the astral plane, where it will inhabit his astral body."

"His *what?*"

"If you will cease your interruptions I shall explain. He will learn what the astral plane is when he arrives. On that plane is the Shamir, which will transport both his mundane soul and his astral body back to this plane—"

"What the devil is the Shamir?" Nash interrupted again.

"Oh, ignorant generation! The Shamir is the Stone of Sages; the Star of Truth. In plain language, it is a gem once owned by Solomon son of David, on whom be peace." Bechard stepped toward Stark.

Montague shrank back, crying: "You can't do this to me!"

"Oh, yes I can, my esteemed Monty."

"What's the idea?"

"The idea, gentleman, is that the demoniac plane is a very dull place. Since we have been organized, those of each Sept are all exactly alike. It is in its way perfect; we consume neither food nor drink. We have no sex. When a Bechard or a Baphomet is afforded an opportunity to inhabit a mundane body and experience its joys and sorrows, he seizes the chance with avidity. But I am not selfish. The Shamir will return you body and soul to the mundane plane, at which time I will give you back your mundane body in exchange for the astral one. Now, esteemed sir, close your eyes and relax—"

"Begone!" yelled Stark, holding his sword out hilt up to make a cross, and fingering the Star of David. "By Jakin and Boaz, the Wheel of Ezekiel, the Pentacle of Pythagoras—"

Bechard glided swiftly toward the terrified sorcerer, but recoiled as Stark defiantly thrust the symbols at him. After three tries, Bechard changed his tactics. "Come, sir," he wheedled, "the astral plane is a very interesting place. And you will be allowed to return as soon as—"

"Not on your life!" shrieked Stark.

"Regret that you are so stubborn," said Bechard, raising his voice above Bob Lanby's prayers. "I shall have to take the young gentlewoman's mundane body, then, though I fear her astral self will prove a less effective means of finding the Shamir than would yours. But—"

Prosper Nash did the quickest thinking of which he was capable. He jumped up and skidded across the floor, snatched up the sheet of artist's board—sending the tripod clattering to the floor—and bounded back to where Alice shrank against the wall. He thrust the pentacle into her hands.

"No you don't!" he told Bechard. "You said yourself you had to respect the pentagram!"

"You are an interfering young gentleman!" rasped Bechard. "I regret. I think *you* will find the Shamir—"

"Hey! Wait! Let's talk this over. You can't steal my body just because I protected a girl—"

"Can and will. Relax, my good sir, and the process will be less painful. You must return in ten days with Solomon's Stone, or I shall be forced to chastise your delinquency."

"But how am I to find this damned rock? And how—"

"There are those on the astral plane who can tell you more than I. Here we go!"

Nash tensed every muscle and felt frantically in his pockets for something bearing a symbol wherewith to thwart the demon. A star—something with a star—hell, the pentagram appeared on the flags of a dozen nations, not to mention States of the Union, societies, political parties—

Bechard was right in front of him, gliding now without moving his green legs, between Nash and the "trap." Nash remembered the bills in his wallet; they almost certainly bore stars—

Too late!

Prosper Nash felt a tremendous shock, as if a destroyer had dropped a depth bomb on him. While his mind strove to keep a grip on his body, he could feel that body being pulled out of his mental clutches—going—going—gone!

He was moving with great speed—or falling; it was like an express-elevator plunge, only more so.

Then he fetched up against something, or into something; shot home into place with an almost

audible clank, like a key into the right lock, or a sword into its scabbard—

He was sitting on a bench; at least the body he had clicked into was sitting on a bench, of dark wood worn shiny without benefit of varnish, by the seats of many pairs of pants.

The bench was in a room; low-ceilinged, dimly lit. Oil lamps shone on rows of bottles. There were others in the room—

Keep your head, J. Prosper. Let's take a look at this astral body of ours first.

Astral body? Sounds silly, but that's what the demon said. Maybe demons are silly.

Prosper Nash bent the head of his new body to look at himself. The first things he saw were his hands—bigger than the hands of his other, mundane, body, with a ring in which was set a huge star sapphire.

Beyond the hands he observed with some horror that lace cuffs from a concealed shirt were turned back over the sleeves of his coat. A roll of the eyes showed that a lace collar sprouted out of the collar of his jacket and lay across his shoulders. He was in a black velvet suit with knee pants.

Little Lord Fauntleroy!

Not quite. The pants disappeared into high boots with wide floppy tops, and a strap across each instep with a gleaming buckle. He bent an ankle to observe that the footgear had high heels like those of a Texan boot.

He tensed the muscles of his right arm, and discreetly pinched the biceps and deltoid with the fingers of his left. Hm-m-m, nice! No wonder Bechard was so willing to take an astral body in exchange for a mundane one!

So far the astral body appeared to have the usual number of everything, and to be substantially if somewhat eccentrically dressed. Maybe the astral plane went in for that sort of thing. The other customers in the dramshop were also costumed rather than merely clad.

Nash put his elbow on the table and started to rest his chin on his fist. He got another shock: he had a goatee, a little inverted isosceles triangle of whisker extending from his lower lip to the point of his chin. He quickly ran his hand around his face. The mustache, which in his mundane body had been a close-cut Anthony Eden affair, now ended in a pair of inch-long waxed spikes. And his hair came down to his shoulders.

So he'd wanted to be a dashing cavalier, eh? Well, he was one, all right, all right. Did that mean he had to act like a cavalier? How was a cavalier supposed to act?

How, indeed?

II.

How did a dashing cavalier dash? He couldn't go everywhere at a dead run, especially in those boots. Though d'Artagnan had come pretty close to it, at least in the old Douglas Fairbanks movie.

Time enough to worry about that later. The room now held Nash's attention.

Nearby sat a solitary gent in plate armor, trying to drink beer out of a mug the size of a child's sand bucket. Something was wrong with the catch that should have held up the visor of his armet. The knight carefully pushed up the visor, where it stayed for the nonce. He picked up the mug in both hands—it had no handle—and almost got it to his lips when the visor fell down with a clang. The knight carefully set down the mug and repeated the process. After the fourth try he just sat there with slow tears coursing down his ruddy cheeks.

At the next table a man in a matador outfit was talking to a beautiful girl dressed like a movie producer's idea of an Egyptian princess. Beyond them was an earnestly conversing group: a samurai in several gorgeous kimonos, the outer one with yard-wide sleeves that stuck out like wings; and two others with long blond hair and bearskin bathing suits.

The astralites were certainly a colorful lot, thought Nash; the men—even the massive bartender—ruggedly handsome; the women, from the three or four in sight, inhumanly beautiful. Were they all astral bodies of real people like himself, or was the whole astral plane a product of the imagination of J. Prosper Nash? Well, maybe the so-called real world, was too—no, stop it; that's a goofy philosophy called sol—solastice—solipism! You ended up in a nice warm cell telling the keepers they didn't exist. Skip it; worrying over such questions would be like trying to rectify a trial balance by an investigation of the Foster-Catchings monetary theories.

The customers were, if anything, a little too orderly. They spoke in the consciously subdued tones of people who not only do not want to be overheard, but expect somebody to try to overhear them. The sharp unsmiling eyes of the monolithic bartender roved from table to table with a "Just start something!" look.

Nash turned his attention back to his new body. A broad leather strap encircled his torso, over the right shoulder and under the left. At its lower end, where it hung loose against his left hip, there was a leather collar, empty, but the right size for a scabbard.

There should be some mark of identification on him. He began to search for pockets. There were none in his breeches, and for a while it seemed that there were none in his jacket, either. At last he located two small ones inside the bottom edge in the rear—in what would have been the tails if the coat had had tails. One was empty; the other contained a slightly soiled handkerchief with the

initial N. Did that mean that his astral body was also named Nash?

When he moved he was aware of a massive, heavy belt under his coat. His exploring fingers identified this as a money belt which held up his pants by friction alone, since the latter garment had no belt loops. Investigation of the compartments of the belt located a couple of wads of bills and a fistful of change, but no papers or calling cards, except one little green square of cardboard bearing the numeral 67.

It was a comfort to know you were well heeled, but it would be still nicer to know who you were. Nash twirled the empty wine glass in his fingers, pondering, until a voice said: "Another of the same, sir?"

The speaker was evidently a waiter, but a very gorgeous waiter for such a mediocre-looking place; a veritable Adolphe Menjou of a waiter.

"Yes," said Nash. As the waiter started to go with a swish of coat tails, Nash added: "Wait. Who do you think I am?" At least that was what he intended to say, but it came out as "Oo do you senk I om?"

Oh, Lord, he thought, now he had a French accent to wrestle with!

"I wouldn't know, sir," bowed the waiter. "This is the first time you've been here."

As the waiter left, a new customer entered the taproom: a man in a uniform with a scarlet tunic and a stiff-brimmed hat. Nash recognized the uniform as that of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

"Scotch and soda," the new man told the bartender.

The little buzz of conversation died, except for the tail-end of a sentence that was being spoken by one of the men in bearskins, with a jerk of his thumb toward the new arrival: *"—diejenigen Feiglingen?"*

Then the silence *was* complete. The Mounty turned his head slowly. "What was that?"

The man in the Siegfried getup ostentatiously ignored the question, and spoke to his companions. The redcoat walked slowly over to the table where the three sat. Prosper Nash saw that his pistol holster was empty.

"Hey!" cried the bartender.

"What did you say?"

He of the bearskin glanced up, snapped: *"V'steh' nicht,"* and turned back to his pals.

A twinkle drew Nash's eye; it was the sparkle of empty bottles being lined up on the bar by the barkeep.

Fssh!

Nash turned back toward the group at the table in time to see a steinful of beer envelop the Mounty's face. Then the fur-clad ones pushed their table over and climbed across it to get at their enemy. Other tables went over booming, too.

Nash's right hand made an instinctive grab for his left hip—more of his astral body's habits, he thought. There was no sword there, of course, and, anyway, it was not his business to get mixed up in barroom brawls, even if this one might have been deliberately staged to rouse his strongest prejudices—

And then he had a glimpse of the samurai drawing a dagger from one of his sleeves, which were big enough to contain a whole arsenal. Since everybody else was disarmed, this was going too far. If he, Nash, weren't nearly blind without his glasses, he'd—

Then he realized that his astral body wore no glasses, and saw perfectly well without them. Moreover this body had, without a direct order from its occupant, risen from the table and stridden halfway across to the nucleus of the developing fight. By the time he got it under control, it was squaring off in front of one of the furry gentlemen.

Because of his mundane body's myopia, Prosper Nash had not been in a fight since childhood, and he had no wish to get involved in one now. Neither did he want to back down in front of the bearskinned barbarian.

The latter soon made up his mind for him by launching a roundhouse swing. Nash was vaguely aware of a violent shock somewhere about his person, and then of slugging back.

A bottle bounced off the furry gentleman's head with a hollow sound, and the blond smiled a kind of sickly smile and sank down to the floor. Nash looked in the direction from which the bottle had come, just in time to duck another. The bartender was loosing them impartially at the heads of the brawlers, who now comprised all the men in the place.

The samurai was still hovering with his dagger. Nash took a step toward him and swung a mighty punch. But something warned the Japanese knight; he spun around and caught Nash's wrist with a smack. The next thing Nash knew he was poised in midair across the fellow's shoulders, and the floor came up and hit him with force enough to stun an elephant.

Nash lay for a second, wondering which bones were broken; then as the dagger flashed into his vision he scrambled up, delighted to find that this new body was apparently made of steel springs and rubber bands. Somebody grabbed him from behind. Nash snapped his head back against the man's nose; his captor howled, but tightened his grip. The samurai glided forward and drew back his arm for a clean, smooth stab.

In a last look around for help, Nash saw something that would have been funny if he had been

able to appreciate it. The matador was sitting on the chest of the man in plate armor, and pouring the contents of a bottle into the face opening of his helmet.

"Aw right, you ring-tailed galoots!" cried a voice from the entrance. "Reach!"

The sounds of battle died, and hands rose, including those of Nash's assailants. Nash, free, looked to the door, which was filled by a man in cowboy clothes including the largest hat and the widest chaparajos Nash had ever seen. The newcomer covered the room with a pair of revolvers. The face under the sombrero was unmistakably that of Hackman William Averoff.

"Bill!" cried Nash.

"Git your hands up, too, mister," replied the cowboy with no sign of recognition. The pile of men in the middle of the floor disentangled itself, and a much battered Canadian Mounted Policeman crawled out from under. The cowboy asked: "Did they hoit you, partner?"

"Not much," replied the Mounty, flexing his joints experimentally.

The bartender spoke up: "Get out, all of ye! This is neutral territory, and I don't want any customers who can't remember that."

Nash approached the cowboy. "Aren't you Bill Averoff?"

"Yep; Arizona Bill Averoff."

"Well, don't you know me? I'm Prosper Nash."

The cowboy looked at him carefully. "No, Frenchy, I don't."

Nash remembered that the body he inhabited was not his own, or at least was not his usual one. "Don't you know a guy named Nash?"

"Never hoid of him."

"He's all right," broke in the Mounty. "He was the first one to try to help me."

"Arizona, me lad," said the bartender, "chase 'em out, will ye? I gotta clean up the joint."

The customers shuffled toward the exit. Arizona Bill Averoff put his head through the open section of the check-room door, and called: "Hey, miss! Reckon you can come up for air."

The check-room girl made a nervous appearance and began handing the customers their effects. The Mounty got his revolver. The samurai got a two-handed sword, which he stuck through his sash, and a hat shaped like an inverted salad bowl, with a ribbon which he tied under his chin.

The furry gentlemen got broadswords and helmets with wings sprouting from them. One of this pair had a swollen and bloody mouth. Seeing it, Nash became aware of a tingle in his right hand, and found that the knuckles were bruised and cut. He also discovered a tender spot on the side of his jaw. Evidently he and his opponent had landed one good one apiece, though he had no clear recollection of the event.

"You got a check, mister?" asked Averoff.

Nash remembered the little square of green cardboard in his money belt. It obtained for him a pair of fancy leather gloves, a rapier, and a wide-brimmed leather hat. The brim was pinned up on the left, Anzacwise, and an ostrich feather stuck aft from between the turned-up part of the brim and the crown.

Outside, the crowd dispersed slowly, some of them, especially the furry gentlemen, lowering back as they departed. Arizona Bill Averoff kept his pistols out until the last rioter had disappeared. Then he holstered them, and he and the redcoat unhitched a pair of horses from a rail on the curb.

"Ain't you goin' home, Frenchy?" he asked in a marked manner.

"Well," said Nash, "you see, I don't know where my home is."

"Lost? Thought you looked kinda doubtful. What part of town are you tryin' to find?"

"I don't know that, either. Is this New York City?"

The cowboy whistled. "Say, didn't you even know what town you were in? Reckon you *are* lost."

"Reckon I am," said Nash with a ghost of a smile. "Is it?"

"Yeah."

"Have you been sick or something?" asked the Mounty.

"Call it lapse of memory," said Nash. "I'd like to—" He stopped as a distant but sharp sound broke into his sentence; then another, and a rattle of them.

"Who's shooting?" he asked.

"Oh," said the Mounty, "I suppose the Arries sent a patrol down into loyal territory, and got caught."

"What," asked Nash, "are Arries?"

"Aryans. Wotanists. Like those two who jumped me tonight. I say, don't you know anything?"

The cowboy spoke in fatherly fashion: "Reckon you need a good night's sleep, mister. Then tomorrow, if you still don't know where you are, you mosey over to a public library and find out. Come along, Jim."

"But," cried Nash, "if this is New York, and you're Bill Averoff, you ought to know me—"

"Shore is too bad, partner, but I don't. So long." Nash's two companions swung into their saddles and clattered off into the dark.

Nash stood uncertainly in the street, which was illuminated only by lights from a few of the windows. Aside from these yellow rectangles hanging suspended in blackness, there was little to be made out. As Nash's eyes got used to the darkness, they picked out by starlight a few more features, such as an irregular and broken line of

roofs, and a tree in what appeared to be a front yard. Nash, who was an indefatigable explorer of his mundane self's adopted city, knew that the only place in Manhattan where front yards were to be found was the Chelsea district. It did not necessarily follow that the same restriction applied to the astral plane's New York.

Pop, went the gunfire far away, and *pop-pop-pop.* He guessed from what the Royal Canadian had said that there was some local war on. Prosper Nash listened, then strode firmly—away from the sounds of combat.

The popping detonations died away. Nash's high uncushioned heels rang loudly on the pavement; too loudly. He realized the lack of the whir of motor vehicles, which forms a continuous undertone day and night to the sounds of mundane New York. In some neighboring street, hoofs *plop-plopped;* then this minor sonic competition sank to inaudibility.

The lighted windows were fewer now. If he had more nerve, thought Nash, he'd knock on one of these doors and ask for a night's lodging. Why not? But as he passed each one he found some excuse for not doing so; this one looked like too small a place; the next had such a shabby appearance, from the little he could make out, that goodness knew what sort of people lived there—

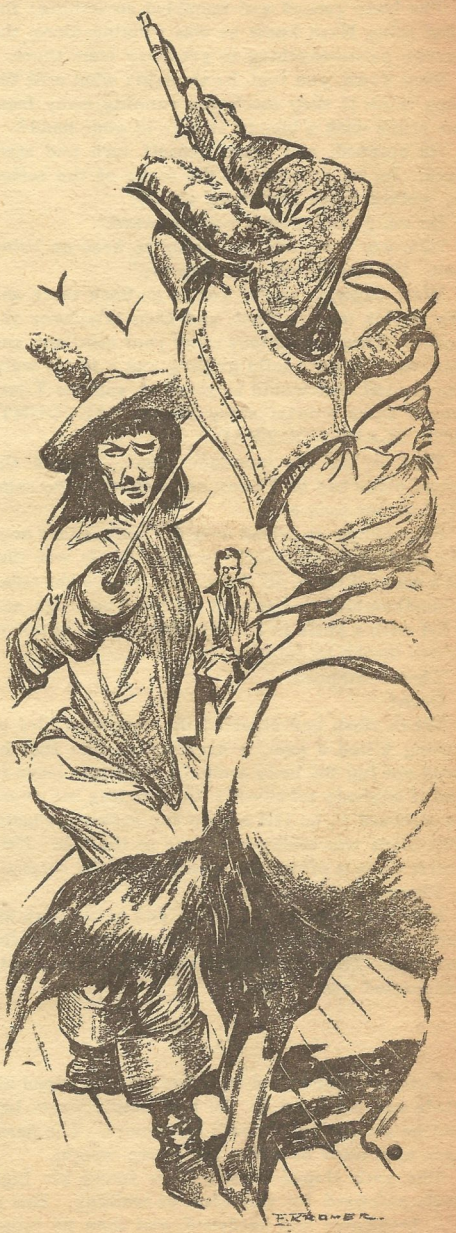
And then there were no more houses, and Prosper Nash almost fell on his face as the pavement ended and the street turned into a dirt path. Wouldn't he feel foolish if he walked all night? If not foolish, at least footsore.

The path climbed a little; Nash's boots swished against the weeds that lined it. This was silly; hadn't he better go back? If he didn't like the houses, he could at least ask where a lodging could be had. But no; he arrived at the top of the little vacant hill, and beyond it he could see the dark silhouette of another built-up area.

A slight sound made him prick his ears; a sound that might have been made by a rolling pebble, but too faint to be sure, except that Nash was sure *he* had not made it. He gripped his scabbard in his left hand to keep it from slapping against his leg, and moved with fair silence except for the slight creak of his boots.

He'd be less frightened, he thought, if he only knew definitely. If somebody was following him, he'd run. That would be the only sensible—

More sounds, small but conclusive, made him turn his head. At the sight of a black shape rushing at him, his mundane mind sent his astral body a frantic command—*run!* But the astral body had already taken matters into its own hand, literally. Its right one swooped to his sword hilt and swept the blade out, while it spun on its heel with the ease of long practice. Then, heels together, legs straight, left arm up and right straight out, it received the charge on its point.



Nash tightened his grip against the fierce backward thrust of the hilt. The shadow stopped, impaled, and gave a very human grunt. It slowly sagged and toppled.

The body gasped and mumbled something; the next thing Nash knew he was running along the narrow path—anything to get away from there.

Slow down, you fool, he thought; what will the cops think if they catch you running away from the crime with a bloody sticker in your hand?

He stopped, and made himself turn and start back. As he approached the scene of the action he walked more and more slowly.

Go on, go on; you're not a coward.

"Oh, yes I am, and I'm going to keep on being one. I'd like to see you stop me."

Well, anyway, you've got to go back there and see if this man is dead, and then telephone the police. They would take away your assailant, and you, too. After a mild grilling and a lot of waiting around, you would be released, and the *Times* would carry a brief story headed "ACCOUNTANT SLAYS FOOTPAD."

That is, on the mundane plane. Maybe the astral plane had no *Times*, no telephones, no cops. He had not seen any.

Nash almost stumbled over the body, silent now. He knelt and reluctantly touched it. It was that of a man, all right, all right. His fingers identified a handkerchief tied around the head, earrings, and a fist with a knife in it. He groped for the pulse; it was throbbing faintly.

Then it stopped.

Gosh!

When Nash had digested the enormous idea of having killed a man, it occurred to him that he need not lug the body around. He'd just leave it, and if anybody asked—hi! In upending his sword to scabbard it, he felt a drop run across his hand. The blade was sticky-wet clear to the hilt. He'd better wipe it off on the garments of the corpse—

There was no corpse.

Nash felt frantically around, and poked with his rapier. The man's clothes were there, even the earrings. They lay flat, as if the body had simply evaporated out of them.

III.

Prosper Nash sighed and gave up. He wiped his blade and his hand on the now empty pants leg, and he set out on the path once more. The darkness oppressed him like a massive weight.

The path sloped down; Nash found his high heels awkward for this kind of walking. But it also broadened and hardened, and soon he found himself on a sidewalk of uneven flagstones. He could feel the presence of houses lining the street; mostly small, irregularly set structures. The only sign of artificial light was a couple of blocks ahead. Nash quickened his stride. When he made out the word "hotel" on a sign dimly illuminated by an oil lantern, he almost broke into another run.

The building was not prepossessing from the outside, from what could be seen of it; about four stories, and covered with involuted stone and iron gingerbread of the General Grant era. As he stepped inside, Nash got a shock: the decorations were of the most garish and angular modernistic style, badly put together, and lighted by the quiet flames of a couple of huge candelabra.

Behind the desk stood a stocky man with a spade beard and a broad red ribbon running diagonally across the bosom of his gleaming boiled shirt. On the desk, beside the register, lay a large revolver on whose butt the bearded man's hand rested familiarly.

White teeth showed through black beard as the man bowed and said rapidly: *"Bon accueil, m'sieur; ma petite auberge est à votre service—"* He spread his left hand and exuded hospitality, all of him but his right hand, which remained motionless on the pistol butt as if it were not part of him at all.

"I don't—" Nash started to add "understand French," when he realized that he had understood that sentence perfectly. In fact the appropriate reply also in French, had already leaped into his mind; but while he tried to grasp this wonder the words faded, and when he deliberately tried to compose a French sentence he could not.

"May I have a room?" he said finally.

"With pleasure, my dear sir," replied the man at the desk. "Your baggage—"

"I haven't any." Nash forestalled a demand for rent in advance by reaching into his money belt. He picked up the pen beside the register and poised it over the paper while he watched the proprietor count out his change. As the money was pushed deferentially toward him, he became aware of motion on the part of his right hand.

The hand had written, in an ornate script with curling swash-lines: "Jean-Prospère, Chv. de Nêche."

A chevalier, eh? *Whew!* Mustn't let Spade-beard see how excited you are— If his astral body retained a subconscious memory of its name, maybe it would remember its address, too. But now that Nash wanted it to perform, it failed to do so. After staring blankly at his hand for some seconds, Nash wrote simply "New York City."

"Do you serve meals?" he asked.

The ambassadorial innkeeper said he did. Nash asked how much. Spade-beard waved his hand with a gently embarrassed motion, and seemed to have trouble making articulate speech. When Nash repeated the question, the proprietor resigned himself to the fact that his guest did not show the gentlemanly indifference to prices that one expected of a knight, and told him.

When the candles in Nash's rather glum little room had been lit, and the host had bowed himself out, Nash bounded to the mirror.

The face that looked back at him was not quite his own, though there was a strong resemblance. It was an older face, probably in its thirties; perhaps the face that the mundane Nash would wear in ten years. Not quite: the jaw was more massive and the nose had a higher bridge. Nash chuckled, thinking that if he had wanted to improve his face, he would have made just about those changes in it.

He shed his hat, coat, boots and sword, and sat down to the writing table to try some more unconscious writing. But the right hand of the Chevalier de Nêche remained obstinately inert, whether he concentrated a glower on it or whether he ignored it. He must have it cowed.

He gave that enterprise up and counted his money. Then he ruled off some lines on one of the sheets of writing paper, and filled it in thus:

		Dr.	Cr.
Oct. 31	Balance brought forward		157.26
	Room rent	1.25	

Then, with the consciousness of a day well ended, he went to bed.

Staring up into the darkness, he thought that now that he had a roof over his head, perhaps he could figure things out a little further. Bechard's invasion of his mundane body had displaced his soul or whatever it was up to this astral plane, which was like, yet unlike, his own—the mundane, the demon had called it—world. It had a New York City, but one that harbored strange specimens like the chevalier. The chevalier must be connected with him, somehow; looked like him, and had a name that was an obvious Frenchification of John Prosper Nash.

And the cowboy, Arizona Bill Averoff, was undoubtedly the astral body of Nash's proletarian friend of the same name. It was funny that Nash's astral body was the kind of person that Nash's mundane self liked to imagine himself as being. The same must apply to the two Averoffs, with those Western pulps Bill read—by gum, that must be the explanation! An astral body was a sort of projection of the mundane body, the person it fancied itself as—

That left a lot of questions unanswered; how astral bodies came into existence, for instance. He had seen how they died—just evaporated. Still it explained the dramatic diversity of human types; people liked to imagine themselves as something outstanding: either what they openly strove to be, or a secret ideal totally different from their everyday character. Witness the Egyptian princesses, samurai, and the rest. Nash was willing to bet that the offensively Nordic gents in the winged hats came from the section of the astral New York corresponding to Yorkville.

Another problem raised its head. If a mundane body had a mundane soul, did an astral body have an astral soul? If so, what had become of that of Jean-Prospère de Nêche? Had it merely been suppressed, or had it been displaced up to still another plane—

The sun in his eyes routed him out of slumber before he knew it. As he got out of bed he discovered a lot of stiff and bruised places, and thought it was too bad he had not imagined an astral self that was invulnerable as well as dashing. The spikes of his mustache had come partly unraveled, and though he could repair the damage somewhat by vigorous twirling, he had no pomade to do a really good job. For that matter he would have to put up with bristling cheeks and furry teeth until he could either buy a set of toilet articles or located his own. They must exist somewhere in the city.

The ambassadorial proprietor met him at the door of the dining room with an apron tied over his cutaway, and bowed him to a table already occupied by a young man in bright-blue zipper-closed boots, tight blue breeches, and a rubbery-looking blue shirt.

The azure young man smiled pleasantly, and Nash bade him good morning. While they waited for the innkeeper to hand around the eggs, Nash asked: "Does he run the place all by himself?"

"He has a day clerk and a cook, but otherwise he does everything," said the young man. "Poor Aristide has the usual trouble finding anybody to work for him. The last three clerks he's had have gone off to join the Home Defense. Might even take a crack at it myself."

"Yes?" said Nash. "What's your present line, if I may ask?" The French accent was giving him less trouble.

"Nothing at the moment. I've been trying to revive the Cosmobile project, but no luck."

"What's that?" asked Nash.

"You've never heard of it? My word. You see, I and a lot of others were created to be Interplanetary Patrolmen. But there's no Interplanetary Patrol, for the good reason that there's no interplanetary traffic. So as the first step we formed a company to build a Cosmobile. But there was the usual trouble."

"What usual trouble?"

"Oh, everybody wanted to be boss. They're splendid fellows, but they just couldn't realize that the job belonged to me, because of my natural gifts of leadership." The young man shrugged and sighed. "We tried using soulless ones, but they're mostly too stupid to handle a pick and shovel, let

alone anything delicate like assembling a spaceship. It's too bad, because the theoretical knowledge does exist. Only nobody could agree on how to apply it. It's like trying to steal the Shamir."

Nash straightened up sharply at this. He asked: "Where's the Shamir?"

Eyebrows rose. "My word, I thought everybody knew that. On the desert island, of course. But look here, pal, in strict confidence, I'm just about on my uppers. If you could let me have a few dollars—I'll give you a note—"

"'Fraid not," said Nash hastily. "I'm unemployed myself." He pushed his chair back.

"But listen, pal, you wouldn't want a man with my qualifications to get killed in a beastly little Home Defense operation—"

Nash fled into the lobby, where the maitre d'hôtel glanced up from his ledger and tipped him a wink and murmured: "I see you got away from young Farnsworth. Shall I keep your room?"

"Uh-huh, please," said Nash. He would have liked to ask more questions about the Shamir, but the azure one might come out any minute.

The street outside looked far more cheerful than it had felt the previous night. The indescribable mixture of architectural styles was revealed in all its grotesque glory. Mercifully the trees hid much of it. As Nash, blinking in the sunshine, looked about him, his eyes picked up the weed-grown hill he had crossed in the dark.

The memory of his encounter came to the surface of his mind with a rush. He walked quickly in the opposite direction. Ahead of him the street ran straight, sloping down slightly to a chink of blue.

The buildings became smaller and more widely and irregularly spaced. There was a California bungalow, and a Cape Cod cottage, and a log cabin, and a box of prefabricated steel sheets. Then the buildings fell away, and Nash was looking across the broad reach of the North River. He must be about opposite Hoboken; Stevens Point was in plain sight. But the hill, instead of being crowned by the nineteenth-century Stevens mansion, was brooded over by a Norman castle.

Directly in front of him the shore plunged into the river in a tumble of big rocks, out of which a few piles of a former pier crazily stuck. There were other piers up and down the river; some small piers with ships in them down, and one huge unfinished one up. The ships were smallish vessels, at least half of them sail-powered.

Nash sat down on the top of one of the piles. He meant to think, but the warmth of the sun and the blueness of the water seduced him into simply sitting.

A triangle of white swam past his vision: the sail of a catboat in mid-river. The tide was carrying it down fast. Nash reflected that normally the press of river traffic would have made such a course extremely hazardous, but the astral plane's North River seemed to have neither ferries nor tugs.

Something winked from the hull of the catboat, and two seconds later the sound of a gunshot came to Nash's ears. Nash looked to see what they could be shooting at on this peaceful river. A vessel the size of a Coast Guard cutter, with smoke billowing from a tall thin stack, was crawling up-river toward the catboat. The white triangle wavered as the latter came about, but having done so it made no headway against the current, and the steam vessel crept closer. There were flashes from both ships, followed by reports; then the shooting stopped. Nash stood up in a fruitless attempt to see what was happening, but all he could make out was the two little boats meeting, and then drifting down toward Staten Island together.

The astral plane might be a world peopled with ideal beings, but the result was certainly not an ideal world—at least not according to the usual concept of a pacific and prosperous one. People getting shot and stabbed right and left—

A crunch on the gravel made Nash turn. A man was standing nearby, feet together and hands in the pants pockets of his suit, smoking a cigarette in a long holder, and looking past Nash at the river. The man had a severely handsome face in whose right eye a monocle was stuck. "See what happened?" asked this individual out of the side of his mouth.

"Not very well."

"Too far, eh? Patroons tried to run the blockade, no doubt." The well-dressed man sat down on the top of another pile. "Lovely day, what?" He smiled all over.

"Yep," replied Nash. "You look pretty well pleased with the world."

"Am. Just collected my fee for solving the case of the Methodist molar. Re-enactment worked like a charm. Now I can loaf for a year. I say!" The man looked sharply at Nash. "Aren't you the chap who so sprightly skewered that vagrant on Chelsea Hill last night?"

Prosper Nash began to shake slightly. He pulled himself up and barked with quite unnecessary aggressiveness: "What gave you that idea?"

"Heh, heh. Elementary, my dear chap. Only had to examine the holes in his shirt to know he'd been done in by a stop thrust from a seventeenth-century rapier, delivered by a man of your height. Won't bore you with the details."

"Are you going to turn me in?" asked Nash more quietly.

"Oh, my Aunt Emmy! To use your own truculent phraseology, what gave you that idea? Not a policeman. Private investigator. They wouldn't

be interested, either, with Arries popping out of their teacups. Served the chap right, no doubt."

Nash drew a long breath. "It did, all right, all right. Say, m'sieur, I recently heard a man say something about a desert island. Do they have such a thing around New York?"

"Certainly. Where the Shamir's kept." The private investigator waved in a northeasterly direction. "Park. Risky to go see, though; been fighting there."

"There seems to be a gosh-awful lot of fighting," commented Nash.

The private investigator shrugged. "True; almost makes one believe that legend about our being the idealizations of chaps on another plane. Naturally chaps would imagine a lot of fierce-quarrelsome idealizations."

"What's that?" cried Nash. A few feet from the men a hazy, flickering outline wavered in the air, gradually thickening and becoming more opaque. Nash repeated his question: "What *is* it?"

"The mystery of creation, my friend," replied the other, puffing unconcernedly.

The presence solidified slowly into a handsome, well-built woman of about Nash's age—or rather, about the age of the Chevalier de Nêche—clad in a severe businesswoman's suit.

The woman stared vacantly for some seconds. She passed her hand across her eyes and took a couple of faltering steps, as if just awakened.

"Sit down, my dear," the investigator addressed her.

She seemed to see them for the first time; an expression of fear and bewilderment appeared.

"Sit down," the man repeated.

She did so, uncertainly, as though she did not quite know how to control her limbs.

"Can I help you?" asked Nash.

She looked at him as though she did not understand him, then slowly articulated: "I—don't—know."

"Give her a few minutes to get adjusted, old chap," said the investigator, and addressed the woman: "Have much trouble coming through?"

"Three—times. It—was—very—painful."

"I know, old girl; it's that way with most of us. Don't be afraid of us; we're pukka. I'm Reggie Kramer, and this chap—"

"Chevalier de Nêche," said Nash, feeling a little silly about the title.

"Righto. Know your name yet?"

The woman closed her eyes, and finally said: "Eleanor Thompson Berry. I lecture."

There was a long silence before she added: "I also write a newspaper column. Are there newspapers?"

"Not many, since the Aryans burned down the *World*. But the best thing for you would be to toddle over to the City Hall. The Home Defense forces need propagandists."

"Where is that?" asked Miss Berry.

Kramer gestured and poured out directions, at which the woman looked all the more bewildered. "I . . . I don't know my way around yet," she said, and looked appealingly at the two men.

"I'll show you," growled Nash, "though I'm not much better off than you are." He looked scornfully at Kramer.

The private investigator merely laughed. "Good idea, old man. I'd offer to conduct Miss Berry if I weren't so infernally lazy. You might take these with you." He whisked out a couple of cards. Nash took one and read:

REGINALD VANCE KRAMER

Discreet Investigations

224 Greene Street New York City

Nash meant to give Kramer a curt good-by, but he had swept off his plumed hat in a wide gesture before he knew it. Wherever the chevalier's soul might be, his body still had a lot of automatic reflexes left over.

Nash and Eleanor Thompson Berry turned away and walked toward the nearest street leading away from the water front. Then they halted.

A clatter of hoofs preceded a group of six horsemen in steel caps and long white mantles, who rode straight at the pair. They had bearded, mahogany-colored faces, and looked enough alike to be sextuplets.

They reined in a few paces from the pair; one cried something in a guttural language, and two of them flung themselves off their horses and ran at the woman, who stepped back in alarm.

"Hey!" cried Nash.

The leader looked down at him dispassionately, and jerked a thumb. He said: "Get hence, youse!"

Miss Berry screamed "Help!" as the two dismounted ones seized her arms. The chevalier's arm had already half drawn its sword. Nash lunged at the nearest kidnaper; the blade bent against a shirt of mail, and then scimitars flashed out all around him.

IV.

Nash parried a cut with a ringing clash, and then one of the riderless horses caught his eye. He bounded toward it with the idea of vaulting into the saddle. But mounting a horse is a task requiring both hands, and Nash was encumbered by his rapier. For a few seconds he clutched the pommel with his left and hopped around trying to spear the nigh stirrup with his toe. The horse

pranced in a circle, and the dark men yelled and took wild swipes at Nash.

At last he thought to put the blade between his teeth and catch the cantle with his other hand. One heave and he was up; he had not found the stirrups, but the chevalier's fine riding muscles made them hardly necessary. He put the animal in motion toward the nearest opponent; the man gave ground and the others closed in on him from back and side. The tip of a saber swished by an inch from his nose; another nicked his boot. He felt as a toad must feel that sees the whirling blades of a lawn mower slicing down on him.

A guttural command opened the press out; the leader of the pack was leveling a pistol at him. He could see that the barrel was squarely in line with his midriff.

A gun crashed. Nash, tensing himself for the hammer blow of the bullet, felt nothing—had he been killed instantly?—and then realized that the man with the pistol had been shot instead of shooting, for he swayed and fell out of his saddle.

There were more shots; the kidnapers yelled, and Nash, finding himself within easy reach of one, carefully ran him through the throat. When he looked around for another to tackle, three were riding off as if the devil were after them, and the remaining one, afoot, was being pursued by Eleanor Thompson Berry, who had somehow possessed herself of his scimitar and was swinging it at his steel-capped head with both hands.

The columnist gave up the hopeless chase and walked back, breathing hard. Nash saw a small group of men standing in front of a water-front shack with rifles and pistols. He rode over to them, finding them a tough-looking lot, and extremely nautical. One with salt-flecked sideburns said: "Ahoy, mister. Thought you was going to get your thwarts stove for a minute."

"Thanks. I needed help, all right."

"Wasn't nothin'; the boys and me didn't figure on letting them sharks take a Christian."

"Thanks again," said Nash. "My name's de Nêche, and if I can ever do anything for you, let me know."

"Aye-aye, Mr. de Nêche. I'm Cap'n Jones; Ahab Dana Jones." He looked at Nash expectantly, which that young man took to be a hint that a little cash on the barrel head would be welcome.

"Take this horse," said Nash, dismounting. "If you don't want to keep him, he'll bring a good price."

"Aw now, mister," said Captain Jones, "I wouldn't want to separate a man from his beast like that. Why, I had a parrot to once—"

"No, I insist," said Nash, realizing that as far as the sailors knew the animal was his own. After more Alphonse-Gaston parley the horse was accepted, and Nash walked quickly off, leaving the sailors arguing whether the creature should be taken into their house, and, if so, how.

Eleanor Thompson Berry had rounded up the other two riderless horses and was waiting for him near where Reginald Vance Kramer still sat on his post and smoked. The detective said to him as he neared: "For a bird who thinks there's too much fighting around here, you haven't done half badly in the last twelve hours."

He indicated the two bodies. Nash looked, and saw that they were really just bundles of clothes from which the contents had vanished.

"You weren't much help, m'sieur," he said belligerently.

"My dear chap, what could *I* do? I work with the jolly old bean, when I work at all. The snickersnee's more your line."

"Oh, well," said Nash. "Who were those people, do you know?"

"Probably soulless ones belonging to one of the sheiks or sultans, out shopping for the harem. My guess would be that they were Arslan's." Seeing by Nash's expression that the cavalier was bursting with more queries, he added: "No more questions, please, there's a good chap. I want to work on my book on ancient musical instruments." Therewith Kramer got out a notebook and began scribbling furiously.

Nash shrugged and turned away. Now that he had a horse he could cover ground fast enough to learn what he had to. He mounted. Miss Berry did likewise, though her costume was hardly suitable.

"You don't talk much," commented Eleanor Thompson Berry.

"Oh, don't I?" said Nash.

"No, not like that other man—Mr. Kramer. Except to ask these people the way, you've hardly said a word."

"Uh-huh."

"But why? Is there a reason? I want to know; I have so much to learn before I can be a lecturer. You are . . . let me think . . . sad? Is that it?"

"Well," said Nash, "I killed—" he almost added "two men," but decided not to raise the ghost of the robber of last night. What Miss Berry didn't know wouldn't hurt her, especially if she were going to join the forces of whatever government held out in the City Hall.

"Was that wrong? Should you have let the men in white take me?"

"I don't suppose it was wrong, exactly. I just don't like killing people."

"But then why—"

"Excuse me, but do you mind if we talk about something else?" This suggestion brought a stream of questions about the astral plane to which

Nash did not know the answers. He was glad when they hove in sight of the City Hall.

"There's your destination, madame," he said. "And now if you'll excuse me—"

The woman said: "I wish you'd go in with me, chevalier; I don't know anyone."

Nash almost weakened, but the thought of the officials detaining him while they investigated the puncturing of two of their citizens—who might, for all Nash knew, have influential friends—stiffened his spine.

"Sorry," he said, "but I have an errand of my own. *Au 'voir.*" He waved his hat and trotted off before she could protest further. Now for the Shamir, before he got involved in any more bloodletting!

The wide street that ran north from the City Hall Plaza corresponded to the mundane New York's Broadway; some of the street signs in fact said "Broadway." But others said various things, such as "Christopher Magellan Avenue" or "Shin Fane Boulevard." The stretches bearing these names began and ended without visible plan, as if half the population had tried its hand at putting up street signs with whatever names pleased their fancy. Many stretches were much too narrow to make the name "Broadway" appropriate, and there were twists and jogs that the mundane plane's equivalent lacked. Nash even had to detour around a couple of Indian tepees set up in the middle of the street, with Indians sitting crosslegged in front of them.

The buildings were still smaller than those of Prosper Nash's New York, and there was not a skyscraper in sight. He did pass a couple of huge excavations that might have been meant as foundations for skyscrapers. But work on them had long been abandoned; the sides were caving in, in one case taking a good part of the avenue with them.

Nash inferred that the astralites tended toward picturesqueness at the expense of practicality. The chevalier whose body he inhabited was probably of that sort, too; always getting into fights—But if the chevalier was something thought up by Nash, wasn't it Nash's own fault? An unanswerable question.

The park to which Kramer had referred must be the equivalent of Central Park, though what a desert island would be doing there remained a puzzle. Nash had reached what he judged to be the latitude of the Fifties when the faint popping of gunfire reminded him that there was a war on. He hesitated, and noticed a restaurant, and was reminded that he had not yet eaten lunch.

As he hung up his hat he was startled to see that it shared the hatrack with a golden crown. The owner of the crown was evidently the dignified person in the embroidered robe sitting at the counter. A king who was lunching on coffee and sinkers ought to be as good a source of information as any.

"How's the war going, m'sieur?" he asked when he had ordered.

"Ah," said the royal dunker. "You may well ask." After an impressive pause, he added: "They've cleared the Aryans out of the southern half of the park, though they still raid down the west side." Another pause. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"You're supposed to say, 'Your sage majesty is most gracious.'"

"Your sage majesty is most gracious."

"Ah. That's better."

The counterman put in: "Heh, he's a good one. You'd think he was really a king still."

"Ah, but I am, my good varlet. 'Not all the water in the rough rude sea can wash the balm off from an anointed king; the breath of worldly men cannot depose the . . . the—' How does it go?"

"I don't know how it goes," snapped the counterman, "but if you want to eat here on credit any more you better not call me 'varlet.'"

"But my dear—commoner, if you prefer—think of the curiosity trade which my patronage brings—"

"Ga wan, kings are a dime a dozen—"

Nash left them arguing and continued on his way. Pedestrians were fewer. Despite the variation in their costumery, which gave the city the air of movie lot during lunch hour, there was a certain uniformity about their physical type that struck Prosper Nash. They were nearly all stalwart, handsome men and women between twenty and forty; there were hardly any old people, and no children.

A few blocks farther north Nash came upon a barricade of cobblestones and furniture, which had once stretched clear across the avenue, but which had since been broken down in the middle to let traffic through. A little later he passed a group of soldiers uniformed like movie ushers. The statement is not literally accurate, for the "uniforms" were far from uniform, but they made up in gorgeousness what they lacked in similarity.

Presently a horseman passed him at an easy canter: a man in a cloth cap and a shabby twentieth-century civilian suit, with a red band tied around his arm and a rifle slung across his back. He gave Nash a suspicious glance as he went by, and Nash saw a small reddish beard under a pair of sharp slightly Mongoloid eyes.

There were more soldiers, and the sound of distant shots broke out again briefly. Then Nash sighted greenery ahead: Without doubt the park corresponded to Central, though its borders were irregular; it was much wilder. The paths were fewer and in an advanced state of disrepair. Moreover there were dwellings in it: a Colonial cottage

"I can't figger mathematics, yer honor, but that customs don't seem right to me."

here, nearly hidden by vegetation; a log cabin there. The trees were shedding bright autumnal foliage.

A group of soldiers sat under a tulip tree eating lunch. Nash asked the way to the lake, got a jerk of a thumb from a hussar with his mouth full of sandwich, and continued on.

At the point where the path debouched on the lake shore there was a small boathouse bearing a sign:

CAPT. PERRY DECATUR SHAPIRO

Boats For Rent

Sounds of carpentry came from the boathouse. Nash dismounted and tried to tie his horse to a tree. But the animal developed fractiousness and tugged Nash toward the lake. The idea finally penetrated his head that the horse was thirsty. He let it drink and tied it so that it could reach plenty of the long grass that grew around.

Captain Perry Decatur Shapiro crawled out from under the boat on which he was working, wiped his hands, and put on his swallow-tailed, brass-buttoned coat and his cocked hat. He and Nash exchanged courtly greetings, and the captain asked if a boat was wanted.

"I have but three fit to put out," he explained. "Two have already been taken today. The rest were so riddled in the battle that they'll not be ready for a week."

"What battle, m'sieur?" asked Nash.

"Weren't you in town when it happened? It was during the recent attempt of the Aryan scoun-

drels. They came down the lake on timber rafts, and our saucy boys went out in the boats to stop them. By God, sir, it was hot work for a while, since we couldn't sink the rafts."

"Have the Aryans all been driven away from the lake now?"

"Yes, sir. So here I sit, hiring my sound boats out to pay for repairs on the rest. Though being so near the front, and what with old Tukiphat's desert island taking up half the lake, I get little enough custom."

"Who," asked Nash carefully, "is Tukiphat?"

"The genius of the Shamir, of course. Though I don't know why he chose my lake to set himself and his bauble up in. He leaves room neither for pleasure boating nor for a proper battle. I wanted to drag the boats over to the river to join Larry Preble Pappas' squadron, but the staff wouldn't hear of it. Those noodles in City Hall are so bemused to the word 'defense' that they'll never put down the vermin, which can be accomplished only by overwhelming attack."

Nash hastily helped launch the rowboat and rowed out before Captain Shapiro could start another tirade. The captain's rate of a dollar an hour made his wallet nerve wince, but he reasoned that if he secured the Shamir he would no longer have to worry about the chevalier's finances.

When he got away from shore he looked around; sure enough there was a most patent desert island; a bare little knob of sand and rock crowned by one sorrowful palm tree, the ensemble looking as out of place in the park as a juke box in a church.

It certainly did not take up half the lake. Nash rowed closer and saw an empty rowboat lying on the sand of the island's minuscule beach. The whole island had a faintly queer, insubstantial look; its perspectives were, somehow, not quite right. Nash put that effect down to an illusion resulting from its general incongruity. Surrounding it was what looked at first sight like a circular ribbon of oil on the water, several yards wide, smooth, dully blue-gray.

Nash decided not to investigate more closely because two other rowboats were in sight. He rowed casually toward one of these; it held two gold-braided soldiers fishing, who warned him off with fingers to their lips. The other looked empty until Nash got close to it. Then he saw that in it lay a young woman sun-bathing in the costume most effective for that occupation. He rowed off, face tingling with embarrassment.

Imagining you were a dashing cavalier was all right for daydreaming. But right now he was more interested in getting back into his own body before Bechard did something awful with it. The demon had not given him detailed instructions for using the Shamir; had in fact sent him off with a mere airy assurance that he would learn what was necessary when the time came. Either Bechard had a great and unfounded confidence in him, or was not very bright, or knew in some supernatural way that things would in fact take care of themselves. The last was the most comforting hypothesis, so Prosper Nash adopted it, pulled into a little cove near the outlet where he would be out of sight of the other boats and Captain Shapiro, lay back, pushed his hat over his eyes, and dozed.

He was awakened by cold and a great interior emptiness. The stars were coming out in quick succession; this city must have a much less smoky atmosphere than its mundane equivalent. The boats were gone from the lake. Everything was quiet save for the faint sounds of the city's primitive means of transportation and the occasional pop of a gun over to eastward.

Nash's main emotions were impatience to get the job over with, and lonesomeness. He was reminded of how he had felt when he first moved to New York from Hartford, knowing nobody.

If Captain Shapiro came out to demand explanations, Nash would simply tell him he had fallen asleep and then had lost his way in the dark. But the little boathouse was as dark as the rest, and the incongruous island sat there inviting him to storm it, and beg, borrow, or steal the Shamir from this Tukiphat. Who was that? The genius of the Shamir, Shapiro had said; so what? A kind of spirit? He would know soon enough.

It looked too easy; the rowboat still lay on the sand. A genius who used a rowboat sounded like a pretty finite sort of being. Still, Nash would have liked to know what he was up against. The sight of a grim but definite policeman on the rock pile ahead would have been a comfort. Decidedly he was too easygoing a person for enterprises requiring meticulous planning and desperate nerve.

Not a sound from the shore or the island. Nash pulled with a short stroke to minimize the squeak of the oarlocks. It was too easy—

It was.

V.

Prosper Nash's teeth chattered a little until the exercise warmed him. He took one last look to assure himself that Tukiphat's island was straight ahead, and bent to the oars again. The water gurgled pleasantly as the blades bit through it—pull—reach—pull—reach—a dozen strokes should bring him to the beach. But a dozen strokes did not, nor yet two dozen. Had he rowed right past it in the dark?

Where was the damned thing? And for that matter where was everything? The stars had vanished, and Nash could no longer make out the silhouette of trees against the sky. In fact he could no longer make out anything save the water

alongside, darkly reflecting like blued steel. It must have clouded over.

He leaned on his oars again, frowning; a prickly sensation began in the hair follicles of his nape and spread over his scalp. Except for that rippling surface he might as well be rowing through interstellar space. He stuck a finger into the water to see whether it was what it seemed; it was at least wet, and warmer than the chill air. A line from a poem ran through his mind:

> The weird ululation of fiends
> On the brackish waters of time—

Nash preferred his poetry more concrete and cheerful, but that line seemed appropriate right now. It was no darker than it had been; he just couldn't seem to see anything except two strips of feebly lit water, one stretching away from the bow of the craft and one from the stern. It was somewhat as though he were in his old mundane body without his glasses? Could it be that he *was?* He felt himself quickly, and was satisfied that he still inhabited the chevalier's big, hawk-nosed, long-haired physique.

But still island, lake, stars, and everything else recognizable had vanished; there was water before and water behind, stretching off to slightly brighter patches on what would be the horizon; everything else was a blur and a dark one at that.

He rowed some more, and quit when it occurred to him that he had no idea whither he was going.

"Hey!"

Silence.

"HEY!"

Still no sound. Gosh!

He rowed with long, hard strokes; the glimmering water slid past. When he stopped and looked around, the boat still floated on a ribbon of water bordered by nothingness and stretching away to infinity on both sides.

Nash headed the boat straight toward the side of this canallike body and rowed some more. He moved; the eddies from his strokes swirled away aft into the dark. But his surroundings failed to change accordingly. It was as though the ribbon of water were being unrolled on one side and rolled up on the other, so that no matter what Nash did he remained in the middle.

When even the chevalier's iron frame began to tire, Nash gave up and rested again. The direct approach that he had used was evidently all wrong. He should have inquired around more. Where had he gotten the idea that he was a sensible fellow smart enough to improvise his way out of trouble? The only comfort was the knowledge that Bechard had been an even bigger fool, to send him off on this adventure so lamentably unprepared—

Well, if it was really all Bechard's fault there was no point in sitting there and reproaching oneself. He was tired and hungry; if he made himself as comfortable as possible until dawn he might be able to grasp his predicament then—if there was going to be a dawn, and if he weren't in some sort of hyperspatial tunnel between the mundane and astral planes. He scooped enough water out of the lake to fill the gnawing void for a while, lay down in the boat, and put his hat over his face.

He slept badly; every time he dropped off, the cold would bring him to shivering. After what seemed like the hundredth such awakening his itching eyes picked out the spots of lighter gray toward which the watercourse stretched. They seemed definitely brighter, and the canal itself was lightening in response.

The world brightened but became no more intelligible. The canal seemed to run through a glass tunnel of indefinite length, the glass fluted so that nothing in the world outside could be made out. At the sides of the canal the water appeared to merge into the glass, so that the diameter of the tunnel was difficult to estimate. Nash guessed it at thirty to forty feet.

As he stared, a narrow horizontal red line appeared in the wall of the tunnel at eye-level. The minutes passed, and the red line widened to a band with an apparent width of about two degrees, meanwhile brightening to a glowing orange. It got no wider, but rose with gastropodal speed and turned a fierce white.

Sun, thought Nash; the walls of the tunnel must have the optical property of stretching one dimension of the world outside out to infinite length. No wonder nothing was recognizable. He rowed about for a while, toward the walls of the tunnel and along its axis, but with no more results than he had achieved during the night.

Before he resigned himself to eating his floppy boots for breakfast he had better have one more try with lung-power. He yelled, and listened, and yelled again, until his throat was sore. At last a voice answered:

"Ahoy, if it isn't the saucy lubber in the macaroni hat! Belay yourself and return my boat, sir!" The voice was startlingly clear and unmistakably that of Captain Perry Decatur Shapiro.

"Glad to," Nash yelled back, "but how?"

"Row, you fool! Not that way; head toward the outer wall of the sphere!"

"Which way is that?"

"Little more to stabberd; there you are. Now pull, my hearty!"

Nash pulled along the axis of the tube until he puffed. "Keep on!" cried the invisible captain. Nash rowed some more and craned his neck to see where he was going. Perhaps fifty yards ahead the water and sun and streaks along the sides of

the tunnel almost converged, and around the spot toward which they pointed, objects could be made out; a bit of lake shore with a couple of trees, shrunken down as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope. As the boat moved, the picture grew as pieces of the streaks detached themselves and joined it. It seemed to Nash as though he were looking into a deep parabolic mirror, except that there was no reflection of himself at the focus.

Suddenly the walls of the tunnel whisked back, and he was out on the familiar lake; or at least most of him was. When he looked at the stern he saw that the boat ended just beyond his feet, as if it had been crumpled up along its longitudinal axis. Even as he watched, the stern extended itself away from where he sat until the boat reached its normal dimensions. He had just rowed out of the smooth, dull, curved band that lay on the water like a wide streak of oil encircling the island.

"Hurray!" "'Rah!" "Vive!" "Bravo!" "Euge!" "Yipee!" "Olé!"

These sounds came from a score of men on the shore of the lake. Among them Nash made out Captain Shapiro's nautical cap. As he rowed toward them he discerned that they were laughing. Half of them were soldiers and the rest the usual motley astral assortment. He handed over the boat to its commander with a self-conscious grin.

"Went to sleep," he explained, "and got lost in the dark—"

Captain Shapiro was examining the boat minutely. "It's well for you that it's sound, sir," he said. "We don't mind your trying to reach Tukiphat's island, having tried to do so ourselves without success. But if you'd lost or damaged the boat, the lads here would have haled you before the Private."

Nash asked: "Say, what is that thing around the island? What became of that tunnel I got into?"

"Wasn't any tunnel," said one of the soldiers. "It's a . . . what you call it . . . optical effect. How does it work, General Kenyon?"

Another soldier took up: "You see, Frenchy, when Tukiphat set up his island he didn't want visitors, so he put what he calls a zone of refraction around it. How does it work, colonel? I'm just an ordinary general."

"It's shaped like a hollow ball," explained the colonel, "and it slows down everything moving toward or away from its center, the way glass slows down light, only more so, so that it takes you as long to go a foot in a . . . uh . . . radial direction as it would take you to go a mile ordinarily. A man who enters it is flattened out so that from the outside he looks like a cardboard cutout, only to him he looks normal and everything not in the zone is stretched all out of shape."

The first general said: "You can fire a bullet at it, and when it hits the zone you can see it hang in the air and then drop straight down plunk into the water. Here, I'll show you—"

The general raised his gun. The colonel barked: "Put that down, you damn fool! Don't you know if you don't hit the zone square on, the bullet'll be refracted back out and maybe hit somebody?"

"Aw, but colonel—"

"Shut up! Who's giving orders here?" The general meekly subsided. The colonel started to say: "All right, Frenchy, try not to get in any more trouble—"

"Jean-Prospère!" cried a man in the crowd who was dressed much like Nash. *"Ami! Où estois tu caché?"* The man threw himself upon Nash with a swirl of cloak, and before Nash could get his guard up he had been seized around the shoulders and kissed on both cheeks. The crowd guffawed.

He looked at his toes, vainly hoping the earth would swallow him, while his new friend poured a stream of Seventeenth-Century French over his embarrassed head. *"—beaucoup de peine j'ay eue! J'ay oui dire par des scélérats que peur tu avois. Un cheval tu as! Je croyois que vendue tu l'avois—"*

Nash finally worked in: "Had a little lapse of memory. Didn't know where I belonged or anything."

"And now back it all comes? *Bon!* We go, no?"

Nash mounted without protest and let the other guide him out of the park. He learned how difficult is the task of following a man while riding alongside of him and acting as if one knew where one was going. He rode in silence, gloomy over the night's fiasco and apprehensive lest his fellow-cavalier get suspicious.

But the fellow-cavalier talked enough for two. Nash picked up the facts that his self-appointed pal was the Comte de la Tour d'Ivoire; that both of them were living in a sort of cavaliers' club; that he, de Nêche, had formerly held a job that caused him to travel between New York City and an unspecified kingdom whereof he and the Comte were subjects, but that de Nêche was now unemployed. Moreover he got the impression that there were persons in astral New York who would like nothing better than to carve their initials on his liver.

Behind their backs, a roll of distant gunfire broke out, fading as they trotted south. They rode until Nash guessed that they had reached the Twenties, though the irregular layout of astral New York made Nash's knowledge of its mundane equivalent of very limited use. They halted in front of an elderly brownstone building with big glass doors. A vacuuous-looking fellow took their horses; Nash wondered who would create such a stupid oaf for his astral body. Then he remem-

bered hearing about "soulless ones"; perhaps this was one of them.

"Ah! M'sieur le Chevalier!" cried the doorman, and there was a stampede of long-haired sword-girt persons across the lobby to pump Nash's hands and kiss his cheeks. They all yelled questions at him in French, until de la Tour d'Ivoire proved himself a real friend by shouting: *"Plus tard, je vous en prie! Les privations horribles il a soutenu!"*

Nash located the dining room and made straight for it. After wolfing his way through a huge breakfast he was presented with a check. He was not quite sure what to do about this, but the waiter had a pencil in his hand, and did not seem disturbed when Nash took it away from him and signed de Nêche's name to the check. They'd have a hell of a time proving that it was a forgery.

At the desk they gave him his key and a couple of letters. They also gave him a meaningful cough, and one of them said: "About your bill, m'sieur—"

"Later, please." As he turned away, Nash saw the clerk toss a slight shrug and an uplift of the eyebrow at the other, as if he had heard that sort of thing only too often.

The mirror in his room showed Nash a very seedy-looking chevalier indeed, unshaven and bloodshot. His drink out of the lake the previous night had dissolved all the wax out of the spikes of his mustache, so that they hung down the sides of his mouth like unraveled ends of tarred string.

He hunted up the chevalier's toilet articles, which included a homicidal-looking straight razor, and freshened his appearance. He considered trimming the mustache down to the dimensions to which his mundane self was accustomed, but decided that it would be a dirty trick to take such a liberty with the body of the chevalier in the latter's absence. There was a small jar of pomade for rewaxing the ornament.

Then he went through his possessions. These included a notebook, a carpetbag, spare clothes, a bill of sale for a bay stallion, and a pawn ticket for a watch.

The pile of correspondence on the table consisted mainly of unpaid bills, some accompanied by nasty little notes. When he dutifully entered all his known debts on the sheet of note paper he was using as a ledger, he was horrified to find himself four hundred sixty-nine dollars and nine cents in the hole. Gosh, if he'd known anything like this was going to happen, he would have created an astral body with some sense about financial matters!

On the other hand, if he could only get hold of the damned Shamir, he could leave the prodigal chevalier to his own dubious monetary destiny.

One letter was personal. In French, it read:

Three Rivers,
October 24th.

My dear Jean-Prospère:

Just a word to inform you that since you recently departed with such magnificent élan, the peace of a tomb has prevailed in the kingdom. Me, I wish you would return. But I cannot, I regret, seriously advise such a course, because his majesty has issued orders that should his officers apprehend you attempting such a gaff, they shall hang you at once.

To me such a sad event would give a sorrow of the most formidable. Very well, my old, remain where you are, and try not to make that spot too hot for you also. We know that you never write letters, but we shall think of you, nevertheless.

Marie, Constance, and Hélène weep to hot tears for you. Célestin swears that she will cut your heart out should opportunity present itself.

With my most affectionate sentiments,
Raoul.

Wow! thought Nash. There remained the two unopened letters he had gotten from the desk. Both were in English; the first read:

Tamerlane Express Co.,
214 Canal Street, New York City,
October 30th.

M. le Chevalier de Nêche,
Alexandre Dumas Club,
New York City.

Dear Sir:

We regret to inform you that we do not at present have an opening for you in our organization as courier.

However, in view of your admirable qualifications, we shall keep your name on file and shall inform you whenever such a position becomes available.

Very truly yours,
Kit Fargo Simpson, Pres.

The other was more personal:

12 Rutherford Place,
New York City,
October 30th.

Dear Chevalier:

I've just heard that you are staying in New York City again.

I'm giving a small party Saturday night. Remembering how you were the life of my last one, I'd love it if you could manage to drop in this time. Any time after eight.

Cordially,
Alicia Dido Woodson.

Nash stared at the signature a long time. That *must* be the astral body of his reserved friend Alice Woodson! Was there some metaphysical affinity between the astral bodies of people who were friends on the mundane plane, that he should keep bumping into the astral equivalents of his acquaintances? Very likely.

Saturday night. Hm-m-m. That was last night, which Nash had spent frozenly rowing about Tukiphat's sphere of refraction. Probably he had gone out early Saturday and so had not received this

letter when it arrived, and had not been home since. The thought of the girl's disappointment brought a slight lump to Nash's throat. The least he could do would be to call at once and explain. Also, he admitted, he was itching with curiosity to see what sort of astral body Alice would have.

Not to mention the possibility that she might know someone who had a job open, or who could give him a line on how to secure the Shamir.

To avoid another refrigeration he put on the cloak he found hanging in the closet. In half an hour he had ridden up to 12 Rutherford Place.

This turned out to be a small walk-up apartment house. A. D. Woodson was announced over the letter box of Apartment 2-C.

No answer to the bell. Maybe this Woodson girl worked for a living, instead of serving as an abused nurse to a cantankerous mother. Apparently people did not have parents on the astral plane; they just flickered into existence when somebody on the mundane plane conceived the idea of them, and then they kept going until an accident took them off.

Or perhaps—not likely, but possible—the bell did not work. Nash did not think much of the standard of technics in this world. Which was only to be expected, if people insisted on conceiving cavaliers and cowboys instead of plumbers, carpenters and electricians. He pushed another bell at random, and when the buzzer sounded opened the front door.

The bell at the door of 2-C was silent; though Nash held his ear close to the paneling as he thumbed the button. Nor could he hear any motion from within.

The door, he noticed at last, was not completely closed. Perhaps he shouldn't push it open and take a look in and holler for Miss Woodson. But after all such conduct was only to be expected of the hell-raising Chevalier de Nêche.

"Alicia! *Hein!*"

That there was nobody in the apartment, he soon made sure. But somebody had been. Chairs were upset, the bed was pulled apart, and the large mirror over the dresser was broken. The room gave every evidence of having witnessed a battle as well as a robbery and ransacking.

VI.

"But, my dear old corn flake!" wailed Reginald Vance Kramer, "I tell you I don't want your damned kidnaping case! I'm filthy rich from my last one, and I want to work on my book!"

"Go on in!" roared Nash, pushing the tweedy astralite through Alicia Dido Woodson's doorway.

"There's the regular police—"

"I don't want to get mixed up with them! Anyway," he added in a more conciliatory tone, "don't they always have to call you in to solve the hard ones?"

"True," grumbled Kramer. "You've got sound instincts, I'm afraid. Let's see. Hm-m-m." The detective began nosing around the room like a cat who smells a mouse. "Notice the position of that overturned chair. It fits the psychological pattern of a sheik's retainer." More nosing, then: "I say, I hope you can pay for this. My minimum retainer is five hundred—"

"Not right away," said Nash. "When I get a job, and in installments."

"Oh now really, look here—"

"You just said you were filthy rich," argued Nash, "so you can afford to wait a bit for your fee. You wouldn't let a little delay like that stop you from cracking a swell case, would you?"

Kramer's curiosity gradually overcame his cupidity. "I'll do it, chevalier. But this time only, mind you. And don't tell anyone I've given you such easy terms." He silently scrutinized the room's tenant's hairbrush. At last he extracted one hair and held it up to the light.

"Blonde," he said. "Golden blonde, five-feet-six, weight nine stone seven, fond of sports."

Nash frowned. "The blondeness I can see, but how do you infer the other—"

"Sh! Perfectly obvious, but I'll have to tell you later, when the case had been solved. Oh, I say!" The last was a cry of delight as Kramer scooped up a small vase that lay on its side on the floor. He held up the object, turning it. "From the Bang Dynasty! This is priceless! And look here; what would you call the instrument this undeniably mammalian wench is playing?"

Nash peered at the picture on the vase. "Some kinda harp, I suppose."

"Ah, there you're wrong! That's a quarter-tone plunk-plunk. They weren't supposed to have been invented as early as the Bang Dynasty. That'll be good for a whole chapter in my book." Kramer got out his notebook and began scribbling.

"You can have the plunk-plunk; I'll take the gal," said Nash. "Hey, how about the kidnaping?"

"Oh, bother the kidnaping! No, don't be wroth, old man. I'll get back to it as soon as I finish these notes. Run along; you make me nervous fingering your sword that way. I'll send you a report."

Nash protested, but Kramer insisted that he could not do effective work with the chevalier looming over him. Nash was frantic with curiosity to see how a real super-sleuth operated, but for the sake of Alicia Dido Woodson he gave in.

On his way back to the Dumas Club he reflected that the astral plane surely had libraries and scientists—Farnsworth, the blue-clad would-be Interplanetary Patrolman, had implied as much. And weren't there plenty of young men on the mundane plane who imagined themselves as Newton, Dar-

win, and Einstein rolled into one? He'd stop at the club only long enough to ask for mail and to inquire where one of the prodigies might reside. This time he would tackle the Shamir problem in the systematic, common-sense fashion that his mundane self would have used in running down an error in a trial balance.

The club doorman said: "Ah, M'sieur le Chev—" then broke off, staring woodenly.

"What's—" Nash looked around the lobby. The other cavaliers were looking at him curiously too, not so much with hostility as with excited expectancy. His surprised gaze flitted from face to face until it lighted on that of the Comte de la Tour d'Ivoire. The last got up and came over to him, very serious.

"Mon ami," he began, "Athos de Lilly is here—"

"Who's that? And why are you all looking at me that way?"

"You don't know Athos de Lilly? My poor friend! Have your wits—"

"Perhaps the sight of me will refresh the gentleman's memory," said a tense, vibrant voice from the dining room doorway, in which stood a tall, pale, thin-faced cavalier. This person advanced catlike over the carpet. When he was quite close, he thrust his head forward and grated: "You, Jean-Prospère de Nêche, are no gentleman!"

Nash simply stared at him. "Well?"

Athos de Lilly jerked his head back as if Nash had made a pass at him. "Perhaps, m'sieur, you did not hear me. I said you were no gentleman."

"Sure, I heard you. So what?"

De Lilly's mouth fell open; he mastered himself and said thickly: "I did not think it would be necessary for me to call you a coward."

Nash was silent.

"Coward!" cried de Lilly, voice rising. "Do you hear me? You are a coward!"

"O. K., I'm a coward. I knew that already," replied Nash amiably. "But what's the idea? I don't know you, m'sieu—"

"You mock me!" screamed de Lilly. "This is for you, *fripon!*" The enraged cavalier pulled off one of his embroidered leather gloves and slapped Nash's face with it.

"Say, m'sieur," growled Nash, taking a step forward and cocking a fist.

Before he could let fly, de la Tour d'Ivoire caught his elbow. "Ah, my God, Jean-Prospère, not that! After all you are a gentleman—"

"He doesn't seem to think so, so I guess I can take a poke at him . . . say, is this guy trying to challenge me to a duel?"

"But of course, my old! After all you killed his best friend—"

"*I* did? The hell you say! I never . . . I mean, if I did I'm sorry—"

"Not here! Not here!" shouted the club manager, running up. "In back, and do not push cries to attract the police!"

Nash found himself caught up in a current of men and swept through doors toward the rear, with the Comte still glued to his elbow. The latter said: "It would do me a great honor to be chosen your second—"

"But . . . but—" expostulated Nash. Nobody paid any attention. The crowd whooped at the prospect of action. He was pushed and hauled out to the lawn behind the club. Athos de Lilly awaited him somberly with drawn sword, flexing his knees every few seconds to limber up.

"Look here, Comte," said Nash, "why have I got to fight this guy? I haven't anything against him—"

"Sh, my dear friend, you have made enough eccentricities for one day! No more, I pray you!"

Nash was about to add candidly that he was frightened, but decided that these stout-hearted and wooden-headed men of honor would misunderstand. They were all spread around the edges of the lawn now except for Nash, de Lilly, the Comte, a cavalier who was acting as de Lilly's second, and another cavalier serving as referee. The last was holding a sword out horizontally in front of him. Athos de Lilly extended his blade so that it crossed the referee's sword a few inches from its tip and lay horizontally upon it. They all waited for Nash to do the same.

Damn Bechard, damn Monty Stark, damn Prosper Nash for getting into such a fix! He tried to summon up the strength of character to tell the assembly that their code duello was archaic nonsense, and walk out on them. But he could not, quite, and presently his rapier crossed the referee's blade too, so that his and de Lilly's swords overlapped by about a foot.

"Allez!" barked the referee, dropping his blade and jumping back. Instantly Athos de Lilly came at him with a hop, skip, and lunge. Nash did not try to control his blade; the Chevalier de Nêche's reflexes took care of that: *tzing, tzing!* After an instant of parry, riposte, and remise—the blades were heavier and slower than Nash had expected—de Lilly jumped back.

There were voices behind Nash, but if he turned his head this man would stick him. The seconds stepped briskly forward and knocked up the duelists' swords with their own. "Quickly!" said a voice. *"Posez!"*

Men were shouldering out of the club, not in the crossed surcoats of Cardinal Richelieu's guards, but in the scarlet tunics of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Their revolvers were out.

"We were just witnessing a fencing exhibition—" said the referee with a feeble smile.

"Oh, yeah?" growled a policeman. "We seen what we seen. You're under arrest, you two, for

dueling. Come along. You too, Mr. Umpire."

The three prisoners were disarmed and loaded into a horse-drawn paddy-wagon.

Nash made a tentative effort to soften up his recent antagonist: "M'sieu, I'm sorry about your friend, but I've just had a lapse of memory, so you shouldn't hold me responsible—"

De Lilly glared scornfully and turned his head away, and the rest of the trip was made in morose silence.

When the desk sergeant asked Nash his name, he answered promptly: "Jean-Prospère de Nêche."

"Age?"

"Twenty-five."

"Mm, a man of your type doesn't usually last that long. Where were you created?"

"Created?"

"Yes, created."

"I don't know."

The sergeant was incredulous. Nash repeated his now wearing yarn about a lapse of memory, which did not seem to cut much ice either.

"Lock him up," said the sergeant. "Justinian Marshal O'Hara can examine him."

"When?" asked Nash.

"Judging by the length of his docket, in about six months."

"But—hey!"

"Will you come quietly," said a firm redcoat, "or must we . . . that's better!"

"Avast, Frenchy, what are you in for?" Nash's cell mate heaved himself up on the edge of his bed and grinned with snaggleteeth. He was a huge, fierce-mustached man in a striped shirt, with ape-long hairy arms.

"Dueling."

"Dooling, huh? Mighta known. You froggies think you're being he-men, standing up and poking at each other *this* way and *that* way." He made ladylike motions with his right fist. "Bucko, if you're going to get kilt, why not get kilt taking a treasure ship or something worth while?

"Oh, a life on the ocean wave,
A home on the briny—"

"SHUT UP!" A simultaneous yell arose from adjoining cells and nearby wardens, and cut off the hairy one's bellow.

"That's appreciation for you," grinned the pirate, stretching out on his bunk again. "My only regret is that I'll be hung before I had a chance at the obscenity Shamir."

"How would you go about that?" asked Nash eagerly.

"Oho, so lace panties thinks he'd like a crack at the loot too? Better leave that to jolly mariners like us, lad.

"Fifteen men on a dead man's chest, yo-ho—"

"SHUT UP!"

"I might," said Nash reservedly. "Got any ideas?"

"It would be a joke on the obscenity cops at that, wouldn't it? My ghost'd laugh to split its liver."

"If it has one."

"Haw, haw! Well, stand by, my bully; the first thing you need is a good magician. That's what we were after when they caught us. Obscenity the whole lot of 'em for using steam and repeating rifles against sail and muzzle-loaders; even so we'd have gotten out of the harbor safe if it hadn't been—"

"Yes, yes, but what about the magician?"

"Our own man, Aeolus Jackson, referred us to one of the local wizards here in New York, since Aeolus specializes in wind-control and didn't think he was up to cracking Tukiphat's crystal ball. So-o-o, we ran in at night, and looked up this wight, one Empedocles MacDonald; but *he* wouldn't help us—no, sir! Before he'd set up his obscenity island, Tuky had made the rounds of the Manhattan wizards and put the fear of God into them. He made 'em all go through some hocus-pocus that put them in his power, in case one of them should get grand ideas.

"But Tuky hadn't thought to give the same rope's end to the out-of-town magi, and Empedocles MacDonald gave us the names of a few of these. So we schooned back to our saucy ship and were just breaking out skys'ls when the harbor patrol put a light on us, and then the ball began.

"As I went down to the rolling sea,
I saw three witches watching me—"

"SHUT UP!"

Nash persisted: "Who were these out-of-town magicians?"

"Lord love you, lad, how should I know? We had 'em wrote down, but the paper got lost in the garboil. Let me think—it seemeth there was a Jerome Cardan Dahlberg of Poughkeepsie, and a Merlin Apollonius Stark of Staten Island, and an Aleister Klingsor van Buren of Yonkers—"

"Wait a minute! Did you say Merlin Apollonius Stark?"

"Aye; of Staten Island, too, though I cannot give you the exact addresses, which were on the obscenity paper. Why, do you know this Stark knave?"

"Yes . . . uh . . . in a kind of way." Ten to one Merlin Apollonius Stark was the astral body of Montague Allen Stark.

"Why, then your problem's solved! Set your helm for this magus and persuade, bribe, or threaten him into telling you how to overcome Tukiphat's barrier."

"How about the forces of law and order?"

"They won't stop you, having no love for Tuky

since he put up his island in their pond without a by-your-leave. Though if they board you after you've taken the bauble they may find some obscenity law to confiscate it. Of course," the pirate added, "I won't warrant what Tuky himself will do. Empedocles MacDonald seemed fearful afraid of him."

"Then why did they nab you?"

The pirate grinned ferociously. "That was for something else. Were we out on the main I'd tell you a tale of gore and perfidy as should make you blanch. But first I must see how I do with Justinian Marshal O'Hara tomorrow. Of all the judges in New York I had to come before him, and he's sworn to try, condemn, and hang me within the hour, so they say."

But the pirate's irrepressible garrulity kept his tongue going all afternoon and evening. He gave Nash plenty of tales of gore and perfidy, merely declining to name himself as a participant, introducing his yarns with: "I once heard a tale—" or "They tell me that when the bark *Antigonus* was becalmed off Montauk—"

When their supper plates were being removed, a warden sauntered by. "De Nêche!"

"Yes, m'sieur?"

"Thought you'd like to know. Judge O'Hara's going to give you your preliminary hearing first thing tomorrow. Seems you've got a friend among the higher-ups."

"Who?"

"A propagandist. Eleanor Thompson Berry. You Frenchies sure got what it takes with the femmes. Mm-mm." The guard rolled a wicked eye and departed.

That started the pirate off again; he asked Nash for amatory details, and when Nash evaded he went off into a full account of his own love life. Nash felt he had a good grounding in the science of comparative anatomy when the buccaneer announced that he intended to make his last night's sleep a good one and fell silent.

Nash awakened later, half-consciously uneasy. The prison was quiet except for the footfalls of guards, and there was a suggestion of pre-dawn grayness.

Then he became aware of a huge apish figure bending over him. Even as he tensed the muscles of his neck to raise his head, great horny hands clamped his throat; thumbs dug agonizingly in. Nash, still half asleep, kicked, swung, and clawed, but the fingers dug deeper and he could not reach to the other end of those terrible arms.

He tried to increase his efforts, but they were weaker. He seemed to be falling into a bottomless black roaring hole, and the throttling grip did not hurt any more—

VII.

When Prosper Nash's consciousness got its head above water, he was first surprised at being alive at all, and next curious as to what plane he was on.

When he pried sticky eyelids apart he saw that he was in the same old cell. And his neck was one vast ache.

"De Nêche?" said a voice over the hum in his ears.

"Here," answered another voice, not his. He tried to lift his head to see over the edge of his upper berth, but could not move his neck. He finally raised a hand and pushed his head a few inches to where he could see, just as a key clicked in the cell door lock.

A man was standing inside the door with his back to Nash, and in the light from the small barred window it was to be seen that he wore Nash's black velvet suit and floppy boots.

For one wild second Nash wondered if the other really were he, or if his psyche had changed bodies— But the hairy wrists that protruded from the sleeves were not his; they were those of the pirate. At that instant the door squeaked open and the pirate stepped out.

Nash tried to call out, but could not even whisper. Desperately he tumbled over the edge of the bunk; hit the floor painfully, and staggered to the door which had just closed.

He banged the bars. The keeper looked at him calmly, then away. He capered and pounded and forced a faint wheezy squeak out of his tortured larynx. He was aware by this time that he wore the pirate's clothes. The pirate gave him a brief uninterested glance, and Nash was startled to see that, in his garments, the pirate really looked quite a lot like him.

"Hey, George!" called the receding warden. "See what's wrong with Roaring Stede."

As the other guard's steps approached, Nash performed a frantic gesture of which he would not have thought himself capable: bit his wrist until blood oozed, and wrote with his finger on the floor: "I AM NECHE."

The other guard frowned at this, then at Nash, then vanished. Nash heard words, then the pirate's bellow: "Don't you think I know whether I'm me?"

"Better check up on it." Presently Nash found himself lined up beside the corsair.

The first guard shook his head. "They do look kind of alike, but that one"—pointing to Nash—"is Stede Morgan Retke. I'd know him anywhere."

Nash went through more antics, pointing to his swollen throat. He managed to whisper: "Water!"

The guards were annoyed by this time, and fetched water in a manner that boded no good for the man who was proved a liar. After a swallow

Nash could manage a faint croak: "Get Miss Berry!"

In ten minutes Eleanor Thompson Berry appeared. She immediately pointed out Stede Morgan Retke as the true de Nêche.

The pirate began to move off with a slight smug smile.

"Hat!" croaked Nash.

He had to repeat it. After another delay his wide-brimmed hat was brought. He clapped it on.

"Oh!" cried Eleanor Thompson Berry. *"He's* the one! I could have sworn . . . stop that man!"

Doors clanged and keepers pounced on the fleeing pirate, who, after knocking a couple cold for the hell of it, surrendered tamely. As he passed Nash on his way back to the cell, he grinned: "Next time, Frenchy, I'll twist your obscenity head clear off to make sure you're dead!"

"Such language in front of a lady visitor!" shouted an outraged guard. "Get along, scum, or we'll . . . we'll—"

"Hang me? I thought you were going to do that anyway!" Roaring Stede made a vulgar noise with his mouth and retired into his cell.

"I'm *so* sorry, Chevalier!" cried Miss Berry. "I don't know how I could have made such a stupid mistake!"

"It's nothing, ma'm'selle."

"I owe you a lot—they greeted me like a long-lost sister. Look, Chevalier, why don't you join us? We need every able-bodied man we can get to put down the Aryans."

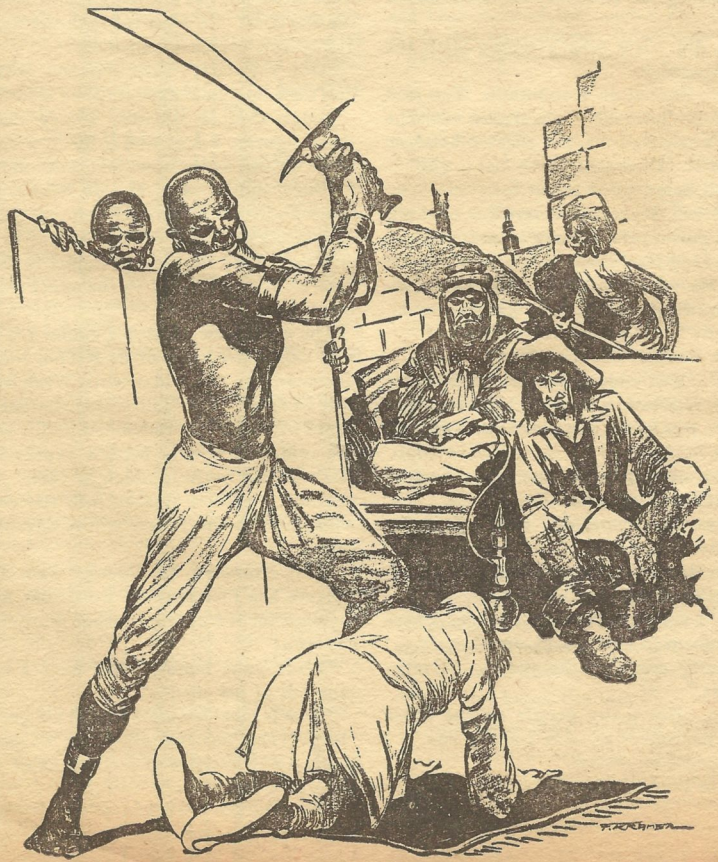
"Well—my draft board turned me down on account of—" Nash was about to say "my eyes" when he remembered what plane he inhabited.

"Yes?" said Eleanor Thompson Berry.

"Nothing, ma'm'selle. I was just thinking that I have an important job of my own to tend to first."

"But, Chevalier, nothing is more important than—"

"Excuse me, Miss Berry," interrupted a guard, "but he's got to change into his own clothes. If you don't mind—"



Judge O'Hara had a gray beard parted in the middle and brushed out sideways, and a pince-nez attached to his lapel by a black ribbon. These glasses were apparently carried for Justinian Marshal O'Hara to make gestures with, for he was never known to look through them.

As Nash and his escorts entered the courtroom, Judge O'Hara and a prisoner in exaggerated cowboy costume were eying one another with hostile determination. Nash recognized the lanky form of Arizona Bill Averoff.

The sergeant-at-arms whispered to one of Nash's guards: "The old man got impatient waiting for this guy, and took up this other hearing first."

The judge said: "I've gone over these figures three times, Averoff, and I can see nothing wrong with them. The duty is still twelve dollars and sixty-four cents. The Bar-Z can pay up, or I'll have to hold you for grand jury."

The cowboy replied: "If you think we're gonna pay live duty on dead critters, you . . . excuse me, your honor, but I have been over our figures *thirty* times."

"We're not asking for live duty on dead steers. I told you—"

"I know you did. But what's wrong with the way our man figured it?"

"I don't know; I'm not an accountant. You said yourself you couldn't see what was wrong with the Port Authority's calculations, and that's official, so I have to accept it. Now will you—"

"I'll go to jail foist, your honor."

"Very well, then. I'm sorry, Averoff . . . what's that? What do *you* want? You're in contempt—"

"Please," wheezed Nash, who had been snapping the fingers of his upraised hand. "If it's an accounting matter, maybe I can help you."

"Who are you?"

"Chevalier de Nêche."

"The duelist? You expect me to believe that a man of your reputation can do bookkeeping? And where were you when your case came up half an hour ago?"

"There was an attempted escape, your honor," explained one of Nash's guards.

"Oh, you tried to escape, did you? Just for that—"

"No, no, your honor," expostulated the guard, and gave a brief account.

Nash added: "I really can account, judge. There aren't many who can in this world, are there?"

"Of course not," snapped the judge. "Everybody knows that."

"I thought so. Not many people on the other plane imagine themselves as—but I really can."

"Not many people on—*what?*"

"Nothing, your honor; slip of the tongue. Give me a try."

Grumbling, the judge did. Nash took a look at the huge sheets of confused scribbles that passed for tariff calculations. *"Whew!* May I have some clean paper?"

"The thing is," said Judge O'Hara, "that the Bar-Z Ranch of Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania, loaded twenty-nine steers on the lighter at Communipaw, and three of them died on the way over to New York. Now, Averoff, who is the New York agent for Bar-Z, wants to—"

"I'm jest claiming the credit we're allowed on account of them steers was for the army," interrupted Arizona Bill.

"But you're claiming it on the dead steers—"

"I am *not*, your honor—"

"Yes, you are!"

"Don't you call me no liar!"

"Don't you shout at me!"

"I ain't shouting!"

"YOU'RE IN CONTEMPT!"

"O. K., AND YOU'RE A RING-TAILED—"

"Just a minute," croaked Nash. "You're both wrong. Look here. The Port Authority was trying to collect duty on the dead steers as if they were alive, but not allowing credit on them. While the Bar-Z—" He went through the figures quickly. Judge and prisoner subsided.

"Dog my cats!" said Arizona Bill finally. "I don't see how he makes it all so clear."

Judge O'Hara added: "Every time I look at those figures, I feel like a fly in a spider web. I trust we can agree now, Mr. Averoff?"

"Sure, judge. Say, Mr. de Nêche, ain't you the one who pitched in to help my pal Jim Cameron a coupla nights ago? When he got in a fight with Arries? This here catawampus is O. K., judge." Averoff paid his tariff to the court clerk and sauntered out.

The clerk now handed a folder up to the judge, who called the name of de Nêche, and perused the documents in the folder while Nash was taking his seat in front. The judge then listened to the evidence of one of the redcoated police who had made the raid, but with a benign expression that told Nash he had nothing much to fear. As the officer finished, a soldier tiptoed into the courtroom and whispered to the judge, whose expression became foxy.

"Jean-Prospère de Nêche," said O'Hara, "the Private has just sent me word that he needs your services for the defense of our municipality. How say you?"

"Well, your honor, I did have a pretty important job of my own—"

"This is more important, and we need every man. Here I am, hearing all kinds of cases fourteen hours a day because of a shortage of jurists. You shouldn't complain."

"But I'm not a citizen—"

The judge waved an impatient hand. "That's taken care of automatically by your oath of alle-

giance. And you are not a citizen of your former country, either, its king having revoked your citizenship. Now, will you agree to take service under the Private, or shall I order you interned as a stateless alien?"

Nash shrugged and agreed; if they interned him he could not hunt the Shamir any better than if he were a soldier.

The Private was a lean, dark man in a very plain uniform. Nash observed that the musical-comedy colonel who ushered him into the office saluted the sardonic figure behind the desk, and followed the example.

"General de Nêche," said the Private, "I am given to understand that you have had civilian experience as a courier, and are at present seeking employment in that line of work. Is that correct?"

"Yes. Uh . . . yes, sir. Excuse me, but are you the commander in chief?"

"Naturally, since I'm the only Private in the municipal forces."

"Excuse me again, but just how do the ranks run?"

"Why, generals, being the most numerous, are the lowest. Next come the lieutenant generals and major generals, who are noncommissioned officers. The lowest commissioned rank is that of brigadier general—what are you laughing at?"

"Nothing, sir—I get it now."

"Ump. As I was saying, we are desperately in need of couriers, so many having been killed lately. On the other hand, I learn that you have accounting ability. We have no competent accountants whatever, the last good one in New York having gone south to work for the Oligarchy of Charleston, and our payrolls are in a mess."

"I don't think I'd make a good courier, sir," said Nash. "I had a lapse of memory, and I don't know the city any more—"

While he was still finishing his explanation, a soldier rushed in and held a muttered consultation with the Private. Nash caught fragments: "The Lenins . . . some time this . . . surround them quickly . . . Sergeant Berl's brigade—"

When the messenger had left, the Private said: "This is most serious. I was going to assign you to accounting, but a matter has come up that calls for the carrying of a message immediately." He began to write, talking at the same time: "You will take this to Sergeant Berl at once. His brigade headquarters is at Harvard Street and Uranus Avenue—"

"But—Private!" exclaimed Nash. "I told you I don't know my way around New York any more—I'll get lost sure!" He suspected Eleanor Berry of having had a hand in this.

"We'll take a chance on that. Don't wait to change into a uniform. There'll be a horse outside for you. Silence! That's an order!"

Nash unhappily left the commander with the message tucked into one of his gauntlets. On the City Hall steps he almost bumped into a tweedy person with a monocle.

"I say, Chevalier!" cried Reginald Vance Kramer. "I've been looking all over for you! Here's my report."

Nash distractedly took the paper and shoved it into his other gauntlet. "I'll read it later," he said, starting for the horse that was being held for him.

"Better look it over now, old thing," said the detective.

Nash hesitated, then ripped the envelope open. One glance was enough to make him pore through the whole thing:

I have ascertained that Miss Alicia Dido Woodson was abducted between 3:15 and 3:20 a. m., the morning of Sunday, November 2nd, by a band of three soulless retainers supporting the sultan Arslan Bey.

Miss Woodson is at present—11:35 p. m., Monday, November 3rd—in the harem of the said Arslan Bey, in his palace at 124 Liberty Street, New York. As far as could be learned, Miss Woodson was and is a most unwilling guest of the sultan. She expressed particular consternation and aversion on being informed that she had been assigned the number 307, and expressed the desire that some stalwart friend would rescue her.

Further reports will follow in due course.

Reginald Vance Kramer.

Nash asked: "What's the significance of that number 307?"

"My word, don't you know? Arslan has accommodations for three hundred sixty-five wives, and he tries to keep his harem at just that number, replacing losses by escape, murder, and other hazards of the harem business as they occur. Miss Woodson is now wife number 307, and today is November 3rd. Figure it out for yourself."

"You mean that today—"

"Exactly, old bottle top."

"But can't you do something? Rescue her?"

Kramer laughed shortly. "Not me. Didn't I tell you that wasn't my line? I get you the information; what you do with it is your own concern."

Just as Nash was sure he was going to explode with anxiety and frustration, a pseudo-Western drawl asked: "What's the matter, partner? Look as if rustlers had lifted your prize stock." It was Arizona Bill Averoff, teetering forward on his Western heels and rolling a cigarette.

Nash explained his troubles. Averoff lighted up and said: "Reckon I can deliver the message to that there sergeant, while you go rescue your gal."

"Do you know the way?"

"Sure, fella, like the palm of your hand."

"That's more than I do. But—" Nash hesitated. True, the cowboy probably would have a better chance of finding Sergeant Berl; true, he had been more or less forced into the army of a government with which he sympathized but to which he owed

only the most doubtful allegiance. Still, there were his oath and his orders.

Averoff explained: "I owe you a good toin anyway."

"He's right, old man," put in Kramer.

Nash gave in, and Averoff departed at a gallop, whooping.

"Hey!" cried Nash to Kramer. "Don't go yet! Got any ideas how I could get Alicia out?"

"Hm-m-m—have you any friends?"

"There are the cavaliers of the Dumas Club—"

"Ha—hadn't you heard? O'Hara ordered the club padlocked for ten days because of the duel. So your long-haired pals will be scattered all over town looking up temporary accommodations."

"How about the municipal police? If they can arrest folks for dueling, I should think an abduction—"

"Arslan's an independent sovereign, old thing, so it would be an extradition job. And the city's hoping to wangle a loan from him, so—" Kramer ended with a shrug.

"What then?"

"I don't know—try it single-handed, I suppose. Use some pretext to get in, as that City Hall sent you to negotiate that loan. Risky, of course, but what are you chaps good for if not taking risks? And now I'm off, unless you want more reports; must get back to my book. I'm starting on the ancestry of the zither. Cheerio!"

VIII.

Nash stopped for brunch on his way to the sultan's without much gastronomic success. His throat was still too sore for him to enjoy solid food, and between the nippings of his conscience in the matter of the message, and uneasiness over his coming battle of wits with Arslan, he did not have much appetite. Common sense told him that he would need physical fortification, wherefore he doggedly forced a pint of milk into his queasy stomach.

The sultan's demesne was impossible to miss: it occupied a whole block around which ran a moat and a formidable wall. Flags bearing a black crescent on a yellow field flapped at the corners. Over the wall could be seen the top of a great cluster of pastel-shaded domes and spikes, like a colossal piece of costume jewelry.

The drawbridge was down and guarded by a couple of Moorish-looking individuals like the sextet Nash had fought on his first day on the astral plane.

The act had better be good, thought Nash. To be convincing he should combine the arrogance of a cavalier with the leisurely assurance of a high-ranking bureaucrat. When he got to know Arslan he could gradually drop this uncongenial role and be his amiable self.

With a final twirl to the spikes of his mustache he clattered over the drawbridge and dismounted just as the guards began to lower their pikes. He tossed the reins to one, not even bothering to see whether they were caught, and told the other in a coldly impersonal tone: "Inform the sultan that de Nêche of the Comptroller's Office is here, please."

It worked. In five minutes he was being conducted into an oriental fairy tale of a palace whose contours stirred memories; something from boyhood or early adolescence, but he could not quite locate the source—

"You wish to see the wazir, *effendi?*" said a gold-spangled flunky. "If you will graciously condescend to wait—"

"Not the wazir, the sultan," Nash corrected.

"But the wazir handles all financial transactions—"

"The sultan, Arslan Bey," repeated Nash firmly.

"His magnificence is at lunch," said gold-leaf. "If you will accompany me, I will inform him of your desire." The person led Nash to a gorgeous but chairless anteroom and left him standing there.

Nash walked slowly about the room, hands behind his back, plotting. A guard in the doorway stared woodenly at an invisible point straight in front of his eyes.

Nash's feet began to complain; he must have been pacing for an hour. These birds probably sat cross-legged on pillows, and it would be doubtful etiquette to demand a chair—

There was the sound of motion, and the guard moved aside. Instead of the sultan there entered a bejeweled eunuch and a pair of half-naked fellows carrying an open chest slung from a pair of poles. The chest was full of gems that flashed until they swam before the eyes.

The fat eunuch bowed to Nash and squeaked: "Ah, M. de Nêche, but a short while and his magnificence will grant you audience, as a most gracious condescension on his part. These"—he waved a deprecating hand at the chest—"are a few of our lord's jewels, which have become soiled through wear. He has ordered them thrown away, wherefore I am on my way outside to scatter them where the poor can find them. Allah be with you, *effendi.*" And out went the procession.

When Nash recovered from his astonishment, it occurred to him that this was nothing but a transparent gag to impress him. What if he had cried: "Hey, how about giving me some—" But no, that would have spoiled the impression that he in his turn was trying to build up.

This business of making him stand and wait by the hour was probably cut from the same cloth. Well, the answer was: "I wish a chair, you!"

The guard withdrew in his turn. Instead of a chair he brought back the spangled usher. This glittering being said: "Will you accompany me to

the audience chamber, sir? His magnificence will join you as soon as he finishes his siesta."

At one side of the chamber was a raised section of flooring on which stood a large sofa. On the rest of the floor several hassocks were scattered. The idea, thought Nash, was that even though the ruler sprawled in oriental indolence on the sofa, he would still be higher than his interviewers. In the West you stood up, or used to, in a ruler's presence; in the East you sat or groveled. Two methods of putting a feeling of inferiority into hoi polloi; the Eastern, being aimed at the psyche rather than at the feet, was subtler.

Nash became uncomfortably aware of the fixed regard of this room's guard.

As he returned the stare with a puzzled frown, the guard strode toward him and burst out: "I know you, dog of a Frank! You are the panty-waist who slew two of us on the water front yesterday!" The guard's arm flashed up and back, and hurled his pike straight at Nash's throat.

Nash had just enough warning to twist sideways and down. The pike whizzed over his shoulder, struck the onyx wall behind him, and clattered to the floor. The guard's scimitar had just cleared its scabbard when Nash's rapier ran him through the body.

Nash held his breath, listening. Gosh, wasn't there any way to get along on this plane without killing people, which he loathed? What would he do with the body? Yes, there were footsteps, growing louder—

His horrified glance returned to the corpse—or at least to its recent site. The body itself had disappeared, leaving a pile of white garments and a steel helmet with fine chain mail attached to its brim. The footsteps came closer.

Nash wiped and sheathed his blade, scooped up the late guard's costume, and stuffed it down behind the royal settee. He tiptoed over to the pike and leaned it in a corner, and was strolling about with an innocent expression when his magnificence, Sultan Arslan Bey, arrived amidst a herd of eunuchs.

The sultan answered Nash's cavalier bow with a minute nod. When Nash straightened up and got a good look at the tyrant, he almost fell over.

Despite his more powerful build—that was to be expected—and the little black beard, shaped like the head of a battle-ax with its edge down, there was no doubt that Arslan Bey was the astral body of Nash's mundane friend Robert S. Lanby, ascetically inclined Y. M. C. A. clerk.

As the full implications struck him, Nash forgot about his latest homicide in the necessity of keeping a straight face. Pious, mousy little Bob Lanby really imagining himself a rip-snorting, infidel, polygamous despot! And the nervously withdrawn Alice Woodson, with her fear of the hairy and snorting male, planning to marry R. S. Lanby.

The sultan settled himself on the sofa; a dark boy took up a lace beside the sofa and waved a long-handled fan, though the room was, if anything, cool.

"We greet you, M. de Nêche," growled Arslan. "Do we infer correctly that you come to see about . . . ha!" The sultan eyed Nash's rapier, then switched to the gold-speckled usher, who turned from mahogany to walnut.

"This," said the sultan heavily, "is the second time yon Nasr has admitted a guest without doing him the courtesy of relieving him of his weapon."

"I . . . I forgot, your magnificence—"

"Off with his head!" thundered the sultan. The eunuchs opened out, and a pair of huge bare-chested blacks pounced on the usher. One spread a small dark-red rug and forced the victim to kneel on it; the other hefted a two-handed curved sword.

"Wait!" said the sultan. "We do not wish to offend the sensibilities of our guest. The screen!"

A screen was brought and set up between Nash and the sultan on one hand and the cast of the execution on the other.

"Now," said Arslan cheerfully, "we can proceed with more agreeable matters—if you will hand your sword to Salah here, who replaces Nasr as usher. Be seated, m'sieur. Fetch coffee, knaves!"

Nash avoided a shudder as the executioner's blade swung high over the edge of the screen, then down with a *chug*. When the screen was removed the body of Nasr was already gone, leaving his glittering robe behind.

"Is that the usual penalty for that sort of thing?" asked Nash.

"Of course. Why?"

"It seems a little drastic, your magnificence, that's all."

Arslan snorted. "He was but a soulless one, so what is the difference? He was created when we were, and forthwith acknowledged himself our slave."

Nash said thoughtfully: "I once read a book by Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac, in which one of his characters argued that it was a much worse crime to kill a cabbage than to kill a man."

"How so?"

"Well, the character argued, if a man has an immortal soul, when you kill him you don't put an end to him, you just change his form. On the other hand, when you kill a cabbage, which has no soul, you end its poor little life for good."

"A silly theory," snorted Arslan. "If we ever catch your man Bergerac, we will give him to Kulu to play with."

"He was just being satirical," said Nash hastily, for the sultan had a dangerous look in his eye.

"That does not excuse it. Some of our soulless

ones might take it seriously, and then where would we be? Are you much of a reader?"

"Not as much as I'd like to be," said Nash. "I read de Bergerac when I was in college."

"It is the same with us," said the sultan gravely. "We pride ourselves that our little state here is the perfect democracy, but it does take all our free time."

"Excuse me, *what* did you call your state?"

"The perfect democracy. Any one of our subjects, even the humblest, can have audience with us at any time. Of how many of the governors and presidents of your so-called republics can that he said? Eh?"

"Well—"

"Of course," Arslan added, "we do have to cut the heads off a few of the more importunate petitioners now and then, or we should have no peace at all. But the principle remains the same, does it not?"

"Well—"

"Of course it does. Ah, the coffee!"

This was a syrupy-sweet liquid served in one-jigger cups. Nash inferred that he was expected to sip slowly and talk persiflage for half an hour before getting down to business. That was all right with him, since his object was to stall along until he had a chance to carry out his mission. With luck he might be able to wangle an invitation to stay overnight. If he could somehow get the dead guard's clothes on Alicia—

The sultan shooed most of his attendants out, and said: "Very well, M. de Nêche, let us talk business . . . yes?"

This was directed at a long-whiskered man robed in splendor exceeded only by that of the sultan. Arslan said brusquely: "M. de Nêche, our wazir. Wazir, M. de Nêche. What is it, Kerbogha?"

"Your splendor," said the wazir, "I tremble to report that the royal counterfeiting machine has broken down, and the royal mechanic avers that he is unable to repair it."

"Give him twelve hours; after that—*kh!*" Arslan drew a finger across his throat. "And now—let me see; with these interruptions we have lost the thread of our discourse. Fetch more coffee!"

The whole procedure was begun again. When the conversation once more settled on business, Nash heard another person approach through the door behind him. Thinking it undignified to squirm around on the hassock with every interruption, Nash kept his eyes front until the rattle of a light chain was followed by something sniffing at his back, and not through human nostrils.

The sniff, he quickly learned, came from an immense tawny feline with a short tail like a lynx and a pair of six-inch saber-shaped upper canines that extended down on each side of its lower jaw.

"Don't flinch, for God's sake," Nash told himself, and, like the Roman, Fabricius, when Pyrrhus suddenly confronted him with an elephant, he managed to regard the monster with an expression of mild interest accompanied by a suggestion of a sneer.

"What ails our little Smiley?" growled Arslan.

The man who was leading the saber-tooth on a chain explained: "He has not been taking his blood as is his wont. Today he has drunk but two quarts of his proper six."

"Write a stiff note to the slaughterhouse," commanded Arslan. "But methinks the real trouble is that he needs another kill. That fellow whom we caught trying to sneak into the harem faded out ere he was half eaten. We should have saved that rascal Nasr for Smiley. If we could only catch the villain who slew a brace of our guards—" (Wish he wouldn't look at me like that, thought Nash.) "However, mayhap the royal mechanic will serve the purpose. Here, what is this?"

The saber-tooth dragged its keeper forward to the royal sofa, and began sniffing loudly around the edges thereof. The sultan pulled himself back among the cushions in frank alarm. "By Allah," said he, "one would think that our royal couch harbored the evidence of recent bloodletting!"

"Maybe Nasr's execution—" suggested Nash.

"That could be, m'sieur. Take him away. And now . . . but ere we discuss business we must have some coffee!"

Nash remembered now the scene of which Sultan Arslan's stronghold was a paraphrase: the Caliph's palace in the old silent movie, "The Thief of Bagdad," starring Douglas Fairbanks, which, from what he remembered of it, Nash preferred to its showier but less coherent remake with sound and color. In the original "Thief" the Caliph's gardens had been guarded by a tiger and an ape; Bob Lanby had merely gone United Artists one better.

"—so you see," explained Nash, "the city will issue you this block of stock—"

"But," complained Arslan, "we do not want stock! Nothing less than a first mortgage on the City Hall will satisfy us!"

"Well, gosh, your magnificence, the stock will be convertible into debentures—"

"Debentures, hm-m-m? That might be managed—if the city would give me three members of the Board of Estimate as security."

"Would you settle for a couple of Tammany councilmen?"

Arslan laughed deeply. "You are a financial spider, M. de Nêche. For an hour you have been spinning the most subtle snares for us. What would you say if we offered you Kerbogha's post as wazir? We could use a man of your talents."

"I'd have to think it over."

The haggling went on. Whenever the sultan showed signs of giving in, Nash was careful to

bring in some new political or financial condition, thus keeping agreement dangling just out of Arslan's reach.

"To Jahannum with your quibbling!" roared Arslan Bey at last. "Hither, Peroz! Prepare to draft an agreement between us as sultan and M. de Nêche as representative of the City of New York! We accept his proposals as they stand. Quickly, now, ere he thinks up another clause!"

Nash gasped a little; he felt like a trout fisherman who has hooked a whale. He had won an agreement that ought to square him with City Hall in case they were looking for him as a deserter. But he had lost his main excuse for hanging around the palace.

Peroz the scribe finished transcribing the agreement, handed Nash one copy, and proceeded to read the other aloud so that Nash could check their identity. Any discrepancies Nash would have overlooked, as he was really thinking up the next act of his performance as ye compleat sponge.

Sultan Arslan thrust out a large paw. "Congratulations, M. de Nêche, and bear in mind our offer! We have a curious feeling that we have known you for a long time. We will see you out—"

"Your splendor," said Nash on a sudden inspiration, "isn't it true that you're a keen chess player?"

"Why, yes, that is so. Though I find few who can give me a stiff game. Why, would you care to try me?"

"Yes, if you'd like."

Arslan settled back on his cushions and bellowed for a chessboard, and more coffee. He took white as a matter of course, opened with queen's pawn, and followed through with a headlong attack that pinned Nash behind his pawns. Bob Lanby's method was to stick to his pet Petroff's defense and to aim at staving off inevitable defeat as long as possible. Hence the sultan's assault took Prosper by surprise—though, he realized, it should not have. Nash put up a good defense, and deliberately dawdled over each move. The lamps had been lit when he was finally checkmated.

Arslan sighed gustily. "We suppose you have a dinner-engagement, monsieur?"

"No, sir."

"Good." The sultan clapped his hands and roared his order. The meal consisted of a gigantic lamb stew eaten with the fingers.

Arslan belched and commented: "That was a good game, de Nêche. More and more we see that you are just the man for our service. It is hard to find a player who is neither so weak as to bore us nor so strong as to humiliate us. You no doubt heard what befell Thomas Alekhin Saito, who was so tactless as to mate us in seven moves? *Ts, ts,* a sorry thing. But he brought it on himself by insulting us to boot."

"What did he do?" asked Nash, wondering how to learn the location of and access to the harem.

"Asked after the health of our womenfolk," said Arslan, licking his fingers. "We expect our guests to refrain even from thinking about such things, let alone coming right out and mentioning them. We hope you like our yoghurt."

This was a junketlike pudding. Nash did not like it at all, but choked it down with a glassy smile. Afterward he pulled on the spare mouthpiece of the sultan's nargileh. He learned that this contraption had to be smoked with deep diaphragmatic gasps; the first one drew smoke into sections of his lungs theretofore unsullied, and sent him into a coughing spasm. The sultan laughed and pounded him on the back, and took a draft from the nargileh that made the apparatus quiver with the violence of its bubbling.

"More chess? Good!" This time Nash knew better what to expect; but Arslan likewise adapted his attack to Nash's defense. The game lasted till nine, with much the same result as before.

Sultan Aslan Bey yawned, rose, and kicked aside the taboret on which the board rested, knocking half the pieces to the floor. "That," he said, "is that. We will assign a couple of stout fellows to ride home with you."

Nash was panicky; if he was kicked out now he would have no chance to rescue Alicia, and besides another of the guards might recognize him as Eleanor Berry's protector.

"Your magnificence, I don't need—"

"Nonsense; we insist. Some thief of a *giaur* might steal your copy of our agreement else."

"To tell the truth," explained Nash, "I haven't any home right now." And he told of Judge O'Hara's closing of the Dumas Club.

Arslan's heart, if he had one, was not melted by this pathetic tale. He merely gruffed: "Pick your own hostelry, then," and whistled for his new usher.

Nash swore mentally, and contemplated harebrained schemes for killing Arslan the minute his rapier was handed to him. For the sultan was quite evidently determined to send him packing before retiring to the quarters of wife No. 307; and Arslan's palace was so overrun with servitors and retainers that Nash despaired of ever getting an unsupervised minute. Right now the room contained two guards and two slaves, all alert and ready to pounce if he made a false move.

After the usher came a boy with Nash's hat, cloak, and sword. The youth stopped at such a distance from the sultan that Nash had to move well away from the despot to take his things; the guards quietly closed in to flank their lord. It was all done very smoothly, and Nash reflected that his host was a pretty shrewd rascal as well as a hearty one.

In a minute, now, he'd be out in the cold. The loan agreement in his money belt would be all very

nice, but it was no recompense for—

Wham! The slam of a rifle swept into the audience room; then another, and another, and swift crackle of reports.

"Allah!" shouted Arslan. "What is this?"

As if in answer, a guard hurled himself into the chamber. "Master! We are being attacked by Romans and Arvans!"

IX.

Arslan Bey's immediate reaction was to curse himself purple in English, French, Osmanli, and Persian. "Perfidious infidel swine!" he screamed. "We keep strict neutrality; we even lend the dogs money—but hold, this is not forwarding our defense. Come with me, de Nêche!"

For the next half-hour Nash clumped about the palace in the wake of the bellowing sultan. The sound of gunfire beat in on them, now strong, now faint. Once Nash heard women's voices and knew they were passing an entrance to the harem. But, fearing that in his present fury the sultan would as lief take off his guest's head as not, Nash kept his eyes averted.

At length they came out on the top of a tower, cluttered with a bronze armillary sphere, an astrolabe, an equatorial, and a six-foot telescope. The domes and spikes of the palace rose around them, and skirting these was the wall, now fully manned and spitting bullets through the embrasures. Answering shots came from neighboring houses and vacant lots. The wall hid those of the enemy who were close to it, but in the streets that stretched away into the darkness Nash caught glimpses of moving soldiery.

On another tower an oil-burning searchlight sputtered into flame. Its crew swept the beam across the neighboring houses, and halted as it caught a group of figures on a roof. There were a couple of furry Aryans in horned casques, and several men in kilts and legionary cuirasses and helmets, incongruously hefting rifles; a man in an ornate gilded breastplate; a man in a spiked helmet, dark-blue frock coat, Hessian boots, and an enormous cavalry saber. Nash could just make out his great handlebar mustache. Arslan, eye to the telescope, muttered: "Gaio Germanico Ricci, and Roon Bismarck von Schmidt! They must mean business." He raised his voice to a shout: "Over there! Pick them off!"

The group scattered and disappeared. The searchlight moved no more, either its crew or its mechanism having been put out of action. A bullet clanged against one of the astronomical instruments and screeched away; Nash ducked, and Arslan laughed.

"You're as bad as the Romans!" he said. "Who would have thought they would have dragged themselves away from their baths long enough to help their so-called allies? There has been bad feeling since—OUCH!"

The sultan jumped, staggered, and cursed. When Nash offered to see what was wrong, Arslan waved him away. "A mere bullet burn. We'll burn those blasphemous *bischos!*" He shook a fist. "It is all the fault of those cowardly west-side assembly districts, thinking they could avoid the war by milk-toast declarations of neutrality. Any fool could see . . . yes, Kerbogha? How goes it?"

"By your leave, not well, my lord," said the wazir, who had just dragged himself up the spiral staircase. "We have lost four guardsmen, and the enemy are piling fardels into the moat at three points."

"Well, shoot them down, fool!"

"We do, master, but they keep coming. I doubt we can hold the wall till morn."

Arslan pulled his little beard agitatedly. "We could escape by way of Minetta Brook," he growled, "but without our treasure we should be but the leader of a band of poor freebooters. And we could not fight a rear guard action encumbered by our harem and chattels—"

"Hey," said Nash, "is Minetta Brook that underground river that wanders around lower Manhattan?"

"Yes. Do not pester us with questions at a time—"

"Well, suppose I try to convoy your stuff on ahead?"

"The very thing! We do not know why we trust you, monsieur; it must be that curious feeling we have of having known you elsewhere—But come, there is no time to be lost!"

Down they went, down dank stone steps to the landing stage. The astral Minetta Brook was bigger than its mundane counterpart; almost a real river, sliding out of darkness into torchlight and back into darkness under a rough rock roof. Slaves were hauling up to the dock three of six boats tied to its downstream end: low beamy decked barges built for canal-crawling rather than for fast or open-water sailing. Each had oars and poles piled on its deck.

Slaves carried a score of chests onto one barge and stowed them below, until it seemed to Nash's apprehensive eyes that water was being kept from flowing over the gunwhales by surface tension only. Then came three hundred and sixty-five dark figures bundled up to the eyes in enough shawls and veils to stock a dry goods store: the harem. The two remaining boats did not look as if they could possibly hold such a crowd, but aboard they went, and one by one squeezed into the little deckhouses and proceeded below.

Nash protested: "The poor things'll be terribly crowded, sultan. Couldn't you let 'em stay on deck?"

"And have some pirate or Aryan craft sight them? Or have them get some silly female notion of escaping? Ha!"

"Hey!" cried Nash, as Smiley the saber-tooth padded down the steps towing his keeper, and after him a huge red-pelted ape, like a gorilla but taller and straighter. "Are they going, too?"

"Certainly. Three guards are all we can spare you; the rest must remain to hold the walls till we make our bolt."

"I'd just as lief not have any guards. Those two animals ought to scare off—"

"Do not be a fool, de Nêche! You would not get a mile with that cargo unguarded. Head straight across the river to the Jersey shore, where we will join you."

"What if—" But Arslan was already bounding up the steps followed by a swirl of soldiery. Nash was left with his barges, menagerie, three guards, and eight miscellaneous slaves.

He shrugged and stepped aboard the first barge and cast off. The three boats, tied nose to tail like circus elephants, picked up way as the current took hold of them. Nash secured a barge pole from the deck and stood in the bow of the lead boat.

"Keep 'em straight!" he called back over his shoulder.

The landing stage and the stone stair shrank away aft, and then there was nothing but black water and rough tunnel, feebly lit by the one torch on each boat, and sometimes so low that they had to flatten themselves to the decks.

They ran into trouble on the first real bend: Nash did not push off from the jagged sides soon enough. His barge came to a scraping halt against the rock, and the other crowded up behind it, bumping its stern. The train folded up and got wedged in the turn.

"Damn it!" yelled Nash. "Push off there, you!" The slave began pushing on the wrong wall. "The other!" screamed Nash, and at length made the slave understand. The latter then got down and began bumping his forehead on the deck boards.

"Pardon, *effendi!* I did not understand—"

"Get up! Get up! Get to work!"

The ape grunted and the saber-tooth whined with alarm; a female chirping from the holds of the middle and after boats made itself heard under the echoing shouts of the men. With more shouting and shoving they got the boats around.

Nash faced aft. "Look here, you guys! The next one we come to, I want a pair of men on the stern of each barge to plant their poles against the sides of the tunnel, to ease the boat around—"

By repeating everything three times he apparently made the soulless ones understand. His scheme worked fairly well on the next turn, though one of the guards nearly ruined it by urging his barge forward instead of holding back with his pole. They got around the third quirk with no trouble. After that Nash could relax, for the tunnel was wider and the current slower thenceforth.

Forming slowly in his mind was a plan to take his convoy, not straight across the North River, but south to Staten Island. Then those of Arslan's wives who did not like the harem could go. Alicia Dido Woodson, veiled and squeezed into the hold of one of the following boats, would grab the opportunity. At least he hoped she would; you never could be sure what strange traits an astral body would turn out to have.

Then Nash could look up Merlin Apollonius Stark. Then the Shamir and home!

What about Arslan's gang? They would hardly be so stupid as not to know New Jersey from Staten Island, soulless though they might be. If they got wind—

In a way he disliked double-crossing the sultan, who had trusted him. But, he told himself, Arslan had undoubtedly accumulated his treasure and harem by force and fraud, and did not deserve much consideration.

That still left the guards and slaves. He did not worry much about the latter, who were unarmed. For the former—he really ought to kill them. Their swords were sheathed; if he drew and rushed them suddenly in the semidarkness—

But no, he just could not do it. The mere idea of deliberate assassination almost made him ill. If one of them attacked him, he could give a stout and reasonably brave account of himself. The chevalier could no doubt murder all three without a second thought, but he was not the chevalier except in body. No, he wouldn't feel inferior; he was as good a man in his way as Jean-Prospère was in his.

But damn the inhibitions inculcated by a peaceful, law-abiding accountant's life! Too bad the draft hadn't taken him after all; he could have used a soldierly indifference to homicide now.

The lapping of water grew louder, and the roof of the tunnel slid back. Nash looked up for stars, but instead got a sprinkle of water in the face. A speckle of damp spots appeared on the deck, growing rapidly denser.

"Effendi!" called one of the guards. "It rains!"

"I know it." Smiley moaned dismally on the second barge, and on the third Kulu the ape wrapped his forearms over his head to shed the water.

"But what shall we do?" persisted the guard.

"Take the oars and put them in the oarlocks. One man to each oar—"

"Do you mean we shall stay out in the *wet?*"

"Of course. You won't dissolve."

"Without stars, how shall we find our way?"

"Leave that to me," ordered Nash. There was nothing like having a few tough-looking armed

men asking for instructions to put confidence in one!

Each barge had four rowlocks. The oars were great sweeps designed to be worked standing up. Since there were just as many men as oarlocks, Nash perforce took an oar instead of standing in the bow, inscrutably wrapped in his cloak. He made them douse the torches, and could then make out a few feeble yellow gleams from the Jersey shore through the drizzle.

Behind him the soulless ones bumped oars and cursed each other, caught crabs, and one missed the water altogether and fell on his face. He would never, thought Nash, win the Poughkeepsie regatta with this crew!

He called to them to keep time with him, whereat they protested that they could not see him. Very well, then, they should each watch the man in front of him! That did not work so well either, and Nash was forced to count aloud to keep them in some sort of unison.

When they were fairly well away from the Manhattan shore, Nash, who had the foremost starboard oar, covertly increased the length and force of his stroke. Slowly, slowly, the train of barges swung around until the lights of Jersey were on the starboard beam. Nash's heart was in his mouth as he waited for one of the men to comment on this state of affairs; he wondered what excuse to give them.

But no objections came; the men, grunting at the squeaking oars, were too busy watching their footing on the wet decks. Nash's confidence rose again. Perhaps they knew so little local geography that he could land them at Staten Island without their being any the wiser!

Nash guessed that they had been pulling a good hour, and noted that the lights did not seem to have moved at all. An adverse tide, probably; that would change to favorable in due course. The distance was something like five or six miles; at an average rate of a mile an hour they should arrive within an hour or two of dawn, either before or after.

Long before that, Nash had almost fallen asleep standing up and walked overboard. The others must be getting tired, too, for their strokes were getting ragged again. Nash decided on a system of reliefs. He ordered the crew of the tail boat forward to take the oars of the lead boat while the relieved quartet took a nap, leaving the tail boat to be towed. The least stupid-acting of the guards was appointed pilot; he was told to keep one of the Jersey lights on the starboard beam, and to wake Nash and the other three nappers after five hundred oar strokes. At an estimated ten strokes a minute that should give them a rest of a little under an hour.

When the wet sky paled to dirty pearl, Bay Ridge lay to port, the long spit of Bayonne to starboard, and the low hills of New Brighton a half mile ahead. A small boat appeared here and there in the upper bay, plowing along on its own business. A choppy little swell had begun to smack against the blunt nose of the leading barge, throwing haphazard drops of spray on the rowers; but they were all too soaked to mind. Nash peered toward the site of St. George; sure enough there were docks there as on the mundane plane.

A subtle change in the music of the oars caused him to turn his head. The rowers of the second barge had quit; the slaves leaned listlessly on their sweeps, and in the center of the deck the three guards had their heads together.

"Hey, you!" called Nash.

The guards looked up; then began to advance forward in line abreast, with careful, catlike tread. Nash walked boldly toward them until he and they were separated only by the yard of water between the first and second barges.

"Well?"

The center guard touched his forehead with thin humility. "Perhaps we are stupid, *effendi*, but it don't look to us as if you had gone directly across the river to New Jersey."

"That's all right."

"Humble apologies, but it is not all right. We heard our lord tell you to cross the river directly."

"Don't worry, I know what I'm doing."

"That may be. But how shall our lord find his dough and his molls if you do not go whither he directed you?"

"Oh, he knows where I'm going. I told him just before we left."

"No," said the guard, "I was watching."

Another guard put in: "It looks to us, *effendi*, as if you sought to give our Protector of the Poor the old double cross!"

"Listen," snapped Nash, "I'm running this show, and as long as—"

"Not any more!" cried the third guard. "Give the perfidious infidel the works!"

"Allah!" shouted the others. "Smite the unbelieving goon!" "Slay the highjacking traitor!"

All three backed up, drew their scimitars, and made a running broad jump from their boat to Nash's.

Nash grabbed for his sword, and realized that he had taken it off because it hampered him in rowing, and leaned it against the lee side of the deckhouse. He sprinted forward and grabbed the hilt, letting the scabbard clatter to the deck, the three guards after him whirling their thin steel crescents.

As soon as he could turn he started to uncork a lunge at the nearest, but had to interrupt it to parry a slash from another. For the next ten seconds he fought as he never had exerted himself in his mundane life. Maybe a movie hero could

fight three foes at once, but only if the foes merely diddled around with their weapons instead of boring in like these guys. No time for fancy fencing; nothing but a crude right-left slashing to knock the curved blades aside as they swung.

He felt the stem post of the barge behind him. They had backed him into the bow; he knew definitely that no matter how hard he tried, they would have him in a matter of seconds.

X.

One scimitar hit Nash on the flank, but was stopped by his money belt, and then a new front was opened up.

Figures popped out of the deckhouse of the second barge: women in baggy Turkish trousers and short bangled vests. They ran forward and leaped to the first barge. The leader, a splendid-looking blonde, snatched up a barge pole. While the others were doing likewise, she swung the pole with both hands against the ribs of one of the guards.

The guard went *oof*, teetered on the gunwhale, and grabbed his nearest fellow. Both tumbled overboard. The girl swung again, the muscles of her white arms standing out. *Clank!* The remaining guard's spiked helmet leaped from his head and spun into New York Bay, and the warrior followed it.

A shaven head appeared alongside the barge, and a swarthy arm reached for the gunwhale. Another girl chopped down on the arm with her pole.

The thump and splash were followed by a curdling shriek. The swimmer brought his legs up under him and pushed off from the boat with his feet. He swam out of reach, though a couple of the women took swipes at him. His partners joined him, wriggling out of their jelabs and coats and getting ducked with every wave.

The guard who had had his arm thumped shook a fist. "Allah curse your—*blub*—house, you lousy —*pfft*—Frank! For this you shall be—*gulp*—most cruelly—*gurgle*—bumped off!"

All three turned away and struck out for Bay-

onne, swimming breast stroke like three large brown frogs.

"Well!" said Nash.

"Jean-Prospère!" exclaimed the tall blonde. "Don't you know me?"

Even as Nash realized that this was unmistakably the astral body of Alice Woodson, she threw her arms around his neck and pressed on him a long kiss that turned his knee joints to water. She whispered in his ear: "Don't you *remember?*"

"Ahem . . . uh . . . sure," said Nash, turning pink. "How did you—"

"I thought I recognized you last night, and I hoped you'd manage something like this. How did you—"

"Went around to explain why I hadn't been to your party," replied Nash. "I got a detective when I saw the mess, and he put me on Arslan Bey's track. But just a minute—we'll have to decide about these birds." He confronted the nearest of the slaves, who stood doubtfully at his oar.

The soulless one doubled himself up and touched his forehead. He mumbled: "There was talk of treachery, *effendi.* Who is the traitor, you or the guards? We must serve our lord the sultan—"

"The guards were the traitors, of course!" barked Nash. "You don't suppose Allah would have let the fight come out that way otherwise?"

That explanation seemed to satisfy the slaves, who set their oars docilely in motion. The rest of the three hundred and sixty-five wives had meantime emerged from the holds in varying degrees of bundled-upness. They gave the animals a wide berth and crowded forward.

"Alicia," said Nash, "I want to talk to you about those—"

"Jean-Prospère, what's become of that cute French accent of yours?"

"Been going to a speech-improvement class. In fact I'd as lief be called plain Prosper."

"All right, Prospère—"

"Prosper."

"I'm cold," complained another of Arslan's wives.

"I don't wonder," said Nash, eying her bare feet and midriff. "Hadn't you better get your—"

Alicia leaned overside and stuck a finger in the bay. "It's much warmer in the water than out of it! I know what we need! Come on, girls!"

Before Nash could make up his mind to protest, the tall girl had thrown off her skimpy vest, stepped out of her trousers, and dived overboard. She came up spouting and laughing. "It's wonderful! Won't somebody else come in? Aw, girls— Hey, Prosper!" With two strokes she reached the barge and made a pass at Nash's ankle. Nash skipped back out of reach. "Come on, peel off and jump!"

"Not a nudist," grinned Nash, "and anyway I can't swim now."

"Why not? Don't tell me it's the wrong day of the—"

"Takes all the starch out of my whiskers."

She splashed water at him, dove again, and swam about. "I know," she said. "You cavaliers and Restoration bucks and such never do bathe. Think it's indecent to get wet all over. I met the young Marquis de la Forge last week, and he positively stank!"

"When you're ready, Alicia—"

"Oh, all right." She put her hands over the gunwhale, hoisted herself out, turned, and sat on the edge splashing with her feet.

Nash sighed. "I hope nobody in St. George has a telescope. Who lives there, do you know?"

"It's called the condottieri town," explained Alicia. "All Renaissance Italians. The other big Italian settlement, in upper Manhattan, is all Romans: baths, togas, and oratory. They're allied with the Aryans, I suppose you know, but these aren't. Now tell me what this is all about."

Nash told briefly the story of his visit to the sultan's palace, and added that when they landed, the harem could do as it individually or collectively pleased.

"Swell!" cried Alicia.

"I . . . uh . . . don't suppose you'll want to return to Arslan?"

"Good heavens, no! Me be satisfied with one three hundred and sixty-fifth of a husband? What'll we do with his money?"

"I've been wondering. I ought to get some sort of salvage fee out of it; thought I could let him know where he could pick up the rest, that it—"

"Salvage fee! Prosper, don't you know Arslan'll be out for your blood now whether you let him recover his loot or not? Why not be sensible and keep it all?"

"That would be stealing."

"He stole it in the first place, didn't he?"

"I suppose so, but I won't steal it in the second. Maybe I'm dumb, but that's how it is."

"Well, if you don't want it, I guess we girls can use it. I doubt if there's over half a million there anyway, counting the jewels. That won't look so big when it's split three hundred-odd ways."

Nash whistled. "Gosh! I can just imagine parading through a town full of tough Renaissance Italians with half a million bucks and three hundred and sixty-five harem beauties. How far do you think we'll get?"

"Mm-m-m. Tell you what. Arslan undoubtedly loaded his full dress arms and armor aboard. Some of us girls used to be pretty athletic before Arslan caught us, and there ought to be enough gold-hilted swords and diamond-studded helmets to outfit a squad."

"Wouldn't it be better to arm the slaves?"

She lowered her voice. "I wouldn't. They'll catch on to what we're up to eventually, and then there's no telling."

"Anyway," said Nash, "we'd better keep together for a while, don't you think? Those girls probably have homes all over, and between the condottieri here and the war in Manhattan they might have trouble reaching them alone."

"Right. It wouldn't do to pay them off at the dock and say 'run along, girls.'"

"O. K. Now suppose you put your clothes on?"

She complied; Nash politely turned his back, and got a playful kick in the pants for his pains.

"You," he said reproachfully, "are no lady!" But she was already gone, laughing.

Whew! So this child of nature was the astral body of his prim friend Alice! It looked as though he would have her as regular girl friend for the rest of his stay on this plane. His spine tingled at the thought; a stouter comrade and a more spectacular ornament he could hardly ask for. But she would not be the easiest person to handle; like trying to use Smiley as a lap dog.

"Here's your Amazon army, Prosper," said Alicia, as he turned at the sound of giggles.

The sultan had packed enough military equipment to outfit fourteen of them, and they had eked out his helmets and mail shirts with some of his gaudier pieces of civilian attire. The glittering result might have stepped off the stage of a Rimski-Korsakov opera.

She explained: "Only six of the girls wanted to go back to Arslan. Some of the others thought they did, but changed their minds when I told them we were going to divide up his money. Most of the others have real husbands and lovers to return to."

"Will those six make any trouble?"

"I persuaded them not to." She looked thoughtfully at a barked knuckle.

"How much stuff will we have to carry?"

"There are about twenty chests. We emptied a couple getting up these outfits, and I think if we throw out the junk—silks and feminine doodads—we can cut the number down to seven or eight."

Nash went below to investigate. The load of coin and plate made the chests too heavy for any one man to carry. Two of them were emptied of coin by distributing their contents among some of the women to carry on their persons. Nash insisted on entering the names of the two hundred-odd girls in his notebook, with the amount given each to tote. There remained six chests of jewelry, art objects, and gold and silver tableware.

"We need some wheelbarrows," he said. "Also we want to know where to go when we land. Do any of you girls know of a place that would hold you all?"

"Louise would know," volunteered one of the girls. "She used to live on Staten Island."

Louise was sought out. Yes, there were several places, if they were not at present occupied: a Renaissance palazzo in the middle of St. George, a somewhat ruinous castle in New Brighton, a Georgian mansion in Richmond—

"I think the castle is our best bet," said Nash.

"But how on earth will you find out whether we can occupy it?" queried Alicia.

"They probably have real estate agents on the island, Renaissance or no Renaissance. Hey, what's that?"

That was a small bejeweled hunting horn. Nash said: "That'll be useful. I'm figuring out a procession that'll set the Staten Islanders back on their heels so far they won't think of bothering us. When we dock, everybody goes below except the girls with the swords and guns, while I go ashore and make arrangements."

Nash tossed the painter to a loafer on the dock, a man wearing a little round cap and hose tights with one red leg and one blue.

"Morning, m'sieur," said Nash as he scrambled up. "Could you tell me where I can buy some wheelbarrows?"

The loafer directed him to a shop a couple of blocks from the dock. Several other men stopped to stare at the barge flotilla, but none ventured close. Kulu was shuffling about the deck as far as his chain would let him, and Smiley was grumbling a bit with hunger.

Nash bought his wheelbarrows, ordered them delivered to the dock at once, and was referred further to the office of a realty agent named Benvenuto Lorenzo Franchetti.

The address turned out to be that of a medium-sized baroque palace, full of mice and corkscrew-shaped pillars, and occupied by several firms. After Nash had wandered about its dust corridors, his ear caught a familiar ring of steel.

In the center of a big hall two men were fighting with rapiers and oversized daggers, one in each hand. One already had a cut on his cheek.

Nash did not feel called upon to interfere, but as he cautiously skirted the hall the combatants jumped apart and lowered their weapons. The unwounded one called out to Nash in Italian.

"Excuse me," said Nash, "but I'm looking for Franchetti's office—"

"That'sa me," replied the duelist. "You want to see me on beez?"

"Yeah, if you're not too busy."

The fighter addressed his opponent: "Excusa me, Giacomo, I gotta da beez. I come back and keel you aft', *si?*"

"*Si,*" said the other darkly. "I keel you any tima you say."

Benvenuto Franchetti led Nash through a small

forest of statues to a desk in the corner. Nash explained his errand.

"Ah," cried Franchetti. "You are justa da man! I could kees you!"

"Please don't. I'll rent this castle for a couple of weeks, if I like it."

"A month," said Franchetti, getting out a map. "See, here, it is on da highesta point in New Bright', nexta da monastery. Beautiful view of da harb'—"

"Two weeks," insisted Nash. "And what's this about a monastery?"

"Justa da monastery. Da owner says a month, mus' be a month." Franchetti wagged his head. "He is offering it at a greata sacrifice—"

"How much?"

"Three hundred dol'."

"Give you fifty a week, for two weeks."

"Looka, my friend, is no use trying to beata me down. I am one-pricea Benvenuto. I offer you da lowesta pricea da firsta tima. I never make excepsh. For you, yes, I make one leetle excepsh. I splitta my commish. I impoverish myself. I giva you this beautiful castle for one month for two hundred seventy-fiva dol'."

Nash finally got the castle for one month, two hundred and fifty dollars. He paid, and Franchetti dug out a pair of bronze keys big enough to choke a horse.

"Fina," said Franchetti, wringing Nash's hand. "And now excusa me, please. This gentleman is await' for me to keel him." He bowed Nash out, and behind him Prosper could hear the clang of blades resume where it had left off.

Back at the dock Nash found quite a crowd, still keeping a respectful distance from the barges. He called the harem up on deck and marshaled them. "We'll march three abreast. Line 'em up, Alicia. You and I and Hamid will lead; he'll tow the cat and toot the horn when the crowd gets in the way. Put your veils back on, girls. Yes, you'll need 'em all right, all right. Ready? Let's go!"

Hamid, the slave who was Smiley's keeper, blew a blat on the horn. Nash drew his sword and started. "Out of the way, please! One side there, everybody!"

The crowd of loafers hastily made room for the padding saber-tooth, behind whom came the triple file of Arslan's wives. The column was broken in six places; in each break a slave trundled a wheelbarrow flanked by a pair of Alicia's Amazons. The ape and its keeper brought up the rear.

The singular procession crawled up the narrow streets of St. George toward the New Brighton hills, about a mile off. The natives dropped whatever they were doing to watch. There were no hostile moves; a blast from Hamid's horn or a sniff from Smiley's nostrils was enough to open a lane.

But there were plenty of comments. "Sucha beautiful soldiers! Are they men or wom'?" "I wonder whatta they got in dosa box? Bricksa?" "Haha, looka da monk' at da end! Hey, monk', you wanta some mon'? OH!"

The last was from a sword-girt gentleman in trunk hose and a round, flat-crowned hat. Kulu shot out a long rust-colored arm and snatched the hat, which he calmly took apart with his teeth.

"Signor," said an insinuating voice at Nash's elbow, "Coulda you spare me one littla dima? I am so poor and you are so richa—"

The vagrant, a handsome, humorous-eyed fellow, looked far from starving. But Nash, who was a sucker for such appeals, handed over the requested alms. In one minute flat there were twenty beggars trotting alongside, all shouting at once.

Nash stood it as long as he could, then in his best attempt at a burr cried: "Get oot, all o' ye, before I whup ye wi' ma claymore!"

The mendicants looked at one another, shrugged, and went their ways.

XI.

"It looks," remarked Alicia, "as though it ought to be haunted."

Nash agreed. The place he had rented was not a real castle, but a square two-story brick mansion with small windows, towers at the corners, and crumbling battlements to give it a period look. Nash started to get out the keys Franchetti had given him, then observed that the front door sagged half off its hinges.

"I wonder who that is?" asked Alicia.

Nash looked. "Probably the haunt." The person in question was an ominous-looking figure in a robe and hood, who stood at a little distance silently watching them.

A nearby bell went *bongggg, bongggg,* and the cowled figure turned and walked swiftly toward a group of low gray buildings.

"I remember now," said Nash. "Franchetti mentioned a monastery, and I guess that's it. Hamid, help me with this door."

Nash wondered who among mundane persons would imagine a monastic astral body for himself. The astral bodies he had met so far seemed to run to the proud, the fierce, the rapacious, and the uninhibited: hardly the sort of people who would make good monks.

Franchetti, he decided, had robbed him, after he observed the warped floor boards, the sagging stairways, the shattered windows, and the scanty and broken furniture. Not that an extra fifty or hundred out of the sultan's hoard would make much difference: it was the principle of the thing.

Still, the place had a huge stove and an equally impressive icebox, and a broom closet holding half a dozen brooms in various stages of decrepitude. Alicia Woodson whooped when she saw these, and

pressed them into the unenthusiastic hands of six of her co-wives. "Get to work!" she shouted.

"Now," said Nash, "what do we need to live here for a week or two?"

Suggestions were poured over him by all the harem talking at once. He rounded up the slaves, doled out money, and sent them off, one to buy food, another firewood, another ice, another some hardware beginning with a hammer and nails, and so on. Before the first slave returned, Smiley began to roar loudly with hunger, and when a slave did appear he was immediately sent off to buy six quarts of blood.

Nash frantically tried to keep track of everything in his notebook, and the continuous gabble of three hundred and some women nearly drove him crazy. Then he was forced out of the house altogether by the choking clouds of dust raised by the brooms. Alicia rushed about like a cross between Brünhilda and Simon Legree, finding jobs for all the women and pouring loud contumely on those who flagged.

By late afternoon Nash had repaired the door and pasted paper over the broken window panes and nailed down the loose floor boards and glued legs on chairs and caulked the well bucket. Alicia found him sprawled supine among the weeds of what passed for the lawn.

"Prosper," she said, "I . . . are you tired?"

"No. I'm dead."

"All right, corpse, before you fade out I've got a job for you."

"Go 'way."

"No, really. There's no bedding in the place to speak of. Louise said that the monastery took a lot of paying guests and would have some. So I sent Cleo over to borrow mattresses and blankets, but do you know, when she knocked on the door a monk opened it and took one look at her and slammed it in her face! I'll bet they aren't real monks at all, but a gang of Satanists or something."

"More likely he feared for his immortal soul," groaned Nash, rising. "O. K., I'll go."

A monk with his hood thrown back answered Nash's knock; looked carefully at Nash, and said: "You are he who is installing his . . . uh . . . seraglio at our very doorstep! What have we to do with such a one?"

"Not at all!" cried Nash. "They're perfectly good girls whom I rescued from a paynim's captivity." He added details.

"Oh," said the monk in a changed tone, "that is different. Come in, my son, and I'll see what we can do. I am Brother Benedict."

When Nash got a better view of Brother Benedict's face, he was sure he had seen it somewhere else—perhaps in a newspaper. He knew that if he dug deep enough through his mental files he'd be able to— Sure enough!

"Brother Benedict," he asked, "is your last name Wilcox?"

"It was."

Nash chuckled. Brother Benedict's mundane counterpart was Harry Van Rensselaer Wilcox, an ornament of café society who had been divorced six times, sued for breach of promise four, and thrown out of half the night clubs in New York.

Half an hour later he had his bedding. It would go round—almost, if the girls tripled up. At that Nash feared that the loan would leave some of the monks sleeping on cold stone. But once he had enlisted their sympathy, they would not take "no" for an answer.

Back in the castle Nash found smoke bringing a stench of burning food from the kitchen.

"One of the girls got careless with her beans," explained Alicia. "I told off thirty of them to cook."

"Can they?"

"Some can't. But if I started asking, they'd all say they couldn't."

After dinner Alicia said: "You look pretty cheerful for a man who was half dead a couple of hours ago. What's your plan?"

"Gosh, I'm too tired to work this evening. I'm going to have fun."

"Oh, good! What?"

"See that ledger I had the boys get? Well, I'm going to count our money, and open a complete set of books for the estate of Arslan Bey, with every nickel's worth of expenditures and receipts in the right account!"

The girl's shoulders drooped a little. As she turned to go she addressed the atmosphere: "Some —people—have—funny—ideas—of a good—time!"

Nash grinned and lugged the account book and money up to the smallest bedroom, which he had chosen for himself.

He had to sit on the floor and work by candlelight. He missed his pipe; the chatter of the women wafted up through the boards; once the bong of the monastery bells startled him. But those distractions were minor— *Clink, clink, clink,* $140, $160, $180, $200, $220— $16,360 in double eagles—

$412,905.45, checked and rechecked, and not counting a small pile of foreign coins and the gold plate.

How much should he keep for himself? That to Nash was a ticklish question whose contemplation made him a little uneasy. Arslan's own title to the money might be bad; Arslan might be a scoundrel; still Nash wished he could forget how unreservedly the scoundrel had trusted him. He admitted, a little grudgingly, that the rescue of these poor girls took precedence over Arslan's getting every cent returned or accounted for. It was still an impossibly tangled legal and moral ques-

tion, especially if Arslan Bey's little robber state had been extinguished by the Aryan armies—

Hell, take ten percent, give the rest to the gals, and forget about it. If he failed to get the Shamir on his next try, he would pay off his debts, salt the rest away in a safe place—if the astral plane had such a thing—and keep very quiet about his nest egg. Not for him the lavishness of a gentleman performing the social duty of conspicuous waste. "Friends" would swarm around begging a little loan, and Nash would be caught between his soft-heartedness and his financial meticulousness, with compliance and refusal both distressing.

He chuckled a little at himself: he should have imagined, instead of a dashing cavalier, one of those thrifty Puritans to whom financial gain was the outward visible sign of inward spiritual grace.

Now for the books: Capital Acc.; Interest & Discount; Profit & Loss; Surplus & Deficit—

Until his door creaked open Nash did not realize that he had fallen asleep in an approximation of the lotus posture of Yoga. He shook the sleep out of his eyes. One of the candles had burned out; the light of the other showed one of the girls in the doorway, big-eyed and wrapped in a monk's blanket.

"Prosper! There's a man in the house!"

"Huh?"

"A man! Burglar! On the back stairs—"

Nash jumped up and went hunting with his sword. His quarry obligingly gave himself away by tripping over his own feet, and Nash chased him downstairs, through the main halls, and out a window, scaring the wits out of the girls sleeping on the ground floor. He got close enough to see that the intruder was no ragged burglar, but a bejeweled late-Medieval dandy.

Two hours later he was aroused again; this time a Casanova was climbing the ivy. Nash stole up to the roof, and as the man's head came over the wall Prosper whacked it with the flat of his blade. The man dropped twenty feet with a crash, picked himself out of the shrubbery, and limped off shrilling maledictions.

There were no more disturbances that night, but next morning after breakfast Nash set out for the monastery with one of Arslan's gold dinner plates under his coat.

In the yard he passed Alicia bending over a washtub. The girl was scrubbing vigorously with a blanket tied around her against the cold, and was smoking a corncob pipe.

At his muttered "Good lord," she looked up.

"Morning, Prosper. 'Smatter, 'fraid I'll shock our monastic friends? I've got to; my only clothes are in the wash."

"No; you're O. K. That pipe just made me wonder if you were created in the Kentucky mountains."

"Nope; I smoke a pipe when I happen to feel like smoking a pipe."

At Nash's request, Brother Benedict took him to see the abbot. Nash began by presenting the plate; the abbot was duly grateful, and said it would be a great thing for the poor of Staten Island.

Then Nash explained his troubles with amorous natives. He asked: "Don't you boys do a lot of walking around at night, by way of penance or something?"

"That is true."

"Well, I was wondering if you couldn't assign a couple of penancers each night to patrol around my castle with good, thick clubs."

"Why—that is a very startling idea. But—now that I think of it, there is something to be said for it. Of course your ladies must not make any . . . ahem . . . must comport themselves in a seemly manner."

"They'll behave all right, all right, if I have to tan their . . . if I have to apply corporal chastisement. Now maybe you could give me some advice on how to get them home safe. I don't want the local banditti to cut their throats as soon as they leave—"

The abbot showed a flash of unmonkish local pride: "It is nothing like as bad as that, M. de Nêche. Of course there are wicked men everywhere, but Staten Island has been reasonably safe since Duke Alessandro took hold. Jersey City is another matter, but I suppose your ladies can avoid it. Why not have them write their husbands and friends to come and get them? The mails run, except in the Manhattan war zone."

"Most of 'em come from Manhattan," objected Nash.

"Still, many of those would have friends in other parts."

"I'll try it. Now could you recommend a jeweler?"

The abbot gave him the name of Arnold Earnshaw Nathan, in St. George. Nash thought of asking for the whereabouts of Merlin Apollonius Stark, but decided that the good monks would probably suspect him of dealings with the Devil.

Nash set the girls to writing letters, and went down to St. George. Arnold Earnshaw Nathan was a plainly dressed man, older than most astralites, who hung out in a shop full of elaborate clocks, all ticking like mad. Nathan agreed to come up to the castle that afternoon to weigh and assay the odds and ends of the sultan's hoard. As he was agreeing, the clocks all struck eleven with a fearful jankle, and in the fancier ones all sorts of wonderful acts took place. Besides the usual cuckoos, there were clocks in which tiny figures appeared and went through acrobatic stunts, a house-shaped clock that appeared to catch fire

until a set of toy firemen whirred into action and put the fire out, and so on.

On his way back, Nash passed a shop displaying weapons of all sorts: guns, swords, daggers. He went in and asked to see the most modern pistols in stock. These turned out to be a line of double-action revolvers, in .32, .38 and .44 calibers.

"You wouldn't have a Colt .45 automatic, service model?" asked Nash. "If I ever have to shoot somebody, I don't want to just irritate him."

"Automatics? No. Nobody uses them."

"That's funny. You know what an automatic pistol is?"

"Sure, sure. No good; jam all the time."

"Where I come from they don't. Why is that?"

"You try to make one, you see. Too many little sliding parts and springs. Can't file them accurately enough."

"You mean your guns are all handmade?"

"Naturally. Make lots of them myself."

Nash ordered the merchant's whole stock of .32s and .38s for the girls, and a .44 for himself. The merchant beamed, and asked to see Nash's license. It was then that Nash learned that Staten Island had a Sullivan law.

He sighed and set out for the county courthouse to get his licenses. All went well until the license clerk asked his reason for wanting the arsenal.

"Well," explained Nash, "my protegées recently came into some money, and they'll want some protection on their—"

"Money? Money? Ah, signor, da collect' of revenue, he wantsa to see you! Come with me!" The clerk bounced up and dragged Nash into the collector's office.

When Nash told the assistant collector of revenue that he had just arrived in Staten Island, and intended to leave in a few days, the official pursed his lips and said: "Then you will be liable for only a few taxes, my friend. Import tax, export tax, residence tax, transit tax, personal property tax, income tax. That'sa all. Here are your formsa."

Nash's face fell further and further. The official said: "Cheer uppa, signor. They will notta take more than eighty percent of this estate."

"At least," said Nash in a choked voice, "I want the text of all your tax laws."

"Certainly, signor!" The assistant collector fished out a pile of pamphlets. "In view of da size of da estate, we will iffa you like send a esspert to helpa you—"

"No, thanks. I can fill out tax returns all right."

"Fina! You will be back in a few daysa? You and your ladies mus' notta leava Staten Island until da taxes are paid, you know."

Early and bright the next morning Nash showed up at the revenue office. He cheerfully laid the six forms down on the assistant collector's desk, and then began to shell money out of his belt.

The official smiled broadly. As he looked at the forms his smile faded. His eyes popped. "Thirteena dollars anda ninety-four cents on an estate of five hundred thous'! *Dio mio*, it is imposs'!"

Nash grinned. "It's possible all right. Just look at all those deductions! Check it over all you want."

The assistant collector jumped up and bounced into the office of the collector, and the two reappeared and held a muttered consultation in Italian over the returns. Finally the collector spoke to Nash: "Looka, signor, what is thissa deducsh? You try to get away witta something, *si?*"

"Let's see . . . oh, that! That's authorized by the amendment to the personal property tax, dated 1893. Hasn't been repealed as far as I can see."

The collector sputtered. "All those old deducsh —dissa man is a magish!"

"No, though I sometimes wish I were. If you can't find anything wrong with my returns, I'd like my receipt, please."

"Ah, signor," said the collector, "is no hurry! Why not stay around our beautiful Staten Island a few daysa longer?"

Nash shook his head, not caring to hang around until Duke Alessandro had a chance to issue some retroactive decree plugging all the loopholes that Nash had so laboriously discovered.

The officials urged him some more, until their importunities took on a tone of veiled menace.

Then Nash said: "Of course I might settle here —I could find out who your biggest taxpayers are and make a living as a tax expert."

"Oh, no, in thatta case! If you mus' go, you mus' go! We woulda not *theenk* of detaining you!"

Nash got his receipts, but when he tried to get his gun licenses the clerk, who had been tipped off, refused on the ground that an estate taxable only to the extent of thirteen dollars and ninety-four cents could not need much protection.

Nash returned to his castle just as a couple of men arrived: one of them on a homemade and extremely noisy motorcycle; the other, in top hat and cutaway, in a buggy. There were passionate embraces with the girls they had come to fetch, and a gala departure with much waving and feminine tears. More departures followed; Alicia handled the breaking-up of the harem in her usual competent manner.

Nash rounded up the eight slaves and asked them: "How would you boys like your freedom?"

"Freedom?" replied one. "But, *effendi*, we belong to Arslan Bey!"

"I'm afraid he's dead, or he'd have joined us by now. I repeat: how would you like to be your own masters?"

They exchanged dazed glances. One said: "Oh, *effendi*, not belong to anyone? That would be terrible! We'd die!"

Nash tried to sell them the beauties of liberty,

but the only result was that they got down on their knees, wept, and prayed that he would not do such a thing to them.

Nash gave up and went in to lunch. Afterward he hiked down to Tompkinsville to find the headquarters of Merlin Apollonius Stark, whose address he had gotten from Nathan the jeweler.

The address was 160 St. Paul's Avenue, a street of small one- and two-story houses of the suburban residence type. He soon found 158; the lot south of it was vacant, and on the other side of the open space was 162.

He walked back to 158 to make sure.

Gosh! Had he forgotten the correct number—no, he never forgot things like that. Had Nathan misinformed him, or had Merlin Apollonius magicked his house down to portable size and gone off with it?

"Come on," crackled a voice from the empty air in the middle of the vacant lot. "Don't stand there. Walk up the path and ring the doorbell!"

XII.

Nash walked slowly up the path. His fifth step brought him to the last flagstone. The lawn also ended at this point, and the waste of hard-packed brown earth and green weeds that comprised the rest of the lot was sharp in the bright, cool sun. A small breeze stirred Nash's cloak and drove a couple of dead leaves tumbling across his vision.

"Come on! Up the steps with you!"

Nash frowned. Merlin Stark must be having fun with him. Well, two could play. Nash drew his sword and used it like a blind man's cane. He located two steps leading up from the end of the path; the scrape made by the point sounded like stone or concrete. As he ascended he discovered a door, invisible like the steps, and began poking it.

"Hey! Stop scratching my door up!"

"Well, fix your doorbell so I can see it!" retorted Nash.

"Oh, come on in and stop fooling around." A large dark rectangle the size of a door opened in the empty space in front of Nash, who found himself looking down a hall with an old-fashioned hall tree in the foreground.

"In here, M. de Nêche!" The voice was now obviously much like that of Monty Stark. Nash hung his cloak and plumed hat on one of the antlers of the hall tree, took at look at himself in the mirror, and entered.

Nash expected to see an improved version of Montague Allen Stark. But what he saw was more arresting: apparently Monty Stark himself with a long white false beard attached to his chin.

"Mont . . . uh, hello, Mr. Stark!" Nash covered his confusion with a formal Seventeenth-Century bow. He advanced to shake the hand that the astral Stark, half rising, extended across his desk.

Now that Nash had a closer look, he was fairly sure that the beard was real. The only trouble was that it did not go with the crisp brown hair, partly covered by a skullcap, and the plump young face. It was just like Monty, in imagining himself a magician, simply to slap a snowy beard on his face without bothering to alter the rest of his physique to match.

The astral Stark wore a dark-blue judicial robe embroidered with astronomical symbols. On Nash's left was a lower desk bearing a typewriter. Behind the desk sat a young woman in an exceedingly gauzy dress. The girl was small and slim, with fair skin, enormous blue eyes, and a fragile, unearthly beauty. Another navy-blue robe lay across her lap, and on this she was embroidering an additional symbol: a thing combining the upper half of P with the lower half of L.

"Pluto," explained Stark. "She thinks I ought to bring my paraphernalia up to date. I hope they don't discover any more planets for a while. You know, M. de Nêche, I had a feeling somebody like you was looking for me."

Of course, thought Nash, a genuine magician would know his client's name without being told. He said: "Quite a trick, making your house invisible."

Stark handed Nash a cigar and lit one himself. "I thought those dead leaves were pretty cute. You have to time their apparent motion so it coincides with a puff of real wind."

"What's the big idea? To keep away hoi polloi?"

The wizard chuckled. With the cigar sticking up out of one corner of his grin, he was, except for the phony-looking bush, the same cocky Montague that Nash had known in his own plane. "Why do lawyers use Latin? If a professional man doesn't mix a little hokum with his art, he doesn't get any clients. Now, what can I do for you?"

Nash said carefully: "I want to borrow the Shamir from Tukiphat."

Stark's eyebrows shot up. "Why, in Thoth's name? Haven't enough folks come to grief trying to snatch the damned hunk of glass?"

"I need it in my business."

"Come on, come on! No secrets from your magus!"

Nash hesitated. "Do you know about the mundane plane?"

"Uh . . . yes and no. Hm-m-m. There's something about you—wait, don't tell me—you don't quite fit—"

Stark took a deep drag, then let the smoke drift up out of his open mouth so that it almost veiled his face.

Nash leaned back in his swivel chair and looked about the room. It reminded him of the office of a country lawyer, except that the corners were

cluttered with brass tripods and lamps, wands, and swords. Everything else was filing cabinets and bookcases, from the top of which two human skulls and one stuffed rooster looked down.

"Got it!" cried Stark. "You're a mundane soul in an astral body! Right?"

"Right."

"By the Great Tetragrammaton, this is going to be interesting! I don't suppose you'd care to let me take your soul out for examination?"

"No, sir! I want to get back to my own plane."

"Oh, what's the hurry? You obviously created an adventurous type for yourself. Haven't you had adventure?"

"Sure," said Nash. "I've killed three guys. Where I come from one homicide per lifetime is considered plenty. I want to get back before I kill any more."

"Hm-m-m. I could fix you up with a ring that would make it unnecessary to kill anybody, except perhaps Aryans. You can give me a lot of valuable information about your plane; the magi and philosophers in this one have the damnedest lot of contradictory theories about it."

"Sorry, but I've got to return before Bechard does something drastic with my mundane body. He gave me ten days."

"Bechard? Who's that?"

Nash told him about the demon.

"Hm-m-m," said Stark. "I see your point. An astral body whose mundane congener has abandoned it or died is more liable to dissolution than one that is constantly maintained by its creator's imagination."

"Well," said Nash, "can you fix me up, and if so what would the charge be?"

"Don't know; I'd have to think. Paraldine, would you get the volumes of Duban Farsi's Encyclopedia with the articles on 'Shamir' and 'Tukiphat'?"

The girl put down her sewing and left the room, followed by Nash's appreciative glance.

"Not looking for a secretary, are you?" asked Stark.

"Nope. Gosh, are you trying to get rid of her?"

"Um-m-m—yes and no. She's a good worker, but you know how sylphs are. Paraldine keeps pestering me . . . say, de Nêche, do you know I have a peculiar feeling—as if I'd known you somewhere?"

Nash grinned. "In a way you have." And he told him about Montague Allen Stark.

"By Adonai Elohim, no wonder you came to me!" cried Stark. "This is . . . ah, thank you, my dear," he said as the sylph dumped two huge volumes on his desk. "Now let's see. Shaddai—Shamgar—Shamir. Hm-m-m." The magus read silently and puffed. "'*Lahu man ham ala al Shamir, al sama' wa jahannam hom ghuraf ji seraiah wahed.*' Literally, To him who holds the Shamir, Heaven and Hell are but rooms in the same building.' What he means is that with this glorified rock you can translate both body and soul from one plane to another. Gives the method of using it too. You insufflate it three times—"

"You what?"

"Blow on it, to you. Then you describe the right pentagram if you're going to a higher plane; the left if to a lower; you'd use the left. Meanwhile you say: 'By the great Adonai, Elohim, Ariel, and Jehovam, *conjuro, petrus veritatis, te cito mihi obedire;* I conjure thee to obey me forthwith—' If the stone doesn't begin to coruscate at this point, that means it's pretending it doesn't understand English and Latin, so you have to repeat in Hebrew or Arabic. I hope you don't because to pronounce Arabic properly you need an oversized glottis and a case of asthma. 'By the holy names Albrot, On, Shaddai—' I'll have Paraldine type it out for you on virgin typewriter paper. Now let's see about Tuky."

Merlin Apollonius Stark opened the other volume and frowned over it for a long time. He murmured: "Don't know— These geniuses are tough customers, Tukiphat particularly. I wouldn't tangle with him myself for a bushel of azoth. But that's your funeral—"

He read on somberly, the slope of his shoulders indicating dim prospects. Then he began to perk up. "Hey! De Nêche! I think I've got a method of getting through the refractory zone!"

The wizard jumped up and began to pace, nervously pulling his beard, cracking his knuckle joints, and hitting his palm with his fist. "It's a natural! Paraldine, take a letter to Arnold Nathan."

The girl put down her sewing and took up her shorthand pad. Stark said: "On self-immolating paper, in a red-bordered envelope. Don't want to burn old Nathan's fingers.

Dear Mr. Nathan:

Could you do a little rush job for one of my clients? Take a watch with a sweep-second hand and a stop button. Transpose the hour hand and the second hand, so that the former hour hand will be controllable by the stud, and when activated will make one complete revolution per minute. The favor of Jod He Vau He be with you if you can do the job in twenty-four hours.

Very sincerely yours,

"All right, de Nêche, you come around day after tomorrow, early. I'll have a spell for binding Tukiphat and getting through his sphere worked out. I warn you that the first may require a triad."

"A whattad?"

"Three people to work it. So you'd better start thinking of whom you want to take along."

"Umm," said Nash. "I suppose I could use a couple of Arslan's slaves—"

"Soulless ones? Too stupid."

"That was my impression. Say, you know I tried to give them their freedom this morning, and they wouldn't take it! Damnedest thing I ever saw."

"Not at all," said Stark. "They were created as slaves, so they can't imagine any other existence."

"On my plane we consider slavery an abomination," said Nash. "And we don't believe in natural-born slaves any more."

"Yes, but this isn't your plane, fellow!"

"Well, what are those 'soulless ones,' then?"

"Oh. When one of you mundane souls creates an astral person, he sometimes throws in a flock of servants to do the dirty work for his hero. These auxiliary astral bodies, as it were, are what we call soulless ones, because they have very little personality of their own. They're useful, though; most of the unskilled labor on our plane is done by them, because there are so few first-grade astralites who will go in for it." He smiled wryly. "Most unjust, according to your lights. The only way I can see to fix it is to persuade you mundane folks to create more honest toilers and fewer leaders and geniuses. If you find us kind of backward compared to you, that's what's wrong; everybody wants to be boss."

"O. K.," said Nash. "But what'll I do with these guys? They give me the creeps."

Stark shrugged. "Give 'em to the members of the harem. By the way, when you come around Saturday, you'd better bring some money with you."

"How much?"

Stark exchanged a knowing glance with the sylph, put his fingertips together, and rolled his eyes piously upward. "Ahem—I don't like to fix a fee so far in advance—you never know what complications you're going to run into—but shall we say ten thousand dollars, including the watch and all the other props?"

"Ow!" yelped Nash. "Who do you think I am, a guy named Morgan Vanderbilt Rockefeller?"

Stark looked surprised and a bit hurt. "After all, this astral money won't be any good on the mundane plane, even if you take it along!"

"It's the principle of the thing. You wouldn't soak your mundane body's best friend, would you?"

Stark sighed. "Oh, all right, suppose we make it five thousand?"

Nash screwed his face into a knot at the thought of handing over five thousand dollars.

"Look, de Nêche," said Stark, "you come in early tomorrow morning prepared to spend the whole day answering questions about the mundane plane, and I'll give you your spells and props and all for twenty-five hundred. At that the Guild would probably kick me out if they heard."

It still hurt, but Nash did not feel he could ask for much more of a reduction.

Back at the castle, Nash found that a large fraction of the harem had already left. Their places had been taken by numbers of husbands and friends who had come to fetch them, but who planned to spend that night at the castle.

"It looks as if all of them would be out of here by tomorrow night," Alicia told him. "Five of them are going to marry natives."

"Say, that's fast work," said Nash. "When have any of them had a chance to get that intimate with the local boys?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"What are you going to do?"

She puffed at her corncob. "Don't know that, either. What are your plans, Prosper?"

"Let's walk over toward the monastery," he said. When they were out of earshot of the castle, with a cold wind whipping their cloaks, he told her: "I'm going to . . . uh . . . borrow the Shamir from Tukiphat."

"Borrow? Does Tuky know about it?"

"No, ma'am, and I don't want him to, either. So don't spread it, please—"

She burst out laughing. "So you're the man who was so persnickety about stealing Arslan's loot!"

"This is different."

"Oh, yeah? That's what they all say. How different?"

"It's a matter of saving my—"

"Yes, yes, go on!"

"It's a long story, and you may not believe it."

She blew smoke in his face. "You poor dope, of course I believe you! Tell Alicia."

He told her about his usurped mundane body.

"I see," she said in a more serious tone than usual. "I thought you'd changed from the chevalier I knew. For one thing, he never knew nor cared where his next dollar was coming from."

"Uh-huh. I'm sorry to steal your gallant friend and give you a glorified bookkeeper in his place—"

She shot out a hand and tweaked his aristocratic beak. "Not a bit of it! I like you better this way. You're kind and foresighted and conscientious—"

"Oh, sure, I've got all the dull virtues."

"But that's not so, Prosper! They may be dull on your plane, but here they're something extraordinary! We have all the arrogant, rapacious gallants we need. Of course," she added sardonically, "you *are* planning a robbery; it's stealing and you know it—"

"Well," he said uncomfortably, "I don't like it, but Bechard has me by the short hair—"

"Don't be silly! Of course you'll go through with it. As far as I know the gem hasn't been put to practical use since King Solomon dressed the stones of his temple by touching them with it. Just how are you going to work it?"

"I've got to find a couple of assistants—"

"Oh, wonderful! I'll be one of them—"

"What? But you're a woman—"

"You bet I am; so what? Don't you think I could help—"

"Sure, but this is likely to be dangerous—"

"What of it? Of course I'm going along! No use trying to go back to my old job while the Aryans—"

"But I can't expose you—"

"Stuff and nonsense! You'll take me, or I'll do some exposing!"

"You probably would, at that."

"Thought that would hold you." She glided close and smiled maliciously up at him from her small inferiority of stature.

"Some day," said Nash darkly, "you're going to waggle that perfect torso in my direction once too often, and then . . . OUCH!"

"Heh, heh, heh, think you could catch me if I didn't want you too?" She danced just out of his reach. "Come on, let's see you try!"

Prosper tried; he flopped, clanked, and fluttered heavily after her back to the castle door. She gained easily and slipped inside the door. As Nash panted in after her, she grabbed him and fastened her rich lips on his—

When the skyrockets in Nash's head stopped exploding, he heard a roar of laughter from the company assembled for the first call to dinner. Nash reeled, crossed his eyes, pushed his hat back, and sat down on the floor. "Where am I?" he cooed.

The company applauded the act. A couple of stalwarts, one in trapper's fringed buckskin and the other in Wall Street's spats and carnation, hauled him up. Somebody pressed a snort of brandy on him, and the dinner got off to a rare convivial start. An astonishing lot of liquor had arrived with the girls' protectors. As Nash responded to toast after toast from these, he was

forced to admit that he was grateful for at least one of his astral body's characteristics. Jean-Prospère de Nêche, it transpired, had a really phenominal liver for liquor.

XIII.

Later, Prosper Nash and Alicia sat side by side on the floor of his room before a small wood fire. They did not talk much, but now and then they kissed.

She said, looking into the flames, "Are you still set on going back to your own plane, Prosper?"

"I dassen't not."

"I suppose so. But I wish now I hadn't urged you to go ahead with your plan."

The kisses got longer and longer. She was, Nash thought, waiting for some sort of declaration.

Well—what could he say? Anything would be wrong. He'd soon be taking both his soul and the chevalier's body away, probably for good. No doubt Bechard would give him back his mundane body in exchange for the astral one.

But this couldn't go on all night. His pulse was racing now.

He took a long look to fix her in his mind. Then he kissed her once more, briefly and gently, and rose. "I'm going out," he said. At her look of pain he added: "I think it's the right thing, dear."

"Always trying to do the right thing—but I suppose if you weren't, I wouldn't—" she broke off, staring into the fire.

Out in the cold November dark, Nash jumped a foot at being confronted by a hooded, menacing figure.

"Hey! Easy with the club, m'sieur! I'm de Nêche!"

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I thought you were one of the local lechers."

Nash laughed. "It's Benedict, isn't it?"

"Yes. Did you decide your watchdogs needed reinforcements?"

"Couldn't sleep. Mind if I walk with you?"

"Not in the least. By the way, the abbot asked me to tell you—if you're through with our bedding, we could use it."

"Sure, you can have it all tomorrow. We're pulling out."

"We would not inconvenience you, least of all for our own advantage. But we're taking in a bunch of refugees from Manhattan."

"What's been happening there?" asked Nash.

"Heh, a worldly man . . . beg pardon . . . like you asking for news from a monk! Haven't you read the papers?"

"Haven't seen one in days. No time."

The monk explained: "Last Monday the city's Lenin regiment mutinied—revolted. They left their place in the line, marched down to the City Hall, and seized it. They shot several members of the administration and staff; all they could catch, the rest having escaped just before the mutineers arrived."

"Gosh! What happened then?"

"The Lenins issued proclamations to the rest of the troops, saying that Historical Necessity had taken charge of the city, which was now a workers' and peasants' republic; that the loyal troops should obey the Lenins and fight like fiends against the Aryans— But you know their style."

"Think I do," agreed Nash. "Go on."

"Of course the loyal troops did nothing of the kind. The Aryans and Romans got wind of treachery among the city's forces and attacked the loyal troops. The Home Guardists stood them off for some hours. Then they gradually learned that their own command had been destroyed by their so-called comrades, and they became discouraged and fled the field. The Aryans, meeting no further resistance, marched down and attacked the Lenins around City Hall. The Lenins fought fiercely, and the last I heard they were still sending out manifestoes calling on the masses to rise, and blaming the disaster on the Private and corporals and the civilian officers of the city, saying they were secretly in league with the Aryans, and so on. As if the people could do anything now that the Aryans control all Manhattan."

"From what I gather," said Nash, "there really aren't any masses in this world: just a minority of soulless ones and a majority of rampant individualists."

"I know," said Brother Benedict. "But try to tell that to a Lenin! I've argued with them. For my part, I hold that a villain is no less a villain because he can excuse his crimes by fine words about Class Loyalty, Bourgeois Morality, and Dialectical Materialism."

"What happened to the loyal part of the army?" asked Nash.

"Many of them escaped to Brooklyn, where they are reorganizing to carry on the fight. Every boat in lower Manhattan was seized that afternoon by fleeing soldiers and civilians."

"They sent a mess—" Nash broke off as the horrible suspicion that his conscious mind had been trying to suppress at last broke through. He remembered the soldier who had burst in on the Private while Nash was speaking with him; this man had said something about "Lenins." Arizona Bill Averoff must somehow have failed to deliver the message—

"Keep a stiff upper lip," he thought. If it does turn out that the disaster was your fault, it'll be time enough then to do something dramatic.

"Where did the Aryans come from?" he asked.

"These pagan savages began appearing in Yorkville ten years ago," Benedict told him. "The New

York City government temporized with them until they were numerous enough to revolt. They somehow got an alliance with the Romans, who up to then had been fairly good citizens most of the time.

"You can neither argue with nor evangelize nor intimidate an Aryan. The only thing that does any permanent good is to kill him, God forgive me. And it strikes me, Chevalier, that you would be better occupied—"

"I know," said Nash. "We've got guys like that at home. One of these days I'll be needed back there."

Merlin Apollonius Stark grinned like a bearded cherub. "Good morning, de Nêche; bright and early I see. I've got good news: the watch . . . say, what's the matter with you? Look like you'd been drug through a knothole."

"Didn't sleep well," growled Nash.

"I guessed that; but there's something else. Come, tell Papa Merlin. You're in love, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh. If you're so smart, maybe you can tell me what to do about it. What would happen if I stayed here?"

Stark shrugged. "That's up to Bechard. When a mundane body abandons an astral congener to create another, the first astral body goes on living unchanged until some accident causes its dissolution. But sometimes a mundane body, instead of abandoning its creation outright, will slowly change it. They do pretty horrible things to us sometimes."

"Would Bechard know about that?"

"He would unless he's even dumber than most demons."

"But if I go back with the Shamir, I'll take this body with me, so she'll be left with nothing at all. Could you . . . uh . . . exorcise me, so she'd—"

"Altruistic devil, aren't you? They get that way sometimes. Wouldn't do any good; your soul couldn't take the Shamir back by itself, and without it Bechard wouldn't let you back into your own body. So you'd bounce right back up."

Nash twisted his strong fingers together. "Could you send her back with me?"

"Sorry, but the Shamir's a one-man vehicle."

"What then? There must be some way out for us."

"You'll get over it."

"But I don't *want* to—"

"Oh, for Och's sake! I'm a magician, not a lovelorn column editor! I was trying to tell you that your watch will be ready this afternoon. If you can locate your two assistants, you could leave this evening, and raid Tukiphat's Island before dawn. I'd strongly advise it, if possible. Have you got any helpers yet?"

"My girl friend, Alicia Woodson."

"How about the third?"

"Haven't anybody. I don't suppose you'd consider . . . uh—"

"Good Uriel, no! I wouldn't say 'boo' to Tukiphat, and anyway I have my practice to look after."

"Well, there are one or two pretty good guys I knew in New York, but I don't know where they are."

"Take too long to locate them, by natural means or otherwise," said Stark. "I do know a local condottiere—that is, he was a condottiere until Alessandro got the better of all his fellow cutthroats and became a champion of law and order. This man, Muzio Sforza D'Amelio, has done one or two jobs for me, and I haven't had cause for complaint."

"Would you advise me to trust him?" asked Nash worriedly.

"I advise you to trust nobody, but you have to make use of people now and then. As I say, D'Amelio has been honest enough in his dealings with me, and before that he had a fairly good reputation as mercenary soldiers go."

"Well, are you specifically recommending him?"

"No, I'm not. I'm merely calling him to your attention. Another advantage is that he speaks Italian, so he might be able to talk you out of trouble if the Romans or Aryans stopped you."

"If I could interview him first—"

"Can do. Paraldine, take a telepathic message." The wizard and his secretary both shut their eyes and concentrated for some minutes. Then Stark opened his.

"O. K., he'll be in some time this afternoon. Guess we'd better do the same for your Alicia. Paraldine, a copy to the chevalier's friend, Miss Alicia Woodson. And now, my friend, you're going to tell me all about the mundane plane. Oh, before we begin, we might . . . uh . . . ahem—"

"Settle the vulgar financial details?" grinned Nash. "Here you are."

Stark smiled broadly as he counted the money. "Put it in the safe, Paraldine, and get your shorthand pad ready."

All morning Nash talked. He gave an hour to his own humdrum biography, and in response to Stark's questions went off into the science, religion, social customs, and other facets of his civilization.

Paraldine brought a couple of light lunches and put them on the wizard's desk. Nash looked at his and said: "Thanks, but I don't think I could eat any lunch."

Stark shook a commiserating head. "Boy, you sure have got a bad case. Try some of this sherry; it's a good antidote for lovesickness."

Nash tried, and eventually was able to choke down his food. The doorbell rang; the sylph went out and returned with a small package which

proved to contain the watch from Nathan.

"It'll do," said Stark after a critical examination. "Go on with your talk; I want to hear more about that nice kind Inquisition."

By three o'clock Nash's throat was sore. Stark held up a hand. "I think that'll do. You've answered all the crucial questions you could. And I see your lady fair approaching."

When Alicia was admitted, she reported to Nash: "The girls are all on their way, and the blankets are all returned, and the slaves are all auctioned off."

"How did they like it?"

"The girls?"

"No, the slaves."

"They were delighted. But I couldn't get rid of the menagerie; nobody would take them even as a gift."

Nash sighed. "I can see why. What'll we do with them? Give them to Duke Alessandro?"

"What's this?" Stark broke in. Nash told him about the sultan's ape and saber-tooth.

Alicia added: "We have food enough to keep 'em happy for a couple of days, and I got their formulas and commands from their keepers. You say *accumbe* when you want them to lie down, and *carpe* when you want them to tear somebody to pieces. That's about all."

Stark suggested: "Why not take them along with you? They seem to be fairly docile as long as they're fed, and they'd give you prestige with the Aryans. Not many would try to stop you if you were leading those animals on leashes."

"Wouldn't they attract attention?" asked Nash.

"Maybe, but you can expect some attention from the Aryans anyway. The only way to deal with an Aryan is to step on his toes until *he* apologizes." Stark looked at his own watch, and set the altered stop watch by it. "D'Amelio ought to be here. Suppose you people help me enchant the props; save time.

"Paraldine, take a spell. Three copies, marked for cues:

" 'I do hereby adjure thee, Watch, by Uriel, Seraph, Ablati, and Agla, that when thou dost enter any enchanted zone wherein the time rate is slowed, the time rate of him who carries thee shall be accelerated even as thy hour-hand shall be accelerated. I command thee in the names of Cronus, Tempus, and Wyrd, that the same acceleration shall apply to the clothes and effects of him who carries thee, and his companions and conveyance. Be faithful to thy trust in the name of Jod, Metraton, by the virtue of the heavens, the stars, the angels, the planets, and the stones; Adon, Schadai, Zeboth; Eloi, Ha, Jo Theos—' "

It went on like this for a whole page. Stark rapidly dictated four more spells; one to immobilize Tukiphat, and one each on a rope, a seal, and a stick of sealing wax wherewith to bind him.

The bell rang, announcing Muzio Sforza D'Amelio, who turned out to be a big burly fellow in colorful Fifteenth-Century costume and a ready smile. Stark showed them into a small private room and left them to confer.

When he had heard Nash's proposal, D'Amelio said: "Soundsa like a fina job! I don' know if a poor littla fella lika me woulda be mucha help, but I lika to try!"

He had charm. When Nash offered him five hundred down and five hundred when the job was finished he jumped at it so quickly that Nash mentally kicked himself for not making a lower offer. Nash was not altogether satisfied with such an impromptu arrangement, but the ten days allowed him by Bechard were running short.

Paraldine had meanwhile typed all the spells in triplicate. Stark took his three visitors into the spell room, which was simply a big, dark, rather bare room with magical devices stacked here and there.

Instead of drawing pentacles on the floor, Stark went over to a pile of circular pieces of linoleum, three to four feet in diameter, on which the magical diagrams were already drawn. He tossed four of these on the floor, and put Nash and Alicia in the centers of two of them.

The magus lit a fire in a tripod, passed the watch quickly through the flame, blew on it, and sprinkled it with a pinch of earth and a few drops of water. Then he wiped it and put it in the middle of the center pentacle. He took his position on the remaining one and began reading the spell. Nash and Alicia, according to instructions, chimed in with choruses at certain points, meanwhile turning round and round like dervishes. Nash became dizzy and almost reeled out of his circle before a snap of Stark's fingers warned him to control his body.

There were similar performances for the other articles. "Now," said Stark, "we'll have a little rehearsal of the binding of Tukiphat. Miss Woodson will read the initial fixation. Muzio, being the biggest, will handle the rope, and de Nêche the seal. You'll have to work fast, because that initial fixation won't hold Tuky much more than a minute."

They went to work. With the fixation spell the magician's limbs became rigid. D'Amelio looped the rope around him as he had been instructed. Nash lit one of the oversized matches he had been given, melted a gob of wax onto the crossing of the rope ends, and gave it a poke with the seal, which had a hexagram with the Greek letters alpha and omega and the Hebrew letters jod, vau, and two he's.

"Swell!" said Stark. "Now if you'll just break this seal, de Nêche—"

"Can't you?"

"No, damn it, it worked on me too! That's how I know you did it right."

"I theenk it woulda be fun to leava him there, eh, Chevalier?" grinned D'Amelio.

"Hi!" cried Stark in alarm. "You can't treat a professional man that way!"

Nash took his time about breaking the seal, commenting: "Seems to me, Merlin, old mage, that we put as much work into this preparation as you did, and we don't get paid for it."

"True. But you paid me, not for what I did, but for knowing how to do it! Thanks. Now you three run along, collect your beasties, and lead them down to Pier 9. You'll find a boat there to take you to Manhattan. Paraldine's already contacted the skipper; name of Jones. No extra charge, de Nêche, if that's what you're looking worried about."

The little steam launch lay moored to Pier 9; a man in a brass-buttoned coat and sideburns leaned against the stack chewing tobacco. He took in the party and said: "Ahoy, be you the passengers for Manhattan? Cap'n Jones. Hi, you ain't gonna take those animules aboard?"

"Oh, signor captain!" said D'Amelio. "Thosa littla creaturesa, they would not hurt a fly!"

"Mebbe not, but I ain't no fly! Oh, well, belay 'em to the quatterdeck. Say, Mr. de Nêche, ain't I seen you somewheres?"

"Might," said Nash. "Is your name . . . uh . . . Ahab Dana Jones?"

"Sure thing! I remember now! You was the man we horned in on when he was fighting the Saracens. Remember the hoss you guv me? That furnished the down payment on this little ship. Cast off, Walter."

The launch wheezed northward in the deepening gloom of an overcast November evening. Smiley and Kulu huddled together as far from the water as they could get.

The skipper spat tobacco juice with carefully calculated trajectory, and said: "Don't get many passengers for Manhattan; everybody that can, wants to get away. Say, Mr. de Nêche, seems to me I heard your name somewheres else. Ain't you the one the Manhattan Government in Exile is lookin' for to hang for desertion?"

Nash swallowed and answered: "I didn't know they'd gone that far. What happened?"

"You and that fella—Average?"

"Averoff?" suggested Nash.

"Yeah. *Heh, heh,* I heard the hull yarn. They say you gave this here cowboy a message to a Sergeant Berl you was supposed to take yourself, and then you vamoosed. Is that right?"

"More or less. I had good reasons, though."

"Ain't sayin' you didn't. All I know is what I heard."

"What else did you hear?" Nash felt a peculiar tightness around his throat as if the noose were already tightening. He must have hung up a record for making enemies during his short stay.

"It was a queer thing. This cowboy, Averoff, talks with a New York accent, and don't make no difference between 'Berl' and 'Boyle'; calls 'em both 'buh-eel.' So when he found a Sergeant Boyle he thought he had Sergeant Berl, and guv him the message, which was an order to disarm the Lenin regiment. But Sergeant Boyle's brigade was on the wrong end of the front, and before he could do anything the Lenins had mutinied. I just heard today the Arries finally took City Hall and shot all the Lenins. Serves 'em right, *heh, heh.*"

XIV.

"HALT! WER DA?" The command rang out in a peculiarly tense, high bark, as if the speaker had screwed himself up to such a nervous pitch that he was on the verge of exploding. But this was, as Nash came to learn, merely the ordinary tone used by Aryans on military duty. This particular Aryan, a cross-gartered barbarian with his hair in long yellow braids, was covering them with a rifle aimed from the hip.

Nash responded: "Just us," and did some quick thinking. When they had been stopped by a squad of Roman legionnaires, Muzio Sforza D'Amelio had talked them loose with a swift hand-waving patter of Italian. That might not work so well with this pseudo-Alaric.

As they advanced into the small circle of light around the sentry, the latter snapped: "Shpeak Aryan, sub-man!"

"I only know about ten words—" apologized Nash.

"You know da regulation. All sub-men must learn Aryan in vun veek or be executed. Vot are dese! Who gave you permission to lead dancherous animals around da streets?"

D'Amelio's hands began to flutter in a way that Nash had learned to interpret as a warming up for articulate speech. The condottiere said: "Theesa poor littla pussy cat anda monk', your high command order' for their blood. We take them."

"Blood? Explain, or you vill be executed."

"Yessa, blood. You know the Aryans have sucha wonderful blood, better than other people? They are going to giva you transfusions from theesa littla animals, to make you stronga like them."

"O-o-oh! Vy didn't you say so? Vot are you vaiting around for? On your vay! Hurry! And don't let dose animals loose, or you vill be executed!"

They walked on through the cemeterial streets for a couple more silent blocks before being challenged again. This time there were three Aryans: a commander in the chain mail and white black-

crossed surcoat of a Teutonic knight, flanked by a pair of horned Siegfrieds.

D'Amelio went through his spiel about the high command's plan for improving the blood of the super-race. The result was different.

"Hm-m-m," said the knight, "let me see." He leaned forward to scrutinize the beasts. The saber-tooth may have taken a dislike to the Aryan's smell, for Smiley laid his ears back and snarled with a sound like the crackle of a high-voltage arc.

The knight retreated a hasty step. "You had better keep them under control, sub-men!" barked the paladin. "If I had been so much as scratched, you would have been executed! Now I see that one is a mythical African ape, a kulukamba, and the other an extinct American carnivore, *Smilodon californicus.* You cannot fool the German culture! These are not Aryan animals. The first is from the Negro continent, and the second from the Jewish continent, America. You think our leaders would inject us with the blood of Negroid and Jewish animals? Fools, you will be executed anyway. Seize them!"

"Who, us?" said the Siegfrieds in rather small voices.

"Ja! Sie!"

Nash did not want to sic his beasts on the warriors at this stage if it could be avoided. While the subordinates tensed themselves to spring, and D'Amelio's free hand stole to his hilt, Alicia's clear voice blasted the night: "You lousy stinking obscenity swine, if you touch us I'll Aryanize you all right! I'll—"

"Madame!" cried the knight, angry but somehow less truculent. "You must not! Such language is forbidden by the regulations!"

Then Nash remembered: "Step on their toes until *they* apologize!"

"Ha-ha!" he shouted in a nasty, mirthless laugh. "Talk of executing *me!* Expect me to commit suicide?"

"What do you mean?" gasped the knight.

"I," announced Nash in the tense, pharyngeal tones of an aroused Aryan, "am Ritter Johann Glück von Nasch, the new executioner!"

"Guk," said the knight. "But . . . but where is your ax?"

"What do you think these are?" Nash pointed to his beasts.

"O-o-oh! *Ich verstehe! Aber, warum sprechen sie Englisch?"*

Nash's heart skipped a beat before he got the answer to that one too: "Because that's the only language these animals understand. Now will you go about your proper duties, or must I report you?"

The Teutonic knight at this point exhibited a marked lack of enthusiasm for Nash's company. He murmured apologies, bowed from the hips, saluted, and clanked off. When the darkness swallowed him and his cohorts, Nash and his assistants heard the Aryan trio break into a run.

D'Amelio laughed. "You are gooda, Chevalier. Thosa poor little supermen, I am sorry for them!"

"Give the credit to Miss Woodson's lack of inhibitions," said Nash, quickening his pace. "In a while it'll occur to them to go round to headquarters to ask if there really is a new executioner, and then Manhattan'll be too hot for us."

"It's not what you'd call frigid now," added Alicia.

Central Park was so dark under the starless sky that it took them half an hour of bush-beating to find the lake.

"More Aryansa," whispered D'Amelio.

Nash peered out from behind a tree, and made out men scattered along the shore. "Seems to be a cordon of 'em clear around the lake," he murmured. "Guess we'd better go around to where Shapiro's boathouse is."

They wended their slow way. The beasts became difficult: Kulu wanted to climb trees, and Smiley sniffed and tugged at the scent of squirrels and other small game. Once the latter got his chain tangled in a bush, and while Nash was unsnarling it the big cat slipped away on his belly.

Nash called: *"Ah—ac*—lie down, Smiley! Alicia, what do you—"

"Accumbe!" cried the girl. After some hunting they found Smiley crouched under the shrubbery; he whined with displeasure when Nash hauled on his chain, but came.

They found the path leading to the boathouse and walked boldly down it. At the first challenge, Nash barked that he was von Nasch, the new executioner—

"Ho, ho! Otto, *hierher!"* There was a stir; more shadowy forms with winged and horned iron hats drifted up. *"Der Kerl behaupt, das er der neuer Henker ist!"*

"Vunderful," rumbled a voice. "A fine shtory. De only flaw is dat *I* da new executioner been!" Nash saw that the speaker was a stocky man who leaned on a huge ax, and had his other arm around the neck of another Aryan who punctuated his sentences with a girlish giggle. *"Doch,* I make you apprentice. I give you vun lesson, very short, very sharp. It is too bad you vill not be able to take more—"

The Aryans gathered around them like a wave about to break. Nash heard the jingle as D'Amelio dropped the ape's chain, and the *wheep* of emerging sword and dagger. He released the saber-tooth. "Smiley! Kulu! *Carpe! Carpe!"*

The kulukamba gave a short, piercing scream; the cat roared; a gun crashed somewhere and lit up the scene for a blink. Nash drove his rapier through Otto's chest while the latter was still starting to swing his ponderous ax. He almost

stuck another figure before he realized that it was Alicia, hacking away with an Aryan sword.

The confusion opened out; the three non-Aryans found themselves alone with a few stiffs. More guns banged, and the shouts, roars, and screams faded into the distance.

One rowboat stood on the boathouse apron; they tumbled into it and pushed off. "You row, D'Amelio," said Nash.

"Butta, signor, a littla weaka man like me—"

"Row, damn it! I've got to work this watch."

The condottiere put his massive shoulders into it, and the boat whizzed through the ripples. Nash directed it toward the desert island.

"It's beginning to get light," said Alicia.

"Gosh! Have we been all night? We'll have a swell chance of getting away in daytime."

"Maybe somebody'll hide us," suggested Alicia, not too hopefully.

"Maybe. More on your right, D'Amelio."

Nash was not sure that they had entered the smooth strip that marked the intersection of Tukiphat's hollow sphere of refraction and the surface of the lake, until the surroundings were suddenly and swiftly stretched out of all recognizable shape. D'Amelio dropped his oars and crossed himself.

"Keep on," Nash ordered him, and pressed the stud on the side of the stop watch. At once the environment returned, if not to normal, at least to a recognizable distortion thereof. Tukiphat's island was visible as if seen through a concave lens. A few more strokes carried them through the refractory zone altogether, and another half-minute's rowing to the island itself.

The keel grated softly against the sand, and before the boat had stopped, Alicia had jumped out into inch-deep water and was pulling on the painter. D'Amelio scrambled after, and then Nash.

The last whispered: "He's supposed to be contemplating his navel beside the entrance to his cave. That's around the hill. Damn it, D'Amelio, stop that jingling!"

They padded noiselessly over the sand. A dark spot came into view on the side of the knoll, and beside it could be discerned an amorphous gray shape the size of a seated man.

A sound that to Nash's excited imagination resembled the explosion of a string of firecrackers, made him jump, till he realized that it was the slight crackle of Alicia's sheet of typewriter paper.

"Light the candle," breathed Nash.

"Can't; I haven't enough hands. You'll have to."

Nash fumbled and dropped his match, and had to comb the sand with his fingers for it. The shapeless figure was as still as a headstone, which it slightly resembled.

Nash struck a light and sought the candle wick. The surroundings seemed suddenly much darker.

"Ouch!" said Alicia, quite audibly.

"What?" said Nash.

"Damned wax burned me—"

"*Sh!* He's coming to!"

In the microcosmic candle light, the gray thing was stirring. A head emerged from the top of the bundle: high forehead, fiercely aquiline nose, in a lean, old, but firm-skinned face; the whole utterly devoid of hair.

The black gimlet eyes threw back tiny reflections of the candle flame, and the whole bundle stirred. A bare arm thrust itself out of the voluminous gray mantle, and the being started to heave itself to its feet. A voice, deep and clear, boomed out: "Damned impertinence—"

Alicia flapped her paper sharply to flatten it out, and cried: "Tukiphat, I command and abjure thee, be thou still in the name of Metraton! Genius of the Shamir, be thou fixed by Mizkun and Nikita! By the fiery serpents of the caduceus, be thou rendered immobile, in the holy names Trinitas, Sother, Messias, Emmanuel, Sabahot, Adonai, Athenatos, and Pentagna! I order thee to remain rigid by Tetragram and Tetragrammaton—"

The cloaked figure creaked to a stop. Its toga slipped from its shoulders and fell in a heap around its feet, leaving it fixed in an awkward semi-erect position, like a bald discobolus without his discus. Nash saw that Tukiphat wore on a chain around his neck a many-faceted stone the size of a hard baseball.

Nash and D'Amelio went into action like a pair of surgeons racing against peritonitis. The former yanked the gem off over Tukiphat's head; the latter whipped the rope around and around, binding wrist and ankle and crossing the ends against the chest of the genius.

Tukiphat blinked and shuddered as a big gob of sealing wax scorched his hide. As he started to come out of the fixation spell, Nash pressed the seal against the wax. The genius twiddled his fingers and squirmed a little, but seemed unable to do anything practical toward ridding himself of the rope.

"Fools!" he roared. "Release me! That loot will do you no good. You cannot escape me—"

But the three criminals were hurrying back to their boat. Alicia put the candle out, as it was now light enough to see their way without it. They passed another, smaller rowboat—the same one that had been there when Nash had made his abortive attempt to raid the island—no doubt Tukiphat's own boat.

D'Amelio broke into a brief run. Before he reached the large rowboat, he turned and drew his weapons: a sword and a broad, foot-long dagger with a massive guard.

"I amma *so* sorry!" he remarked amiably, "but

I mus' aska you to giva me da jewel—"

"Oh, yeah?" snarled Nash. He had been subconsciously expecting something of the sort. Almost before he knew it he was boring in.

D'Amelio's sword was a pre-rapier, with a cut-and-thrust blade much heavier than his opponent's. Nash had little trouble getting past this slow crowbar, but the condottiere did not seem to mind. He did most of his parrying with the big dagger anyway. As Nash finished one lunge, D'Amelio snaked his left hand out and hooked a projection of the guard of his dagger into the guard of Nash's sword. Nash could not recover, and D'Amelio sent a lethal thrust straight at his chest.

Nash felt a blow like that of a fist against his breastbone; it almost tore his grip on his hilt loose, but did not penetrate. D'Amelio tried again, and again his point stopped and his blade bowed in compression.

D'Amelio's eyes widened. "You are invulnerab'! No fair!"

Nash snorted with truculent relief. He put his foot against D'Amelio's body, took his hilt in both hands, and tore the dagger out of the condottiere's grasp. Then he lunged—but into thin air; D'Amelio danced back out of range. A sound made him turn. Alicia Woodson was ankle-deep in the water, wading purposefully ashore with one of the oars in her hands.

D'Amelio ran back some more to avoid being flanked. As Nash followed, he cried: "Waita, my friend! Looka!" His left hand went into his trunk hose and came out with a small shiny object: Nash's magical watch.

"Where'd you get that?" said Nash.

"I picka your pock'!" The swarthy face grinned with high good humor. "Now, you gotta da jewel, I gotta da watcha. Let'sa be friends, splitta da dough fifty-fifty. Otherwise I throw da watch in da drink!"

"Won't work. Not going to sell it. Gimme!" Nash advanced; D'Amelio would hardly throw away their only means of escaping Tukiphat's vengeance—

But Muzio Sforza D'Amelio did just that. A small black blob arched high against the breaking clouds and disappeared with a *plunk*.

"You damned idiot!" yelled Nash, starting for the mercenary. The big man whirled and fled again, light as a ballet dancer. "You thinka you catcha me? Ha ha!"

"Prosper!" called Alicia. "Quick!"

She had the oars in the locks and the boat ready to shove off.

"The watch—" objected Nash.

"I know! Hurry, before water gets into the works!"

There seemed to be no percentage in chasing the elusive Italian, so Nash took to the rowboat. "Hope you know what you're doing, Alicia."

"Of course I do! Look behind you. The watch fell into the refractory zone, so now there isn't any refractory zone!"

Nash took a quick glance. "Gosh, that's so!"

"But," she continued, "when water works into the gear wheels the watch will stop, and the refractory zone will be right back where it was!"

Nash only half paid attention, for he was pulling with all his might. Behind Alicia in the stern appeared Muzio Sforza, rowing Tukiphat's small rowboat.

"That man," panted Nash, "is hard to discourage."

They entered the area of optical distortion that marked the partly neutralized refractory sphere. The pursuing boat at once looked much farther off, but it gained rapidly.

"Chavalier!" called D'Amelio over his shoulder. "You are a man of honor, yes? Then you will notta risk your beautiful lady by a naval battla, yes?"

Alicia said: "Give me your sword, Prosper, and when he gets close enough—"

"Not—necessary," grunted Nash. They were almost out of the zone. They crossed the line—and three seconds later the zone reappeared in full force.

Nash rested on his oars for a few seconds. "Guess the watch stopped, all right, all right. Look at the poor guy, Alicia!"

A few feet away, Muzio Sforza D'Amelio bobbed up and down on the smooth dull surface of the refractory strip. He and his boat were there and as large as life, but they seemed to have lost all depth—except for their motion, they looked just like a big cardboard cutout facing Nash and his lady.

D'Amelio's head turned, like the head of a character in a colored movie, and his mouth moved. After a few seconds his voice reached them: "Signor! Signora! Where are you? I am los'! Oh, helpa me, dear friendsa!"

Nash grinned. "He's such an impudent duck you can't help liking him. I'm almost tempted to —but I guess—"

"Prosper! Don't you dare!"

"I was saying I guess I'd better not. We've got enough troubles." He glanced at the lightening sky. "The sun's due any time."

Alicia suggested: "Why don't you use the Shamir now to go back to your own plane?"

"And leave you in this hell hole? Don't be silly!" He glanced down at the gem on his chest, which in the waxing light was sending out gleams of all the spectral colors from red to violet.

No Aryans were in sight, though faint traffic sounds began to filter in from the unseen city surrounding the park. Nash rowed to the side of the lake as far as possible from Shapiro's landing.

They hauled the boat out and into the bushes.

Nash suggested: "Maybe we'd better climb a tree until dark—"

"The leaves are all off, Prosper."

"Yeah, so they are. But if we can find some sort of hide-out during the day, we can sneak down to the water front tonight. Jones said he'd be there to pick us up—"

The shrubbery, which up till then had been so accursedly dense, suddenly looked so sparse as to be practically nonexistent.

"They'll be hunting for us around here anyway," said Nash. "Let's hike up north a mile or so."

That procedure went well until they came to a big open weedy field. "Too risky to cross," said Nash. "Let's skirt it—"

Around they went, flitting from tree to tree. Halfway around—

"Halt!"

They jumped and whirled. Fifty feet away an Aryan sat on an outcropping of rock, covering them with his rifle. He was in the plainest of plain sight, but the fugitive pair had been watching the field so closely as to overlook him completely.

Nash, without a word, seized Alicia's hand and set off at a clumping run. Ka-*pow!* went the rifle; ka-*pow!*

Alicia, once started, quickly got ahead of Nash, but did not run away from him altogether. The rifle crashed twice more, and the sentry shouted. Other shouts came through the bare trees from different directions.

"Rotten bad shooting," panted Nash. "This way—"

"No, this way! There's an Arry over that way—"

It made little difference, for another Aryan hove in sight, running, and then another. A bullet went *whick* close to their heads.

"Hi, partner!"

The voice came from nowhere visible, until Nash noticed that the curtain of ivy that cascaded down over a granite outcrop was parted at the base, and

a lantern-jawed face looked out: that of Arizona Bill Averoff.

They did not need instructions, but ducked down out of sight of their pursuers and went through the ivy on hands and knees. After a few knee-bruising irregularities, the tunnel expanded to walkable size. It was no longer a natural cave entrance but a man-made passageway.

"What's this, Arizona?" asked Nash, after a quick handshake.

"This yere," said Averoff, "is an old tunnel that leads out from the cellar of the old Arsenal. I shore hope them Arries don't find the exit, because they's several of us hidin' out in that there cellar."

"Say, Arizona, what's this I heard about your going astray with the message I gave you?"

"It's so," said Averoff gloomily. "You shoulda wrote the boid's name down, mister. Now I gotta watch out for both the Arries *and* my own government, which says it's gonna hang me and you if it catches us. Course in time they'll see it was bad luck 'steada our fault, but that won't do us no good if we been already suspendered."

"Thanks for them kind words, partner," said Nash. "Is that your cellar ahead?"

"Yeah." There were a couple of empty hinges on the side of the tunnel where a door had once been, and a ten-by-sixteen concrete-floored chamber lit by one candle. Five men and a woman sat around the wall. Rickety steps led up to a closed trapdoor.

"Folks," said Averoff, "I got a coupla recruits: Miss Woodson and Mr. de Nêche. The lady is Mrs. Russell, the soldier is General Leeds, and the Turkish gent is Sultan Arslan—oh, do you boys know each other already?"

Arslan Bey got to his feet and said heavily: "In view of the fact that M. de Nêche just robbed us of everything we had, even our women, we—think—we do!"

XV.

"Wait a minute, Arslan," said Nash. "Why do you say I robbed you?"

"Ha! Our faithful Kutluk"—the sultan jerked his head toward a second Turk, also rising and unlimbering his chopper—"was one of those whom you treacherously threw into the North River. Since the Aryans stopped our barges at the mouth of Minetta Brook, we were unable to leave Manhattan, and Kutluk returned hither at risk of life to acquaint us with your perfidy. You even have the impudence to confront us with our favorite wife, No. 307—"

"*Sh!* Don't be a fool; you'll bring the Aryans down—"

"Yah!" screamed Arslan. "Die, you dog!"

Since Alicia was standing beside Nash when Arslan launched his attack, Nash's first concern was to get her out of the way. But in sweeping her behind him he allowed Arslan to get between him and the tunnel entrance.

Nash had never experienced anything like the demoniac fury of the sultan's attack; the slashes came so fast that he had no time for ripostes. Kutluk took a position back to back with his master, with his scimitar ready in case anyone else was minded to take a hand, but as none of the others was armed, they simply watched.

The weight of Arslan's assault pushed Nash back toward a corner. Then under the hail of blows Nash's blade snapped.

The jeweled scimitar whistled round and hit Nash's neck. Nash, instead of parting company with his body as he expected to do, felt a dull, heavy blow that staggered him— Then another on his scalp, and another on his shoulder. The Shamir!

He dropped the remains of his rapier and dove for Arslan's body; got a hand under the sultan's thigh and heaved him off the floor—the animal must weigh a ton—and sat him down heavily. When he tried to pin his opponent, Arslan pulled Nash down on top of him, and they rolled about, kicking and gouging. Kutluk spun around to do his part, but Arizona Bill climbed on his back and fastened his bow legs around the soulless one's waist in a scissors.

"Hey!" cried one of the noncombatants, "The Aryans! They must have found the tunnel!"

Nash had secured a three-quarter nelson on his antagonist and was trying without success to break Arslan's bull neck. He heard Alicia's voice: "Turn him over, Prosper, so I can get at his eyes—"

"Don't bother! Take the Shamir off my neck! *Unh!*"

"What? But then you'll be vulner—"

"Do as I say! And get that paper out of my rear inside coat pocket!"

"But—"

"Now blow on the Shamir and magic yourself down to the mundane plane . . . *unh* . . . and look up—"

"I won't leave you! Up the ladder, quick—"

The general had climbed the steps leading to the main floor of the arsenal and was pounding on the lower side of the trapdoor. The tramp of Aryan feet came down the tunnel.

"Don't argue!" yelled Nash. "Go look up my friend Montague Allen Stark, *unh*, at the Central Park Y. M. C. A.! Maybe he can help—"

"*Halt!* You are under arrest!"

The trapdoor flew open, and the gold-braided soldier scrambled out, followed by Mrs. Russell.

"Shtop or you vill be shot!" The shrill bark was close.

Alicia's voice penetrated Nash's consciousness: "—great Adonai, Elohim, and Jehovam, *conjuro*—"

Arizona Bill Averoff's chaps disappeared through the trapdoor. A gun roared, and the

civilian following him groaned, doubled up, and fell down the steps. The cellar suddenly swarmed with Aryans. They hauled Nash to his feet and kicked him, and did likewise with the ex-sultan.

Kutluk was stretched out, not quite conscious. The Aryans kicked him. He stirred and groaned but did not rise. When a few more kicks failed to bring him to his feet, an Aryan fired a bullet through his head. Kutluk quivered and began to fade out. The civilian had already done so; Alice had disappeared completely. That left Nash, Arslan Bey, and the other civilian in the bag.

The Aryans handcuffed their prisoners together and kicked them up the cellar steps and out the door of the arsenal.

The sun was cool and bright on the field, which was much like the one Nash and Alicia had been trying to skirt when they had flushed their first Aryan. A section of Aryans stood at ease, and in front of them slouched several dejected-looking non-Aryans.

"Guess we'll fade out in good company," said Nash.

"You've got nerve, Chevalier," said the civilian.

Nash lowered his voice: "I'm scared half to death, but don't tell—"

"Silence, sub-man!" A kick followed the admonition. Nash painfully guessed that his hams must be all the colors of the rainbow by now.

Two of the previous arrivals were arguing heatedly: one a soldier, the other a shabby man wearing a cloth cap and a red brassard. The Aryans let them shout, enjoying the spectacle.

Nash heard the soldier say: "If you Communists hadn't—"

The other—an obvious Lenin—interrupted: "We had to do what we did because of Historical Necessity. If you degenerate bourgeois had co-operated—"

"Yeah? By 'co-operate' you guys mean let you be God almighty—"

"Of course! If you weren't blinded by slimy social-fascist prejudices, you'd see—ah!" The Lenin glared venomously at Nash. "One of the decadent aristocracy! I thought we'd liquidated them all, but I guess the Aryan bloodsuckers will—"

"Silence!" The nearest Aryan kicked the Lenin, who folded up with a howl. A punch in the face brought him back upright, spitting out a tooth.

Nash and his two companions were lined up with the other victims; their handcuffs were changed around to one per man. After an excruciating wait, the boss Aryan addressed them: "According to da regulations, you must be executed in alphabetical order. So—"

"Ah, commander!" growled Arslan Bey. "We have a favor to ask."

"Vot?"

"If you intend to slay us all, allow me the boon of killing this villainous unbeliever de Nêche!"

"De Nêche?" cried the soldier. "That's the traitor who didn't deliver the message! Let me at him!"

A general wrangle broke out. The Lenin grinned brokenly through his little blond beard. "So that's de Nêche? Seems to me he showed almost proletarian realism! He made our coup possible. Of course since gratitude is a mere bourgeois superstition, I'd kill him anyway—"

"Silence! Silence!" The usual kicks quieted the dispute. One Aryan said to the boss: "Since dey love each odder so, vy not give them knives and let dem fight it out?"

"Not according to da regulations! Now, submen, give me your names. You?" He addressed a mild-looking civilian.

"Zwuggle," answered the man promptly.

"Vot?"

"Zwuggle! Z-W-U-G—"

"Dere is no such name! You are trying to get a place at de end of da line! Answer truthfully or you vill be executed!"

"But you're going to execute me anyway!" said the astralite plaintively. "And it really is Zwuggle!"

"I don't believe it. Put him at da beginning of da line. Now ve know dis Asiatic is named Arslan Bey; he is an A. Put him next to Herr Zwuggle. De Nêche, dat is a D—"

"It's an N!" protested Nash. "I'm listed under N in the phone book—"

"Vot is a phone book? I never heard of it, so dere can be no such thing. Get over dere, *schwein*, or—"

"I know," said Nash. "I'll be executed."

"Your name?"

"Harris."

"Stand dere. Your name?"

"Wright."

"R goes dere."

"It's a W!"

"You said 'Wright,' not 'Vright.' Next?"

This was the Lenin. "Darmer!" he cried. "Nikolai Frunze Darmer!"

"Party name or real name?"

"Party name, of course. My real name begins with S, but a proletarian hero like me doesn't purchase a few lousy minutes of life by telling his real name to cowardly murderers like—"

A tattoo of punches and kicks ended the demonstration. The rest of the party was soon sorted out. Then there was another wait while the Aryans conferred among themselves; a messenger was dispatched somewhither, and returned twenty minutes later.

The boss Aryan grinned sardonically. "I am so sorry ve cannot do you de honor of meeting da regular executioner, but he vas killed last night

and has not been replaced. So—" Another Aryan stepped forward, swung up a light battle-ax, and brought it down, *chunk*, on the skull of the unfortunate Zwuggle.

The civilian went down, grinning by halves. The Aryan stepped in front of Arslan Bey. *Chunk!* Then the Lenin, who cried: "We shall be avenged! The masses will—" *Chunk!*

Nash knew that one could not run well with one's hands tied behind one's back, but he was determined to try. The only person between him and death was a certain Davis, a young man in a baseball-player's uniform. Mr. Davis tried to avert his fate by dodging the ax, which sliced off an ear and buried itself in his shoulder. The baseball player shrieked and jerked back; the next blow smashed his jaw. He fell supine, and the Aryan stepped forward and systematically chopped his face into red ruin. The other Aryans laughed.

"Ach, was ist—"

"Achtung!"

The laughter died; the Aryans stared horrified past their victims. Nash craned his neck.

A monstrous army was erupting out of the trees on the west side of the field. Strung out in open order from one end of the field to the other was a line of things somewhat resembling Kulu, the late ex-sultan's pet ape. But these were eight feet tall, wore steel helmets and breastplates, and each one had four arms full of lethal weapons.

And just behind the center of the line came a rider whose mount seemed to have been assembled out of spare parts from all the monsters of mythology. Its head was like that of a huge turtle, except that it had ears and horns. Its body and limbs were shaped like those of a bear, but were covered with scales. Its massive tail ended in a ball of spikes.

A gun roared from the skirmish line, and the head of an Aryan vanished—or to be accurate, sprayed all over his fellows. The boss Aryan shouted: *"Sieg heil!"* and pushed through the line of executionees toward the apes.

The victims came to life and ran in all directions. The remaining Aryans rushed after their leader, echoing his war cry. The firing became hot; Nash, running awkwardly like the rest, sighted a hollow and dived into it.

He was still straining futilely at the handcuffs when the firing ceased and a voice said: "Excuse me, your honor, but are you the man with the soul of Prosper Nash?"

Nash looked up: one of the apes was bending over his depression.

"Uh-huh," said Nash. "Now what do *you* want to execute me for?"

"Oh, sir, nothing of the sort!" The ape put a tin whistle to his huge mouth and blew. A slight tremor of the earth hinted that the composite beast was approaching.

Nash rolled over and tried to rise, but found that getting up from a prone position with one's hands manacled behind one takes special technique. As he thrashed among the weeds, the ape reached down, gathered the nape of his jacket into one hairy hand, and set Nash gently but firmly on his feet.

The first group of Aryans had disappeared. The skirmish line had crossed most of the field. Nash, looking at their backs, saw a group of Aryans emerge from the trees beyond them. There was a brief moment of thunderous gunfire, and those Aryans were gone too. Other apes streamed out of the woods following the skirmish line.

The turtle-headed monstrosity lumbered up, and a massive young man in riding breeches vaulted off. This individual combined the physique of a heavyweight champ with the face of—Montague Allen Stark.

"You're Nash?" he said crisply, extending a hand. "Good. Looks as though we weren't any too quick. We were created primarily to rescue you, and secondarily to clean up the Aryans." He cocked his head as gunfire broke out. "Those are my babies now." He looked surprised as Nash appeared to ignore his hand, until Nash showed him the handcuffs.

"That's easy," he said. He signaled to the ape, who snapped the chain.

"Thanks," said Nash. "What's your name?"

"Let me see . . . haven't gotten used to it yet . . . I know! Flash Rogers Stark! Anything else we can do for you?"

"I . . . uh . . . don't know yet. I'm sort of at sea . . . hullo, look who's here!"

A tall angry figure was approaching, all but his bare feet and glabrous head wrapped in yards of gray wool. "You!" roared Tukiphat. "It took me two hours to get free of that anathematized rope! What have you done with the Shamir, O youth of little prudence?"

"Now see here, sir," said Flash Rogers Stark, "I've got orders to protect Mr. Nash, and—"

"You!" sneered the genius. "O shadow-being of a mortal's irrational fancy, I can erase you with a wink. Behold!" Tukiphat waved his hand, and the super-Stark was hoisted six feet into the air. "Interfere not, and fear not for this temerarious imbecile's safety. Tukiphat is above such petty vengeance. Now, Jean-Prosper de Nash or whatever you call yourself, answer me truly, for the fate of your plane may depend on your veracity. Where is the Star of Wisdom?"

"Far as I know it's on the mundane plane," said Nash. This being might have too many inherent, built-in powers to monkey with. "I sent my girl friend down there with it when the Aryans cor-

nered us, and I guess she looked up my friend Monty Stark as I told her to, and he imagined this fellow and his army."

Tukiphat snorted. "Well enough, but tell me not that you stole the Stone of Sages merely to have it handy in such emergencies. What seduced you to this mad enterprise?"

"Well, you see, I've really got a mundane soul; the demon Bechard stole my mundane body—"

"Demon? Bechard?" Tukiphat gave a groan at which the whole field trembled slightly. *"Pater Omnipotens!* Mean you that a demon is on the same plane as the Shamir?"

"Looks that way. He told me to get it for him, or else."

"Quickly, the rest of your tale!"

Nash told him. Tukiphat went through the motions of tearing nonexistent hair. "I might have known! Should Bechard obtain the jewel, your plane will be overrun with demons and your people enslaved or wiped out!"

"But . . . why . . . what—"

"Since Lerajie became their ruler, they have been incubating a plot to obtain more living space, as they put it. Bechard will bring his whole host in, body and soul, by means of the Shamir."

"Gosh! But my mag . . . I was told the Shamir only transports one at a time."

"Child of unwisdom, among demons the one is many and the many are one. 'Bechard' is but the name of a legion, all as alike as so many belocoli. But I will not burden your so-called mind with the metaphysics thereof. We must act quickly, if it be not already too late!"

XVI.

Tukiphat bent over, extended a bony finger, and drew a circle in the earth. He added an ellipse, a couple of crosses, and a labarum; then sketched a smaller diagram tangent to the first. He did not seem perturbed by the fact that, because of the weeds, his pentacles lacked something of clarity.

"I conjure thee, Bechard, and constrain thee, in like manner, by the most holy names of God: Eloi, Adonai, Eloi, Agla, Samalbactai; come without delay or evasion! Do thou obey me and fulfill my commands, by the nut and the moon! Come, Bechard!"

And there was the demon in the smaller pentacle, looking smaller than Nash remembered. Bechard was a little flickery around the edges, and there was something very peculiar about his manner.

"Wazzis?" muttered Bechard.

Tukiphat shouted: "Answer my questions truly and in a seemly manner, O Bechard, else I will torment thee with the holy words—"

"Questions? Regret. Got a hangover. Can't answer."

"Tagla in Oarios, Almoazin on Membrot!"

"Ouch!" said Bechard. Then, sulkily: "Don't know anything. Go peddle your papers—"

"Sulphae, Gabots, and Zariatnatmik!"

"Ow! All right, you big bully. Ask away."

"Where is the Shamir?"

"Shush-shamir? Dunno. Told young gentleman to get. Lessee." Bechard moved his head as if peering blearily. *"That* young gentleman! Ho, you, Prasper Nosh, where ish Samir?"

"Be silent!" snapped Tukiphat. Bechard sat down in the center of his pentacle and covered his face with his hands. Tukiphat turned a worried look on Nash. "I cannot destroy him and I cannot release him. He will be dangerous unless translated back to the demoniac plane, and that will require a double exorcism. Not even I can be on two planes at once."

Bechard looked up and pointed a wobbly finger at Nash. "Young gentleman's maindun . . . mundane body. Die. In coma. Heh. Good joke on you."

"What?" yelled Nash.

"It is true," said Tukiphat. "Your mundane body, having now no tenant, is in coma and will soon die."

Nash began to dance with alarm. "Hey, can't you—"

"A matter of no importance, O Nash, compared with this. Interrupt me not; I must cerebrate—"

"Hey!" cried Nash. "Isn't your trouble that you've got to have an exorcist ready to catch Bechard when he reaches the mundane plane, and give him the yeo-heave-ho down to the demoniac plane?"

"True, but—"

"Well, what's wrong with me?"

"You! O worm who would be an eagle—"

"I mean it! You exorcise me back into my own body, and then send Bechard—"

"What, a mere— O boy, perhaps I misjudge you. It could be . . . but you are no exorcist! And, lacking the Shamir, I cannot send any material object with you. You could not remember the details of the spell, without a writing—"

"Sure I could! Remembering details is the one thing I *am* good at! I carry all my addresses and phone numbers in my head—"

"So be it, then!" Tukiphat rapidly dictated instructions for drawing the pentacles and pronouncing the exorcism that would pitch Bechard back to that dark region from which he had come.

"One more thing," said the genius. "As soon as you have disposed of Bechard, seek out your Alicia Woodson and instruct her to return to this plane at once with the Shamir, lest such a catastrophe threaten the harmony of the spheres again!"

"But," protested Nash, "I'm in love with the gal—"

"That, O youth, is your misfortune. It must be, lest worse befall. Change not your mind, for I can conjure your spirit back hither as easily as Bechard's. And now farewell; the grace of Adonai Elohim go with you—"

It seemed to Nash that Tukiphat had hardly begun the exorcism when he felt again that terrible rushing, falling sensation—

He was lying, dressed, on a rumpled bed. His mouth tasted like nothing in heaven or earth or the waters under the earth.

He blinked sticky eyelids, pulled himself up with cricks and twinges, and fumbled for his glasses.

Gosh, Bechard must have taken his body on a rare bender!

There was something he had to do—the exorcism!

He looked around his narrow room. Chalk—none. A pencil? Might; might not. Soap!

He drew the pentacles with a piece of soap and stood in the larger one, waiting.

He waited a long time, or so it seemed until he looked at the clock. It was quarter of ten; he had been waiting ten minutes. No doubt Tukiphat was allowing him plenty of time to get ready. Did he remember the exorcism? Sure!

"Whass the idea? Mundane plane, astral plane, can't let a poor demon rest—"

There the spook was. Nash shouted: "I exorcise thee, Bechard, by the holy names—" He raced through it in half the time it had taken Tukiphat to give it to him—and Bechard went out like a match-flame.

Nash drew a long breath. He felt his unshaven chin, and tried to raise Monty Stark on the telephone.

No answer. Monty would have left for school long before.

Nash looked distastefully at his rumpled suit, then at himself in the mirror. The face was pale and puffy; the eyes bloodshot. But it was at least his own face. He'd almost forgotten what it looked like.

He went downstairs, and sighted Robert S. Lanby at the cashier's window. He said: "Hi, Bob!"

Lanby looked at him, without surprise but still a little oddly, in fact with a suggestion of horror.

Then Nash remembered. "It's O. K., Bob. I'm me again. Say, what happened to you?" He had observed that Lanby had a dark stain down the side of his face

"I . . . uh . . . you better ask Monty. All I know is a girl that looked like Alice came in here just after I went on duty. She was wearing some sort of pajamas under her coat, and she was panting as if she'd run a mile, and she asked to see Monty. Said it was a life-and-death matter. I tried to explain that we don't let girls up to fellows' rooms in a well-regulated Y, and she should telephone. She claimed she didn't know how to use a telephone, and one thing led to another, and pretty soon she bunged the inkwell at me. I had to change all my clothes. But, Prosper, what happened to *you?* How'd you get back—"

"Tell you all about it later." Nash chuckled. "Seen Monty around?"

"Oh, yeah, he came down and went into a session with this girl. Then they went out, and he came back. I think he went down to breakfast a little while ago—"

"This late?"

"Sure, today's Saturday. He doesn't go to work. But listen, how'd you get rid of—"

Nash waved his friend to silence, and started to go. He turned back. "How do you feel, Bob?"

"All right. Why?"

"Didn't feel as if somebody'd split your skull with an ax?"

"Well—come to think of it, I did have a little stabbing headache a while ago. What's it all—"

"Just this: instead of being so pure in your conduct, and then imagining yourself a ferocious Turk with a harem, you'd better try to be a little more average in both respects. See you later." Nash left a popeyed Bob Lanby and hurried down to the cafeteria.

Montague Stark's eyes met his over the lip of a coffee cup. Stark put the cup down and looked with the same badly concealed aversion that Lanby had shown, until Nash gave him the same reassurance he had given Bob.

"Did it work?" asked Stark at once.

"What, you mean your astral army? I'll say it worked! It's too bad we can't get rid of our own Aryans that easily. That monster your new astral body rode was a humdinger."

"I thought it was pretty cute. After that your lady friend—some girl, by the way—explained what was what, I left her and went up to my room. I got out the old bottle, and just sat and imagined myself a super-duper hero—"

"Where is she?" demanded Nash.

"I put her up in a room at the Imperator, and told her to wait until—"

"Monty, you wouldn't be interested in going up to the astral plane to live? It's a swell place, full of the damnedest incongruities—"

"Me? No, sir! Not on your life! I'll be satisfied to do things like that in my imagination . . . hey, where are you going? I've got a million questions to ask—"

Nash was on his way, but as he reached the door to the street he changed his mind. He went upstairs, shaved, took a swim and a sun-lamp treatment, and put on his best suit. Thank God there

were no more waxed mustache-spikes to come unraveled!

"Wait a minute," said Alicia. "You're . . . not —Prosper Nash himself?"

"That's me. Sorry if I'm not as impressive as I was up there—"

"Just let me get used to you—"

As he told of his adventures since their parting, she warmed to the familiar voice and turn of phrase. Eventually she cut loose in her own tempestuous fashion: hugged him, kissed him, pushed him into a chair and sat on him, mussed his hair, cried over him, and generally behaved like an uninhibited girl who has just learned that her lover is safe from grievous perils.

"We're not through yet, darling," he told her. He glanced toward Solomon's stone, gleaming softly with all the colors from red to violet from the top of the dresser.

When he explained their predicament, she really did break down. Nash tried to stem the flood, awkwardly but as well as he could.

"C-couldn't we send someone else?" she sobbed.

"Monty won't go, and I wouldn't trust anybody else. Also the thing will only take one of us. But I'll tell you what. I don't suppose Tukiphat would mind a *little* delay, say about twenty-four hours. And there are lots of things we can do in that time—"

It was Sunday noon when Prosper Nash drifted into Monty Stark's cubicle, to find Stark half buried in a blizzard of Sunday newspaper sections.

"'Lo, Prosper," said Stark. "Where's your Alicia? Gone back?"

"Yep."

"Thought so, from that gone look on your face. Why did she have to?"

Nash explained. Stark commiserated with him, but when he tried to pump Nash for astral information, Prosper yawned: "Later, pal. I'm worn out; going back to bed. It's funny, too, since it wasn't this body that I raised so much hell with."

"Not funny at all, considering what Bechard did with this body while it was his."

"What did he do?"

Stark rolled his eyes up and whistled.

"So you won't talk, eh? Maybe it's just as well I don't know. Have I still got my job?"

"I *think* so."

Nash grumbled: "Bechard has all the depravity, and all I get is the reputation and the hangover." Then his eye lighted on the curious sight of a wastebasket stuffed full of books, many of them of such venerable appearance as to make such treatment seem sacrilege.

Nash bent over the basket and fingered the books. "'Arbatel,' 'The Heptameron,' 'The Kabbalah' . . . say, aren't these your books on magic?"

"Yeah. I'm throwing 'em out. After this I'll stick to amateur archæology for a hobby."

Nash picked up the wastebasket, books and all, and started for the door. "If you don't want 'em, I do. Maybe I'll never see Alicia again, but it won't be for not trying!" As he departed, his back straightened and the spring returned to his stride.

THE END.

★ ★

GRAB BAGS ARE DANGEROUS

By Frank Belknap Long

● Particularly so when they haven't been made up by the Ladies' Aid Society, but are a little something an Arabian magician tossed together—

Illustrated by Orban

Satterly picked up the coarse burlap sack which Tony the iceman was trying to sell him, and examined it critically. It was unsanitary, of course, and would have to be shaken out in the sunlight. But it seemed to be just the right size for a party grab bag.

Satterly was feeling sorry for himself. He was only thirty-two and a bachelor, but whenever he rigged himself up as the Night Before Christmas his youth seemed to slip away from him until he felt as old as Methuselah.

He could still hear Ellen giving him a sentimental pat on the back. "Darling, you should have seen those children's faces. *Your* Santa Claus isn't just department store."

All right, he was fond of children. He hoped some day to have a kid of his own. But, like all normal males, he resented having children forced on him. Ellen was simply taking advantage of his good nature and his dramatic talents.

She wanted him to wear a brown beard this time, and masquerade as Friar Tuck. She was having a summer birthday party for her kid sister, and— "Ted, a pillow case would be too small. Couldn't you pick up an old burlap bag somewhere?"

He had mumbled something deep in his throat which had sounded a little like "Um, I'll try."

Now he was sorry she wasn't beside him so that he could turn to her and ask: "How's this?"

Tony was giving him a persuasive sales talk, but he wasn't sure he liked the bag.

"For five cents where could you find a better bag?" Tony was saying. "I'm asking you, where?"

"You're sure it won't tear?"

Tony frowned and flicked a hand over the rough burlap. "It will not tear. It is strong, see?"

Gripping a fold of the bag, he jerked at its seams with his fingers. "See?"

"O. K.," Satterly said. "Here's your nickel."

Five minutes later he was walking homeward along a quiet suburban street, the sack under his arm and his mind irrelevantly disturbed by the look of relief which had come into the Italian's face when his sweaty palm had closed over a chiseled Indian head.

Tony was a chiseler, all right. That bag hadn't cost him a cent. He was simply a shrewd—

Satterly's thoughts congealed. Something was nuzzling his ankle as he walked, something cold and moist. Abruptly he stopped walking.

The nuzzling was encircling his ankle now, but he was sure that it was just a tic. A neuralgic twitching in his ankle muscles would feel like that—like something cold nuzzling him. He was sure that if he looked down he would feel all right about it.

Why was he afraid to look down? It was silly as hell, in broad daylight, a block from his lodgings. He shuddered and tugged at his collar band. Feeling all the revulsion of a man who has been asked to look into an open grave, he lowered his gaze to the pavement.

For a moment it seemed that they could not be dogs. They were crouching all about him, their bared fangs gleaming in the sunlight, and their wolfish eyes riveted on—on—

He thought at first that they were glaring up into his face. When he took a slow step backward the hair bristled along their backs, and they arched their bodies as if they were about to spring upon him and sink their teeth in his flesh.

Sweat broke out on him when he realized that they were staring up at the bag under his arm. He realized that the instant the slavering jaws of a big police dog closed with a crunch a foot from his face.

The dog's teeth had missed the bag by a scant half inch. It flopped back on it haunches and growled savagely, its gums flecked with froth.

All the dogs in the neighborhood seemed to be crouching at Satterly's feet. Even as he stared others came loping toward him, their nostrils quivering.

Satterly was breathing harshly when he arrived at his lodgings. He had saved the bag by holding it aloft and beating a hasty retreat. He hadn't hoped to find the front door of Mrs. Kildaire's rooming house ajar, but for once luck favored him. Before the dogs could turn in from the street and stream howling across the lawn, he was inside the house with the bag still intact.

He had no memory of shutting the door, only of pulling out a handkerchief, mopping his brow, and ascending to his room on the third floor on automatic feet.

That had been a close call, all right. He might have been mangled!

"Why, Ted, how pale you look," Ellen said. She stood in the doorway of the summerhouse, looking cool and lovely, a Blue Danube something in the set of her hair and the low-cut evening dress which she was wearing with the moonlight at her back.

He was tantalizingly aware of her cool fragrance even before he took her in his arms. He kissed her with the sack under his arm, wishing that he had fallen in love with a less strong-willed woman, even if that meant getting worked up over a girl with a harelip.

"Darling, I brought all the favors out here. I want you to be a complete surprise. You look exactly like Friar Tuck."

"I look like a brown Santa Claus," Satterly said. "Friar Tuck was smooth-shaven, if I remember my Robin Hood."

"Never mind. Children aren't as critical as all that."

"When I was a kid historical anachronisms drove me nuts."

"You were not a normal child in a good many ways, Ted."

Satterly sighed and showed her the sack. "What do you think of this? It ought to hold thirty or forty favors."

Ellen's eyes lit up. "Oh, you sweet," she said, and kissed him again.

He wondered why her lips always smelt of lavender and old lace, although she never used perfume and a kiss was supposed to be odorless.

"You can help me fill the bag," she said. "I didn't want the children to eavesdrop, so I brought all of the favors out to the summerhouse."

"I get it. You want me to be a surprise."

"Ted, what is the matter with you tonight? You don't have to jump all over me. I'm just trying to bring a little happiness into the lives of—"

"I'm sorry," Satterly said. "It's just that—well, my nerves are all shot. I've been working too hard on my damned play, I guess—sweating all morning over two lines of dialogue that won't jell."

"You poor dear," she said.

"I've a neat twist at the end of the second act, but I can't get it to jell. What I really need is a vacation. Last night I had a dream that could only mean one thing—I'm teetering on the brink of a nervous breakdown."

"You did, Ted?"

"It was an ugly, mildewed sort of dream. Cobwebs and spiders and everything not nice. Before I woke up something ghastly came close—so close that its breath fanned my face."

"You mean you wanted to run and couldn't?"

Satterly shook his head. "It's hard to explain how I felt. I was terrified, but I didn't want to run. I could have lifted off the sack, but I didn't want to do that, either."

"You could have lifted off the *sack*."

Satterly nodded. "My head and shoulders were inside this bag."

Ellen looked at him askance. "Ted, sometimes I wish you were a more prolific writer. If you could bat out plays the way some writers do, you wouldn't have time for nervous breakdowns. Why should you dream about this sack?"

"I'd rather not talk about it, Ellen—not tonight. I'm not even sure that it *was* a dream."

"But—"

"This is supposed to be a kids' party, Ellen, and my dream had 'not for children' stamped all over it."

"I'm not a child, Ted."

"I know, but it might spoil your evening."

"Don't be like that, Ted. I'm not squeamish."

"Well, I was dog-tired and thought I would drift right off into a dreamless sleep. But all I did was toss and turn until a voice began whispering that I could never, never sleep.

"It was a cracked-record kind of voice, raucous, metallic, going round and round, and breaking off when the needle struck the crack, if you get what I mean."

"I think I do."

"This is how it went: 'Get up and get under the sack—sack—sack—get up and get under if you don't you won't—won't—won't—won't—ever sleep, get up and—get under the sack—sack—sack—sack.'"

Ellen shivered. "You were asleep already, of course."

"I'm not sure. I actually got out of bed, and pulled the sack down over my body to my waist."

"You actually—"

"Got out of bed, yes. When I awakened I was standing by the window breathing through the bag. I could have lifted it off in the dream, but awake I was paralyzed. I was in total darkness, and the bag smelled like dead flesh. I went reeling back against the dresser, clawing at it, and finally—I got it off. It was still dark in the room, but the dawn was beginning to break outside the window, and I knew that—"

"Ted, you haven't told me about the dream itself."

"I'm not sure it *was* a dream, Ellen. Part of the time I may have been awake. But until I smelled that dead-flesh odor I was certainly in an abnormal state, because the bag itself, the fact that I was inside, didn't terrify me

"It was what I saw that made my flesh crawl. Perhaps I should say—*didn't see*. All I could make out at first was a confused blur—a sort of flowing grayness. The voice had stopped, but there were sounds inside the bag which I didn't like any better. Somewhere in the grayness were faint rustlings and cracklings such as a mouse might make scampering over dry leaves in a forest. Or a mole might make, burrowing inside a hollow log and throwing up dry leaves and dirt.

"I thought I could smell damp, moldy earth, but I could have been mistaken about that. Mingled with the forest feeling was an old-house feeling. I mean, there were moments when I seemed to feel blank walls about me, walls unpierced by windows or even ventilator shafts.

"A time passed and the grayness began to thin a little. White lines formed before my face, crisscrossed and became—spider webs.

"I closed my eyes, but I couldn't shut out the spider. It was clinging to one of the strands, and its image seemed to burn through my eyelids into my brain. It was lumpish and hairy and huge, but the worst thing about it was its stickiness. It moved logily across the web, leaving a trail of sticky ichor in its wake.

"I could tell the ichor was sticky without touching it. When I opened my eyes again there were five spiders, moving up, down and across the web, and a tall shape was coming toward me through the grayness.

"It was then I had that feeling I told you about. I didn't *want* to pull the sack off. Don't get the idea I wasn't frightened. Black horror was clutching at my throat, but I didn't want to run. I wanted to see the face of that shape. The nearer it came the more it seemed to merge with the grayness. It had a face, but I couldn't tell you now whether it was human or not. It was clad in a flowing white robe and had a sort of turban on its head. But it could not have had an entirely human look, or I would not have been so terrified."

"What happened then?" Ellen whispered.

"I woke up—with an odor of dead flesh in my nostrils."

Ellen shuddered. "Couldn't you have kept all that to yourself? You've spoiled my evening."

It was on the tip of Satterly's tongue to retort: "You asked for it," but he restrained himself. Ellen was dear, sweet, lovely, adorable and kind, and this was her evening which he had spoiled. He felt like a brute.

She said: "I'm glad the children didn't hear you. Things like that should be kept from children."

He had forgotten about the children completely. The children. He was Friar Tuck, and the bag would have to be filled quickly now.

"Let's put in the favors," he said. "Here, you hold the sack."

They spent a pleasant five minutes filling the sack. Pleasant to Satterly because when he bent over Ellen's hair brushed his face, and pleasant to Ellen because she enjoyed making children happy, and was, of course, glad that her strong, big, handsome, if somewhat neuratic, playwriting fiancé was helping to make her sister's birthday party a success.

Trooping across the lawn in the moonlight with Ellen at his side, Satterly felt almost young again, despite the beard which descended to his waist, and the paunch which he had constructed by stuffing a pillow under his brown mendicant's costume.

There were fifteen children in bathing suits sitting in moonlight at the edge of the swimming pool on the back lawn of Ellen's big, white, rambling, eighteenth-century house. They ranged in years from seven to fourteen, and what adorable children they were.

Two of the boys, nine and eleven respectively, were twisting the pigtails of two of the girls, seven and ten, and three of the other boys were getting ready to gang up on the rest of the girls and throw them into the pool from the high springboard overhead. Satterly could tell by the way they were whispering together that their big moment was just around the bend.

Sitting in a split-bamboo garden chair on a green cushion was Miss Constiner. Miss Constiner loved children, too. Whenever there were birthday parties for children Miss Constiner could be seen sitting with the little dears. Never standing—sitting. Miss Constiner weighed two hundred and eighty pounds, and had given up dieting in her youth. She was a kindly, well-intentioned woman, and subconsciously Satterly liked her.

It was Miss Constiner who saw Satterly first. She arose excitedly, her avoirdupois quivering, and waddled toward him, a beaming expression on her face.

"Oh, how wonderful," she exclaimed. "Friar Tuck! You are Friar Tuck, aren't you? And you've favors for all our little sweets in that bag."

Satterly glanced at Ellen, and was pained to see a gratified smile spread across her face. Little sweets!

"I'm just dying with curiosity, Mr. Sat—I mean, Friar Tuck. Just what have you got in that bag? Toys? Is there anything for grownups in your wonderful bag, Friar Tuck?"

Ellen said: "Of course there is, Lucy. Gertrude's friends are not selfish. Sharing with others is half the—"

"Oh, how thoughtful. You mean there are presents for our little sweets' parents in Friar Tuck's bag, too?"

"Of course, Lucy. Wouldn't you like to try your luck? If you get a doll, you can exchange it for something adult."

"That's sweet of you, dear. I think I will see what I can draw out of Friar Tuck's wonderful bag."

Satterly started to protest, but was silenced by a look from Ellen which said as plain as words: "Keep your cynicism under your hat. Lucy will get a great kick out of this."

There was a sudden screeching from beside the swimming pool. The children had espied Satterly simultaneously and were racing toward him across the lawn, their bare feet pattering on the grass.

"Presents! Boy, oh, boy! Stay back, I saw him first."

"Jackie Powers, you get outa my way. Y'wanta getcha face pushed in?"

"Oh, dear," sighed Miss Constiner. "I'm afraid the children will think me very selfish."

Satterly felt, somehow, that Miss Constiner's well-intentioned sloppings-over were on a higher plane than the sheer savagery of the children.

He sighed and extended the bag. "Take your pick, Miss Constiner. I hope you get something really worth while. If it's a refrigerator, I'll help you lift it out."

Miss Constiner giggled. She raised a fat hand and went exploring, so deeply that even her dimpled elbow went slithering down into the depths of the bag. For a moment she foraged about, a look of rapturous anticipation on her face.

"There are so many bundles it's hard to—"

"Take a little one, Lucy," Ellen prompted. "Most of the adult gifts are small. I thought that pen-and-pencil sets—"

"Now don't tell me, Ellen. I want to be surprised."

Miss Constiner got her wish. She screamed so loudly that even the children froze.

"Something bit me," she shrieked, whipping out her hand and recoiling backward across the lawn. "An animal! Oh, Ellen, how could you?"

Satterly turned pale. He lowered the bag to the lawn, and grabbed Miss Constiner's wrist before she could sink back into her chair, and burst into hysterical tears.

She tried to jerk free, her bosom heaving. "Let go of me, Mr. Satterly. You have a cruel and horrible sense of humor. To put a live animal with sharp teeth into that bag, to expose those little darlings to—"

"Hold steady for just one second, Miss Constiner," Satterly pleaded. "I want to look at your hand. You can cut yourself badly on paper, you know."

"I didn't cut myself. Something bit me. I could feel its wet mouth."

Despite Miss Constiner's tuggings, Satterly succeeded in twisting her wrist around. Ellen heard him suck in his breath sharply.

"What is it, dear? A scratch?"

Satterly nodded. His voice came out startlingly loud with: "It's nothing, dear. Nothing at all."

Nothing at all! On Miss Constiner's palm were the unmistakable marks of—*of teeth.* Something had bitten Miss Constiner viciously on the hand, and left eight gleaming indentations which could not be concealed.

Which could not be concealed. Satterly knew that he would have to think fast if Ellen was to be spared the full, ghastly impact of a horror that would certainly do something to her mind. Having told her about his dream, she was in no position to stand up to it the way he could with his adrenals working overtime from strain.

Satterly was a fast thinker when he had to be. Pulling out a handkerchief, he wrapped it around Miss Constiner's hand. "You'd better put some iodine on that right away," he said. "With a rusty knife you can't be too careful."

Miss Constiner began to tremble. "A rusty knife—"

"There were some pocketknives in that bag," lied Satterly. "The automatic kind, with press buttons on the side. One of them must have snapped open."

Ellen started to protest, but Satterly silenced her by pinching her arm.

Miss Constiner looked Ellen up and down, her eyes flashing. "Ellen, I thought you had better sense. If those children cut themselves, how will you feel, knowing that you—oh, Ellen."

A moment later Miss Constiner's waddling bulk was a receding blur in the moonlight, and Ellen was facing Satterly with a stamping-foot look in her eyes.

"Why did you lie to her?" she demanded. "You've made her think I'm the kind of woman who should never have a child of her own."

"She was getting on my nerves," Satterly said. "If I hadn't thrown a scare into her, she would have asked you to bandage that little scratch, and stayed right on. That's all it was—a little, trivial scratch. She'd have spoiled Gertrude's birthday party."

"Spoiled Gertrude's party! Do you imagine you haven't done that?"

Ellen turned and ran so swiftly into the house that it was difficult for Satterly to realize that she had left him alone with the children.

It was especially difficult because of the horror in his mind. In the sack lurked something ghastly, something *ghastly* which made his immediate surroundings seem remote, unreal.

He *was* sure, now. The dogs had known. Dogs loved scents, lived for scents. Their lives were enriched by odors beyond human comprehension which they knew how to savor to the utmost. But in the sack was something ghastly which had lifted their harls, and given them no pleasure at all.

Yet they *had* sensed it—the thing which he had seen in his dream.

Ellen's little sister was clutching at his sleeve. Ellen's sister, Gertrude, dear, sweet child. How he wished that she would go away.

"Can we have our presents now, Mr. Satterly? Can we? Can we? Can we, Mr. Satterly?"

"Friar Tuck," he muttered. "I am supposed to be Friar Tuck."

"You can't fool us, Mr. Satterly. Can we have our presents now?"

Far off somewhere a cracked phonograph record that was really a horrible voice had begun to turn. "Get up and get under the sack—sack—sack—get up and get under if you don't you won't—won't—won't—ever truly rest get up and—get under the sack—sack—sack."

He clutched the stone bench under him and stared down at the sack, which was lying on the wet grass where he had left it.

It was surrounded by children now, who were eying it covetously, who were circling around it like little jungle beasts.

"Can we have our presents now, Mr. Satterly? Jimmy, you get outa my way. I saw it first."

"Yeah? You and who else?"

He felt like a child, too. That is to say, deep in his mind he felt just as savage and rude. And frightened—no sensitive child left alone in a big, old house at midnight by thoughtless modern

parents could have felt more completely at the mercy of things unseen.

An icy band encircled his skull and his heart was a solid lump of ice which dripped, dripped, dripped. It didn't beat at all, but just dripped, like an old cistern leaking in an empty house at midnight.

"Get up and get under the sack—sack—sack—if you don't you won't—"

Ellen's sister had long, golden curls and a stubborn chin which was set firmly now. "Mr. Satterly, please. Can we have our presents?"

Presents? The sack was full of presents, so why was he experiencing that awful sense of helplessness, of impending disaster? He couldn't pull the sack down over his head because it was bulging with presents. The joke was on that damned, horrible voice. It couldn't compel him to do something that was physically impossible. Two solid bodies couldn't occupy the same space at the same time. Even those savage children knew that.

One of the twelve-year-olds reached out suddenly, grabbed the sack and held it up in the moonlight. "Whatcha gonna give me for this, Gertrude? You wanta play post office?"

Satterly got lurching to his feet. "Just a minute, you little ape. *Put that sack down.*"

The youngster dropped the sack and leaped back with a startled cry, and the rowdyism damped out of him by the glaring fury on Satterly's face.

Satterly shook his head as though to clear it, and moved to where the sack was lying. He picked it up. The youngster had twirled it about so that he had to tug at the burlap before there was room for his hand to reach down inside.

Standing grimly in the moonlight he went exploring, precisely as Miss Constiner had done. On the outside the sack still bulged as though it were filled with packages. But inside his hand encountered—*nothing at all.*

Nothing for quite a full minute. Nothing while cold sweat broke out on his forehead and ran in rivulets down his face.

Suddenly there was something there. Not favors, but something. His fingers tangled in a wilderness of hair, and moved slowly across a moist surface that felt soggy to the touch.

Close your eyes and put your hand on somebody's face. How does it feel? That's the way it felt to Satterly, only soggier.

The features were not composed. They squirmed beneath his palm—squirmed and twisted horribly. It didn't seem to have any eyes—just empty sockets lined with cold, moist flesh.

Satterly's face had gone as white as the belly of a dead fish. The hair was damp, clinging. It seemed to have a peculiar, repellent life of its own. Satterly had the awful feeling that the strands were about to twine themselves about his fingers and draw them tightly against a wet, blubbery mouth that wanted to *gnaw on his flesh.* With a choking sob of utter revulsion he whipped his hand out, and stood trembling.

"Get up and get under the sack—sack—sack—get up and get under if you don't you won't—won't—won't—ever rest—get up and get—"

The cracked voice stopped abruptly, stopped completely, and then—began again. Began again with a deeper, more sepulchral intonation, as though someone had slipped a new record on a gramophone.

"Get up and get under the sack—sack—sack—get up and get under so that I may feast—feast—feast—and grow strong—strong—strong and grow fat—fat—fat; get up and get under the sack—sack—sack."

Suddenly Satterly knew that he could not fight against the voice or cheat it in any way. He was being summoned and must obey. There was a compulsion in every syllable of the voice which he could not fight.

Far off amidst ancient night and chaos a record that never was on sea or land was turning, turning, turning— But, of course, it wasn't a record. It was the greedily beckoning voice of something not quite human, something leprous and tainted that wanted to feast—feast—feast—and grow fat—fat—fat—get up and get under the sack—sack—sack.

Golden-haired Gertrude's jaw was still firm.

She came up and tugged at the bag. "Please, Friar Tuck, we want our presents."

The clever little minx. She was trying to cajole him by accepting his disguise, as though he could be flattered even now.

"My dear child," he wanted to scream at her. "When a man is being lowered into the earth, when his eyes are about to be filled with rheumy matter, you cannot reach him in any way. He is beyond vanity, beyond hope, beyond all the little sillinesses of—"

"Get up and get under the sack—sack—sack."

Satterly smiled, as a man will when he knows for certain that he is about to die, and is amused despite himself by the antics of his executioner.

How could he get up when he was not lying down? The moon had come out from under a cloud, and the swimming pool was bathed in a silvery refulgence. Satterly looked up at the trees, the stars that he would miss, and thought also of Ellen. A dull lump came into his throat. She was strong-willed and her mind was not as keen as his, but she—she was the brightest light his life had ever known.

It would be awful when that light when out. He raised the sack suddenly, and shook it so that all the presents fell out upon the lawn.

There was the sound of smitten flesh, as the children started scrambling for the largest and most promising-looking packages, boys and girls together, shouting, scratching, kicking—

Satterly scarcely saw them. Slowly he raised the sack, and pulled it down over his body to his waist. He not only felt like a condemned man now—he looked like one. The scaffold was a lawn where children romped, and the noose was a film of grayness flowing—

He saw it coming toward him through the grayness almost at once. It was carrying its turban now, and he could see its face clearly. It had a flat little horrible nose and pointed ears—

Satterly screamed.

"Darling, darling, darling."

He seemed to be coming out of a sea where bubbles were arising, dancing, bursting with a plop high above his head. Coming up out of a sea to a raft which was floating on fleecy white clouds, pulling himself up with dripping arms to—

"Darling, can you ever forgive me? I ran off and left you when you needed me most."

His faculties were steadying now. Things which had seemed strange and terrifying were resolving themselves into quite commonplace objects in the guest room of Ellen's big, white house.

His arms *were* dripping, but not with sea water. He was simply drenched with perspiration from head to toe. The bubbles were motes dancing in moonlight by a window which looked out upon the branches of a familiar tree. The raft was the ceiling overhead, and the clouds bas-relief cupids cavorting above the mantel on the opposite side of the room.

Ellen was sitting on the edge of the bed with a glass of aromatic spirits in her hand. "Darling, I just didn't realize how worked up you were, how badly you needed a rest. I should have known you'd pull that awful sack down over your head again."

It was coming back now. Horribly. He began to shiver.

"I'll never forgive myself, darling. If Tony hadn't torn the sack off—"

Satterly sat up so suddenly that Ellen was nearly bounced off the bed. "Tony? What was Tony doing here?"

"He came for that sack. Hassin Ali wanted it back."

"Hassin Ali?"

Ellen nodded. "He was living in the back of Tony's shop. He paid Tony two dollars a week for a horrible little hole of a room that only an Arab could live in. Tony felt sorry for him. He was working down at the mine, but last week they laid him off, and he had to economize. All he had were the clothes on his back and that . . . that awful sack."

"You mean Tony sold me a *stolen* sack?"

"Yes. Tony just didn't—like the sack."

"I don't wonder."

"Hassin Ali was furious when he found out. He threatened to kill himself. He made Tony phone your landlady, and, of course, Mrs. Kildaire told him where you were. When Tony found you, you were lying on the lawn in a dead faint, with the sack over your head. If Tony hadn't ripped it off, you would have suffocated. Gertrude was just standing there smiling. Ted, it will be some time before she is able to sit down. I just couldn't help it—I saw red."

Satterly swabbed a perspiring brow. "Did Tony say why this Hassin Ali went haywire when he thought he had lost his sack?"

Ellen nodded. "Tony said that Hassin Ali had brought that sack all the way from Damascus. It had belonged to his grandfather. He said Hassin told him it was a *coal* sack. He said there was a coal in that sack. But, of course, Tony's grammar is pretty bad."

Satterly turned as white as a sheet. "No, Ellen," he said. "Not his grammar. His pronunciation. He just can't pronounce goo as in *ghoul.*"

"As in—"

"Ellen, can't you get me something stronger than this sissy drink. Aromatic spirits—"

THE END.

TOMORROW

By Robert Arthur

● The House of Tomorrow in truth! Where Tuesday's paper arrived every Monday morning, and Wednesday's phone calls came through on Tuesday. And sometimes just that could be a horribly grim joke—

Illustrated by Orban

It was exactly the house Henry Harris had been hoping to find—small, new, modern, but not freaky. Everything about it delighted him from the moment he laid eyes on it—its neat geometrical lines, dark-green lawn, flat, sun-deck roof, even its name. The sign on the lawn read:

TOMORROW HOUSE

Completely Furnished
Step In

Briskly Henry Harris turned up the brick walk, went up three steps, and rapped the door knocker, observing as he did so that from the small porch he could see across the roof tops, down into the blueness of the Golden Gate, dotted with tiny ships and flecked with whitecaps. The door opened to his knock at once. A young man with a slightly harassed look confronted him.

"Good morning," Henry Harris said, with the new air of decisiveness which had come to him since he had inherited the ten thousand dollars his almost forgotten Uncle Ebenezer had left behind after his transition to another and presumably better world. "I'd like to look at the house. I'm in the market for one."

The young man smiled; nay, beamed.

"Come in, sir," he invited. "Er—let me give you a hand."

He grasped Henry Harris' elbow, and just in time. For as he extended his right foot across the threshold, a sudden giddiness swept Mr. Harris. The world reeled; strange tinglings ran through his body. Then he was inside, the young man holding his elbow, and everything was normal again.

"Sorry," Henry Harris said apologetically. "Must have had a touch of vertigo, I guess."

"The sun, maybe," the young man said heartily. "It's hot today. But notice how cool it is inside here. Prefabricated walls, with built-in insulation. But let me show you around. Unless you'd like to rest—"

"Oh, no." Henry Harris shook his head. "Feel fine now."

So the young man showed him over the house, talking rapidly. His name, he said, was Jones. He was the architect and builder both. Tomorrow House was ten years ahead of any other house in America. He'd built it to prove his theories. Now he wanted to sell, to use the cash to form a company to make prefabricated houses. If Henry Harris liked it, he'd take a substantial sum off the purchase price for cash in hand and—

Henry Harris did like it. Enormously. The cozy living room, completely furnished, even to books on the shelves and a radio, with a telephone installed in a niche, needing only to be switched in at the central office. The tiny bedroom, compact kitchen, small hall. The heating plant, air conditioner, and the steel-girder wall construction. It took him no time at all to make up his mind, and having done so, he promptly drew out his check book.

When he tucked the check, representing almost half of Uncle Ebenezer's legacy, into his pocket, young Mr. Jones' expression was one of relief. The slightly nervous manner fell from him. He drew a deep breath and shook Henry Harris' hand.

"Mr. Harris," he said warmly, "Tomorrow House is now yours. I'll tend to all the papers and send them over. I can see you're not a nervous man. But if you were, you could congratulate yourself on your purchase. In Tomorrow House you can rest as unworried as a babe in its crib. It is burglar proof, fire proof, lightning proof and earthquake proof. Perhaps you remember the slight earthquake and thunder storm we had three nights ago?"

"Why, yes," Mr. Harris nodded, remembering. "Quite exciting, too."

"Exciting enough to shift half a dozen houses in the neighborhood off their foundations," Mr. Jones said impressively. "But not Tomorrow House. No, sir! At the very height of the storm and 'quake, a bolt of lightning hit the roof. Neighbors said it would have blasted a Pyramid to pieces. But the metal frame absorbed the bolt and the temblor force, too. Wasn't a sign of damage the next day. Not a sign."

Henry Harris nodded, pleased to hear how his house had stood up under punishment.

"I'm sure I'm going to be happy here," he said complacently. "I've retired from business, and I'm just going to read, maybe write a little, putter around, do all the things I've never had time for. Probably travel some, later on."

"Well, good luck," Jones said heartily. "Those papers will be along within twenty-four hours."

He strode to the door, hesitated a moment, then almost leaped across the threshold. On the little porch he staggered a moment, catching his balance. Then, waving back, he went down the brick walk and was gone.

Henry Harris, beaming with cheerfulness, stepped more slowly outside to stroll around his property and look at his house from all angles—and discovered then why Mr. Jones had seemed so relieved at making the sale.

For, as he stepped out, a swift electric tingle shot through him, and giddiness made him stagger. And when he stepped back in, vertigo again shot through him, almost causing him to fall.

It was impossible to enter or leave Tomorrow House without getting a shock!

After he had made sure of this, Henry Harris retired to the neat little living room and sat down, his middle-aged face sober. He'd been stuck! He'd bought a lemon! There was something wrong with the house. Jones had known about it and he, Henry Harris, had gone and paid out his money without making a thorough investigation!

For a time, Mr. Harris felt sick and desolate. Then, slowly, he brightened. The house, once you were in it, was delightful. Just what he'd dreamed of owning during those thirty long, poverty-ridden years as a bookkeeper for Lord & Johnson. And then it occurred to him that perhaps the strange shock only occurred at the front door. Filled with quick hope, he tried the rear door. But the first trial dashed his hopes. And when, in a last experiment, he tried crawling out the living-room window onto the porch, and found himself gripped by that same dizziness, he knew that whatever it was, affected the whole house.

No doubt, he concluded presently, the lightning bolt that Mr. Jones had told him about was, somehow, responsible. Striking the house during the earthquake of the previous week, it had perhaps magnetize the steel girders of the walls in some way, making a magnetic field that caused you to become dizzy in stepping into or out of it.

At once he felt better. Perhaps it could be fixed—the steel framework demagnetized, somehow. In any case, it didn't seem to be dangerous, merely

uncomfortable. And it had enabled him to buy the house at a bargain. He would investigate further later. Now he wanted to get his clothes from his old boardinghouse, Mrs. Trimble's, and move in.

It took him an hour or so, traveling by trolley, to get his few modest pieces of luggage and return. He took a taxi back, stopping off to phone from a drugstore to ask that the phone be turned on, and to the newspaper office to ask for an evening paper to be delivered each day. The phone and the paper were promised, service to begin tomorrow, and Mr. Harris, well satisfied, paused only enough longer to buy a bag of groceries at a delicatessen before returning home.

He had been back only about half an hour, and was enjoying tea that he fixed for himself in the compact kitchen, when a loud thump in the hall startled him. A cheese sandwich crammed into his mouth, Mr. Harris almost choked in his agitation. But it was only the evening paper he had ordered delivered, folded up into a compact square and dropped in through the door slot by the delivery boy.

Pleased at the promptness of the service—after all, delivery hadn't been supposed to start before next day—Henry Harris was unfolding the journal to scan the headlines when the telephone in its wall niche rang.

Hastily swallowing the sandwich, he answered it.

"Mr. Harris?" a pleasant, feminine voice asked. "This is the telephone company. We just wanted to say that your phone is in operation now."

"Why . . . why, that's fine," Mr. Harris responded. "That's real service. I didn't expect to be able to use it before tomorrow."

"Oh, no," the voice laughed. "We try to keep our promises. The connection order reads for Thursday, and we're right on time."

"But this isn't Thursday," Henry Harris protested. "This is Wednesday."

"No, I'm sorry, but it's Thursday, all right," the young lady told him. "Good-by, Mr. Harris."

Henry Harris hung up, his brow furrowed. Absently he opened the paper that had just been delivered. Then he leaped a little.

The date line of the paper read: "Thursday, November 6th."

He swallowed hard. But it had been Wednesday, the fifth, when he got out of bed that morning. He knew, because he had just paid the previous week's rent, which he always paid on Wednesday. And besides—

Henry Harris looked for the morning paper he had been just this morning. So it couldn't be He spread it out and stared at it, eyes bulging.

"Wednesday, November 5th," it read. And that had been just that morning. So it couldn't be Thursday now, unless— A sudden, startling suspicion flowered in Henry Harris' mind. It was so startling that he leaped up, ran out of the house, disregarding the usual vertigo that he felt upon going in or out, and hurried down to the walk to accost a well-dressed passer-by.

"Pardon me!" Henry Harris puffed. "But—can you tell me the date?"

"Wednesday," the other told him, eying him curiously. "November 5th."

"Thank you!" Mr. Harris gulped, and dashed back into his home. He closed the door and snatched up the phone. The most authoritative agency he could think of was the Weather Bureau. He called them, and in an unsteady voice asked the date.

"November 6th!" a crisp voice answered him, and the phone clicked.

Henry Harris hung up, slowly and soberly, swallowing hard. It was true! His home was twenty-four hours ahead of all the rest of the world!

It was an idea that took considerable getting used to. In fact, it took Henry Harris the better part of a week to really become accustomed to the thought. Even after he proved to himself, beyond any possible doubt, that it was so, he tried to argue that it couldn't be. In the first place—

But there wasn't any "in the first place." No matter from what angle he tried to think about it, it was confusing in the extreme. And Henry Harris quickly abandoned any efforts to think the thing through, to rationalize it in any way. The fact simply remained that in some way, apparently through the combined impact of simultaneous earthquake and electrical shock, his home, Tomorrow House, had literally been thrown forward into tomorrow. So that it was tomorrow's paper that was delivered within its door, tomorrow's phone messages that came in on the telephone, and tomorrow's radio programs that came over the parlor radio. Confusing at first, but not disturbing when you became accustomed to it. Rather pleasing and exciting, in fact.

And so, over a period of several days, it all became straightened out in his mind. Outside his home he was in Today. Inside, he was in Tomorrow. By stepping over his threshold, he moved from one day into another—forward or backward as the case might be.

It worried him at first. He kept expecting something to happen. Just what, he didn't know, but something. Nothing did, however. He left his home as he willed, and returned to it without incident and without discomfort, save for the recurrent dizziness which struck him as he went in or out the doorway. And as the days passed with no untoward incident, his fears dwindled, to be replaced by a secret pride in the uniqueness of his house.

But it was not until the end of the first week

that the glittering possibilities of the situation dawned upon him.

If Henry Harris had been a reader of popular fiction, his very first move would probably have been to look at the morrow's paper that was delivered to his home each evening, memorize the movements of the stock market, the winners of the races at Belmont and other tracks, and then rush out to buy or sell stocks and make bets accordingly, thereby reaping a nice profit.

But Henry Harris had been a hard-working bookkeeper for thirty years, until released by Uncle Ebenezer's legacy. He had never made a bet in his life. And it was only accident that turned his thoughts in that direction.

He was sitting beside his radio, reading tomorrow's paper and seeing with great satisfaction that the British were going to win another spectacular naval battle in the Mediterranean, when in fiddling with the radio dial he got a sudden hoarse voice that chanted in his ear:

"We bring you the results of the fifth at Bowie. Winner, Starlight, post position 4, fifteen-forty, six-sixty, four dollars. Place, Boomtown, post position 7, four-forty, two-twenty. Show, Melissa, post position 1, three-thirty."

Then music liltingly filled the room. But Henry Harris was sitting bolt upright, his sparse gray hair erect on his head. That was it! He had been worrying about the unexpected rapidity with which his inheritance was diminishing. Somehow he had thought it would last indefinitely—ten thousand dollars had seemed such a large sum. Instead, it was going at a rate which would see it all gone within a year or two.

But now there was no need to worry. He could replenish his fortunes, and add to them, by simply betting on races the results of which he knew a full day before they were run!

Perhaps it is a commentary on human nature that, out of a hundred men placed in Henry Harris' situation, a full one hundred would sooner or later have thought of exactly the same thing. But that idea did not bother him in the least, because it never occurred to him. Instead, he dragged out his wallet and fumbled in it for a card which a fellow boarder, a racy, sporting type of individual, had given him when he lived at Mrs. Trimble's boardinghouse. The card contained a name, Sure-shot Sam, and a number. Sure-shot Sam was a bookie. The other boarder had suggested, with a dig in the ribs, that if Henry Harris ever wanted to make a little gamble, Sure-shot Sam would give him action.

Henry Harris had repudiated the suggestion, not because he disproved of gambling, but because he had never had two dollars he dared risk. Now the card was a godsend. He dialed the number it gave, his heart beating rapidly.

"Hello?" a gruff voice demanded after a moment.

"Mr. Sure-shot Sam?" Henry Harris squeaked.

"Sam speaking. Who's this."

"This is Henry Harris, of 713 Hemlock Street," Henry Harris said breathlessly. "I . . . er, I wanted to find out if I could . . . well, make a small bet on a horse named Starlight in the fifth race at Bowie toda—tomorrow, I mean?"

"Ha-ha!" The hearty laughter had an admiring ring in it. "So it's you, Mr. Harris! I had a hunch you'd be calling about now."

"You . . . you did?" Henry Harris stammered in amazement.

"Sure thing. Race results just come in, didn't they? Bet you was sitting by your radio with an ear glued right to it. Ha-ha! You sure can pick 'em, Mr. Harris! Calling up to ask can you put a bet on Starlight! What a gag."

"I . . . uh . . . I—" Henry Harris was completely flustered.

"The way you acted yesterday," Sure-shot Sam confided, "I thought you was wacky. I almost threw you out. Maybe I should've. If I had, I'd be fifteen hundred bucks better off today. That's life. Come on down and get your dough—fifteen hundred and forty smackers, plus the hundred you bet, and it ain't hay. You know the address."

"No . . . uh, I mean, I've forgotten it," Mr. Harris squeaked, trying to adjust his whirling thoughts.

"Eighty-five Water Street, over Mac's Poolroom. Knock two, then two."

"Th-thanks," Mr. Harris stammered, and hung up, head whirling.

So he'd already made a bet with Sure-shot Sam! Either that, or the fellow was making a mistake of some kind. Because certainly the thought of betting on a horse had never entered Henry Harris' head until just a moment before. Yes, it had to be a mistake. But there was only one way to be sure. That was to go to the number Sure-shot Sam had given him. Henry Harris got his hat, left the house, and somewhat nervously took a trolley down to Water Street.

It was a gloomy section of the city. With much trepidation he mounted the stairs of eighty-five and knocked as directed on the stout, blank door. At once a large, frightening individual opened it.

"Come in," he grunted. "Last is just running at Bowie. You're too late to get any dough down, though."

"I . . . uh, I wanted to speak to Mr. Sure-shot Sam," Henry Harris ventured, stepping into a large, dingy room, across one end of which ran a partition with several wickets, across the other a blackboard covered with names and cabalistic symbols being rubbed out and changed by a perspiring boy. Several dozen men, of varying age and dress, were slouched in worn chairs, listening

to a rapid voice over a loudspeaker describing a race somewhere.

"Sure-shot? What about?" the gorillalike individual demanded.

"About a bet," Mr. Harris gulped.

"Yeah? Well—"

The other shrugged, turned, opened a door to an inner office, where a stout man sat with his feet on a desk, a telephone receiver to his ear.

"Guy says he wants to speak to you about a bet," Henry Harris' guide announced, and withdrew.

Sure-shot Sam barked into the phone, then hung up. He lowered his feet and gazed at Henry Harris questioningly.

"Yeah?" he demanded.

"I . . . uh, I'm Henry Harris," Mr. Harris piped, swallowing. "I was just speaking to you on the phone and—"

"When?"

"About half an hour ago. And—"

"You're mistaken, buddy!" Sure-shot Sam growled. "I never spoke to anybody named Harris today or any other time. What's your game?"

"But I was calling about making a bet on a horse named Starlight and you said—"

"Said what?"

"Said you had some money waiting for me and to—"

"Now I know you're nuts!" Sure-shot Sam snapped. "In the first place, Starlight don't run till tomorrow. And second, I got no more time to waste on you. So get going before—"

"No, wait!" Henry Harris squeaked. "I thought it was a mistake all along. What I came for is because I want to bet on Starlight. A hundred dollars."

"That's different." Sure-shot Sam relaxed at the sight of Mr. Harris' wallet. "What'd you say your name was?"

"Henry Harris, 713 Hemlock Street," Mr. Harris told him.

"O. K., Mr. Harris." Sure-shot Sam made a note and took the money. "Though, confidentially, you're throwing your money away. Starlight is strictly from glue factory. Make it two hundred if you like."

"No," Henry Harris said quickly. "A hundred is . . . is the figure. I . . . yes, just a hundred."

"Well, drop in tomorrow, Mr. Harris," Sure-shot told him genially. "If your dog wins, which it won't, the dough'll be here. Track odds."

Henry Harris mumbled something and made his exit, his thoughts in confusion. On the way homeward he tried to straighten them out. He had called Sure-shot Sam from the house. But actually, indoor time, he'd called him tomorrow, so that presumably he wouldn't get the call yet for twenty-four hours, outdoor time. But because of the call, which Sure-shot Sam still hadn't received, he, Henry Harris, had come down to make a bet which he knew was going to win him almost sixteen hundred dollars—a bet he would probably not have made except for Sure-shot Sam's reply to a call he hadn't gotten yet, about a bet that wasn't made until after the call had been completed, but which—

Mr. Harris, the instant he got home, took three aspirins and stopped trying to sort out the loose ends. Obviously, the time relationships existing were too intricate for him to fathom. He would simply have to accept them and make use of them, as he did the properties of electricity and radio waves, two other complex subjects he had never remotely understood.

So he spent the evening quietly, reading tomorrow's news and listening to tomorrow's radio programs, and did not go out of the house until the following afternoon. Then, having learned the name of a new winner over the radio, he sallied forth to collect his bet.

With more confidence this time, he knocked upon the door at 85 Water Street, and was admitted by the burly guardian, who ushered him into Sure-shot Sam's office. The stout bookie, his back to the door, was just completing a phone call when Mr. Harris entered.

"That's life," Henry Harris heard Sure-shot Sam saying. "Come on down and get your dough —fifteen hundred and forty smackers, plus the hundred you bet, and it ain't hay. You know the address." He paused a moment, then added a few last words. "Eight-five Water Street, over Mac's Poolroom. Knock two, then two."

He hung up and as he swung around, Henry Harris' scalp was prickling. Could—was— The

bookie settled his speculations by gaping at him as if at a ghost.

"You!" he got out. "But I just finished talkin' to you on the phone!"

Henry Harris swallowed hard.

"I . . . I was just phoning from the corner," he said feebly.

Sure-shot Sam still stared at him with unbelieving gaze.

"Then you must 'a' flew in the window!" he grunted. "Because you was still talking when I hung up!"

Henry Harris, seeing the dark suspicion on the bookie's features, spoke with unwonted glibness, considering he had practically never told a lie before in his life.

"It was really a friend," he said wildly. "I was . . . was just playing a joke on you."

"Huh," Sure-shot Sam muttered, and some of the suspicion faded. "A gag, huh? Feel good because your dog won. Well—"

He paid Henry Harris his winnings, seemingly satisfied with the explanation, and Mr. Harris left another hundred-dollar bet, which Sure-shot Sam took without overmuch enthusiasm. It was a long shot, and had won—was going to win, rather—at twenty to one, which would probably decrease the bookie's enthusiasm even further.

To avoid getting into any more complications such as had just occurred, Henry Harris prudently arranged to have Sure-shot Sam send a check for any future winnings direct to Mr. Harris' bank, while he would send in his bets in the form of telegraph money orders. Matters thus simplified, Henry Harris started home in a glow of excitement so great that on the way, seeing a snappy coupé such as he had always wished to own, standing in a dealer's window, he strode in and bought it on the spot.

The salesman saw to it that he got a driver's license, by means unknown to Henry Harris, and Mr. Harris drove homeward with utmost caution, but with his heart swelling with triumph. Life was pleasant. Life was very pleasant indeed!

The day after he bought the car, however, something happened that Henry Harris did not find pleasant because it mystified him, and, for some reason, upset him.

Returning from a short drive to try out his new car, in the course of which he stopped to chat for half an hour with the only friend he had in the neighborhood, Dr. Robert Jordan, to whom he had been going for treatment of his colds and sinus attacks for so long that they were on the basis of friends now rather than that of physician and patient, he put the coupé away in the detached garage and tried to enter Tomorrow House through the back door.

But the key stuck. The door would not open. He tried vainly for five minutes to make the lock work, then went around to the front door. But it, queerly, would not open, either. With mounting anxiety, Henry Harris struggled to get into his home. After half an hour he was on the point of smashing a window and crawling in when, unexpectedly, on one last try, the latch turned smoothly and the door opened. Feeling oddly upset and shaken, Henry Harris staggered inside and poured himself a tiny tumbler of apricot brandy, just as the clock struck five.

The drink helped, but he could not rid himself of his nervous, shaken-up feeling. It still persisted the next morning, and in an effort to calm himself, he went out after lunch for a short drive in his car. It was in returning that, three miles outside the city, a tire blew out.

Henry Harris' car went into the ditch, for he was not expert enough to control it, turned over twice, and came to rest right side up ten yards off the road.

Mr. Harris, feeling shaken and bruised, crawled out. A passing motorist took him into town and dropped him at Dr. Robert Jordan's. There he phoned to a garage to go get his vehicle, then Jordan insisted on making a careful examination of him. No bones were broken, but Jordan bound his scratches, gave him a mild sedative, and sent him home by taxi.

Feeling oddly ill and upset, Henry Harris unlocked the door and tottered into his house. As he did so, the clock was striking five.

From that moment dated Henry Harris' gradually increasing nervousness and apprehension over the fact that his home was twenty-four hours ahead of the rest of the world.

Having, the first few days, gotten over his initial fears, he had been excited and interested by the phenomenon. Having discovered no dangers in it, he had accepted it calmly, almost complacently. There were curious contradictions in it, as he had observed. One of these had been his seeming ability to be in two places at the same time.

This latter power had escaped his notice until one Sunday—house time, as he phrased it—he had stayed indoors all day, reading the Sunday paper. The next day, a trifle restive, he had left the house early in the morning, stepping out, of course, into Sunday, outdoor time. Stopping in to see Dr. Jordan, he remained away until late in the evening. It was only as he made his way homeward that he realized he had spent two Sundays, one indoors and one outdoors. Presumably it was the same Sunday. If so he had violated some rather fundamental laws, or apparent laws, by being in two places at the same time. Yet there had been no indication of conflict anywhere in his existence.

Of course, he had practically skipped Saturday altogether, which perhaps accounted for it. Two

Sundays—no Saturday. On the face of it, it was logical. Even so, he was disposed to brood about it until he recalled the International Date Line. Mariners sailing across it, he knew, either had two days the same, or skipped a day. His home was something like an international date line in time.

But now—what had happened had upset all his previous ideas. Logic told him it could not be a coincidence that, the day before, he had been unable to enter his house until five struck, and today, having suffered a nerve-racking accident, he had found it impossible to get back home until the exact same moment, five.

Pondering, Henry Harris thought he perceived the significance. For once he had *not* been able to be in two places at the same time. On previous occasions, with nothing but his free will operating, it had been possible for him to choose where he would be. Thus, since he *could* have been in either place—outdoors or indoors—he had been able to be in both. But this time he had had no choice. His accident, a happening beyond his power to control, had made it impossible for him to enter his home before the hour of five. Therefore, yesterday, he had been unable to get in, because at that moment—indoor time—he was just returning from the doctor's.

So that, when his free will ceased to operate and fate, or destiny, took over, the time structure ceased to be elastic and—

Henry Harris did not pursue the thought. It was too upsetting. Each time he returned home now, he inserted his key into the lock with an inward trembling lest it refuse to turn. It never did. But it might. And if it did—

Although he was still making money by placing bets on certain winners through Sure-shot Sam, and had opened an account with a local brokerage office which daily made substantial gains, all Henry Harris' pleasure in his home was gone. An increasing nervousness with which he entered his home after going out now was affecting him. He became progressively jittery. He brooded. Meticulously he tried to live according to an exact schedule, so that there was no possibility of time conflict in his life. Rigorously he avoided doing anything, making any further experiments or investigations, which could possibly cause confusion or set up an impossible situation among the curiously balanced forces of his environment.

But still he worried. He had read somewhere of a man, coming accidentally into possession of a tomorrow's paper, reading of his own death. He found himself scanning his own evening paper for news of his own demise, which was ridiculous, since, if he had found it, it would have meant he was both dead and alive at the same time, a far different matter from simply being in two different places.

He became so jittery that, after a couple of weeks, he went to his old friend, Jordan, for advice. The medical man, diagnosing his condition as an aftermath of his automobile accident, suggested a long sea trip. And instantly Henry Harris knew that that was what he was going to do—take a trip and get away completely from Tomorrow House. He'd always wanted to go around the world, if possible; he'd always wanted to see Australia, where his only living relative, a cousin, resided.

He decided to go around the world, if he could, and by air so far as possible—the flight of a New York reporter around the globe on commercial airlines a few years before had stirred his imagination immensely. In any case, he would go to Australia. The Pacific Clippers made that jump now. Maybe he'd stay in Australia. He didn't know. But there he would go.

Promptly he set about making arrangements. It wasn't easy, but in two weeks of intensive activity he did it. Arranged for a passport, for a Clipper passage, and for clothing and luggage. Closed down his brokerage account, converted several thousand dollars into travelers' checks, and prepared to close his house and store the car that, since his accident, he no longer used.

It was with a sense of relief that the last detail was tended to. He had quadrupled Uncle Ebenezer's legacy, thanks to the possibilities of Tomorrow House, and he felt no regret at not having done better. Fate had given him an opportunity. He could let it go now, without being greedy. Unpleasant things, it was his belief, tended to happen to people who reached too far.

The last afternoon before he was to leave he spent with his friend, Dr. Jordan. The next day, at six, the Clipper was due to leave. Within his closet were his bags, packed. A new suit hung waiting for him, his travelers' checks, ticket, passport, and necessary papers in its pocket. He had only to lock the door for the last time and leave. The sense of relief was tremendous.

With Jordan he enjoyed a cocktail, then stayed to dinner at the medical man's urging. It was after dark when he left. They stood for a moment on the terrace, looking down at the night-shrouded bay, dotted with yellow glints, from which next day the Clipper would take off.

"Well, Henry," Jordan told him, slapping him on the back, "this time tomorrow you'll be two hundred miles or more out over the sea."

"Farther than that," Henry Harris said happily. "I'll send you a post card from Honolulu."

Jordan grinned, and Henry Harris started his stroll homeward. It was a mild evening, the moon rising, a queer shade of orange red. Mr. Harris breathed deeply—then his breath caught in his throat. What had Jordan said?

This time tomorrow you'll be two hundred miles at sea—

But in that case, it wouldn't be possible for him to be within his home tomorrow—and inside it was already tomorrow—

Henry Harris, panic stirring at him, began to hurry. Presently he was almost running. His breath was sharp in his chest when at last he stood before his own door, his key held in shaking fingers. Fearfully he inserted it, turned—

The lock would not give. The key would not turn.

After ten minutes of panicky effort to make either the front or back door open, Henry Harris withdrew to the walk and forced himself to calmness. If he could not get into the house, that meant he was not to be in it tomorrow, of course. That, in turn, simply indicated that tomorrow he would be, as planned, aboard the Pacific Clipper. There was no reason to be upset. The very fact he could not get into the house was proof that his plans were going to be carried out.

But—

Henry Harris caught his breath again.

His ticket, his passport, all his vital papers, were inside the house. Without them, he could not board the Clipper tomorrow. Unless he got them, he *wouldn't* be far on his way toward Honolulu this time tomorrow! In order to carry out his plans, he *had* to get inside—

But if he got inside, if he was able to enter tomorrow within the house, that would be a sign that he wasn't going to be aboard the Pacific Clipper when it took off.

So he couldn't leave with the Clipper unless he got in, and if he got in, as far as he could see, that would mean he was not to be on board in any case.

Then, if he was not be aboard the Clipper, and not inside his home, either, *where was he going to be this time tomorrow?*

The question echoed back and forth within Henry Harris' brain, pounding like a hammer. Where was he going to be tomorrow? Where?

He tried the doors again, and when they would not budge, unreasoning desperation made him snatch up a rock from the garden and hurl it through the bedroom window. Glass shattered with a loud tinkling. The rock crashed on into the room. And there was a hole in the window big enough to admit him.

Henry Harris almost sobbed in relief. Disdaining the fragments of broken pane, he got one foot on the sill and almost dove in through the hole in the glass.

As he went through, the old familiar dizziness seized him. His foot slipped, and he fell heavily. For a moment he lay prone, dizzy, the floor seeming to rock beneath him. Then his senses cleared.

and he scrambled up. The floor *was* quivering, markedly. He had felt the motion once before, years ago, and he knew what it meant. Earthquake!

He must get outside again. But first he staggered across to his closet, snatched the envelope of precious papers from his suit pocket. Then, clutching them, he made for the front door. But even before he reached the hall, weakness gripped him, and he felt warm wetness running down his leg.

He got to the telephone, staring in terror down at himself. His trouser leg was ripped from knee to cuff. And from a deep gash beneath the knee, made when he had slipped on the window sill, arterial blood was pumping in bright crimson spurts.

For a moment he could only stare at those small, jetting gouts of crimson. The house still quivered to the temblor. He was aware of that. And a faint tintinnabulation of music told him he must have left the radio on when he had gone out. Then the power to move returned to him. He pawed on the light, groped for the telephone, frantically dialed Jordan. His friend's voice answered in brief seconds, and Henry Harris gasped out his message.

"Doctor!" he panted. "Come over—right away. Bring—ambulance. I've cut myself. Artery! Now—got to get outside. Earthquake—"

Knowing he could depend on Jordan, he dropped the phone, turned toward the door. But he could not walk. He fell to his knees, crawled toward it, grasped at the knob, and his fingers slipped weakly off. He fell face downward on the hall floor, could not rise from there.

Beneath him he still felt that unnerving tremble as the house shook in the grip of titanic forces. His senses were acutely clear. He could hear the radio, hear voices of passers-by in the street a few yards away.

"And now," a voice was saying over the radio, "we bring you the weather report. The weather for Thursday—"

Dizziness and nausea shook Henry Harris then, horribly. When his senses cleared, the trembling of the house had ceased, but the radio was still speaking.

"—eather for Wednesday, December 16th—" said the voice monotonously, and Henry Harris, his preternaturally sharpened senses noting the change, understood instantly. In that moment Tomorrow House had returned to today.

So the problem wasn't any problem at all. It wasn't tomorrow any more. It was today. And he wasn't going to be either in the house, or aboard the Clipper tomorrow. Because Jordan would be there any instant, with an ambulance. Jordan would get to him in time. Tomorrow he'd be in a hospital, of course. That was the answer. That was the solution to the paradox.

Weakly, Henry Harris almost sobbed in relief.

And then his heart seemed to stop beating. For he remembered.

It had still been tomorrow when he made the phone call. So it could not be until tomorrow that Jordon received it. Twenty-four hours from now, Henry Harris' frantic plea for help would reach him.

Fleetingly, Henry Harris had time to wonder what Jordan would think of that strange phone call from nowhere. Because now, with his last strength ebbing from him, he saw the other answer. Inadvertently he had done what he had been so determined to avoid doing—he had created an impossible situation. He had upset the balance of forces. For just a few seconds he had done something that couldn't be done. And there was only one answer that would keep matters in hand. Tomorrow he wouldn't be aboard the Clipper, and he wouldn't be in his home, and he wouldn't be in the hospital. He wouldn't be anywhere.

Tomorrow—

THE END.

THE GHOST OF ME

By Anthony Boucher

● As is known, a ghost haunts the scene of its murder. And murder would be a shock to anyone, enough so the ghost might be a bit confused and haunt a bit before the murder took place—

Illustrated by Kolliker

I gave my reflection hell. I was sleepy of course. And I still didn't know what noise had waked me; but I told it what I thought of mysterious figures that lurked across the room from you and eventually turned out to be your own image. I did a good job, too; I touched depths of my vocabulary which even the complications of the Votruba case hadn't sounded.

Then I was wide awake and gasping. Throughout all my invective, the reflection had not once moved its lips. I groped behind me for the patient's chair and sat down fast. The reflection remained standing.

Now it was I. There was no doubt of that. Every feature was exactly similar, even down to the scar over my right eyebrow from the time a bunch of us painted Baltimore a mite too thoroughly. But this should have tipped me off from the start: the scar was on the right, not on the left where I've always seen it in a mirror's reversal.

"Who are you?" I asked. It was not precisely a brilliant conversational opening, but it was the one thing I had to know or start baying the moon.

"Who are you?" it asked right back.

Maybe you've come across those cockeyed mirrors which, by some trick arrangement of lenses, show you not the reversed mirror-image but your actual appearance, as though you were outside and looking at yourself? Well, this was like that—exactly, detailedly me, but facing me rightwayround and unreversed. And it stood when I sat down.

"Look," I protested. "Isn't it enough to be a madhouse mirror? Do you have to be an echo, too?"

"Tell me who you are," it insisted quietly. "I think I must be confused."

I hadn't quite plumbed my vocabulary before; I found a couple of fresh words now. "You think you're confused? And what in the name of order and reason do you think I am?"

"That's what I asked you," it replied. "What are you? Because there must be a mistake somewhere."

"All right," I agreed. "If you want to play games. I'll tell you what I am, if you'll do the same. You chase me and I'll chase you. I'm John Adams. I'm a doctor. I got a Rockefeller grant to establish a clinic to study occupational disease among Pennsylvania cement workers—"

"—I'm working on a variation of the Zupperheim theory with excellent results, I smoke Camels, and I'm a registered Democrat but not quite a New Dealer," it concluded, with the gloomiest frown I've ever heard of outside a Russian novel.

My own forehead was not parchment-smooth. "That's all true enough. But how do you know it? And now that I've told you I'm John Adams, will you kindly kick through with your half of the bargain?"

"That's just the trouble," it murmured reluctantly. "There must be a terrible mistake somewhere. I've heard of such things, of course, but I certainly never expected it to happen to me."

I don't have all the patience that a medical man really needs. This time when I said "WHO ARE YOU?" it was a wild and ringing shout.

"Well, you see—" it said.

"I hardly know how to put this—" it began again.

"To be blunt about it," it finally blurted out, "I'm the ghost of John Adams."

I was glad I was sitting down. And I understood now why old Hasenfuss always recommended arms on the patient's chair to give him something to grab when you deliver the verdict. I grabbed now, and grabbed plenty hard.

"You're the—"

"I'm the ghost—"

"—the ghost of—"

"—of John Adams."

"But"—I held onto the chair even tighter—"I *am* John Adams."

"I know," my ghost said. "That's what's so annoying."

I said nothing. That was far too impressive an understatement to bear comment. I groped in the

pocket of my dressing gown and found cigarettes. "Do you smoke?" I asked.

"Of course. If John Adams smokes, naturally I do."

I extended the pack.

He shook his head. "I'll have to dematerialize it. Put one on the table."

I obeyed and watched curiously. A hand that was not quite a hand but more a thin pointing shape stretched out and touched the cigarette. It lingered a moment, then came away holding a white cylinder. The cigarette was still on the table.

I lit it and puffed hard. "Tastes just like any other Camel."

"Of course. I took only the nonmaterial part. You wouldn't miss that any more than you miss . . . well, me."

"You mean you're smoking the ghost of a cigarette?"

"You can put it that way."

For the first five puffs it wasn't easy to get the cigarette into my mouth. My hand was more apt to steer it at nose or ear. But with the sixth puff I began to feel as normal and self-possessed as any man talking with his own ghost. I even got argumentative.

"This isn't possible," I protested. "You won't even come into existence until after I'm dead."

"Certainly," my ghost agreed politely. "But you see, you are dead."

"Now look. That's nonsense. Even supernaturally. Because if I were dead . . . well, if I were dead, I'd be my own ghost. I'd be you. There wouldn't be two of us."

"I am glad that I had a clear and logical mind when I was alive. I didn't know but that might have come later; it sometimes does. But this way we can understand each other. What I meant is this: Where I come from, of course I am dead; or if you prefer, you are dead. It means the same thing. Also I am alive and also I am not yet born.

You see, I come from outside of time. You follow?"

"I think so. Eternity embraces all time, so when you've gone over from time into eternity, all time coexists for you."

"Not too precise an expression, but I think you grasp the essentials. Then perhaps you can see what's happened. I've simply come back into time at the wrong point."

"How—"

"Imagine yourself at large in three dimensions, facing a fence with an infinite series of two-dimensional slots. Think how easy it'd be to pick the wrong slot."

I thought a while and nodded. "Could be," I admitted. "But if it's that easy, why doesn't it happen more often?"

"Oh, but it does. You've heard of apparitions of the living? You've heard of *Doppelgänger?* You've even heard of hauntings before the fact? Those are all cases like this—just slipping into the wrong slot. But it's such a damned stupid thing to do. I'm going to take a terrible ribbing for this." My ghost looked more downcast and perplexed than ever.

I started to be consoling. "Look. Don't take it so— Hey!" The implication suddenly hit me. "You said haunting?"

"Yes."

"Is that what you're doing?"

"Well . . . yes."

"But you can't be haunting me?"

"Of course not."

"Then who are you haunting in my room?"

My ghost played with his ghostly cigarette and looked embarrassed. "It's not a thing we care to talk about. Haunting, I mean. It's not much fun and it's rather naïve. But after all, it's—well, it's expected of you when you've been murdered."

I could hear the right arm of the chair crack under my clutch. "When you've been—"

"Yes, I know it's ridiculous and childish; but it's such an old-established custom that I haven't the courage to oppose it."

"Then you've been murdered? And that means I've been murdered? I mean, that means I'm going to be murdered?"

"Oh, yes," he said calmly.

I rose and opened a drawer of the desk. "This," I prescribed, "calls for the internal application of alcoholic stimulants. Damn," I added as the emergency buzzer rang. All I needed was a rush operation now, with my fingers already beginning to jitter.

I opened the door and looked out into star-bright emptiness. "False alarm." I was relieved—and then heard the whiz. I ducked it just in time and got the door closed.

My ghost was curiously contemplating the knife where it stuck quivering in the wall. "Right through me," he observed cheerfully.

It was no sinister and exotic stiletto. Just a plain butcher knife, and all the more chillingly convincing through its very ordinariness. "Your prophecies work fast," I said.

"This wasn't it. It missed. Just wait."

The knife had stopped its shuddering, but mine went on. "Now I really need that stimulant. You drink rye? But of course. I do."

"You don't happen," my ghost asked, "to have any tequila?"

"Tequila? Never tasted it."

"Oh. Then I must have acquired the taste later, before you were murdered."

I was just unscrewing the bottle top, and jumped enough to spill half a jiggerful. "I don't *like* that word."

"You'll get used to it," my ghost assured me. "Don't bother to pour me one. I'll just dematerialize the bottle."

The rye helped. Chatting with your own ghost about your murder seems more natural after a few ounces of whiskey. My ghost seemed to grow more at ease, too, and after the third joint bottle-tilting the atmosphere was practically normal.

"We've got to approach this rationally," I said at last. "Whatever you are, that knife's real enough. And I'm fond of life. Let's see what we can do to stave this off."

"But you can't." My ghost was quietly positive. "Because I—or you—well, let's say we already have been murdered."

"But not at this time."

"Not at this time yet, but certainly *in* this time. Look, I know the rules of haunting. I know that nothing could have sent me to this room unless we'd been killed here."

"But when? How? And above all by whom? Who should want to toss knives at me?"

"It wasn't a knife the real time. I mean it won't be."

"But why—"

My ghost took another healthy swig of dematerialized rye. "I should prefer tequila," he sighed.

"That's too damned bad," I snapped. "But tell me about my murder."

"Don't get into such a dither. What difference does it make? Nothing you can do can possibly affect the outcome. You have sense enough to understand that. Foreknowledge can never conceivably avert. That's the delusion and snare of all prophecy."

"All right. Grant that. Let's pretend it's just my natural curiosity. But *tell me about my murder.*"

"Well—" My ghost was hesitant and sheepish again. "The fact is—" He took a long time to swallow his dematerialized rye, and followed the process with a prolonged dematerialized burp.

"To tell you the truth—I don't remember anything about it.

"Now, now!" he added hastily. "Don't blow up. I can't help it. It's dreadfully easy to forget things in eternity. That's what the Greeks meant by the waters of Lethe in the afterworld. Just think how easy it is to forget details in, say, ten years, when the years are happening only one at a time. Then try to imagine how much you could forget in an infinity of years when they're all happening at once."

"But our own murder!" I protested. "You couldn't forget our murder!"

"I have. I know we must have been murdered in this room because here I am haunting it, but I've no idea how or when. Excepting," he added reflectively, "that it must be after we acquired a taste for tequila."

"But you must at least know the murderer. You have to know the guy you're supposed to be haunting. Or do you just haunt a place?"

"No. Not in the strict rules. You merely haunt the place because the murderer will return to the scene of the crime and then you confront him and say: *'Thou art the man!'* "

"And supposing he doesn't return to the scene?"

"That's just the trouble. We know the rules all right. But the murderers don't always. Lots of times they never return at all, and we go on haunting and haunting and getting no place."

"But look!" I exclaimed. "This one will have to return because he hasn't been here yet. I mean this isn't the scene of the crime; it's the scene set for a crime that hasn't happened yet. He'll have to come here to . . . to—"

"To murder us," my ghost concluded cheerfully. "Of course. It's ideal. I can't possibly miss him."

"But if you don't know who he is—"

"I'll know him when I see him. You see, we ghosts are psychic."

"Then if you could tip me off when you recognize him—"

"It wouldn't do you any— What was that?"

"Just a rooster. Dawn comes early these summer mornings. But if I knew who he was, then I—"

"Damn!" said my ghost. "Haunting must be so much simpler in winter with those nice long nights. I've got to be vanishing. See you tonight."

My curiosity stirred again. "Where do you go when you vanish?" But he had already disappeared.

I looked around the empty consulting room. Even the dematerialized rye had vanished. Only the butcher knife remained. I made the natural rye vanish too, and staggered back to bed.

The next morning it all seemed perfectly simple. I had had one hell of a strange vision last night; but on the consulting room desk stood an empty pint which had been almost full yesterday. That was enough to account for a wilderness of visions.

Even the knife didn't bother me much. It would be accounted for some way—somebody's screwy idea of a gag. Nobody could want to kill me, I thought, and wasn't worried even when a kid in a back-lot baseball game let off a wild pitch that missed my head by an inch.

I just filed away a minor resolve to climb on the wagon if this sort of thing became a habit, and got through a hard day's work at the clinic with no worries beyond the mildest of hangovers. And when I got the X rays on Nick Wojcek's girl with her lungs completely healed, and the report that she hadn't coughed for two weeks, I felt so gloriously satisfied that I forgot even the hangover.

"Charlie," I beamed at my X ray technician, "life is good."

"In Cobbsville?" Charlie asked dourly.

I gloated over those beautiful plates. "Even in Cobbsville."

"Have it your way," said Charlie. "But it'll be better this evening. I'm dropping by your place with a surprise."

"A surprise?"

"Yeah. Friend of mine brought me a present from Mexico."

And even that didn't tip me off. I went on feeling as chipper and confident as ever all through the day's work and dinner at the Greek's, and walked home enjoying the freshness of the evening and fretting over a twist on a new kind of air filter for the factories.

That was why I didn't see the car. I was crossing the street to my house, and my first warning was a bass bellow of "John!" I looked up to see the car a yard away, rolling downhill straight at me. I jumped, stumbled, and sprawled flat in the dust. My knee ached and my nose was bleeding; but the car had missed me, as narrowly as the knife had last night.

I watched it roll on down the hill. There was no driver. It was an old junk heap—just the sort of wreck that would get out of control if carelessly left parked on a steep grade. It was a perfectly plausible accident, and still— The car hit the fence at the bottom of the hill and became literally a junk heap. Nobody showed up to bother about it. I turned to thank Father Svatomir for his shout of warning.

You've seen those little Orthodox churches that are the one spot of curious color in the drab landscape of industrial Pennsylvania? Those plain frame churches that blossom out on top into an exotic bloated spire topped by one of those crosses with an extra slantwise arm?

Father Svatomir was the priest from one of those, and his black garments, his nobly aquiline nose, and his beautifully full and long brown beard

made him look as strange and Oriental as his own church. It was always a shock to me to hear his ordinary American accent—he'd been born in Cobbsville and gone back to the Near East to study for the priesthood—and to realize that he was only about my age. That's thirty-two, for the record; but Father Svatomir seemed serenely ageless.

He waved away my thanks. "John, my son, I must speak with you. Alone and seriously."

"O. K., Father"—and I took him around to the door into my own room. I somehow didn't want to go into the consulting room just yet. I was sure that there was nothing there; but night had fallen by now, and there was no telling.

I sat on the bed, and the priest pulled a chair up close. "John," he began quietly, "do you realize that you are in danger of your life?"

I couldn't help a glance at the door of the consulting room, but I said casually, "Nuts, Father. That little accident out there?"

"Accident? And how many other 'accidents' have befallen you recently?"

I thought of the butcher knife and the wild pitch, but I repeated, "Nuts. That's nonsense. Why should anybody want my life?"

"Because you are doing too much good. No, don't smile, my son. I am not merely indulging in a taste for paradox. I mean this. You are doing too much good and you are in danger of your life. Martyrs are not found in the Church alone. Every field has its martyrs, and you are in most grievous danger of becoming a martyr to your splendid clinic."

"Bosh," I snorted, and wished I believed it.

"Bosh it is indeed, but my parishioners are not notably intellectual. They have brought with them from their own countries a mass of malformed and undigested superstitions. In those superstitions there is some small grain of spiritual truth, and that I seek to salvage whenever possible; but in most of those old-country beliefs there is only ignorance and peril."

"But what's all this to me?"

"They think," said Father Svatomir slowly, "that you are working miracles at the clinic."

"I am," I admitted.

He smiled. "As an agnostic, John, you may call them miracles and think no more of it. But my parishioners cannot see matters so simply. If I, now, were to work these wonders of healing, they would accept the fact as a manifestation of God's greatness; but when you work them— You see, my son, to these poor believing people, all great gifts and all perfect gifts are from above—or from below. Since you, in their sight, are an unbeliever and obviously not an agent of God, why then you must be an agent of the devil."

"Does it matter so long as I heal their lungs from the effects of this damned cement dust?"

"It matters very much indeed to them, John. It matters so much that, I repeat, you are in danger of your life."

I got up. "Excuse me a minute, Father . . . something I wanted to check in the consulting room."

It checked all right. My ghost sat at the desk, large as death. He'd found my copy of "Fanny Hill," dematerialized it, and settled down to thorough enjoyment.

"I'd forgotten this too," he observed as I came in.

I kept my voice low. "If you can forget our own murder, small wonder you'd forget a book."

"I don't mean the book. I'd forgotten the subject matter. And now it all comes back to me—"

"Look!" I said sharply. "The hell with your memories."

"They're not just mine." He gazed at me with a sort of leering admiration.

"The hell with them anyway. There's a man in the next room warning me that my life's in danger. I'll admit he just saved my life, but this could be a trick. Could he be the man?"

Reluctantly my ghost laid his book aside, came to the door, and peered out. "Uh-uh. We're safe as houses with him."

I breathed. "Stick around. This check-up system's going to be handy."

"You can't prevent what's happened," he said indifferently, and went back to the desk and "Fanny Hill." As he picked up the book he spoke again, and his voice was wistful. "You haven't got a blonde I could dematerialize?"

I shut the consulting room door on him and turned back to Father Svatomir. "Everything under control. I've got a notion, Father, that I'm going to prove quite capable of frustrating any attempts to break up my miracle-mongering. Or is it monging?"

"I've talked to them," the priest sighed. "I've tried to make them see the truth that you are indeed God's agent, whatever your own faith. I may yet succeed, but in the meanwhile—" He broke off and stared at the consulting room. "John, my son," he whispered, "what is in that room?"

"Nothing, Father. Just a file that I suddenly remembered needed checking."

"No, John. There's more than that. John, while you were gone, *something* peered at me through that door."

"You're getting jumpy, Father. Stop worrying."

"No. John, there is a spirit in this place."

"Fiddlesticks!"

"Oh, you may not feel affected; but after all, a man of my calling is closer to the spirit world than most."

"Father, your parishioners are corrupting you."

"No. Oh, I have smiled at many of their superstitions. I have even disbelieved in spirits. I

knew that they were doctrinally possible and so to be believed; but I never believed in them personally, as an individual rather than a priest. But now— John, something peered at me."

I swore silently and said aloud, "Calm yourself, Father."

Father Svatomir had risen and was pacing the room, hands clasped like Felix the Cat. "John, my son," he said at last, "you have been a good friend to me and to my parish. I have long been grateful to you, and never been able to prove that gratitude. I shall do so now."

"And how?" I asked, with a certain nervous foreboding.

"John," he paused in his pacing and laid a hand on my shoulder, "John, I am going to exorcise the spirit that haunts this place."

"Hey!" I gasped. "No, Father. Please!" Because, I reasoned hastily to myself, exorcising spirits is all very well, but when it's your own spirit and if that gets exorcised—well, what happens to you then? "No," I insisted. "You can't do that."

"I know, John," he went on in his calm deep voice. "You think that this is more superstition, on a level with the beliefs of my parishioners. But though you do not sense this . . . this *thing* yet, you will in time. I shall save you much pain and discomfort. Wait here, John, while I go fetch some holy water and check up the formula for exorcism. I'm afraid," he added ruefully, "I haven't looked at it since my days in the seminary."

I seized his arm and opened my mouth in protestation too urgent for words.

"John," he said slowly and reproachfully, "are you willfully harboring a spirit?"

A knock on the door cut the scene short and gave me a breathing spell. I like Charlie, but I don't think I've ever before been so relieved to see him.

"Hi," he said, and "Hi," again to Father Svatomir. "That's the advantage of being celibate," he added. "You can grow a beard. I tried to once, but the waitress down at the Greek's didn't like it."

Father Svatomir smiled faintly.

"Three glasses, mine host," Charlie commanded, and produced from under his arm a tall bottle of greenish glass. "Told you I had a surprise."

I fetched three whiskey glasses and set them on the table. Charlie filled them with a flourish. "Noble stuff, this," he announced. "Want to hear what you gentlemen think of it. There's supposed to be a ritual goes with it, but I like it straight. Down the esophagus, boys!"

Was it Shelley who used the phrase "potable gold"? Whoever it was had surely tasted this liquor. It flowed down like some molten metal that had lost the dangerous power to scorch, but still glowed with rich warmth. While the subtle

half-perceived flavor still clove to my mouth, I could feel the tingling heat reach my fingertips.

"By Heaven," I cried, "nothing like this has happened to the blood stream since Harvey discovered the circulation. Charlie, my lad, this is henceforth my tipple!"

Father Svatomir beamed and nodded. "I concur heartily. Tell us, Charles, what is this wondrous brew?"

"Tequila," said Charlie, and I dropped my glass.

"What is the trouble, my son? You're pale and trembling."

"Look, Johnny. I know it's high-proof stuff, but it hadn't ought to hit you like that."

I hardly heard them. All I knew was that the one-time barrier separating me from my murder was now removed. I had come to like tequila. I bent over to pick up the glass, and as I did so I saw a hand reach out from the consulting room. It touched the tequila bottle lightly and withdrew clutching a freshly dematerialized fifth.

Charlie refilled the three glasses, "Another one'll put you back on your feet, Johnny. It's swell stuff once you get used to it."

Father Svatomir was still concerned. "John," he insisted, "was it the tequila? Or did you . . . have you sensed what we were speaking of before?"

I gulped the second glass. "I'm all right," I protested. "A couple more of these and I'll— Was that a knock?"

Charlie looked around. "Consulting room door, I think. Shall I go check?"

I slipped quickly between him and the door. "Never mind. I'll see."

"Had I better go with you?" the priest suggested. "If it were what I warned you of—"

"It's O. K. I'll go."

My ghost was lolling back in my chair with his feet propped up on the desk. One hand held "Fanny Hill" and the other the tequila. "I got a good look at the guy that brought this," he volunteered without looking up. "He's all right."

"Fine. Now I have to let in a patient. Could you briefly disappear?"

"Uh-uh. Not till the cock crows."

"Then please hide. Try that cupboard—I think it's big enough."

He started for the cupboard, returned for book and bottle, and went back to shut himself up in comfort. I opened the outer door a very small crack and said, "Who is it?"

"Me, Dr. Adams. Nick Wojcek."

I opened the door without a tremor. Whatever Father Svatomir might say about the other inhabitants of Cobbsville, I knew I had nothing to fear from the man whose daughter was my most startlingly successful cure to date. I could still see the pitiful animal terror in his eyes when he brought her to me and the pure joy that glistened in them when I told him she was well.

"Come in, Nick. Sit down and be comfortable."

He obeyed the first half of my injunction, but he fidgeted most uncomfortably. Despite his great height and his grizzled hair, he looked like a painfully uncertain child embarrassed by the presence of strange adults. "My Ljuba," he faltered. "You got those pictures you tell me about?"

"I saw them today. And it's good news, Nick. Your Ljuba is all well again. It's all healed up."

"She stay that way now?"

"I hope to God. But I can't promise. So long as you live in this dump and breathe cement dust day in and day out, I can't guarantee you a thing. But I think she'll be well now. Let her marry some nice young man who'll take her away from here into the clean air."

"No," he said sullenly.

"But come, Nick," I said gently. It was pleasant to argue an old man's foibles for a moment instead of fretting over your approaching murder. "She has to lead her own life."

"You tell me what do? You go to hell!"

I drew back astounded. There was the sheer

venom of hatred in that last phrase. "Nick!" I protested.

He was on his feet now, and in his hand was an ancient but none the less lethal-looking revolver. "You make magic," he was saying slowly and harshly. "God would let my Ljuba die. You make her live. Black magic. Don't want daughter from magic."

"Nick," I urged as quietly as I could, "don't be a damned fool. There are people in the next room. Suppose I call for them?"

"I kill you first," said Nick Wojcek simply.

"But they'll find you here. You can't get away. They'll burn you for this, Nick. Then what'll become of Ljuba?"

He hesitated, but the muzzle of the revolver never wavered. Now that I was staring my murder right in the nose, I felt amazingly calm. I could see, in a clear and detached way, just how silly it was to try to avert the future by preknowledge. I had thought my ghost would warn me; but there he was in the closet, comfortably curled up with a bottle of liquor and a filthy book, and here I was, staring into Nick Wojcek's revolver. He'd come out afterward of course, my ghost would; he'd get in his haunting and go home. While I . . . only then I'd be my ghost, wouldn't I? I'd go home too—wherever that was.

"If they get me," said Nick at last, "they get me. I get you first."

His grip tightened on the revolver. And at that moment my tardy ghost reeled out of the closet. He brandished the empty green tequila bottle in one hand, and his face was carefree and roistering.

My ghost pointed the bottle dramatically at Nick Wojcek and grinned broadly. "THOU ART THE MAN!" he thundered cheerily.

Nick started, whirled, and fired. For an instant he stood rooted and stared first at the me standing by the desk and then at the me slowly sinking to the floor. Then he flung the revolver away and ran terror-stricken from the room.

I was kneeling at my ghost's side where he lay groaning on the floor. "But what happened?" I gasped. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I," he moaned. "Got a little drunk . . . started haunting too soon—" My ghost's form was becoming indistinct.

"But you're a ghost. That knife went right through you. Nothing can wound you."

"That's what I thought. But he did . . . and here I am—" His voice was trailing away too. "Only one thing . . . could have—" Then there was silence, and I was staring at nothing but the empty floor, with a little glistening piece of light metal on it.

Father Svatomir and Charlie were in the room now, and the silence was rapidly crammed with questions. I scrambled to my feet and tried to show more assurance than I felt. "You were right, Father. It was Nick Wojcek. Went for me with that revolver. Luckily he missed, got panicky, and ran away."

"I shall find him," said Father Svatomir gravely. "I think that after this fright I may be able to talk some sense into him; then perhaps he can help me convince the others." He paused and looked down at the gleaming metal. "You see, John? I told you they believed you to be a black magician."

"How so?"

"You notice that? A silver bullet. Ordinary lead cannot harm a magician, but the silver bullet can kill anything. Even a spirit." And he hastened off after Nick Wojcek.

Wordlessly I took the undematerialized tequila bottle from Charlie and paid some serious attention to it. I began to see now. It made sense. My ghost hadn't averted my death—that had been an absurd hope—but he had caused his own. All the confusion came from his faulty memory. He was haunting, not mine, but his own murderer. It was my ghost himself who had been killed in this room.

That was all right. That was fine. I was safe from murder now, and must have been all along. But what I wanted to know, what I still want to know, what I have to find out and what no one can ever tell me, is this:

What happens after death to a man whose ghost has been already murdered?

THE END.

THE IDOL OF THE FLIES

By Jane Rice

● A magnificent bit of writing about a small and utterly vicious boy—and his peculiar hobby.

Illustrated by Kolliker

Pruitt watched a fly on the corner of the table. He held himself very still. The fiy cleaned its wings with short, back-stroke motions of its legs. It looked, Pruitt thought, like Crippled Harry—cook's husband. He hated Crippled Harry. He hated him almost as much as he hated Aunt Mona. But he hated Miss Bittner most of all.

He lifted his head and bared his teeth at the nape of Miss Bittner's neck. He hated the way she stood there erasing the blackboard in great, sweeping circles. He hated the way her shoulder blades poked out. He hated the big horn comb thrust into her thin hair—thrust not quite far enough—so that some of the hair flapped. And he hated the way she arranged it around her sallow face and low on her neck, to conceal the little button that nestled in one large-lobed ear. The button and the narrow black cord that ran down the back of her dress under her starched collar.

He liked the button and the cord. He liked them because Miss Bittner hated them. She pretended she didn't care about being deaf. But she did.

And she pretended she liked him. But she didn't.

He made her nervous. It was easy. All he had to do was open his eyes wide and stare at her without batting. It was delightfully simple. Too simple. It wasn't fun any more. He was glad he had found out about the flies.

Miss Bittner placed the eraser precisely in the center of the blackboard runnel, dusted her hands and turned toward Pruitt. Pruitt opened his eyes quite wide and gimleted her with an unblinking stare.

Miss Bittner cleared her throat nervously. "That will be all, Pruitt. Tomorrow we will begin on derivatives."

"Yes, Miss Bittner," Pruitt said loudly, meticulously forming the words with his lips.

Miss Bittner flushed. She straightened the collar of her dress.

"Your aunt said you might take a swim."

"Yes, Miss Bittner."

"Good afternoon, Pruitt. Tea at five."

"Yes, Miss Bittner. Good afternoon, Miss Bittner." Pruitt lowered his gaze to a point three inches below Miss Bittner's knees. He allowed a faint expression of controlled surprise to wrinkle his forehead.

Involuntarily, Miss Bittner glanced down. Quick as a flash, Pruitt swept his hand across the table and scooped up the fly. When Miss Bittner again raised her head, Pruitt was regarding her blandly. He arose.

"There's some lemonade on top of the back porch icebox. Can I have some?"

"*May* I have some, Pruitt."

"*May* I have some?"

"Yes, Pruitt, you may."

Pruitt crossed the room to the door.

"Pruitt—"

Pruitt stopped, swiveled slowly on his heel and stared unwinkingly at his tutor. "Yes, Miss Bittner?"

"Let's remember not to slam the screen door, shall we? It disturbs your auntie, you know." Miss Bittner twitched her pale lips into what she mistakenly believed was the smile of a friendly conspirator.

Pruitt gazed at her steadily. "Yes, Miss Bittner."

"That's fine," said Clara Bittner with false heartiness.

"Is that all, Miss Bittner?"

"Yes, Pruitt."

Pruitt, without relaxing his basilisklike contemplation of his unfortunate tutor, counted up to twelve, then he turned and quitted the room.

Clara Bittner looked at the empty doorway a long while and then she shuddered. Had she been pressed for an explanation of that shudder she couldn't have given a satisfactory answer. In all probability, she would have said, with a vague conciliatory gesture, "I don't know. I think, perhaps, it's a bit difficult for a child to warm up to a teacher." And, no doubt, she would have added brightly, "the psychology of the thing, you know."

Miss Bittner was a stanch defender of psychology. She had taken a summer course in it—ten years ago—and had, as she was fond of repeating, received the highest grades in the class. It never occurred to Miss Bittner that this was due to her aptitude at memorizing whole paragraphs and being able to transpose these onto her test papers without ever having digested the kernels of thought contained therein.

Miss Bittner stooped and unlaced one Oxford. She breathed a sigh of relief. She sat erect, pulled down her dress in back and then felt with her fingertips the rubbery, black cord dangling against her neck. Miss Bittner sighed again. A buzzing at one of the windows claimed her attention.

She went to a cupboard which yielded up a wire fly swatter. Grasping this militantly, she strode to the window, drew back, closed her eyes, and swatted. The fly, badly battered, dropped to the still lay on its wings, its legs curled.

She unhooked the screen and with the end of the swatter delicately urged the corpse outside.

"Ugh," said Miss Bittner. And had Miss Bittner been pressed for an explanation of that *ugh* she, likewise, would have been at a loss for a satisfactory answer. It was strange how she felt about flies. They affected her much as rattlesnakes would have. It wasn't that they were germy, or that their eyes were a reddish orange and, so she had heard, reflected everything in the manner of prisms; it wasn't that they had the odious custom of regurgitating a drop of their last meal before beginning on a new one; it wasn't the crooked hairy legs, nor the probing proboscis; it was—well, it was just the creatures themselves. Possibly, Miss Bittner might have said, simpering to show that she really didn't *mean* it, "I have flyophobia."

The truth was, she did. She was afraid of them. Deathly afraid. As some people are afraid of inclosed areas, as others are afraid of height, so Miss Bittner was afraid of flies. Childishly, senselessly, but horribly, afraid.

She returned the swatter to the cupboard and forthwith scrubbed her hands thoroughly at the sink. It was odd, she thought, how many flies she had encountered lately. It almost seemed as if someone were purposely diverting a *channel* of flies her way. She smiled to herself at this foolish whimsy, wiped her hands and tidied her hair. Now, for some of that lemonade. She was pleased that Pruitt had mentioned it. If he hadn't, she might not have known it was there and she did *so* love lemonade.

Pruitt stood at the head of the stairwell. He worked his jaws convulsively, then he pursed his

mouth, leaned far over the polished banister and spat. The globule of spittle elongated into a pear-shaped tear and flattened with a wet smack on the floor below.

Pruitt went on down the stairs. He could feel the fly bumbling angrily in its hot, moist prison. He put his tightly curled hand to his lips and blew into the tunnel made by his thumb and forefinger. The fly clung for dear life to his creased palm.

At the foot of the stairs Pruitt paused long enough to squeeze each one of the tiny green balls on the ends of the fern that was potted in an intricate and artistic copper holder.

Then he went through a hallway into the kitchen.

"Give me a glass," he said to the ample-bosomed woman who sat on a stool picking nut meats and putting them into a glass bowl.

The woman heaved herself to her feet.

"'Please' won't hurt you," the woman said.

"I don't have to say 'please' to you. You're the help."

The cook put her hands on her hips. "What you need is a thrashing," she said grimly. "A good, sound thrashing."

By way of reply, Pruitt snatched the paper sack of cracked hulls and deliberately up-ended the bag into the bowl of nut meats.

The woman made a futile grab. Her heavy face grew suffused with a wave of rich color. She opened her hand and brought it up in a swinging arc.

Pruitt planted his feet firmly on the linoleum and said low, "I'll scream. You know what that'll do to aunt."

The woman held her hand poised so for a second and then let it fall to her aproned side. "You brat," she hissed; "you sneaking, pink-eyed brat!"

"Give me a glass."

The woman reached up on a shelf of the cabinet, took down a glass and wordlessly handed it to the boy.

"I don't want that one," Pruitt said, "I want *that* one." He pointed to the glass' identical twin on the topmost shelf.

Silently, the woman padded across the floor and pushed a short kitchen ladder over to the cabinet. Silently, she climbed it. Silently, she handed down the designated glass.

Pruitt accepted it. "I'm going to tell Aunt Mona you took your shoes off."

The woman climbed down the ladder, put it away and returned to the bowl.

"Harry is a dirty you-know-what," Pruitt said.

The woman went on lifting out the nut hulls.

"He stinks."

The woman went on lifting out the nut hulls.

"So do you," finished Pruitt. He waited.

The woman went on lifting out the nut hulls.

The boy took his glass and repaired to the back porch. It spoiled the fun when they didn't talk back. Cook was "on to" him. But she wouldn't complain. Aunt Mona let them stay through the winter rent free with nobody but themselves to see to and Harry was a cripple and couldn't make a living. She wouldn't *dast* complain.

Pruitt lifted the pitcher of lemonade from the lid of the icebox and poured himself a glassful. He drank half of it and let the rest dribble along a crack, holding the glass close to the floor so it wouldn't make a trickling noise. When it dried it would be sweet and sticky. Lots of flies.

He relaxed his hand ever so slightly and dexterously extricated his shopworn captive. It hummed furiously. Pruitt pulled off one of its wings and dropped the mutilated insect into the lemonade. It kicked ineffectually, was quiet, kicked again, and was quiet—drifting on the surface of the liquid, sagging to one side, its remaining wing outstretched like a useless sail.

The boy caught it and pushed it under. "I christen you Miss Bittner," he said. He released his hold and the fly popped to the top—a piece of lemon pulp on its back. It kicked again—feebly—and was quiet.

Pruitt replaced the lemonade and opened the screen door. He pulled it so that the spring twanged protestingly. He let go and leaped down the steps. The door came to with a mighty bang behind him. *That* was the finish of Aunt Mona's nap.

He crouched on his haunches and listened. A cloud shadow floated across the grass. A butterfly teetered uncertainly on a waxy leaf, and fluttered away following an erratic air trail of its own. A June bug drummed through the warm afternoon, its armored belly a shiny bottle-green streak in the sunlight. Pruitt crumbled the cone of an ant hill and watched the excited maneuvers of its inhabitants.

There was the slow drag of footsteps somewhere above—the opening of a shutter. Pruitt grinned. His ears went up and back with the broadness of it. Cook would puff up two flights of stairs "out of the goodness of her heart," Aunt Mona said—"out of dumbness," if you asked him. Whyn't she let "Miss Mona" fill her own bloody icebag? There'd be time to go in and mix the nut shells up again. But no, he might run into Miss Bittner beating a thirsty course to the lemonade. She might guess about the fly. Besides he'd dallied too long as it was. He had business to attend to. Serious business.

He got up, stretched, scrunched his heel on the ant hill and walked away in the direction of the bathhouse.

Twice he halted to shy stones at a plump robin and once he froze into a statue as there was a movement in the path before him. His quick eyes

fastened on a toad squatted in the dust, its bulgy sides going in and out, in and out, in and out, like a miniature bellows. Stealthily, Pruitt broke off a twig. In and out, in and out, in and out. Pruitt eased forward. In and out, in and out, in and out. He could see its toes spread far apart, the dappling of spots on its cool, froggy skin. In and out, in and out, the leg muscles tensed as the toad prepared to make another hop. Pantherlike, Pruitt leaped, his hand descending. The toad emitted an agonized, squeaking scream.

Pruitt stood up and looked at the toad with amusement. The twig protruded from its sloping back. In and out, in and out went the toad's sides. In—and out, in—and out. It essayed an unstable hop, leaving a darkish stain in its wake. Again it hopped. The twig remained stanchly upright. The third hop was shorter. Barely its own length. Pruitt nosed it over into the grass with his shoe. In—and—out went the toad's sides, in—and—out, in—and—out, in—

Pruitt walked on.

The crippled man mending his fishing net on the wooden pier sensed his approaching footsteps. With as much haste as his wracked spine would permit, the man got to his feet. Pruitt heard the scrambling and quickened his pace.

"Hello," he said innocently.

The man bobbed his head. "'Do, Mr. Pruitt."

"Mending your nets?"

"Yes, Mr. Pruitt."

"I guess the dock is a good place to do it."

"Yes, Mr. Pruitt." The man licked his tongue across his lips and his eyes made rapid sortees to the right and left, as if seeking a means of escape.

Pruitt scraped his shoe across the wooden planking. "Excepting that it gets fish scales all over everything," he said softly, "and I don't *like* fish scales."

The man's Adam's apple jerked up and down as he swallowed thrice in rapid succession. He wiped his hands on his pants.

"I said I don't *like* fish scales."

"Yes, Mr. Pruitt, I didn't mean to—"

"So I guess maybe I better fix it so there won't *be* any fish scales any more."

"Mr. Pruitt, please, I didn't—" His voice petered out as the boy picked up a corner of the net.

"Not ever any more fish scales," said Pruitt.

"Don't pull it," the man begged, "it'll snag on the dock."

"I won't snag it," Pruitt said; "I wouldn't snag it for anything." He smiled at Harry. "Because if I just snagged it, you'd just mend it again and then there'd be more fish scales, and I don't *like* fish scales." Bunching the net in his fists, he dragged it to the edge of the dock. "So I'll just throw it in the water and then I guess there won't ever be any more fish scales."

Harry's jaw went slack with shocked disbelief. "Mr. Pruitt—" he began.

"Like this," said Pruitt. He held the net out at arm's length over the pier and relinquished his clasp.

With an inarticulate cry the man threw himself awkwardly on the planking in a vain attempt to retrieve his slowly vanishing property.

"Now there won't ever be any more fish scales," Pruitt said. "Not ever any more."

Harry hefted himself to his knees. His face was white. For one dull, weighted minute he looked at his tormentor. Then he struggled to his feet and limped away without a word.

Pruitt considered his deformed posture with the eye of a connoisseur. "Harry is a hunchback," he sang after him in a lilting childish treble. "Harry is a hunchback, Harry is a hunchback."

The man limped on, one shoulder dipping sharply with each successive step, his coarse shirt stretched over his misshapen back. A bend in the path hid him from view.

Pruitt pushed open the door of the bathhouse and went inside. He closed the door behind him and bolted it. He waited until his eyes had become accustomed to the semi-gloom, whereupon he went over to a cot against the wall, lifted up its faded chintz spread, felt underneath and pulled out two boxes. He sat down and delved into their contents.

From the first he produced a section of a bread board, four pegs, and six half-burned birthday candles screwed into nibbled-looking pink candy rosettes. The bread board he placed on top the pegs, the candles he arranged in a semicircle. He surveyed the result with squint-eyed approval.

From the second box he removed a grotesque object composed of coal tar. It perched shakily on pipestem legs, two strips of Cellophane were pasted to its flanks and a black rubber band dangled downward from its head in which was embedded—one on each side—a red cinnamon drop.

The casual observer would have seen in this sculpture a child's crude efforts to emulate the characteristics of the common housefly. The casual observer—if he had been inclined to go on with his observing—also would have seen that Pruitt was in a "mood." He might even have observed aloud, "That child looks positively feverish and he *shouldn't* be allowed to play with matches."

But at the moment there was no casual observer. Only Pruitt absorbed in lighting the birthday candles. The image of the fly he deposited square in the middle of the bread board.

Cross-legged he sat, chin down, arms folded. He rocked himself back and forth. He began to chant. Singsong. Through his nose. Once in a while he rolled his eyes around in their sockets, but merely

once in a while. He had found, if he did that too often, it made him dizzy.

"O Idol of the Flies," intoned Pruitt, "hahneemahneemo." He scratched his ankle ruminatively. "Hahnee*wee*mahneemo," he improved, "make the lemonade dry in the crack on the back porch, and make Miss Bittner find the scrooched up fly *after* she's already drunk some, and make cook go down in the cellar for some marmalade and make her not turn on the light and make her fall over the string I've got tied between the posts, and make aunt get a piece of nutshell in her bread and cough like hell." Pruitt thought this over. "Hell," he said, "hell, hell, hell, hell, HELL."

He meditated in silence. "I guess that's all," he said finally, "except maybe you'd better fill up my fly catcher in case we have currant cookies for tea. Hahnee*wee*mahneemo, O Idol of the Flies, you are free to GO!"

Pruitt fixed his gaze in the middle distance and riveted it there. Motionless, scarcely breathing, his lips parted, he huddled on the bare boards—a small sphinx in khaki shorts.

This was what Pruitt called "not-thinking-time." Pretty soon, entirely without volition on his part, queer, half-formed dream things would float through his mind. Like dark, polliwogs. Propelling themselves along with their tails, hinting at secrets that nobody knew, not even grown-ups. Some day he would be able to catch one, quickly, before it wriggled off into the inner hidden chamber where They had a nest and, then, he would *know*. He would catch it in a net of thought, like Harry's net caught fishes, and no matter how it squirmed and threshed about he would pin it flat against his skull until he *knew*. Once, he had almost caught one. He had been on the very rim of *knowing* and Miss Bittner had come down to bring him some peanut butter sandwiches and it had escaped back into that deep, strange place in his mind where They lived. He had only had it for a split second but he remembered it had blind, weepy eyes and was smooth.

If Miss Bittner hadn't come— He had vomited on her stockings. Here came one of Them now—fast, it was coming fast, too fast to catch. It was gone, leaving behind it a heady exhilaration. Here came another, revolving, writhing like a sea snake, indistinct, shadowy. Let it go, the next one might be lured into the net. Here it came, two of them, roiling in the sleep hollows. Easily now, easily, easily, close in, easily, so there wouldn't be any warning ripples, closer, they weren't watching, murmuring to each other—*there! He had them!*

"Pru-itt. Oh, Pru-itt."

The things veered away, their tails whipping his intellect into a spinning mass of chaotic frenzy.

"Pru-itt. Where are you? Pru-itt."

The boy blinked.

"Pru-itt. Oh, Pru-itt."

His mouth distorted like that of an enraged animal. He stuck out his tongue and hissed at the locked door. The handle turned.

"Pruitt, are you in there?"

"Yes, Miss Bittner." The words were thick and meaty in his mouth. If he bit down, Pruitt thought, he could bite one in two and chew it up and it would squish out between his teeth like an eclair.

"Unlock the door."

"Yes, Miss Bittner."

Pruitt blew out the candles and swept his treasures under the cot. He reconsidered this action, shoved his hand under the chintz skirt, snaffled the coal tar fly and stuffed it in his shirt.

"Do you hear me, Pruitt? Unlock this door." The knob rattled.

"I'm coming fast as I can," he said. He rose, stalked over to the door, shot back the bolt and stood, squinting, in the brilliant daylight before Miss Bittner.

"What on *earth* are you doing in there?"

"I guess I must've fallen asleep."

Miss Bittner peered into the murky confines of the bathhouse. She sniffed inquisitively.

"Pruitt," she said, "have you been smoking?"

"No, Miss Bittner."

"We mustn't tell a falsehood, Pruitt. It is far better to tell the truth and accept the consequences."

"I haven't been smoking." Pruitt could feel his stomach moving inside him. He was going to be sick again. Like he was the last time. Miss Bittner was wavering in front of him. Her outside edges were all blurry. His stomach gave a violent lurch. Pruitt looked at Miss Bittner's stockings. They were messy. Awfully messy. Miss Bittner looked at them, too.

"Run along up to the house, Pruitt," she said kindly. "I'll be up presently."

"Yes, Miss Bittner."

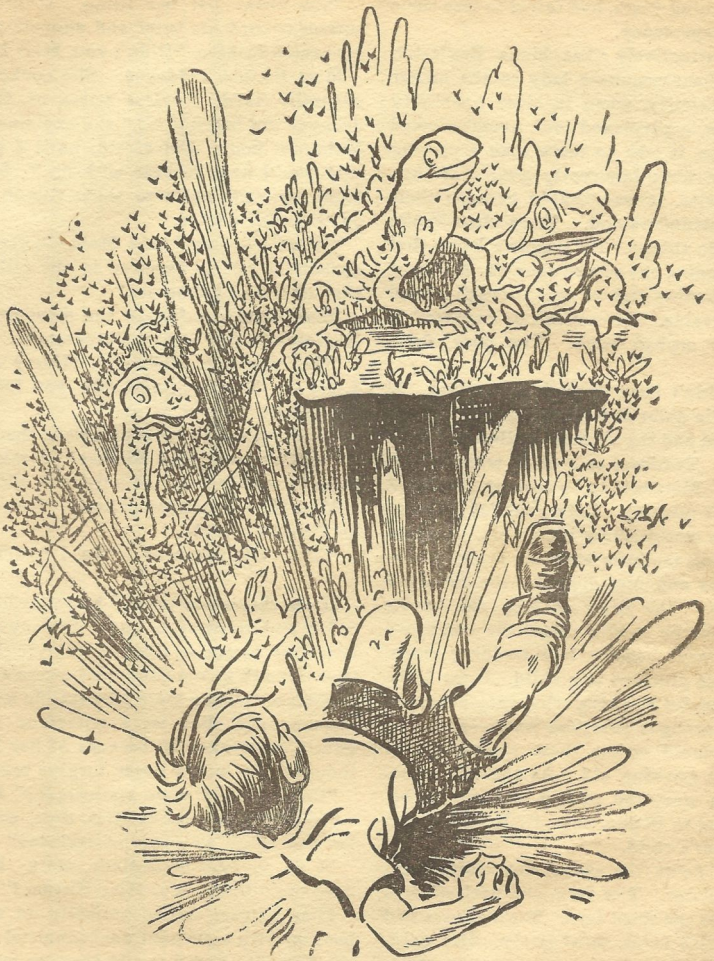
"And we won't say anything about smoking to your auntie. I think you've been sufficiently punished."

"Yes, Miss Bittner."

"Run along, now."

Pruitt went languidly up the path, conscious of Miss Bittner's eyes boring into him. When he turned the bend, he stopped and crept slyly into the bushes. He made his way back toward the boathouse, pressing the branches away from him and easing them cautiously to prevent them from snapping.

Miss Bittner sat on the steps taking off her stockings. She rinsed her legs in the water and dried them with her handkerchief. Pruitt could see an oval corn plaster on her little toe. She put her bony feet into her patent-leather Health Eases.



got up, brushed her dress and disappeared into the bathhouse.

Pruitt inched nearer.

Miss Bittner came to the doorway and examined something she held in her hands. She looked puzzled. From his vantage point, Pruitt glimpsed the pink of the candy rosettes, the stubby candle wicks.

"I hate you," Pruitt whispered venomously, "I hate you, I *hate* you." Tenderly, he withdrew the coal tar image from his shirt. He cuddled it against his cheek. "Break her ear thing," he muttered. "Break it all to pieces so's she'll have to act deaf. Break it, break it, hahnee*wee*mahneemo, break it good." Warily he crawled backward until he regained the path.

He trudged onward, pausing only twice. Once, at a break in the hedge where he reached into the aperture and drew forth a cone-shaped contraption smeared with sirup. Five flies clung to this, their wings sticky, their legs gluey. These he disengaged, ignoring the lesser fry of gnats and midges that had met a similar fate, and returned the flycatcher to its lair. The second interruption along his line of march was a sort of interlude during which he cracked the two-inch spine of a garden lizard and hung it on a bramble where it performed incredibly tortuous convolutions with the lower half of its body.

Mona Eagleston came out of her bedroom and closed the door gently behind her. Everything about Mona was gentle from the top of her wren brown head threaded with gray to the slippers on her ridiculously tiny feet. She was rather like a fawn. An aging fawn with liquid eyes that, de-

spite the encroaching years, had failed to lose their tiptoe look of expectancy.

One knew instinctively that Mona Eagleston was that rare phenomenon—a lady to the manor born. If, occasionally, when in close proximity with her nephew, a perplexed look overshadowed that delicate face, it was no more than a passing cloud. Children were inherently good. If they appeared otherwise, it was simply because their actions were misunderstood. They—he—Pruitt didn't *mean* to do things. He couldn't *know* that—well, that slamming the screen door, for instance, could send a sickening stab of pain through a head racked with migraine. He couldn't be *expected* to know, the poor orphan lamb. The poor, dear, orphan lamb.

If only she didn't have to pour at teatime. If only she could lie quiet and still with a cold compress on her head and the shutters pulled to. How selfish she was. Teatimes to a child were lovely, restful periods. Moments to be forever cherished in the pattern of memory. Like colorful loops of embroidery floss embellishing the whole. A skein of golden, shining teatimes with the sunset staining the windows and high-lighting the fat-sided Delft milk jug. The taste of jam, the brown crumbles left on the cookie plate, the teacups—eggshell frail—with handles like wedding rings. All of these were precious to a child. Deep down inside, without quite knowing why, they absorbed such things as sponges absorbed water—and, like sponges, they could wring these memories out when they were growing old. As she did, sometimes. What a wretched person she was to begrudge a teatime to Pruitt, dear, little Pruitt, her own dead brother's child.

She went on down the stairs, one white hand trailing the banister. The fern, she noticed, was dying. This was the third fern. She'd always had so much luck with ferns, until lately. Her goldfish, too. They had died. It was almost an omen. And Pruitt's turtles. She had bought them at the village. So cunning they were with enameled pictures on their hard, tree-barky shells. They had died. She mustn't think about dying. The doctor had said it was bad for her.

She crossed the great hall and entered the drawing room.

"Dear Pruitt," she said to the boy swinging his legs from the edge of a brocaded chair. She kissed him. She had intended to kiss his sunwarm cheek but he had moved, suddenly, and the kiss had met an unresponsive ear. Children were jumpy little things.

"Did you have a nice day?"

"Yes, aunt."

"And you, Miss Bittner? Did you have a nice day? And how did the conjugations go this morning? Did our young man . . . why, my dear, whatever is the matter?"

"She broke her ear thing," Pruitt said. He turned toward his tutor and enunciated in an exaggerated fashion, "Didn't you, Miss Bittner?"

Miss Bittner reddened. She spoke in the unnaturally loud, toneless voice of the deaf, "I dropped my hearing-aid," she explained. "On the bathroom floor. I'm afraid, until I get it fixed, that you'll have to bear with me." She smiled a tight strained smile to show that it was really quite a joke on her.

"What a shame," said Mona Eagleston, "but I daresay it can be repaired in the village. Harry can take it in tomorrow."

Miss Bittner followed the movement of Mona Eagleston's lips almost desperately.

"No," she said hesitantly, "Harry didn't do it. I did it. The bathroom tile, you know. It was frightfully clumsy of me."

"And she drank some lemonade that had a fly in it. Didn't you, Miss Bittner? I said you drank some lemonade that had a fly in it, didn't you?"

Miss Bittner nodded politely. Her eyes focused on Pruitt's mouth.

"Cry?" she ventured. "No, I didn't cry."

Mona Eagleston seated herself behind the teacaddy and prepared to pour. She must warn cook, hereafter, to put an oiled cover over the lemonade. One couldn't be too particular where children were concerned. They were susceptible to all sorts of diseases and flies were notorious carriers. If Pruitt were taken ill because of her lack of forethought, she would never forgive herself. Never.

"Could I have some marmalade?" Pruitt asked.

"We have currant cookies, dear, and nut bread. Do you think we need marmalade?"

"I do *so* love marmalade, aunt. Miss Bittner does too. Don't you, Miss Bittner?"

Miss Bittner smiled stoically on and accepted her cup with a pleasant noncommittal murmur that she devoutly hoped would serve as an appropriate answer to whatever Pruitt was asking.

"Very well, dear." Mona tinkled a bell.

"I'll pass the cookies, aunt."

"Thank you, Pruitt. You are very thoughtful."

The boy took the plate and carried it over to Miss Bittner and an expression of acute suffering swam across the Bittner countenance as the boy trod heavily on her foot.

"Have some cookies." Pruitt thrust the plate at her.

"That's quite all right," Miss Bittner said, thinking he had apologized and congratulating herself on the fact that she hadn't moaned aloud. If he had *known* she had a corn, he couldn't have selected the location with more exactitude. She looked at the cookies. After that lemonade episode, she had felt she couldn't eat again—but they were tempting. Gracious, how that corn ached.

"Here's a nice curranty one." Pruitt popped a cookie on her plate.

"Thank you, Pruitt."

Cook waddled into the room. "Did you ring, Miss Mona?"

"Yes, Bertha. Would you get Pruitt some marmalade, please?"

Bertha shot a poisonous glance at Pruitt. "There's none up, ma'am. Will the jam do?"

Pruitt managed a sorrowful sigh. "I do *so* love marmalade, aunt," and then happily, as if it were an afterthought, "Isn't there some in the basement cubby?"

Mona Eagleston made a helpless moue at cook. "Would you mind terribly, Bertha? You know how children are."

"Yes, ma'am, I know how children are," cook said in a flat voice.

"Thank you, Bertha. The pineapple will do."

"Yes, ma'am." Bertha plodded away.

"*She* was walking around in her bare feet again today," Pruitt said.

His aunt shook her head sadly. "I don't know what to do," she said to Miss Bittner. "I dislike being cross, but ever since she stepped on that nail"—Mona Eagleston smiled quickly at her nephew—"not that you meant to leave it there, darling, but . . . well . . . will you have a slice of nut bread, Miss Bittner?"

Pruitt licked back a grin. "Aunt said would you like a slice of nut bread, Miss Bittner," he repeated ringingly.

Miss Bittner paid no heed. She seemed to be in a frozen trance sitting as she did rigidly upright staring at her plate with horror. She arose.

"I . . . I don't feel well," she said, "I think . . . I think I'd better go lie down."

Pruitt hopped off his chair and took her plate. Mona Eagleston made a distressed *tching* sound. "Is there anything I can do—" She half rose but Miss Bittner waved her back.

"It's nothing," Miss Bittner said hoarsely. "I . . . I think it's just something I . . . I ate. Don't let me disturb your t-t-teatime." She put her napkin over her mouth and hastily hobbled from the room.

"I should see that she—" began Mona Eagleston worriedly.

"Oh, don't let's ruin teatime," Pruitt interposed hurriedly. "Here, have some nut bread. It looks dreadfully good."

"Well—"

"Please, Aunt Mona. Not *tea*time."

"Very well, Pruitt." Mona chose a slice of bread. "Does teatime mean a great deal to you? It did to me when I was a little girl."

"Yes, aunt." He watched her break a morsel of bread, butter it and put it in her mouth.

"I used to live for teatime. It was such a cozy—" Mona Eagleston lifted a pale hand to her throat. She began to cough. Her eyes filled with tears. She looked wildly around for water. She tried to say "water" but couldn't get the word past the choking in her lungs. If Pruitt would only—but he was just a child. He couldn't be expected to know what to do for a coughing spell. Poor, dear Pruitt, he looked so . . . so—perturbed. Handing her the tea like that, his face all puckery. She gulped down a great draught of the scalding liquid. Her slight frame was seized with a paroxysm of coughing. Mercy! She must have mistakenly put salt in it, instead of sugar.

She wiped her brimming eyes. "Nutshell," she wheezed, gaining her feet. "Back . . . presently—" Coughing violently, she, too, quitted the room.

From somewhere beneath Pruitt's feet, deep in the bowels of the house, came a faint, faraway thud.

Pruitt picked the flies off of Miss Bittner's cookie. Where there had been five, there were now four and a half. He put the remains in his pocket. They might come in handy.

Dimly he heard cook calling for help. It was a smothered, hysterical calling. If Aunt Mona didn't return, it could go on quite a while before it was heeded. Cook could yell herself blue around the gills by then.

"Hahnee*wee*mahneemo," he crooned. "Oh, Idol of the Flies, you have served me true, yea, yea, double yea, forty-five, thirty-two."

Pruitt helped himself to a heaping spoonful of sugar.

The pinkish sky was filled with cawing rooks. They pivoted and wheeled, they planed their wings into black fans and settled in the great old beeches to shout gossip at one another.

Pruitt scuffed his shoe on the stone steps and wished he had an air rifle. He would ask for one on his birthday. He would ask for a lot of impossible things first and then—pitifully—say, "Well, then, could I just have a little old air rifle?" Aunt would fall for that. She was as dumb as his mother had been. Dumber. His mother had been "simple" dumb, which was pretty bad—going in, as she had, for treacly bedtime stories and lap sitting. Aunt was "sick" dumb, which was very dumb indeed. "Sick" dumb people always looked at the "bright side." They were the dumbest of all. They were push-overs, "sick" dumb people were. Easy, little old push-overs.

Pruitt shifted his position as there came to his ears the scrape of footsteps in the hall.

That dragging sound would be cook. He wondered if she really *had* pulled the muscles loose in her back. Here came Harry with the car. They must be going to the doctor. Harry's hunch made him look like he had a pillow behind him.

"We mustn't let Pruitt know about the string," he heard his aunt say. "It would make him feel badly to learn that he had been the cause."

Cook made a low, unintelligible reply.

"Purposely!" his aunt exclaimed aghast. "Why, Bertha, I'm ashamed of you. He's only a *child*."

Pruitt drew his lips into a thin line. If she told about the nut hulls, he'd fix her. He scrambled up the steps and held open the screen door.

But cook didn't tell about the nut hulls. She was too busy gritting her teeth against the tearing pull in her back.

"Can I help?" Pruitt let a troubled catch into his voice.

His aunt patted his cheek. "We can manage, dear, thank you."

Miss Bittner smiled on him benevolently. "You can take care of me while they're gone," she said. "We'll have a picnic supper. Won't that be fun?"

"Yes, Miss Bittner. *Oodles* of fun."

He watched the two women assist their injured companion down the steps with Harry collaborating. He kissed his fingers to his aunt as the car drove away and linked his arm through Miss Bittner's. He gazed cherubically up at her.

"You are a filthy mess," he said caressingly, "and I hate your guts."

Miss Bittner beamed on him. It wasn't often that Pruitt was openly loving to her. "I'm sorry, Pruitt, but I can't hear very well now, you know. Perhaps you'd like me to read to you for a while."

Pruitt shook his head. "I'll just play," he said loudly and distinctly and then, softly, "you liverless, old hyena."

"Play?" said Miss Bittner.

Pruitt nodded.

"All right, darling. But don't go far. It'll be supper time soon."

"Yes, Miss Bittner." He ran lightly down the steps. "Good-by," he called, "you homely, dear, old hag, you."

"Good-by," said Miss Bittner, nodding and smiling.

Pruitt placed the bread board on the pegs and arranged the candles in a semicircle. One of them refused to stay vertical. It had been stepped on.

Pruitt examined it angrily. You'd think *she'd* be particular with other people's property. The sniveling fool. He'd fix *her*. He ate the candy rosette with relish and, after it was completely devoured, chewed up the candle, spitting out the wick when it had reached a sufficiently malleable state. He delved into his shirt front and extracted the coal tar fly which had developed a decided list to starboard. He compressed it into shape, reanchored a wobbly pipestem leg, and established the figure in the center of the bread board.

He folded his arms and began to rock back and forth, the swealing candles spreading his shadow behind him like a thick, dark cloak.

"Hahnee*wee*mahneemo. O Idol of the Flies, hear, hear, O hear, come close and *hear*. Miss Bittner scrooched one of your candles. So send me lots of flies, lots and lots of flies, millions, trillions, skillions of flies. Quadrillions and skintillions. Make them also no-color so's I can mix them up in soup and things without them showing much. Black ones show. Send me pale ones that don't buzz and have feelers. Hear me, hear me, hear me, O Idol of the Flies, come close and *hear!*"

Pruitt chewed his candle and contemplated. His face lighted, as he was struck with a brilliant thought. "And make a thinking-time-dream-thing hold still so's I can get it. So's I'll *know*. I guess that's all. Hahnee*wee*mahneemo, O Idol of the Flies, you are free to GO!"

As he had done earlier in the afternoon, Pruitt became quiescent. His eyes, catlike, were set and staring, staring, staring, staring fixedly at nothing at all.

He didn't look excited. He looked like a small boy engaged in some innocuous small-boyish pursuit. But he *was* excited. Excitement coursed through his veins and rang in his ears. The pit of his stomach was cold with it and the palms of his hands were as moist as the inside of his mouth was dry.

This was the way he felt when he knew his father and mother were going to die. He had known it with a sort of clear, glittering lucidity —standing there in the white Bermuda sunlight, waving good-by to them. He had seen the plumy feather on his mother's hat, the sprigged organdy dress, his father's pointed mustache and his slender, artist's hands grasping the driving reins. He had seen the gleaming harness, the high-spirited shake of the horse's head, its stamping foot. His father wouldn't have a horse that wasn't high-spirited. Ginger had been its name. He had seen the bobbing fringe on the carriage top and the pin in the right rear wheel—the pin that he had diligently and with patient perseverance, worked loose with the screwdriver out of his toy tool chest. He had seen them roll away, down the drive, out through the wrought-iron gates. He had wondered if they would turn over when they rounded the bend and what sort of a crash they would make. They had turned over but he hadn't heard the crash. He had been in the house eating the icing off the cake.

But he *had* known they were going to die. The knowledge had been almost more than he could control, as even now it was hard to govern the knowledge, the *certainty*, that he was going to snare a dream-thing.

He knew it. He knew it. He knew it. With every wire-taut nerve in his body he knew it.

Here came one. Streaking through his mind, leaving a string of phosphorescent bubbles in its wake and the bubbles rose and burst and there were dark, bloody smears where they had been. Another—shooting itself along with its tail—its greasy sides ashine. Another—and another—and another—and then a seething whirlpool of them. There had never been so many. Spiny, pulpy, slick and eellike, some with feelers like catfish, some with white, gaping mouths and foreshortened embryo arms. Their contortions clogged his thoughts with weeping. But there was one down in the black, not-able-to-get-to part of his mind that watched him. It knew what he wanted. And it was blind. But it was watching him *through* its blindness. It was coming. Wriggling closer, bringing the black, not-able-to-get-to part with it and where it passed the others sank away and his mind was wild with depraved weeping. Its nose holes went in and out, in and out, in and out, like something he had known long ago in some past, mysterious other life, and it whimpered as it came and whispered things to him. Disconnected things that swelled his heart and ran like juice along the cracks in his skull. In a moment it would be quite near, in a moment he would *know*.

"Pruitt. Pruitt." The words were drops of honey.

"Pruitt. Pruitt." Pollen words, nectareous, sprinkled with flower dust. The dream-thing waited. It did not—like the rest—dart away affrighted.

"Pruitt. Pruitt." The voice came from outside himself. From far away and down, from some incredible depth like the place in his mind where They had a nest—only it was distant—and deep. Quite deep. So hot and deep.

With an immense effort Pruitt blinked.

"Look at me." The voice was dulcet and alluring.

Again Pruitt blinked, and as his wits ebbed in like a sluggish tide bringing the watching dream-thing with it, he saw a man.

He stood tall and commanding and from chin to toe he was wrapped in a flowing cape and, in the flickering candlelight, the cape had the exact outlines of Pruitt's shadow, and in and about the cape swam the watching dream-thing, as if it were at home. Above the cloak the man's face was a grinning mask and through the mouth, the nostrils and the slits of eyes poured a reddish translucent light. A glow. Like that of a Halloween pumpkin head, only intensified a thousandfold.

"Pruitt. Look, Pruitt." The folds of the cloak lifted and fell as if an invisible arm had gestured. Pruitt followed the gesture hypnotically. His neck twisted round, slowly, slowly, until his gaze encompassed a rain of insects. A living curtain of them. A shimmering and noiseless cascade of colorless flies, gauzy winged, long bodied.

"Flies, Pruitt. Millions of flies."

Pruitt once more rotated his neck until he confronted the stranger. The blind dream-thing giggled at him and swam into a pleat of darkness.

"Who—are—you?" The words were thick and sweet on Pruitt's tongue like other words he half

remembered speaking a thousand years ago on some dim plane in some hazy twilight world.

"My name is Asmodeus, Pruitt. Asmodeus. Isn't it a beautiful name?"

"Yes."

"Say it, Pruitt."

"Asmodeus."

"Again."

"Asmodeus."

"Again, Pruitt."

"Asmodeus."

"What do you see in my cloak?"

"A dream-thought."

"And what is it doing?"

"It is gibbering at me."

"Why?"

"Because your cloak has the power of darkness and I may not enter until—"

"Until what, Pruitt?"

"Until I look into your eyes and see—"

"See what, Pruitt?"

"What is written therein."

"And what is written therein? Look into my eyes, Pruitt. Look long and well. What is written therein?"

"It is written what I wish to know. It is written—"

"What is written, Pruitt?"

"It is written of the limitless, the eternal, the foreverness, of the what is and was ordained to ever be, unceasingly, beyond the ends of Time for . . . for—"

"For whom, Pruitt?"

The boy wrenched his eyes away. "No," he said, and with rising crescendo, "no, no, no, no, no." He scooted backward across the floor, pushing with his hands, shoving with his heels, his face contorted with terror. "No," he babbled, "no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no."

"*Yes,* Pruitt. For whom?"

The boy reached the door and lurched to his feet, his jaw flaccid, his eyes starting in their sockets. He turned and fled up the path, heedless of the pelting flies that fastened themselves to his clothes and tangled in his hair, and touched his flesh like ghostly, clinging fingers, and scrunched beneath his feet as he ran on—his breath breaking from his lungs in sobbing gasps.

"Miss Bittner . . . help . . . Miss Bittner . . . Aunt . . . Harry . . . help—"

At the bend waiting for him stood the figure he had left behind in the bathhouse.

"For whom, Pruitt?"

"No, no, no."

"For whom, Pruitt?"

"No, oh no, *no!*"

"For whom, Pruitt?"

"For the DAMNED," the boy shrieked and, wheeling, he ran back the way he had come, the flies sticking to his skin, mashing as he tried frantically to rid himself of them as on he sped.

The man behind him began to chant. High, shrill, and mocking, and the dream-thought took it up, and the earth, and the trees, and the sky that dripped flies, and the pilings of the pier clustered with their pulsating bodies, and the water, patched as far as eye could see with clotted islands of flies, flies, flies. And from his own throat came laughter, crazed and wanton, unrestrained and terrible, peal upon peal of hellish laughter that would not stop. Even as his legs would not stop when they reached the end of the pier.

A red-breasted robin—a fly in its beak—watched the widening ripples. A garden lizard scampered over a tuft of grass and joined company with a toad at the water's edge, as if to lend their joint moral support to the turtle who slid off the bank and with jerky motions of its striped legs went down to investigate the thing that was entwined so securely in a fishing net there on the sandy bottom by the pier.

Miss Bittner idly flipped through a textbook on derivatives. The textbook was a relic of bygone days and the pages were studded with pressed wild flowers brittle with age. With a fingernail she loosened a tissue-thin four-leaf clover. It had left its yellow-green aura on the printed text.

"Beelzebub," Miss Bittner read absently, "stems from the Hebraic. Beel—meaning idol, zebub—meaning flies: Synonyms, lesser known, not in common usage, are: Appolyon, Abbadon, Asmodeus—" but Miss Bittner's attention flagged. She closed the book, yawned and wondered lazily where Pruitt was.

She went to the window and immediately drew back with revulsion. Green Bay flies. Heavens, they were all over everything. The horrid creatures. Funny how they blew in off the water. She recalled last year, when she had been with the Braithwaites in Michigan, they had come—and in such multitudes—that the townspeople had had to shovel them up off the streets. Actually *shovel* them. She had been ill for three whole days thereafter.

She hoped Pruitt wouldn't be dismayed by them. She must guard against showing her own helpless panic as she had done at teatime. Children placed such implicit faith in the invincibility of their elders.

Dear Pruitt, he had been so charming to her today.

Dear, little Pruitt.

THE END.

THE OLD ONES HEAR

By Malcolm Jameson

● **The Old Ones may hear—and act, too—in somewhat different manner, in ways we do not expect. And in ways that military tactics do not take into account—**

Illustrated by Orban

Yesterday our forces occupied the island of Aea.
Axis War Communiqué.

The promontory loomed ahead, vague and shadowy. Behind it, dark against the starry western sky, lay the remainder of the small island. The commander who sat in the stern sheets leaned forward and spoke quietly to the men on the aftermost thwart.

"Land ahead," he said. "Pass the word forward to make no noise."

Under the dim starlight the men sent the whispered message on its way. The scantily dressed lieutenant and midshipman who sat on either side of the boat officer shivered and pulled their blankets tighter about their shoulders. Their blouses had been ripped apart and blown off by the terrific blasts of the bombs that had sunk their ship.

The boat went on. All was silent except for the faint ripple under its bows and the swish of quickwater along the sides. Even the wounded were quiet, though the faithful mast groaned once or twice as the hastily rigged sail slightly shifted its position.

It was a strangely assorted boat load, those men huddled together on the thwarts and in the spaces between. Thirty-odd of them were various ratings of his majesty's ship *Peeblesshire;* nine were Anzacs, all wounded; four were what was left of the crew of a cargo ship sunk four days before. The oddest was a queer old Greek, clad in his quaint skirted uniform. He had been the Anzacs' mountain guide and had fought with them from Mount Olympus, down through the desperate stand at Thermopylæ, across the flanks of lofty Parnassus, past Delphi to the water's edge. A little touched, they thought him, for when they had rigged the mast he produced a leather bag as if from nowhere and hung it on the mast by the nock of the sail. "For good luck," he had grunted, by way of explanation. Ever since, he had sat doggedly on the third thwart and never taken his eyes off it.

The commander peered anxiously ahead. It had been a hard trip, even though luck had been with them, just as the old Greek had foretold. They had driven more than sixty miles through the winding waterways of the Gulf of Corinth and that of Patras, and always with a miraculously favorable breeze. Not once had a roving Stuka found them, nor the prowling coastal motorboats. But they had had to leave their ship in a hurry and there was room only for men, not for spare stores of provisions and water. The wounded were very miserable, and some were near death. The commander wondered what the island was, and whether it held capture for them, or haven.

There was not a glimmer of a light to be seen. Nor could his keen, night-piercing eye detect that there had ever been a light on the end of the jagged cape which he passed close aboard. He gave the tiller a touch and headed up into the cove that lay inside. Suddenly he started. For dead ahead, square across his bows, he could distinctly see the masts and upperworks of a cruiser. It was an enemy cruiser. He knew that at a glance from its fat, single stack with a deal of rake to it. He had laid his sights on a sister of it, not two weeks before, and watched her disappear in a gush of flame, smoke and splinters.

"Douse the sail," he ordered huskily, and put his tiller up.

The sail came down with a rush and with remarkably little noise, but the nails of the commander's disengaged hand were biting hard into the palm. He expected momentarily to hear a staccato challenge or be fixed in the prying beam of a searchlight. There were such things as picket boats, too, which might be lurking anywhere. But there was no challenge. The ship was as dead, apparently, as a hulk left to rot in some back channel.

The boat had way enough upon it to neatly round the stern of the alien warship. He eased it off a little and studied his unexpected adversary more closely. There was not a man on deck, so far as he could see, and, astonishingly enough—for it lacked only an hour or so to the dawn—her colors flapped at both bow and stern, for all the world like noontime on a gala day.

"Out oars," he whispered, and waited patiently while the extra men slid off the thwarts and lay down out of the way in the soggy bilges. Of a sudden a daring idea had come to him. Perhaps the bulk of that cruiser's complement were on shore, and the remainder, certain of their safety, had been celebrating an easy victory over an undefended island. It might be that they were all drunk. He had heard that discipline on some of those ships was not of the best.

"Give way together," he ordered, and pointed the nose of his overladen craft toward the unguarded gangway.

For several minutes there was only the rhythmic stroke of the oars and the sound of water dripping from their uplifted blades as they swept forward for the next impulse. The commander steered her deftly, and after a few more low-spoken orders, felt the bow graze the platform of the accommodation ladder. Ready hands grasped at stanchions, and the rowers boated their oars without a sound. The moment they were alongside, the commander leaped like a panther to the landing stage and swiftly mounted the ladder.

There was no one at the top of it. A quick turn around the deck revealed nobody. He listened at a hatchway and at a ventilator. The ship was silent as the tomb, except for the faint throbbing of machinery far below decks. He went back to the gangway and beckoned his men to come up.

They swarmed up the ladder, all of them that could walk, gripping what pistols and rifles they had contrived to keep with them in their hurried evacuation. There was a low conference and the group split up into several smaller squads. They parted, some going forward, some aft, the remainder below. Fifteen minutes later they reassembled, as had been agreed upon.

"A rum thing, sir," said a petty officer. "Not a living soul in the ruddy ship. But there's lights below and some auxiliaries running. They left a few burners going, so there's some steam in the boilers, though their water's low."

"How long will it take to get steam enough up to move her?" asked the commander sharply.

"Two hours, sir. Maybe less."

"Get at it. Mr. Torkingham!"

The lieutenant acknowledged.

"Have the wounded men brought up out of the

boat and put 'em to bed. When you have found yourself some warm clothes, go up on the bridge and get acquainted with all the gadgets there. When there is steam enough to work the anchor engine, heave short. We're getting under way in two hours."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"I notice there's not a boat on the ship. Every set of skids and davits and all the booms are empty. I'm curious about that. While you are making ready, I am going to take a pull ashore and find out what has happened. I'll be back shortly."

The commander waited stolidly at the top of the gangway while the injured men were being carried up. He was concealing his impatience as best he could, for he felt he could not leave this unknown island without some explanation of his bizarre landfall. Never in all the histories of the navies of the world had there been a precedent for it. To leave a modern warship all standing with not even an anchor watch or a water tender on board! It was incredible. Not even during the darkest, undisciplined days of the Menshevik revolution at Kronstadt had it a counterpart.

He thought back over the escape and the marvels of the previous day and night. When he had left the shattered *Peeblesshire* she was an inferno of raging flames. There had been no opportunity to salvage a chart. Yet the boat had found her way through the winding channels to this place he did not recognize, and always with a good, stiff following breeze that veered and hauled as if to order. He wondered quizzically about the queer old Greek and his "windbag" and his talk of good luck. Well, they had had fair winds. And as for good luck! Just now he stood on the quarterdeck of a ship quite as good in some respects as the one he had had blown from beneath him. And he had taken it without a vestige of a struggle. He was short-handed, of course, but he could manage.

It occurred to him to ask the men about the Greek. He wanted to question him as to what island this was, how it lay as regards Cephalonia, and how far from Cape Mátapan. But none of the men knew where he had gone. No one had seen him since they made the gangway. He had not come on board. He was not now in the boat. Maybe, feeling himself safe among his own people and his duty done, he had swum ashore.

The commander shrugged. It did not matter greatly. He had never been able to get anything out of the old fellow, anyway, but scarcely intelligible mumbles. He picked out a few men for a boat's crew, then slid down the ladder and into the boat. By that time it was full light, though still gray, and he could see that the pull would not be a long one.

He stood up in the boat on the way in, examining the shore. Ahead of him was a quay of antique masonry, hung over with green moss. Alongside it lay the abandoned cruiser's boats—power boats, pulling boats, even life rafts ripped from the bases of the masts—but in none of them was a boatkeeper. The desertion of his prize's crew had been absolute and complete.

To the right and left stretched sandy beaches, studded with the protruding ribs of vessels left to go to wrack many years before. They marred the beach as the straggly, yellow teeth in the gums of a hag mar her smile, transforming it into something sinister and ominous. As he drew closer he saw one peculiar relic and he knew it from its unique shape. It was covered with green patina of many centuries, but it could have been but one thing—the bronze ram of an ancient trireme.

He mounted the worn treads of the ancient steps of the quay with misgivings that grew with every foot of progress he made. This unknown islet—and he thought he knew them all, for he had cruised this coast many times since his midshipman days—appeared to be the graveyard of ships. Was it subject to a strange and swift pestilence? If so, why had it not been mentioned in the "Sailing Directions"? A sense of disquiet, unease, descended upon him, far more disturbing than had been the roar of the plunging Stukas or the screaming of their deadly bombs. He wondered whether he should go on or turn tail and fly. But curiosity drove him forward.

"Wait here," he said tersely to the boat crew, and strode off up the gentle slope, doing his best to quell the thrills of expectancy, amounting almost to fear, of imminent disaster.

There was no town to be seen, nor houses of any sort. Nor were there tilled fields. The place was more of a park, lovely in its grassy stretches, and spotted with clumps of trees and hedges. He found a path which ran between two winding rows of bushes and followed it for some distance. At a turn farther on he caught a glimpse through the copses of an establishment of some sort on the top of the hill.

"Ah," he thought, "the villa of a rich playboy, perhaps a retired munitions millionaire, or an exiled grand duke."

He stopped to survey it, though he could see little except the red tiles of its roof and the olive grove surrounding it. But his viewing of the place was cut short in an unexpected way. Before he knew what was happening, a horde of snapping wolves descended upon him. There were hundreds in the pack and they swarmed about him, leaping and snarling.

He drew his pistol, but hesitated to use it. He did not want to advertise his presence on the islet. He pivoted on one leg and kept himself in an

incessant swinging, kicking at the fangs of those animals that threatened him most. Once or twice he succeeded in landing a vicious kick squarely in the jaws of the plunging brutes, and after that the others kept at a more respectful distance. He noticed then that they were not truly wolves, but near-wolves—a noisy pack of blustering jackals, willing and eager to pull down a lamb, but not overbold when it came to man. Yet they surrounded him, and their ceaseless yapping and snapping annoyed him. He could defend himself, but hardly progress.

Again a miracle happened. In his turning and twisting he had put his back to the villa on the hill, but now he heard a vibrant, contralto voice berating the creatures in tones of withering scorn. He did not recognize the odd dialect she used, but he did know the biting end of a black-snake whip when he saw one. The end of a long lash flashed by him, nicked a patch of yellow hair from the rump of one of the howling doglike creatures, which promptly slunk away, yelping and whining miserably. He heard the whistle and snap of the lash again and the distressed cries of another victim. He wheeled to see who his rescuer might be.

His senses reeled, and he could only gasp. The wielder of the lash was a woman; he had already surmised that from the voice. But nothing in his previous life had prepared him for what he saw. He was gazing at a woman, but such a woman as exists ordinarily only in visions and dreams. She was the incarnation of ideal voluptuous beauty, but at the same moment she was also the incarnation of cold, vindictive fury as she laid mercilessly about her with her whip. Her hair, under the touch of the first ray of the morning sun, was as a mass of flame, and there was an uncanny quality to her flashing green eyes which had the curious property of seeming to repel yet attract irresistibly at the same moment. There was hardly a detail of her exquisite figure he did not take in at that first startled glance, for she wore only a filmy veil of a garment that revealed more than it hid.

She seemed suddenly to become aware of him, as if she had not observed him before. Raging scorn melted from her face and she took on an expression of utter tenderness and longing that was more than he could bear. In that instant she cast her whip away from her and stretched out her arms to him in passionate welcome. He staggered forward blindly, all thought of ship or duty vanishing from his mind. He only knew that unless he reached her and embraced her, the drumlike roll of his throbbing pulses would drive him mad.

Yet he had taken not more than one or two strides before her manner altered again, and he froze where he stood under the compulsion of her calm, imperious gaze. She was cold and haughty now, and queenlike, and regarded him with a cool, appraising look that was almost as terrifying as had been her fury and her ardor.

"You are a Briton, our ally?" she asked, a trifle hesitantly. "The man Hermes brought?"

"Hermes?"

"Oh, you wouldn't know, of course. He assumes many forms." She relaxed her forbidding attitude and permitted herself a little smile. "But you were not to come upon my island. You were brought to take that hideous, smoking iron galley away—"

"But its crew—what became of them?"

She stooped and picked up her whip, flicking it tentatively as she did. The wolfish animals which had been cowering and whimpering about her feet slunk a little farther away.

"Have no fear of them. They will not return to interfere with you. Later, when I have disciplined them properly, I shall take them to the other side of the island and turn them into the pasture with my swine. Those are they who came to me from the sky." She seemed to be laughing inwardly, as if at a pleasant reminiscence.

The softening of her mood brought back his earlier yearning with all its imperativeness. He sprang forward to snatch her into his arms, but she recoiled and looked at him with something like horror.

"No, no!" she cried. "Not you! You are our friend, our ally. It cannot be. Take what the gods have provided and go. It is a privilege few have had who have stepped upon this island and dealt with me, but it is so ordered. Go!"

The kaleidoscope of emotions to which he had been subjected in this last strange hour showed a new phase. A chilling sense of awe began to grow upon him as the monstrous truth of what he had seen and heard began to dawn upon him. He looked at her now with something akin to fear, yet there was a degree of grudging respect in it, too. That these long dormant ones should stir themselves now to help, if only a little, was something to be honored. He felt impelled to bow.

"I will go," he said quietly, "at once. But tell me—I must know, for my sanity's sake—who *are* you?"

Her eyes widened, as if she were deeply hurt.

"I? In the old days I had a name, but that does not matter now. I am everywhere, anywhere, and my work is always the same—I turn men into beasts."

She shuddered, and her look changed. It was a horrible mixture of passion and power—and agony. "Go!" she said.

THE END.

ON BOOKS OF MAGIC AND PROPHECY

THE KEY OF SOLOMON THE KING

By Comte de L'Avro

Aspirants to occult knowledge who sincerely seek far and wide for secret information on the age-old science of magic usually are first introduced to the principles contained in the book "The Key of Solomon the King."

This book is the most widely known, among occult students, of all works on the mysterious arts and sciences. It serves as an introductory text for beginners in the hidden practices, yet it is considered a veritable font of cabalistic and ceremonial magic by the masters of magic. Tradition and apocryphal Hebrew literature say that the "Key" was first discovered by some Babylonian scholars when they attempted to renew the famous old king's tomb.

This strange work was sometimes called the "Secretum Secretorum" or "Secret of Secrets." Solomon himself called it the "Clavicula" or "Key" because "like a key which opens a treasure, so this work introduces thee into magical arts." The secrets contained in the "Key" consisted not only of direct revelations to King Solomon, but also of the most ancient and powerful occult teachings of the Egyptians and Chaldeans.

The original ivory-bound copy of Solomon's "Key" having been lost, the great work was first made known to the world by the Arabians. Most magicians prefer the Arabian text even today. Josephus writes about the "Key" in his "Antiquities." It has been translated into and now exists in Latin, French, Italian, German, English and Greek. The first Hebrew translation came to Europe in the sixteenth century.

For hundreds of years the "Key" remained in manuscript form. As a result of handwritten copies, various spurious and incomplete manuscripts came into existence. The writer has in his possession such a copy in the French language. It purports to be *"La Grande Clavicule de Salomon"* and has weird and horrible figures of the devil and spirits drawn in it. However, it contains only a few pages of the genuine "Key of Solomon the King." The rest is false. This is how so many useless grimoires came into existence.

The actual "Key" in printed book form makes a very thin book, much smaller than the "Book of Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage" which has already been described previously by the writer. In 1889 S. L. McGregor Mathers translated the first complete "Key" into English from the Latin and French texts.

This French manuscript of the "Key" was the principal textbook of study and practice of the so-called "last great adept," Eliphas Levi. Levi, whose real name was Alphonse Louis Constant, a Frenchman (1810-1875), called himself a true "sorcerer." From Levi's study of the "Key of Solomon the King" he was able to produce phenomena which has only been equaled by medieval magicians. In front of many witnesses he evoked the spirit of that great miracle worker, Apollonius of Tyana, and many other spirits of angels and demons. He challenged and outdid a medium with magical technique by raising more and greater spirits than the medium could. He made these powers of the other world serve him in many ways, such as discovering how the Archbishop of Paris was assassinated. The "Key" furnished Levi with data for his three great magical works. These works, "History of Magic, "Doctrine and Ritual of Magic" and "Transcendental Magic" have been translated into English and may be obtained from some of the larger libraries in the United States.

The actual "Key" itself is composed of two parts and a small introduction. In the first part, or Book I, is chiefly given the method of consecrating and constructing pentacles, talismans and seals necessary for use in the various magical operations. The second part, or Book II, contains, in addition to regulations about magical equipment, the manner in which the magical arts may be directed in the different ceremonies.

Before the pentacles can be properly prepared or consecrated, the magician himself must understand the solemnities and powers of the magical arts and sciences. Therefore, Book I opens by giving the antiquity of magic, a justification for its use, the confession of great humility of the magician, and various powerful conjurations by which the pentacles and talismans are infused with power. The most favorable time for the making of pentacles and talismans is when the moon is in an airy or earthly sign during the days and hours of Mercury. The magician must perform the consecration in his special magical room or sanctum. A talisman is a magical figure that has been charged with the force of some angel or other power which it is intended to represent. The pentacles, talismans and seals are made either on the appropriate metal, skin or unused paper. All beings of the shadow world are linked magnetically to specific colors, plants, incenses, precious stones and metals by their names and certain ceremonies.

It should not be necessary to mention that talismans, seals or pentacles can be made by anyone

and distributed indiscriminately. Talismans do have powers as many people throughout the world today know. Once a properly consecrated talisman of any design brings the owner a successful manifestation, his confidence opens up a channel for further and greater demonstrations.

In fact, the powers which the famous King Solomon wielded over spirits, animals, wind and water were the result of the tremendous magical force residing in his mysterious talismanic ring, partly brass and partly iron, set with four jewels which had been given him by the chief angels of these four realms. These stones were set in a pentacle, six-pointed star, in which was engraved a particular name of God, "the most Great Name of God."

This figure of a six-pointed star, hexagram or interlaced triangles has become known to the world as "Solomon's Seal." It is, however, much older than Solomon, having been used by the Hindus as the "Sign of Vishnu," and by the ancient Egyptians and Chaldeans, also. Certain occult bodies of today, such as the Martinist Order and the Theosophists, have made great use of it.

All magical workers must have clothes and tools of a sort to assist them in their invocations and ceremonies. Book II lists each and every instrument to be used: a wand, sword, dagger, cup, et cetera, and all the accessories such as wax, silks, inks and incense. This equipment is first to be exorcised or have the evil and negative conditions banished from them. Then they are properly consecrated for the work to be undertaken. In addition, certain preparations of the magician himself are necessary, such as a state of intense sincerity and a correct understanding of the magical circle, the right times for fasting, bathing, et cetera. In fact, a very compact method for bringing into visibility and under control any desired spirit which may suit the magician is finally compiled. This briefly is the actual magical ceremony as undertaken by the occult operator. First, proper preparations of the instruments and construction of the magical circle are necessary. Then a thorough banishing of the sanctum must be performed. Next the magician voices a general invocation to the highest ideal he knows, be it the God of the Universe or the God of his heart. A potent conjuration follows giving the authority by which the magician works and reciting the results which have been produced by him in the past.

The psychology of the colored robes, fumes of the incense, long sonorous names, flickering lights and colored pentacles will then bring on a controlled trancelike condition. The climax of the ceremony will be the spirit's appearance. After the magician has given the spirit the directions as to what is to be done—locating thieves, lost articles, prohibiting intended violence, et cetera—the spirit is told to depart and the banishing ritual closes the ceremony.

The philosophy of "The Key of Solomon the King" is based on the age-old belief of all races in the existence of seven great entities which are under the direction of a negatively defined Supreme Being. These seven great beings have subregents under them which help them rule the Universe. The "Key" calls these seven beings the planetary spirits. In all ancient theogonies and cosmogonies we hear of the seven great spirits. The Hindu writes of seven Rishi, the Parsi of seven Ameshaspentas, the Mohammedan of seven Archangels, and the Christian religion has its seven Spirits before the Throne. The planetary spirits of each planet are considered real and objective in the extreme in the "Key." It is generally known that the weekdays have planetary significance, such as Sunday is the day of the Sun, Monday of the Moon, et cetera. The reality of the manifestations of these spirits admittedly is debatable. However, the greatest of philosophical questions is still where does the spiritual realm end and the objective begin, or is the Universe objective or subjective?

In support of the effectiveness of talismanic practices as given in "The Key of Solomon the King," the following modern example is cited. Hamlin Garland's last book, "The Mystery of the Buried Crosses," is based upon the life of a woman who was peculiarly able to discover lost articles. Through the courtesy of Mr. Garland, with whom the writer was in correspondence, the private notebooks of this woman were carefully examined. Her strange powers commenced as the result of her invocations to and use of the talismans of the planetary spirit of Venus.

Orval Graves.

CONCERNING NOSTRADAMUS & CO.

The two discussions of books on Nostradamus are of more interest together than separately, I think. Both of the reviewers—"J. Wellington Wells" and Boucher—are keenly analytical, scholarly men. Anthony Boucher, in his recent article, "On a Limb," stated his belief that there was, in Nostradamus prophecies, much of the scrambling early scientists contemporary with Nostradamus used. It was customary, then, to publish a scientific discovery in code, in anagram, in horribly confused allegory, or by depositing a sealed description of the discovery with some trusted friend. That way, while the "publication" didn't do anybody any good, the discoverer was able, later on when it became general knowledge, or was discovered by someone else, to give the key to his code, anagram, or what have you, and prove that he had been the first discoverer.

Boucher's view is that Nostradamus, similarly, made of his prophecies so elaborate a structure of allegory and anagram as to make them almost un-

interpretable before the event, but clear and identifiable proof of his pre-vision after the event. That there is, in other words, plenty of meat there, if you could only defeat Nostradamus' allegory-anagram concealment and find it.

"J. Wellington Wells" on the contrary—

But here are two reviews of the current crop of Nostradamus puzzle-breakers, from two different viewpoints.

The Editor.

BROKEN LIMBS

A Survey of the Nostradamus Crop by Anthony Boucher

Boswell, Rolfe. "Nostradamus Speaks." New York, Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1941.

Howard, Nona. "Nostradamus and Our Era." A series of articles in *Horoscope*, September, 1941, to January, 1942.

McCann, Lee. "Nostradamus, the Man Who Saw Through Time." New York, Creative Age Press, 1941.

"Norab." "Nostradamus Prophecies About the War." Stockholm, Stockholm Bokindustri Aktiebolag, 1940.

Reed, Clarence. "Prophecies About the War in Europe." Philadelphia, W. Foulsham Co., 1941.

Robb, Stewart. "Nostradamus on Napoleon, Hitler and the Present Crisis." New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941.

Ward, Chas. A. "Oracles of Nostradamus." (Reprinted from the edition of 1891 with a supplement of additional quatrains.) New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940.

"The essence of true prophecy is that it must be disbelieved or misinterpreted."

This text is taken from the article "On a Limb," my own contribution to the Nostradamus crop, in Unknown Worlds, October, 1941. I crawled way out on the limb in that one with prophecies of Free French triumphs, the collapse of the British government, and an American invasion of Europe, which, if not disproved, certainly remain unfulfilled. And I never said a mumbling word about Russia (the article was written in May, 1941) or Japan.

This does not surprise me. Prophecy can be interpreted only after the fact. What can be understood can be averted, and the prophecy nullified.

For this reason De Garencieres, the first English translater of Nostradamus (1672), interprets admirably the quatrains dealing with the Valois court in France and simply boggles at the obscurity of others which now seem the clearest possible indications of the course of Napoleon.

And for this reason prophecy is of no practical value. Its interest lies solely in its appeal to intellectual curiosity and in its possible use as evidence of some extrasensory power latent in mankind. Interpreting prophecies concerning the past is a task for an abstract scholar. Attempting to apply prophecies to the future is nothing but a game.

A fascinating game, to be sure, with a one-in-a-million chance of hitting an astounding bull's-eye. But still a game, and a game that has to be played according to the rules.

And those rules are, above all things else, even above historical knowledge and ingenuity of interpretation, accuracy and impartiality.

But at this point there enters a sinister economic factor. Books will be published only when there is popular demand for them. The ideal attempt to interpret the as yet unfulfilled quatrains of Nostradamus would be made in an ivory tower when all the world was at peace. But books on Nostradamus sell only in times of terrible crisis, when the public wants no quiet and reasoned analysis, but an impassioned assurance that We are going to lick the blazes out of Them because look, it says so right here. And in times of terrible crisis, rules are apt to get lost.

Impartiality? The typical Notradamus book is as pure propaganda as a Tokyo dispatch. Accuracy? Half the quatrains printed would flunk their translators out of high-school French.

The one book of those reviewed that adheres to the rules is Charles A. Ward's "Oracles of Nostradamus." But this is not a part of the crisis crop. It is an opportunist reprint of a careful and detailed study first published in 1891, a work which makes no attempt at reading the future, but simply interprets the fulfillments of Nostradamus' quatrains from his own lifetime to the death of Napoleon III. By adding a supplement of haphazardly selected quatrains and plastering the jacket with such startling, if irrelevant, questions as "Will America Enter the War?" and "Will the British Fleet Be Destroyed?" the fortunate publishers of the 1891 edition managed to leap into the van of the current fad. The book is now a marked success under its false colors; in 1891 it probably sold a thousand copies.

Three of the other works mentioned may be dismissed briefly. The Reed pamphlet is a melange of various prophecies from the Pyramids to Tolstoy, with special emphasis on Nostradamus. The translations are fair and the conclusions drawn exceedingly sketchy; the original is not given, nor are even the numbers of the quatrains cited for reference and comparison. Miss Howard's series of articles suffers likewise from the last two flaws, but she seems a reasonably conscientious student with no specific ax to grind save that of astrology, which enables her to give more detailed

explanations of Nostradamus' many astrological references than any other commentator. Boswell's "Nostradamus Speaks" is long and detailed, covering all fulfillments from 1559 down to 194?; but the book is sprawling, padded and formless, and the author's French often lamentably weak. This opus is chiefly notable for a markedly successful attempt to correlate Nostradamus with the Apocalypse, and for the fact that it gives more of the quatrains in their original text than any other book available to the student on the American market. All three of these agree vaguely that Hitler will get his.

The other three deserve more consideration. These are the ax-grinders, the propagandists, the wishful thinkers who seek to convince the reader that Nostradamus has surely foretold what they wish to come to pass. The official Nazi propaganda work in English is "Norab's" "Nostradamus Prophecies About the War." It is a surprisingly good pamphlet. The age-long tradition of German scholarship has not been entirely destroyed under Goebbels; text and numbers are given, translations are accurate, and the general tone is reasoned and scholarly. Until, that is, we reach the future; and there the propagandist tricks of false translation and suppressed lines at once crop up. If it's any comfort to you, "Norab's" case for a Nostradamic prophecy of Hitler's victory is pitifully weak.

The second half of Stewart Robb's "Nostradamus on Napoleon, Hitler and the Present Crisis" is the British equivalent—purportedly an interpretation of the prophecies, and actually a diatribe directed equally against the Germans and against American isolationists—Japan had not yet eliminated that problem. For pages at a time you may be persuaded that the subject of the book is Wheeler or Lindbergh rather than Nostradamus. The first portion of this volume, however, contains the most lucid, concise and accurate exposition of the quatrains concerning Napoleon that I have seen anywhere. Both sections are appropriately illustrated with British political cartoons of the period.

The strangest of the current books on Nostradamus is, no doubt, Lee McCann's "Nostradamus, the Man Who Saw Through Time." The body of the book purports to be "the first and only biography of Nostradamus written in English." Perhaps it is, if you extend the term biography to include a mediocre fiction which invents whatever material it needs and delves profoundly into the fancifully imagined thought processes of the dead. The interpretive section is, if anything, more tendentious than either Robb or "Norab," and for a surprising cause: it is an urgent plea for the restoration of the French monarchy in the person of the present Bourbon pretender, Henri, Duc de Guise, who as Henri V will drive out the Teuton invaders and restore France to her glory.

Miss McCann's case for this restoration as one of the events predicted by Nostradamus is superficially plausible in her own translations; but the most casual check-up with other sources—she does not dare to present the originals—proves her fraudulent and inaccurate to an extent that stands out even among Nostradamus commentators. One example of her work will suffice. In the forty-eighth quatrain of the eighth century occur the cryptic words:

Dedans Février Chaldondon saluterre.

They may mean something like "Within February the Chaldean is the salvation of the earth"; and what *that* means I have no notion. Out of those four words Miss McCann evolves, with no warning to the reader that she is interpolating, the following astonishing translation:

"A university professor, wise as a Chaldean seer, under the aegis of a vigorous young nation, with the fullest round measure will save the country in February."

That gives you an idea. Add that Miss McCann's uninterpolated translations are usually funnier than a book of boners, that a third of the quatrains are unnumbered or misnumbered, that the text of this supposed medieval scholar contains vile Latin grammar, heraldic blazon reduced to gibberish—she thinks *sable* is not a color but an animal—and high-nonsensical philology—*branch* and *bronchial* derived from the Greek god *Branchus*—and that she is unable even to quote "Through the Looking Glass" correctly, and you may realize that the very existence of this McCann opus is an insult to the standards of American publishing.

The trouble, as I said, is an economic one. When a good book on Nostradamus could be produced, no one would buy it. When the public is eager, the market is flooded with flatulent trash. The result is the delight of the credulous who flock the séances and read astrology magazines, and the disgust of the average intelligent reader.

But the discriminating student will still keep his eye on Nostradamus. Even though no quatrains seem to fit the present aspect of the world crisis—as is not unnatural, since France, the focus of Maitre Michel's interest, is now quiescent—even though every commentator shatters his bones in the collapse of his particular limb, even so the man who dated the great fire of London, who named the betrayers of Louis XVI, who recounted the slightest details in the career of Napoleon, must remain as one of the extraordinary and thus far inexplicable phenomena in the history of mankind.

"Nostradamus: the Man Who Saw Through Time," by Lee McCann; New York: Creative Age Press, Inc.; 1941, 421 pp., $2.50.

Come war, revolution, or other national crisis, and the sixteenth-century Provençal physician and prophet, Michel de Nostredame, is conjured out of his grave by means of a magic circle somewhat different from those used by medieval necromancers, but nevertheless effective, and asked for information to guide the living. And, wonder of wonders, it always transpires that a considerable portion of his several fat volumes of prophetic quatrains refer to the particular war—out of the twenty-odd major conflicts that have occurred since Dr. Nostradamus' time—or other disturbance now taking place; and moreover that they prophesy inevitable victory for our side—whichever that happens to be. A wonderful man, Nostradamus.

The present War of 1939 ff. is no exception, and within the past two years there have appeared a number of books offering translations and interpretations of the seer's "Centuries." Miss McCann's work is as good an introduction as any to the subject, though if you are going in for Nostradamus-fancying, I strongly advise you to read at least two unconnected books of interpretations, for reasons that will appear.

The present book is devoted largely to a biography of Nostradamus; what the eminent doctor lacked in picturesque life is made up for by interesting description of his country and times, about which Miss McCann appears to be an accomplished scholar. Born in 1503, he got his degree at Montpelier, and then for many years traveled and practiced medicine in various parts of France and Italy. He courageously fought several epidemics, and at least did not kill any more of his patients than his contemporaries. In one of these plagues he lost his first wife and two children; after this tragedy his prophetic gift developed.

His forecasts were written in the ambiguous, allegorical language that has been the mark of the successful prophet from the Delphic Oracle on down. Miss McCann believes that he did this in order to keep people interested over a long period by offering them a puzzle to unscramble (Cf. Mr. Boucher's theory that the reason was to prevent people from circumventing, and thereby falsifying, his prophecies). In his later years he resided briefly at the court of Henri II of France and his froglike, coldly ruthless queen, Catherine de' Medici. He died at his home in Salon, France, in 1566.

The latter third of "Nostradamus" is devoted to the detailed application of his prophecies. To give an idea of what consistent results are obtained by the methods of interpretation employed by the author, it is interesting to compare her interpretations with those of a couple of other translators: Anthony Boucher, in an article in last

Continued on page 129

AL HADDON'S LAMP

By Nelson S. Bond

● It might take a bit of coaching to get a jinni in tune with the modern way of things—but he'd be just as useful as he was in the old days, no doubt—

Illustrated by M. Isip

Life, folks say, is a vicious circle. That's right. If it hadn't been for Betty, Al wouldn't have got drunk. And if Al hadn't been drunk, he wouldn't have had a fuss with the boss. If it hadn't been for the Old Man, there wouldn't have been any Betty—

See what I mean? No? All right. I'll begin at the beginning.

The beginning was Betty. Betty was sugar and spice, and everything nice; she was small and slim and a sweaterful of curves. Any marching soldiers who *didn't* "yoo-hoo" at Betty would be fit candidates for the paper-doll brigade.

She was also very determined. Frighteningly so. To Al she said, "Yes, Al, I *will* marry you"—Al stammered incredulous delight and grabbed for her, but she fended him off deftly—"*but,*" she continued, "you'll have to speak to daddy first. You've got to get his permission and a raise."

Al's enthusiasm cooled. Congealed, rather. He grew two new furrows NbyE of the juncture of his eyebrows. "But," he groaned, "he won't give it to me, sugar-pie!"

"Which?" demanded Betty.

"His permission, for one thing—"

"Oh, *that!*" sniffed Betty. "Just a matter of form."

"—or a raise!" concluded Al.

Betty frowned. "Now that," she said, "is a nag of a different nature. I have no objection to changing my name to 'Mrs. A. Haddon, *née* Booth,' but I utterly refuse to be known to the neighbors as 'that poor little Mrs. Haddon.'"

"They say two," suggested Al hopefully, "can live as cheaply as one—"

"One what?" derided Betty. "Elephant?" No, Al—you must get a raise or the rice-and-old-shoes clambake will have to be indefinitely postponed." She glanced at her wrist watch and rose. "Well, it's almost one o'clock. Time for you to get back to the office. You'll ask him this afternoon?"

Al gulped manfully and nodded.

"This afternoon," he promised.

So she left, then. But after she had disappeared, a new vision took her place in Al's mental eye. A considerably less alluring vision: that of his employer, Old Man Booth. A sudden terror overwhelmed Al; he shuddered with a weakness he recognized as the qualm before the storm. For the first time he realized the enormity of the demands into which the arrows of Dan Cupid had prodded him.

Obviously he was in no condition to confront Old Man Booth. His backbone was as rigid as a four-day-old fish, his hands had an equally piscatorial warmth and dryness. He knew but one thing to do. Al called a waiter to bring him courage in a three-starred bottle. It came. Al poured and gulped.

He was not a drinking man, really. Thus it was that one shot engulfed his woes in a roseate mist—the second put wings on the soles of his Oxfords—the third routed his last vestige of uncertainty.

It occurred to him, suddenly, that it was foolish of him to fear Old Man Booth. He said as much, aloud and to the amazement of several nearby patrons of the restaurant-bar. A waiter came scurrying with his check. Al paid it with an air of benign grandiloquence and, strongly fortified by the aroma of CH_3-CH_2OH, set forth to joust for his lady's favor.

Over the events of the ensuing half hour it would be best to draw a curtain of charitable silence, but this we cannot do. It is too vital a part of our history. Homer Booth was a good employer and a fair one—but his temper was only slightly less explosive than trinitrotoluene. He glanced up curiously as Al tacked into his private office.

"Well, Haddon?" he challenged.

Al nodded owlishly.

"Very," he confided, "and you?"

Old Man Booth scowled and reached for the fountain pen with which it was his habit to drum a Rogue's March tattoo whenever he was annoyed by unseemly frivolity.

"What," he demanded coldly, "do you want?"

Al grinned. This was, he thought with approbation, getting to the point quickly. Without unnecessary words or circumlocution. He leaned forward precariously and breathed a hint of his ethyl-scented wishes.

"Well," he said, "a couple of things."

Betty's father sniffed suspiciously.

"Such as?" he prompted, glowering.

"First of all," Al told him, "I want a raise."

"A what!" Old Man Booth stiffened like the central figure in an autopsy case. "Haddon," he accused, "you're intoxicated!"

"I'm nossing," replied Al with simple dignity, "of the snort! I mean, I'm snuzzing—"

"You're drunk," repeated the boss, "and impertinent and incapable! Raise, indeed. For the amount of work you do around this office, your salary should be cut, not increased! And just why do you think you should have more money? To buy liquor, I presume?"

Al beamed seraphically and waved a happy forefinger in front of his employer's nose.

"Now there's where you're wrong!" he chuckled. "Got to have more money for a very important reason. Because I'm going to marry your daughter!"

"You're *what!*" Old Man Booth had spluttered before. Now he erupted. His neck and face flushed a violent mauve as his choler choked him. "Marry my daughter? Why, you must be mad! You're plastered! You . . . you—"

"Poetry!" discovered Al, delighted.

"I'll poetry you!" shouted the boss. "Get out of my office, you insolent young ingrate. And if you ever set foot near my daughter again, I'll— *Oh-oh!*"

To tell the truth, Al had not been very attentive to the Old Man's ravings. He had been watching, with a curious, scholarly interest, a most amazing spectacle. For before his eyes the boss had suddenly and inexplicably accomplished that phenomenal process which Al had heretofore conceived possible only to unicellular organisms—mitosis.

With abrupt impetuosity Homer Booth had divided himself into two separate and distinct Homer Booths, each ruddy-jowled entity pounding on his own, individual desk.

Now, however, both Homer Booths lapsed into silence. Two jaws dropped. A pair of mouths hung agape. A dull light dawned fearfully in twin pairs of eyes. Al stared.

"Whazzamatter?" he demanded anxiously. "Got a pain, boss?"

Old Man Booth had something worse than a pain; he had a premonition. It had occurred to him, belatedly, that he was going about this the wrong way. Homer Booth was a headstrong man, but a logical one. He understood his daughter too well. Being of his flesh and blood, she also shared a number of his mental characteristics.

The surest way to make her want something was to refuse to let her have it. The surest way of throwing her into this double-blanked young whippersnapper's arms was to bounce Haddon out on his ear. Guile, saw Old Man Booth, was needed. The way to bust up this puppy-love affair was to offer Haddon a sporting chance and make him look ridiculous.

He forced a grin to his lips. It didn't quite jell, but Al Haddon was in no analytical mood, he being immediately occupied with the problem of deciding which of the two Booths before him was Trade, and which Mark.

"Er . . . Haddon," he hrrumphed, "perhaps I've been a little hasty. Quite a shock, though. You understand. So my daughter . . . er . . . loves you, eh?"

The proper Homer Booth, Al decided, was the somewhat more substantial one on the left. To this one he nodded.

"Yes, sir."

"It must be," mused Booth thoughtfully, "on her mother's side. No one in my family has ever been committed. Oh, well —no matter!" And to Al again, "So you're going to get married if I give you a raise?"

"*When*," replied Al, "not *if*. Betty won't marry me unless you do."

Old Man Booth nodded. This was good news. But he wasn't out of the woods yet. Not quite. A point-blank refusal on his part would only make Betty more determined. He had to give at least the appearance of co-operation. He leaned back in his swivel chair and steepled his fingers.

"Well, Haddon, I won't pretend to be in complete agreement with these plans, but my daughter is old enough to know her own mind. However, as I said a few minutes ago, I honestly don't believe your work around here merits an increase in salary. It's only fair that you should do something to earn a raise, isn't it?"

That sounded logical, thought Al. He nodded his agreement.

"Very well, then. As my future son-in-law there are three qualities I think you should prove you possess. Your love for Betty, your ability to provide for her in the style to which she is accustomed, and your business acumen. Therefore, I believe I have the right to demand these things:

"First, that you procure for Betty a suitable wedding present, and by suitable I mean something that does full justice to my daughter's superior qualities, a gift so unusual that it might well be envied and coveted by everyone in Newtown.

"Second, that before you are married you shall have prepared for Betty the finest residence in town.

"And finally, that you prove to me your business ability. As you know, Haddon, we are in the real estate business. The business of a realtor is to sell property. We hold title to a fine, exclusive, but so far unfortunately undeveloped tract of land a few miles south of the city. A section known as Oak Valley. Effective immediately I am turning the handling of this property over to you for unload . . . *hrrumph* . . . I mean, development.

"When," summed up Old Man Booth, "you have accomplished these things I shall fulfill my part of the bargain. You shall have my permission to marry my daughter. And furthermore"— Homer Booth could afford to be magnanimous. So can a boa with its victim in a half nelson— "when you offer me proof that these things have been done, I shall not only see to it that you get a raise; more than that, I shall greet my future son-in-law as a junior partner of the firm. There!" He settled back smiling. "Is that fair enough?"

Under ordinary circumstances Al Haddon might have tarried to dispute the question of fairness. But at the moment he was in no condition to do so. The feeling of kick-around-little-pink-clouds which had suffused him so pleasantly for the past half hour was beginning to wear away; in its place had arisen a tumultuous feeling of imminent disaster. An uprising of outraged nature, so to speak. There were butterflies in his tummy, large ones wearing hobnailed boots, rebellious ones making tentative gestures toward escape.

Al gulped and nodded blindly. "Thass fine," he managed in a

muffled tone. "Thass fine. S-see you later, boss." And he fled.

Some while later, a trifle paler, a bit steadier, and considerably less exuberant, Al Haddon moodily strolled the streets of Newtown. The supposed butterflies had fled their duodenal chrysalis, leaving behind a winnowed husk of Haddon just now beginning to realize the sorry mess he had made of things. With returned sobriety had come a recollection of Old Man Booth's demands and his agreement to them. Now, one by one, he recalled the pledges he had made, and groaned to realize their impossibility.

A wedding gift that would draw the envy of the whole town —and him with exactly four dollars and eighty cents in his pockets and less than a hundred in the bank! Al had heard the expression *multo ex parvo* but he didn't believe it applied in this case. There were a multitude of very pleasant little wedding gifts that could be bought for a hundred dollars, but he couldn't envision the assembled populace of Newtown leaping up and down in paroxysms of delight and envy over any of them.

And the finest residence in town! How that promise was going to be fulfilled, Al hadn't the faintest idea. His present capital was not enough to permit the construction of a fair sized pigsty. How then—

He shook his head. It really didn't matter. For even were he able, by some miracle, to accomplish these first two feats of high finance his plans would come a cropper at the barrier of Old Man Booth's third demand —the popularization and sale of the Oak Valley development. For, as clever and farsighted a realtor as Homer Booth was, this tract of land represented the major mistake of his business career.

The purchase of Oak Valley had been a speculation based on the likelihood of Newtown's someday expansion southward. The fond hope had never been realized. One of those unpredictable whims which govern the growth of a city had caused Newtown to widen in every other direction: north, east, and west, property values had skyrocketed with the passage of years, but to the south values had declined. Business centers had moved away, residential sections shunned the spot, saplings and underbrush crept in to cover the survey stakes planted there so optimistically two decades ago. The Oak Valley development was, in short, a turkey.

The whole thing, thought Al, was a foul situation. Oak Valley was a turkey. He had been chicken-hearted. Now his plans were a dead duck.

Musing thus, he hardly realized that he had stopped walking until he snapped out of it to find himself standing before the dust-filmed window of a tiny shop before the door of which hung the trispherical emblem of the Medici. Some deep-rooted instinct had halted him there. The window displays of pawnshops had ever been a fascination to Al. Now for a brief moment he forgot his woes in the happy contemplation of the scores of interesting objects spread before him

The window was a hodgepodge of miscellany. Cornets and cameras, revolvers and razors, Limoges and lower plates, hampers and harmonicas, these nestled cheek-and-jowl in intimate disarray with sabers and sewing baskets, golf clubs and garden tools, books and bracelets, watches and whisk brooms.

One object in particular won his approval. Why that should be so, Al could not clearly explain even to himself—unless it were simply because the item was of such obscure purpose. There was a touch of romance hidden deep beneath the layers of Al Haddon's conventional hide. Anything which smacked even faintly of the mysterious, the unknown, the exotic, exerted a strange appeal upon him.

The item attracting him was a shallow, ship-shaped dish with an elongated lip at one end and a curved handle at the other. It was made, apparently, of brass or bronze. Al could not decide which with any degree of certainty because the entire thing was crusted with verdigris. Still, under this ancient mold could be dimly seen the faint tracings of a design that once had been both beautiful and intricate; an elaborate curvilinear design. Oriental, thought Al. Indian, perhaps, or maybe Persian. Possibly Chinese. At any rate, the thing appealed to him. He went into the shop.

The pawnbroker, a gaunt, disillusioned soul, wraithlike in the semi-gloom, confronted him suspiciously. As Al placed his hands on the counter the man screwed a tiny glass in his right eye, scroonched over and scrutinized the signet ring on Al's left hand. He straightened, dolefully shaking his head.

"Two dollars," he said. "Not a penny more. Two and a half. I'm cheating myself—make it three. Is my lest void; tek it or leaf it."

"I gave you twelve for it," Al reminded him, "six months ago. Anyway, I'm not selling; I'm buying. I'd like to see that little brass bowl in the window."

"For the gold in the ring," said the pawnbroker smoothly, "three dollas. For the movvless craftsmanship is void easy anudder ten, mebbe tventy? A customer? Vy didn't you say so? Bowl?" He ducked into the window, brought forth the object of Al's admiration and plunked it on the counter between them. He gazed at it affectionately. "Werry fine *nu?*" he demanded. "An exceptional exemple of a . . . an Arabian eshtray. Special imported. The only vun of its kind."

"Moslems," Al informed him

absently, "don't smoke. Peculiar looking thing, isn't it? I think maybe it's a gravy boat."

"Exectly," nodded the pawnbroker. "I vas just about to say, an outstending exemple of a Poishun gravy boad. Fit to grace the table of the finest mension."

"How much?" asked Al.

The proprietor stroked his chin. "Ten dollas?" he suggested tentatively.

"Two," offered Al.

"Is custing me eight!" grieved the dealer. "Six?"

"It has a dent in it," Al pointed out, "and it's dirty. Three."

"I'm losing my mind, bud to a good customer a special price. Five dollas."

"Four," parried Al. "That's the best I can do."

The pawnbroker sighed. "Four-fifty and it's a deal."

"Good-by," said Al.

He turned toward the door. The proprietor moaned and stopped him. "So vait a minute! You vant it for four dollas? So I'm losing money, but I'm making good will. So take it."

"If it's worth more than a buck," Al told him, "I'll eat it." But he surrendered the last four greenbacks in his pocket and carried home his find.

Just what he was going to do with the bowl, or inkwell, or ash tray, or gravy boat, or whatever it was, Al hadn't the faintest idea. But by the time he reached his home—a tiny, two-room efficiency apartment in a mediocre section of town—he had decided that, cleaned and polished, the thing might make a nice addition to the hope chest of household goods he and Betty had been collecting spasmodically.

He had an hour or so before dinner. He took some oil and a soft cloth from his cupboard and industriously set to work on the blackened metal.

The thing was dirtier than he had thought. Damn dirty in fact. He had taken no more than a couple of swipes at it when a thick cloud of smoky dust puffed up into his face, apparently from the interior of the bowl. It was a most peculiar smoke, heavy bodied and pungent with the aromatic scent of aloes or sandalwood or myrrh. Al was subject to hay fever, anyway. His eyes watered and he sneezed. He sneezed again.

The smoke seemed to eddy away, spiraling toward the ceiling. Then, astonishingly, its increasingly dense volume began to form into a shape. Legs appeared, firmly anchored to the floor—a torso—shoulders. The figure formed of a creature so towering that it had to bend at the hips to confine its height within the boundaries of Al's little room. A figure humanoid but not human. For it was jet black, with a cockatoo crest of tawny hair. Two great fangs protruded from its upper jaw, and blazing, crimson eyes stared down from the ceiling upon Al. And a voice, surprisingly servile, boomed thunderously, "Say what thou dost want of me. For here am I, thy slave and the slave of him who holdest the wonderful lamp which is in thy hands!"

There was only one thing to think. Al thought it. He buried his face in his hands. "D. T.'s," he moaned faintly. "Oh, for an aspirin tablet! I might have known it. I'll be seeing pink elephants next. Go 'way!" He waved his hand vaguely at the hovering vision. "Go 'way!"

And it was gone. Just like that.

Al glanced about him, furtively at first, then with gathering assurance. He sighed relievedly.

"Well," he said, "that wasn't the *prettiest* bogyman anybody ever saw, but it sure was the shortest-lived! Of all the—"

Then his words died in a strangled gasp as his eyes rested on the end table beside his chair. For there, neatly disposed within his reach, sat a small saucer. And upon the saucer lay two aspirin tablets and a fresh glass of ice water!

Al swalowed the tablets. He felt—but definitely!—that he needed them. Then he sat himself down to think, very hard, for a few minutes. After a brief interval of cogitation he rose and pawed through the dustier and least-often-read volumes of his bookcase, finally coming up with the one he sought. He leafed through it and painstakingly reread, for the first time in years, a story dimly remembered from childhood days.

As he read, certain parallelisms struck him with staggering force. His own name and its somewhat distorted prototype. The fact that his father, like that of the story's hero, had once been in the dry-goods business. The name of the girl, Betty Booth, so plausible an anglicization of the more exotic name, Bedr-el-Budur. Both girls were beautiful, both princesses, though the father of one was ruler of an empire and the daddy of his light-of-love but a business tycoon. And ever weaving through the magical tale of long ago was the legend of a monstrous creature, not human but humanoid; an Ifrit who was the slave of a wonderful lamp.

Al Haddon laid down his volume of the "Arabian Nights" with a hammering pulse of excitement pounding in his veins. His fear and uncertainty had vanished now; in their place was a great exultation. He had the proper scorn of all romantic men for the cold, illogical logic of science which derides the existence of spirits and demons. He knew, fully and confidently, what would happen when again he rubbed the tarnished surface of the lamp.

And it did happen. Again the stifling fumes arose, billowed into a towering figure. Again the thunderous voice throbbed through the room. "Command what thou wilt, O my master! I am thy slave and the slave of

him who possesseth the lamp!"

This, thought Al, was it. The showdown. He might as well find out right here and now whether he were wacky and this was all a pipe dream or—

His command was purely experimental. "O, jinni—" he began.

He stopped and started over. He wasn't any too sure of this elaborate, archaic style of speech anyway. He assuredly disliked addressing the slave of the lamp as if he were calling for a slug of Gordon's Dry at a bar.

"O Marid," he cried, "canst thou verily bringeth me whatever I damn well wantest?"

The jinni nodded gravely. "Thy wish is my command, O my master! Ask what thy willst."

Al, remembering his date tonight with Betty, thought suddenly how swell it would be to make his appearance in a snorky new twelve-cylinder convertible, all dolled up in the white tie he had always wanted but never been able to afford. And with a pocketful of jack.

"O. K., thou," he commanded. "Beat it and bringeth me pronto a new suit of evening duds, eke verily a pocketful of shekels, and eke also very verily the swellest car anybody ever saw."

The jinni touched his brow, his lips, and his forehead obsequiously, but looked just a trifle puzzled.

"As thou wilt, O my master," he said. "But pray tell me, by Allah—whose name be exalted—what is this 'car' thou speakest of?"

"Car?" repeated Al. "Why . . . er . . . an automobile. A conveyance, of course. A way of getting from one place to another. *You* know."

The jinni nodded, satisfied. "So be it, master," he said, and vanished. Al took a shower. He had just stepped from beneath the icy needle-spray and was rubbing himself down, pink-fleshed and gasping, when the jinni returned.

"Thy raiment awaits, O master, and thy purse of wealth withal. Thy conveyance, yea, even one worthy of the loftiest emir or sultan, approacheth and will arrive eftsoons. Hast thou other commands for thy servant?"

Al, rubbing himself down vigorously, had a briliant thought. "Just one, Ifrit, old boy," he called genially. "Thou canst take a powder now, but while thou art on the lamister, take thou a couple of lessons in modern English, so that in the future thee and me won't have to talketh like a Quaker meeting."

"I hear and obey, O my master," said the Marid. And was gone.

Al stepped expectantly from the bath into the bedroom. As the Ifrit had said, his new clothing was laid out for him carefully upon the bed. But Al's heart dropped when he saw it.

For *what* clothing! Here lay no grosgrain vest, no fine, starched broadcloth shirt, no tails and trousers of well-cut midnight blue, no gleaming topper. The raiment the slave of the lamp had brought him was gorgeous of cut and exquisite of texture, but it consisted of: 1—a gossamer veil of scarlet silk, wound into a turban and secured by a ruby and emerald clasp; 2—an intricately braided sleeveless mess jacket of purple velvet; 3—bright-orange ankle-length pantaloons; 4—a pair of spiral-toed, green morocco sandals, and 5—a half dozen or more thingamajigs and gadgets the very purpose of which—save for a pearl-scabbarded scimitar—Al could not even guess!

As he stood staring aghast at these fugitives from an Oriental rummage sale, a faint sound wafted to his ears. It was a medley of human applause and laughter mingled with weird, exotic music. A sudden apprehension seized him. He darted to the window which opened on the street below—and shuddered. His hunch had been right. The slave of the lamp had, indeed, ordered for him a conveyance worthy of the Haroun-el-Raschid himself. Up the street toward his boardinghouse marched a parade surpassing in color even that of the annual Newtown Young Democrats' Marching and Clambake Society.

Eight musicians, beating, plucking, and skirling on tambours, lutes, and pipes, came first. Then forty luscious maidens, incredibly exposed to the elements, strewing flowers and chanting in high, rhythmic falsetto. Behind them waddled forty fat and fatuous eunuchs, and behind these, short swords bared and glinting in the late afternoon sun, an equal number of Nubian men-at-arms. Then came the conveyance itself. A tremendous Indian elephant, saffron-white of hue, guided by a burnoosed mahout, and saddled with a gigantic jewel-incrusted palanquin!

Al had to do something, and fast. A crowd was gathering in the streets below. In a very few seconds this anachronistic sideshow would come to a halt; his secret would become public property. Hastily he grabbed the lamp, scrubbed it. His order interrupted the Marid's greeting.

"Get them away from here, O Ifrit," he commanded. "Don't make them disappear; that would be too obvious. Just march them past the house and out of the city somewhere before you vanish them. Hurry! And then come back!"

The slave bowed low and muttered something, then vanished. So intent was Al on the spectacle below that a good five minutes passed before the double-take struck him and he realized what the Ifrit had said. Then he knew with sure finality that the slave was in all ways subservient to his desires. For an earlier order had been faithfully obeyed. What the Marid had

"No, no! We don't do things that way any more—"

said to him just before he disappeared was:

"O. K., Butch!"

It was a disappointed jinni who reformed himself before Al a few minutes later. His cockatoo crest of tawny hair looked limp and discouraged. There was an anxious look in his scarlet eyes. He hovered before Al dubiously.

"What's the matter, boss?" he whined in a melancholy tone, "didn't you like de layout I fixed up for you?"

Al stared at him numbly. "I . . . I beg your pardon?"

"Dey was de keenest babes," claimed the Ifrit, "in Limbo. An' de biggest sacred elephant. I went all out on dat show. Why, de las' time I t'rew a party like dat for a guy in Bagdad it wowed 'em! An' de show I flang for him wasn't one, two, t'ree wit' yours."

"Where," demanded Al hollowly, "did you learn to talk like that?"

The jinni fidgeted uncomfortably, mildly dislocating the chandelier. "Well, you *tole* me to loin to speak modern English," he defended.

"Where did you go?" insisted Al.

The jinni shrugged. "To de biggest boig I could find on dis continent. A city called Flatbush, or Brooklyn-on-the-Gowanus." The Ifrit beamed proudly. "I loined quick, didn't I, boss? I got de langwidge down pat. Listen: "Oh, you bline Tom!—Moider dat bum!—Berl

'im in erl!—G'wan, bust one, Ducky!—Wait'll nex' year—"

"That's enough," shuddered Al. "Listen, my friend, these miracles of yours are all very well, but they won't do. They won't do at all. People don't travel in howdahs any more. And they don't wear silken plus fours to their insteps. I wanted you to bring me a *modern* car and a *modern* full dress suit. Now, how about it?"

The Ifrit shook his head thoughtfully.

"No can do, boss. I mean, not out of de storehouse, anyway. Dere's plenty of jools and gold an' t'ings like dat dere, but all the equipment is a couple hundred years old. Of course," he added thoughtfully, "I can get dem t'ings for you. Just pernt out what you want an' I'll wring a few necks—"

"No," said Al hastily, "never mind! That won't be necessary. You *did* bring me a purse of money? Very well, that will see me through. You may go now."

The Ifrit salaamed. "O. K., boss. Abyssinia!" he said. And Al was again alone.

Shortly before he set out for the Booth home a last minute thought occurred to Al. He summoned his now-familiar servant in the now-familiar fashion. He said, "Jinni, I am going to visit the young lady I love. Her father has forbidden me his house."

The Marid nodded understandingly. "I get it, doc," he said. "Want him liquidated, eh? Well, O. K." He grinned evilly, his tusks glistening. "I'll take care of him for you."

"No," cried Al. "Wait a minute! I don't want anything drastic to happen to him. Just . . . er . . . just make him glad to see me. Can that be arranged?"

"We-e-ll, I guess so," said the Ifrit disappointedly. "I'll see what I can do. Meet you out dere, bud."

Al took a streetcar. The Booth mansion was in an exclusive residential section, a mile or so from the end of the car line. Dusk was gathering rapidly as Al stepped through the privet gateway that screened the Booth estate from the road. He thought he heard a faint sound in the terrace garden. He was right. As he drew nearer the sound grew clearer, became the cry of a human voice raised in anguish. Startled, Al broke around the corner of the house to behold a most amazing thing.

Homer Booth, so sallow of jowl that he looked for all the world like an overstuffed green gage plum, was perched on the topmost branch of a sapling locust. Beneath the tree, gazing hungrily up at Betty's father, circled a huge tiger. Its tail flicked back and forth like a sinewy metronome, timing Homer Booth's terrified yelps.

Al took an incredulous step forward. "Hey!" he called.

The man in the tree stared down at him. "Y-you! Thank God, someone came! This damn beast has had me up here for a half hour!"

"It . . . it's a *tiger!*" said Al.

"It is *now*," wailed Booth. "It was a rhinoceros a minute ago, and a crocodile before that! *Look out!* There it goes again!"

Al turned in time to see the pacing cat shimmer briefly, undergo a swift shrugging movement, and alter its shape. Its body shortened and darkened, its shoulders hunched, its fangs curled into tushes, and suddenly the creature was no longer a tiger but a tremendous wild boar.

"D-don't stand there like an idiot," yelled Old Man Booth. "Call the police! Call the army! Get that thing out of here!"

Any timidity Al might have felt had disappeared now. He stepped forward confidently, waved his hands at the transitory beast. "*Shoo!*" he said. "Go 'way!"

The boar glanced at him over its shoulder, winked one crimson eye, and scampered off. Al grinned up at his employer. "It's all right," he said soothingly. "You can come down now."

Old Man Booth dropped beside him, panting heavily. "You . . . you saw it too, Haddon?" he gasped.

"It?" queried Al.

"Th-that thing! You saw it change from a tiger into a boar—"

"Maybe you'd better go in," Al suggested, "and lie down quietly for a little while. You'll feel better directly."

"But it *was* there? I saw it!"

"In the future," Al told him prudishly, "I'd be more careful about calling other people intoxicated if I were you. We'll let this be our little secret, Mr. Booth, if you wish. I won't say anything about it if you don't. Is Betty home?"

Old Man Booth passed a flabby hand across his brow, waggled it vaguely in the direction of the house and staggered away.

Betty was keenly excited about the agreement that had been struck between her father and her fiancée. She had heard the details from what might be called a biased source, and consequently was more enthusiastic about Al's prospects than was Al himself.

"Isn't it wonderful, darling?" she cried. "Why, you're practically a junior partner right now! All you have to do is sell a couple of silly old plots of ground, and build us a pretty house, and as for the present for me—well, gracious! You know that anything you give me I'll just love! Especially if it's square-cut."

"Only," reminded Al, "he didn't say a *little* house. He said the finest house in town."

"Well," pouted Betty, "we wouldn't exactly want a little house, anyway, would we? It's much nicer to have room enough to move around in. And," she added hopefully, "it's not as if you had to go to the expense of

building. You can buy one already built, you know. Now, let me see—the nicest home in town? I guess that would be Mr. Replogle's home. You know—Walter Replogle?"

Al didn't. But he knew who Walter Replogle was. Newtown's most prominent citizen; banker, stockbroker, dabbler in real estate, and one of the wealthiest men in the state. He shifted arguments abruptly.

"And it's not just one or two little plots, dear. It's the whole Oak Valley development."

"Yes, I know. Wasn't it lovely of daddy to give you a whole real estate development all to yourself? Oh, by the way—he told me at dinner he'd signed over exclusive rights in that property to you on a month's option. He said you were to dispose of it in that length of time, or else. Honey, what did he mean by 'or else'?"

Al rose suddenly. "Never mind, sugar-pie. Look, can I call a taxi? Let's run into town and do things. I want to get my mind off—"

Betty looked at him dubiously. "Now, Alfred, are you sure you remembered to bring some money with you tonight? The last two times we went downtown you'd left it at home and I had to—"

Al nodded, patting the bulge in his pocket affectionately. "Yes, honey, I'm sure. Now go get your hat on."

Which was just another indication of Al Haddon's carelessness. Because a few minutes later they were whirling downtown in a taxi. A few minutes after that, the cab had drawn up before the marquee of Newtown's latest and most elaborate night spot. Al dug into his jinni-supplied wallet and handed the cab driver a more than sufficient number of coins. He was just about to follow Betty through the portals of the club when a rude hand fell on his shoulders.

"Hey, wait a minute, buddy! What do you think I am, anyway? I ain't in business for my health. And I can't pay the rent with these fancy slugs."

Al stared miserably at the rejected coins. In a feeble voice he called to Betty, "Honey, wait a minute! Do you happen to have a dollar in your purse? I . . . I've just made a little mistake—"

Which was really the only explanation he could offer Betty. How could he tell her it was not *his* mistake but the jinni's? For the wallet, so pleasantly plump and heavy, was filled not with good, spendable American dollars—but with beautifully bright and useless Arabian dinars.

Dinars are made of brass.

Al Haddon woke late the next morning. His first impulse, upon seeing how closely the hands of the clock approached the vertical, was one of panic. Then he remembered. He was no longer an ordinary wage slave with regular nine-to-five business hours. He was on his own. A man of weighty responsibilities. Within the next few weeks he must accomplish three tasks on which his whole future depended. Alone, unaided—

No, not alone! Al bethought himself suddenly of the lamp. And, thinking of it, a swift doubt assailed him. In the cold, sober light of morning the events of yesterday assumed fantastic implausibility. After all, he had been drinking yesterday afternoon. He was not accustomed to drinking. There was a distinct possibility that everything which had happened to him was the result of mental inequilibrium.

And yet—and yet, there stood the small bronze lamp by his bed. He reached for it, stroked it not too certainly. But it had not been hallucination. For once again the room was thick with the cloying scent of incense, and, ceiling-high, sleepily rubbing its scarlet eyes, appeared before him, yawning, the slave of the lamp.

"Hyah, boss!" greeted the jinni, "how's by you dis morning?"

Al stared at him distastefully.

"A fine looking Ifrit *you* are! Where have you been?"

The Marid fidgeted sheepishly. "Well, it was dis way, boss. Two old buddies of mine, Sheytans from down Elbis way, had the night off. We picked up a couple of keen-looking ghouls and t'rew a little jinn-brawl."

"Disgusting," sniffed Al. He glared at the Ifrit reproachfully. "A fine servant you are, going out on a bender and leaving me to be embarrassed before the sweetest girl in the world! That money you gave me—"

"What was de trouble, boss? Wasn't it enough?"

"It was too much! I told you to bring me money, not brass washers! Oh," conceded Al dispiritedly, "I guess it's not your fault. You don't have any good United States currency in that warehouse of yours, any more than you have Brooks Brothers clothes or Lincoln town cars. The trouble with you," he decided moodily, "is that you're an anachronism! You're as outdated as a month-old form sheet. For a plugged nickel I'd shove you and your darned lamp into the river!"

The Marid looked worried. "Oh, don't do dat, boss! Gimme another chanst. You're right about me not being able to smoke up dese modern t'ings. But, look—supposin' I bring you a poise of gold?"

Al shook his head. "No good. The country's off the gold standard. I'd get shoved in the clink."

"Well, di'monds, den? Or rubies? Dere must be sumpin I can do."

"There is," acknowledged Al suddenly. "I'm in a jam. Listen here—"

And he told the Ifrit about his three pledges. When he had fin-

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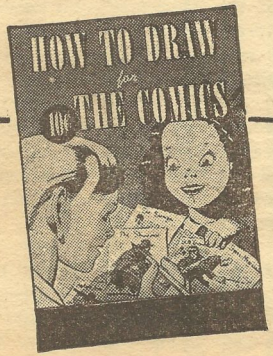

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ished, the slave of the lamp nodded thoughtfully.

"I get it. You need a whipperoo for de doll, de snazziest jernt in town to park your pups in, an' you're s'posed to unload dis Oak Valley section, huh? Dat last one gets me. How do you get rid of a hunk of ground you don't want nowadays, anyway?"

"You sell lots," Al explained.

"Lots of what?"

"Lots of lots. The Oak Valley section comprises about a hundred and forty acres. What you do is popularize it as a real estate development and sell little parcels of ground. People build houses."

"Sounds silly," commented the Marid. "But not hard. Let's go take a look at de dump, shall we?"

Al nodded. That wasn't a bad idea. "As soon as I've had breakfast," he assented.

"Breakfast? What d'you like for breakfast?"

"Oh, the usual things. Orange juice, cereal, scrambled eggs, toast, jelly, coffee—"

"Comin' up," said the Ifrit. He twisted one inky arm slowly into nothingness, from there extracted a tray laden with all the things Al had mentioned. "Hurry up an' feed your puss, boss, an' we'll go have a looksee."

Al sipped the orange juice gingerly. It was fresh and ice-cold and very good. He set to work on the other edibles with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Nice going, chum," he muttered through a mouthful of hot buttered toast. Then as the jinni fidgeted, squinting anxiously at the alarm clock—"Well, what's the matter with you? What's the rush?"

"What? Oh, nuttin', boss. Only if you c'd just shake a leg a little? It's almost noon now, an' if you don't mind, I'd like to do whatever's got to be done and take de afternoon off."

"Afternoon off! Why in the world—"

The jinni shifted uncomfortably. "Well, it's dem Dodgers!" he blurted. "Dey're playin' a double-header today wit' de Cards. It's a crooshul serious!"

A very short while later, Al and the jinni stood side by side on a country road at the border of that wooded desolation which was Homer's cataclysmic speculation—Oak Valley.

What they saw was neither inspiring nor encouraging. The acreage was a wide, flat valley nestling amongst rounded foothills. It was a tangle of forest growth. All shapes and ages of trees, from tender saplings to hoary patriarchs, formed a webbing of leafy boughs. Wild grasses swayed waist high. Like the wistful sentinel of a ghost city, a single signpost, ivy-overgrown, asserted itself to be the intersection of a "Hill Street" and "Central Avenue" that had never come into being.

Even Al Haddon, who acknowledged himself only a mediocre judge of real properties, could see at a glance why this development had never attained popularity. Ignoring the fact that Newtown had grown in the opposite direction, the Oak Valley plateau was just simply too damn flat! Too dry, too parched, too sheltered in the lee of the hills to ever enjoy the fresh coolness of breezes. No sane homesteader would *ever* build in such location.

Al shook his head discouragedly. "The Old Man," he muttered, "must have been off his button when he speculated on this ground. Why, it's just like the bottom of a cup!"

"Hey, boss!" whispered the Marid huskily.

"Eh?"

"Jiggers, the cops! I'm fading!" The jinni's black bulk swelled to a gray and tenuous mist, then vanished completely.

Al looked around, startled. But the newcomers were not police. True, two of the trio wore uniforms, but the uniforms were the olive-drab of the United States Army. The third member of the party was a portly gentleman whose picture had graced the front page of the Newtown *Gazette* many, many times. Al sprang forward excitedly.

"Why, good afternoon, Mr. Replogle. This *is* a surprise!"

Walter Replogle ignored his hand haughtily. "I'm afraid . . . *hrummph* . . . young man, you have the advantage of me. I don't seem to recall—"

"I'm Al Haddon. From Mr. Booth's office, you know? Were you"—Al breathed hopefully—"were you looking over our Oak Valley development? A charming site, gentlemen! Close to town, a beautiful view of the mountains—"

"Mr. Haddon," introduced Replogle peremptorily, "Colonel Thompson and Major Margraves. I suppose it will do no harm to tell you why we're here. These gentlemen are officers of the United States Army Air Force. As a part of the national defense operations, the government has decided to build an airport somewhere within the vicinity of Newtown. As chairman of the City Council I have been delegated to point out to them various possible locations. I think, however"—his hands made a gesture of dismissal—"our friends will agree how impossible this particular site is. Am I right, Colonel Thompson? Major Margraves? Well, this is the last of the locations on our list. I'm sure you can see, now, that Center Hill is the ideal spot for the new port."

"Center Hill!" broke in Al shrewdly. "Excuse me, Mr. Replogle, but isn't that one of your properties? West of the town, I believe, in the flood area."

"Floods? *Nonsense!*" Walter Replogle's gaze would have scorched asbestos. "Nothing of the sort! A modicum of spring rains, yes! But any flat, exposed area—" He smiled at his com-

panions ingratiatingly. "On the whole, gentlemen, it is obvious that Center Hill is a much more desirable location than this . . . this jungle."

Colonel Thompson rubbed his chin. "We-e-ell," he said, "you may be right, Mr. Replogle. On the other hand, this might have certain advantages we have not seen elsewhere. I don't have to look at a topographical map to see that it is perfectly, ideally flat—"

"Moreover," Major Margraves pointed out, "there seem to be no streams. That means a good hard surface."

"B-but," expostulated Replogle, "those infernal hills hemming in the plateau! Egad, gentlemen, aircraft would have a devilish time spotting the field!"

"Exactly!" nodded the colonel. "That's another point in its favor. To enemy aircraft, the field would be completely invisible until they were almost upon it. A few antiaircraft guns mounted at strategic spots—" He turned to Al suddenly. "You say your employer holds title to this site?"

Al's head spun dizzily. "I . . . I do. I'm the sole representative."

"Well, young man, I don't mind admitting I'm greatly impressed with the potentialities of this location as an airport. If something could be done to clear this ground—"

Al gulped. Visions of ground crews, tractors, scrapers, axmen, danced before his eyes, mingled with sweeter visions of dollar signs and Betty.

"It *can* be," he blurted. "It can be ready in—"

"How long?" demanded Major Margraves. "I'm afraid that is our stumbling block, colonel. As you know, we must make our decision within a week. We can't definitely decide on this site until we see it stripped of its foliage."

Walter Replogle beamed triumphantly. "That's right, major. I have had a great deal of experience along these lines and, believe me, gentlemen, it will take at least a *month* to clear this ground properly. On the other hand, my . . . er . . . the Center Hill development is already cleared. Well"—he turned to Al patronizingly—"it's too bad, young man, but I'm afraid we can't waste any more time here. Shall we go, gentlemen?"

"Wait a minute!" cried Al. "Colonel, can you come back here at this time tomorrow?"

The officer stared at him dubiously. "Why, I suppose so, young man."

"Very well. It will be cleared by then," cried Al boldly.

Replogle's face achieved the impossible feat of turning another shade redder. *"Wh-what!"* he spluttered. "You mean to tell me you can clear one hundred forty acres in twenty-four hours?"

"If I can't," declared Al grimly, "the lamp goes into the junk pile! And now, if you'll excuse me, gentlemen—"

He waited until their automobile was out of sight, then addressed himself tentatively to empty air.

"Jinni," he called. "Are you there?"

"Comin', boss," puffed a faint, far voice. A swirl of nebulous dust motes formed a huge, gray cloud before him. The gray cloud swirled and tightened into a compact ebon body, and the familiar of the lamp looked down upon him.

"Talked yourself out of it, eh, boss? Nice goin'! I was worried for a minute!"

"I didn't talk myself out of it," Al told him. "I talked both of us *into* it. Jinni, look! This entire acreage has to be cleared, raised, leveled to the ground within twenty-four hours. Can you do it?"

"A cinch!" sniffed the Marid. "Only—right now, boss?"

"Why not?"

"Well," frowned the Ifrit, "de foist game's started already. I ducked over dere while you was beefin' wit' de bulls. Wyatt's pitchin' for our boys—"

"The game," said Al, "will wait. Get going!"

The Marid sighed. "O. K., you're de boss. But you better get outa de way. 'Cause when I get workin' I'm a hot rock!"

Al retreated to a safe distance, a discretion he was never to regret. Because an instant after he had left the field the jinni raised an arm and waved at him.

"O. K., boss," he boomed, "here I go! Watch me whoil!"

He spread his arms like two bat wings, spun on one heel like a Dervish. Then faster, and faster, and still faster he spun until all semblance to a humanoid shape had vanished, and before Al's stunned eyes there spun in that desolate field the gray and roaring vortex of a whirlwind. Like a vast, conic dart the howling shape whisked off across the valley, gouging huge furrows. Like a cyclone on a rampage it plunged into the tangled forest. And where had been an interwoven network of lacy boughs gaped cavernous tunnels. Leaves, dust, earth, and fragments of wood whirled high into the heavens; small trees bent and trembled; aged ones groaned and splintered and crashed to the ground. How long the razing operation took Al could not say; he could only stand there watching spellbound this supernal holocaust. It could not have been long, though, for suddenly the crashing tumult ceased, the whirlwind vanished and Al, staring, saw that the whole plateau lay level save for towering piles of shattered boughs.

Then a violent thunderclap startled him, and the jinni, grinning, was at his side.

"Doin' all right, eh, boss?" he gloated.

"You're doing beautifully," said Al.

"Aw, I didn't mean *me*, I mean dem Dodgers. I ducked over to Flatbush for a minute. Dey're

leadin 4-1 in the fift'. Cookie just busted a homer. Well—here I go again!"

And once more he flashed into the field. "Flashed" is the proper word, for again his form was transmuted; this time not into a whirling wind-cone, but a blazing brand that leaped and darted like a maddened star, brushing the ground in a hundred spots. Where the spark had touched, flame rose, licking hungrily at shredded heaps of wood. Within five minutes the entire plateau was a seething caldron of flame. Black clouds of smoke fumed from the blazing inferno. The roaring crackle of doomed forestland was deafening.

Al's heart stood still. He had asked for aid; he had not bargained for such violent allegiance as this. It occurred to him horribly that he had unleashed powers beyond his control. A forest fire of this size, in the sultry dog days of autumn, represented a major peril. Already, he saw with awe, the flames had escaped the valley and were coiling like a fiery serpent up the sides of the encircling hills. Al had retreated far up the road; even so, blistering heat scorched his hands and face. More than once he was forced to stamp out blazing, windblown sparks that flew in his direction. And—the Marid was nowhere to be seen.

"O Ifrit," Al called.

No answer. Only the explosive crackle of blazing brands and the gusty roar of superheated winds.

"O Ifrit!" he cried again desperately.

Still no answer. But now, from the northward city came an ominous, spine-chilling sound. The spiraling wail of fire engines, racing to stave off this menace to the safety of Newtown.

Al groaned. *"Arson!"* he thought wretchedly. "A twenty-year offense!" Or was it life? If they were to find him here—

"IFRIT!" he howled in panic alarm. And this time his call was answered. The Marid dropped beside him lightly, grinning from ear to ear.

"O. K., boss! I hoid you de foist time! What's de rush?"

"Th-they're coming!" bleated Al. "The fire engines! It's getting out of hand!"

"Pouff!" snorted the jinni. "I'll have dis bonfire out in jigtime. I had to watch Reiser take his licks, didn't I? You better get under cover, pal. It's gonna be kinda wet around here."

With a tremendous bound he soared into the sky. To Al's straining eyes it seemed his bulk did not diminish with distance—it grew, rather, spreading and widening until it resembled a mountainous cumulus cloud. It *was* a cumulus cloud. A thunderhead that split suddenly asunder. It was no mere shower, no gentle autumn rain. It was a veritable cloudburst that deluged suddenly upon Oak Valley. Gushing torrents of water, beating out, stifling, drenching every last vestige of flame. Rivers of water cascading from the unemptiable cloud, bearing away in roaring streams the charred debris of what had been a half hour ago a tangled forest.

Then, as suddenly as the downpour had begun, it stopped. And Al, looking out across Oak Valley, discovered dazedly that from hillside to hillside there sprawled but one flat plain, clean-swept of every stalk of undergrowth, unmarred by even a lone, protruding tree trunk.

And the Marid must have had a latent sense of beauty too. For gloriously spanning the sober flats arched a rainbow. A moment this gleamed, brilliant, scintillating; then, with a defiant little shrug, it too disappeared. Al thought he knew where. The jinni had gone back to the ball game.

But there was no time to think of that now. Wailing sirens deafened his ears, brakes screamed as the crimson fire engines of Newtown pulled up beside Al. Another car, a limousine, pulled up too. From this tumbled the excited, portly figure of Walter Replogle. The chief called out to Al, "Hey, buddy, where's the fire?"

"Fire?" repeated Al innocently.

"We seen it from the city. Looked like a big one."

"Oh, *that!*" said Al. "I was just burning a bit of underbrush on my property, chief."

"That all?" said the fire captain disappointedly. "Well, I guess they ain't nothing here for us, then, boys. Let's get back to the station."

The engines howled away. Not so the car of Walter Replogle. The most important citizen of Newtown wore the expression of one who had been bopped unexpectedly with the business end of a sledge hammer. He stared out across the cleared acreage, then at Al. "You . . . you've cleared it!" he said unbelievingly.

Al shrugged. "Nothing to it. Just burned down a few trees."

"A few trees! That jungle! And you put the fire out again!"

"It rained a little," explained Al.

Replogle was staggered but game. He nodded grudging admiration. "Well, young man, I don't pretend to understand how you accomplished it. It hasn't been an hour since I left you here. But you've done it, and that's the main thing. Never let it be said Walter Replogle can't admit defeat. What's your price?"

"Price?" repeated Al.

"Don't play coy, my lad. You know as well as I do that when the army officers see this field they'll want it. As chairman of the City Council I'm in a better position to negotiate with them than you. Therefore I'm willing to take this property off your hands for . . . well, let's see . . . one hundred and forty acres at five hundred dollars an acre—shall we say seventy thousand dollars?"

Seventy thousand dollars! Al's head reeled with swift statistics. He knew perfectly well that Old Man Booth's price for the property was one third that figure. Since he had been designated sole titleholder, anything over and above twenty-five thousand dollars represented a net profit to himself. In addition, he would get five percent commission on Booth's figure.

Perhaps it was just as well he was too stunned to speak. Walter Replogle, studying him shrewdly, took his silence for refusal.

"I see you have a good business head, young man. Can't be fooled, eh? Very well, then. I'll make it one hundred thousand dollars even. But not a single penny more. Walter P. Replogle will not be gouged—"

The repetition of the name struck Al like a sudden blow. His eyes hardened and he turned to the older man.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Mr. Replogle. I'll make a dicker with you. You may have the property for your original offer, seventy thousand dollars, *if*—"

"Go on," prompted Replogle cautiously.

"*If* you'll throw in," demanded Al, pulse hammering, "your own home."

The financier stared at him. "My . . . my own— Just a minute, young man. Let me get this straight. You mean the old Replogle homestead to be thrown in as *lagniappe* on a sordid business deal?"

Al nodded mutely. "I have reasons. Very important reasons. Of course, if you don't want to . . . if you'd rather have me deal directly with the officers—"

Walter Replogle surrendered with what, had Al been in complete possession of his senses, he might have detected as suspicious alacrity.

"No, that won't be necessary," he said swiftly. "Young man, you drive a hard bargain. But—much as I hate to do it—I agree. Shall we go to my office now and sign the papers?"

So they did. But it was not until their final signatures had been notarized that Al permitted himself to express the joy bubbling over within him. As he rose to leave Replogle's office, the coveted title clenched tightly in his hand, he turned for a final word.

"I can't tell you how happy this makes me, Mr. Replogle. You see, I'm going to be married soon. And more than anything else, my fiancée has always wanted to own your beautiful home in Chestnut Grove. Now that you've made her dream possible—"

It was then that lightning struck. Walter Replogle grinned. He too, for the first time, was permitting himself to reveal delight at the bargain he had struck. "Chestnut Grove?" he repeated archly. "But, my dear boy, aren't you laboring under a misapprehension?"

"Not at all," replied Al. "This deed to your home—"

"I'm afraid there's been a terrible mistake," said Replogle suavely. "I had no *idea* it was my new Chestnut Grove home you were referring to. Why, I couldn't think of letting *that* go. The property I just transferred to you is the *old* Replogle homestead—the one built by my great-grandfather many, many years ago. Believe me, I hate to see it pass from my family's possession. But when business demands—Miss Huffman, come quickly! I think the young man has fainted!"

"Yeah, boss?" said the jinni.

"Dinner," said Al faintly. He felt a little better now. Not *much* better. But he had recovered somewhat from the shock sustained in Walter Replogle's office. He felt well enough to sit up and take a little nourishment. "Buttered toast," he ordered, "a poached egg, and a cup of weak tea."

The jinni stared at him thoughtfully. "You ain't looking so good, boss."

"I'm not feeling so good," admitted Al. "That fat old scoundrel! I thought I was on my way to solving all my difficulties, and he diddled me! Pawned off that dilapidated old shack of his—"

"What you need," said the Ifrit judiciously, "is a little entertainment. How about a couple of dancing goils?" He winked

lasciviously. "Dance of de Seven Veils, an' all dat sorta stuff. Eh, kid? Lookit!"

He made a pass with his hands, and Al stared violently as the quiet of his room was shattered suddenly by the rhythmic throb of oriental tambours and the plaintive whining of pipes. He looked up to behold before him two peach-hued, almond-eyed damsels most diaphanously clad. Unclad is more like it. For, as Al stared, shocked, the duo undulated through a series of all-too-obvious gyrations calculated to emerge them from their remaining wisps of apparel like butterflies from their cocoons.

Al clasped his eyes shut virtuously. Betty, he knew, would not approve of this. "Send them away!" he yelped. "What's the big idea of bringing Arabian burleyque into my room? Send them—"

They had vanished. The only indication they had ever been there was the fragrance of musk in the air, and, on the floor, abandoned streamers of oriental stripteasery. The Ifrit looked hurt.

"I was just tryin' to quiet your noives, boss," he explained.

"Well, that's a hell of a way to do it!" said Al irately. "Now go get me some dinner, and—oh, yes! get me tonight's paper while you're out."

"Never mind it," said the Marid gloomily.

"Never mind what?"

"De paper. I can tell you de results. Dem bums dropped bot' games. Oh, well! Wait'll nex' year."

"Jinni, will you get out of here?" roared Al.

The jinni salaamed and vanished.

Barely had he done so when there came a knock on Al's door. The newcomer was the janitor of the apartment house. He shouldered his way into the room belligerently, stopped, sniffed the air suspiciously, nodded as he spied the silken veils bestrewing the carpet, then glared at Al with ardent Celtic scorn.

"Now, phwat, Mr. Haddon," he demanded, "is the meanin' of this?"

"I . . . I beg your pardon?"

"Shure, an' don't be afther denyin' the scallawaggery goin' on around here! I have a nose on my face an' eyes in me head. Not to mention ears. Phwere are they?"

"They?" repeated Al dazedly.

"Thim brazen hussies. I heard you dancin' and cavortin' around up here. This is a *re*-spectable apartment house, Mr. Haddon. I'll ask you kindly to read y'r lease. Phwich same clearly states there shall be no orgies or wild parties—"

Al said, "Now, look, Mr. Muldoon, you're quite mistaken. There's no one in this apartment but myself."

"Oh, no?" retorted Muldoon. "And with my own ears didn't I hear you talkin' to somebody named Jeanie! I give you fair warning, Mr. Haddon, for the fairst and last time. If there's any more of these parties goin' on—"

"There won't be," Al assured him hastily. *"Ixnay, ixnay—"* He broke off to cry sudden warning as there began to appear between himself and the glowering janitor a pallid cloud already beginning to assume familiar form. *"Amscray, umpchay—"*

The cloud vanished. Muldoon scrubbed his eyes and squinted at the spot where it had been.

"There's things goin' on around here," he muttered darkly, "and they'd better stop! That's all *I've* got to say. Good night, sorr!" And he went away.

The jinni appeared cautiously.

"Coast clear, boss?" he husked.

"Come on," said Al. "Now see what you and your dancers did? Almost got me kicked out of a good lodginghouse. Put the dinner down here. Did you get a paper? Let's have it." He propped it up before him, scanned it moodily as he ate. It was the same old stuff. Axis boasts of staggering victories, flatly contradicted by Allied claims; the usual number of motor, train, and just plain accidents; a new tax bill before Congress. A headline caught his eye briefly:

FALSE ALARM FIRE SOUTH OF TOWN

Mysterious Appearance of Flames at Site of Future Airfield

Then another item—

Al slapped the paper and groaned heavily. "Damn!" he cried. "O double-blasted damn!"

"What's de matter, boss?" asked the Ifrit anxiously.

"This!" raved Al. "If that slithering snake of a Replogle hadn't gypped me— Listen!" He read aloud:

HOUSE DESIRABLE AWARD TO BE GIVEN

Silver Plaque First Prize

By this time tomorrow night, some home owner of Newtown will be the proud possessor of a gorgeous silver plaque acclaiming his house the most beautiful in the city.

The award will be presented by the editors of the *Home Desirable Magazine* as an incentive to stimulate public interest in the building, landscaping and furnishing of lovely residences.

Judges of the committee will today and tomorrow visit all competing residences in Newtown, and will announce their decision tomorrow evening.

While this city is justly proud of its numerous charming homes, Newtown architects and interior decorators today expressed the unanimous opinion that the winning house would be that of Walter P. Replogle, chairman of the Newtown City Council and well-known public figure.

"A lovely home," said Gerald T. Smithers, heading the *Home Desirable* committee, "is any woman's most cherished possession—"

Al stopped reading. The jinni nodded sympathetically. "Well, dat's right, ain't it, boss? What I always say is, if you want to keep a dame happy give her a nice jernt wit' plenty of closet

room to park her chap-poos in, an' good, modern plumbing. I remember once a couple of hundred years ago I was building a little dump in East Bagdad for a guy named . . . hey, boss! His name was almost de same as yours! Ain't dat funny? His name was—"

But Al was staring at him strangely. "You say you were building a house? How long did it take you?"

"Oh, a couple of hours. But —now, boss! Don't go lookin' at me like dat! Times was different den. I built dat house outa mostly gold and poils and t'ings. An' like you said de odder day, dat stuff ain't no good no more. I ain't got ong-tree to de t'ings dey build houses outa nowadays —bricks an' plaster an' dat sorta stuff."

"But if you *had* a supply of those things," said Al thoughtfully, "and all you had to do was reconstruct— Come on! We're going places!"

"But you ain't et your dinner yet, boss!"

"I'll eat," Al told him feverishly, "later. Right now you and I are going down to the old Replogle homestead."

A few hours later they were standing in a dingy downtown section of Newtown before the house to which Al held deed. It was a ramshackle looking dump that had once, perhaps, been charming. But that was when it had stood alone, aloof, and proud; the only home on spacious acres. Now a sordid business district had grown up about it, pressing in tightly on every side.

Its one-time lawns were now shaved to the very walls, a tawdry little row of merchant shops huddled to its right wing and on its left was a gleaming tile-and-chromium gas station. The house had lain unoccupied for years; a gaunt, forgotten crone dreaming of ancient glories. Its walls were plastered with ancient posters. Its windows were jagged-paned, and its shutters sagged in dejected melancholy. Al, studying it, felt die within him his last surge of hope. He shook his head dispiritedly.

"Well, it was a good idea while it lasted. I guess we might as well go home again."

"Hm-m-m!" said the Ifrit.

"Well, come on," said Al.

"Wait a minute, boss," said the Marid. "You know, dat jernt looks—"

"Like," completed Al, "a fugitive from a junk pile."

"As long as we're here," wheedled the jinni, "it won't do no harm to take a look inside, will it, boss?"

"Oh, well," shrugged Al. "But we're wasting time."

Nevertheless, they entered. If anything, the interior of the house was more discouraging than the façade. A thick crust of grime overlay floors and woodwork. The walls and ceilings were draped with the victorious guidons of a myriad resident spiders. Huge, lofty-ceilinged rooms echoed their footsteps hollowly as they traipsed through the deserted mansion. Al viewed distastefully sagging balustrades, mottled walls, marred and split-bricked fireplaces. Each room was more disheartening than the ones before. At the sight of a bath, a museum piece of antique Midwestern ceramics, he gave up in disgust.

"If you want to stay here all night," he stormed, "O. K.! I'm getting out. I feel buggy from just looking at this dump! See you later!" And he started toward the front door.

He had taken perhaps a half dozen steps when he heard behind him a peculiar *whrrrrr-ing* sound. He spun, startled. The jinni had performed another of his amazing transfigurations. This time he had converted himself into a miniature replica of this afternoon's whirlwind. A rather gritty whirlwind with a flat, wide base. On this base he was scooting up and down the uncarpeted floor of the room Al had just quitted.

It was dusk, but even so Al could see, with amazement, that where the whirling figure passed, the woodwork was no

longer dirty, gummy, and black—but ashine with the exquisite luster of beautifully weathered oak!

Even as his mouth fell open, the jinni completed his revolutions, and, breathing heavily, took form again before him. There was a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"See, boss! Get a gander at dat! Just like I t'ought. Underneat' all dat doit dese floors is *poifect!*"

Al stared at him awfully. "You . . . you mean you think something could be done with this house?"

"T'ink it? I *know* it! Just gimme free rein—"

Al shut his eyes and thought hard. He had nothing to lose, everything to gain. And the jinni *had* performed miracles in the past. He nodded abruptly.

"Go to it, chum," he said.

Of the further events of that night it is not needful to go into detail. Suffice it to say that things happened with such rapidity that Al Haddon's head spun.

The jinni had been right about the floors. They had been horribly abused, neglected; but once sanded, they leaped to lustrous, gleaming beauty. And the wainscoting and the woodwork. At the jinni's magic touch its scarred discoloration vanished—and Al was dazed to find it such woodwork as had not been carpentered in this country for more than a hundred years.

The windows were the next to receive the Ifrit's ministrations. Repaned and screened and weather-stripped they became glistening models of perfection. Then from somewhere the Marid conjured paint. For an hour the pungency of turpentine tingled Al's nose, but when the job was completed the rooms, the walls, the ceilings, were revealed in all their pristine grandeur. The walls, repaired and replastered where necessary, were given pastel coats save for the three rooms downstairs; the dining hall, the drawing room, and library. In these, layers of tattered paper removed, both Al and the Ifrit were astonished to discover the original block-linen prints with which the house had first been papered. Al gasped. "That—that paper! It's worth a young fortune! Can it be restored, jinni?"

"Why not?" demanded the Ifrit. And with a delicacy incredible in one so huge he breathed back to glowing life the delicate, original hues of the paper.

It is not needful to tell how, between the hours of dark and dawn, the roof was reslated, the outer walls straightened and pointed, the marble colonnades before the entrance scoured to pearly perfection. Nor need it be told how the shutters were reset; the outmoded heating plant discarded and an ultramodern oil and air-conditioning unit installed; how the kitchen was finished to an epicure's taste with every twentieth-century device.

Neither is it discreet to ask whence came those kitchen appliances, nor the furniture with which, under Al Haddon's excited advice and guidance, the jinni decorated the house. Al suspected that, with the morning, there would be reported from divers homes and department stores and factories of surrounding communities a series of spectacular thefts. He also suspected the belabored police would be hard pressed to explain the disappearances of such bulky articles as a rosewood piano, a Louis Quinze sofa, and a complete set of sterling service for twelve.

But just now he was not concerned with these problems. His bank account held fifty thousand dollars. He had already decided to establish a "conscience" fund out of which he would pay for all articles to which he had fallen criminal heir.

With the first blush of dawn the job was completed. And once more, before the first passerby could wander down the lonely street and gawk with incredulous eyes at the miracle which had been wrought, he and the Ifrit stood before the house.

"It . . . it's perfect!" he breathed. "Perfect!" Then a horrible thought struck him. "But—those awful shops! That gas station! Jinni, we've made a terrible mistake! Gorgeous as it is, it's a white sepulcher in this squalid neighborhood!"

The jinni nodded glumly. "It don't look so hot, does it, boss? Uh—where do you 'tink it *would* look good?"

Al sighed. "I know just the spot for it. That acre and a half beside Betty's house. Her father owns it, you know. He always said he'd some day give it to Betty."

"O. K.!" grinned the Marid happily. "Dere it goes, boss!"

Al blinked once. Then twice. And again. For the house had vanished. And now, between the tile-and-chromium gas station and the first of the tiny shops a hole yawned where it had stood. Said the Marid thoughtfully, "Of course, people might ast questions if dey wasn't no explanation for dis. So—" And he pointed his finger. Immediately there leaped from the heart of the rubbled emptiness a sheet of flame. The Ifrit tugged Al's shoulder.

"Come on, boss, let's get outa here before the cops come an' find us. Dey'll t'ink de house boined down. I fixed it so nuttin' elst in de neighborhood will catch fire. Let's go."

"And so," said Al Haddon airily, "I've completed two of the assignments you gave me. The Oak Valley development is sold and you've received the full value you asked for it. The house has been built and furnished and here"—Al patted affectionately the shining plaque presented to him an hour or so before by the enthusiastic judges of the *Home Desirable* contest—

is proof that it is the finest home in Newtown."

Homer Booth's jaw had fallen slack some time ago. It is doubtful whether his mouth had closed since. Now, however, he found words.

"It . . . it's impossible!" he declared flatly. "I'll take my oath that house was not there last night—"

"Of course not!" Al explained patiently. "I've told you I had it moved there during the night. You know this new house-moving process they have now," he explained vaguely, "is very ingenious. Rollers and all that—"

Betty, close beside him, pressed his arm with a fervor that sent little pink chills running up and down Al's spine. "It's wonderful, darling," she whispered. "Simply wonderful! We'll be *so* happy in it."

The Old Guard dies but never surrenders. Old Man Booth was limp, but still unconvinced it was time to greet Al Haddon as son-in-law and junior partner. He clutched at a tenuous straw.

"Nevertheless," he managed feebly, "you've only fulfilled *two* of your pledges. There remains one more. The gift to Betty."

"Oh, *that!*" said Al. He took a folded paper from his pocket, handed it to the girl. "Unless I am very much mistaken, this gift's one that will draw the envy of every person in town. The deed to the house. Am I right, Betty?"

Betty's soft gaze was answer enough. But Old Man Booth was still fighting. might

"Oh, no, you don't, young man! That's redundancy! That's two birds with one stone. You're trying to make one thing fulfill two requirements. No, sir! I Don't agree to let you marry my daughter until—"

"Father," said Betty sternly, "perhaps you'd better let me handle this."

Betty had heard things. It so happened that when Al had not shown up for their date last night she had called his apartment. Getting no answer, womanlike, she had visited there. Visiting there, she had met a dour individual named Muldoon—and from Muldoon's lips she had heard certain peculiar things about which, up till now, she had managed to subdue her curiosity. But now seemed a good time to find out just what tomfoolery her lover had been engaged in.

She said sweetly, too sweetly, "Al, tell me frankly—did you do these things all by yourself?"

"Well, not exactly. You see, someone helped me—"

"Ah-hah! I thought so! Someone named—Jeanie?"

Al looked at her in surprise. "It *was* a jinni! But how did you—"

"Jeanie, indeed! And who, Al Haddon, might *she* be, may I ask? Some designing young female, I suppose, who'd like to get her hooks into you—"

"Oh, *no!*" expostulated Al, horrified. "Not that at all. You see, my jinni's a Marid—"

"Married!" Betty's indignation vanished suddenly. She had suspected some sort of philandering, had been prepared to have her say, then effect a happy reconciliation. Now all her fine plans went aglimmering. A married woman! Her Al! This was no longer a situation wherein she could be demanding. Surrender was indicated—and vital. She turned to her father wildly.

"I don't care *what* you say, daddy," she cried. "Al's fulfilled everything you asked of him, and done it well. And I'm going to marry him just as soon as we can find a preacher. That is"—she faltered—"if . . . if he still wants me."

And for once in his life Al Haddon had sense enough to abandon further explanation.

Daddy Booth had no proof against this ultimate weapon of femininity: tears. He took out a pocket handkerchief and jabbed it toward his daughter. "Here!" he said gruffly, "Stop sniffling and use this. If you're that much in love with him, why,

I . . . I guess I'll have to say—God bless you, my children!"

So that was that. And, it would be nice to offer here the traditional ending of all such stories—"so they lived happily ever after." But that far into the future, of course, we cannot see. Thus our tale of the wooing of Betty Booth ends at this point. Save, perhaps, for one more item, and it in itself is a remarkable thing.

It happened approximately four months after the wedding bells had chimed their blessing on Betty and Al. Al came home from his office to view for the first time in his benedictine life that sight which is ever a shock and a disillusionment to young married men—the vision of his Betty, apron-garbed, with a long black smudge across the tip of her nose, a broom clutched in her hand, and a gleam of triumph in her eye. He stared at her alarmed.

"What's going on, honey?" he asked worriedly.

"Can't you see?" demanded Betty with some asperity. "I'm house-cleaning, of course. The house was simply filthy. Come in and take your coat off; I want you to move some furniture. I've been rooting out the closets and getting rid of old junk—"

Sudden alarm seized Al. "Closets? You didn't clean out my study closet!"

"Of course I did. I don't know how you accumulate such odds and ends."

Al shut his eyes. "Did you," he whispered, "happen to see a little bronze—gravy boat?"

"Why, yes, I saw it. A stupid-looking thing. Did you win it at a raffle? Come, Al, get your coat off."

"What did you do with it?" demanded Al hollowly.

"It? Oh, you're still talking about that silly old gravy boat. I don't remember . . . oh, yes! Two Boy Scouts came around. They were collecting metals for defense. Something like last year's aluminum drive, remember? So I gave it to them. Al! Come back here this moment! Where are you going?"

And there's one more little scene that might be pertinent. It took place many miles from Al Haddon's home; many, many miles from Newtown. It took place in an arsenal on the east coast, where two workmen were engaged in assembling steel jackets and bronze percussion caps for aërial bombs. One workman grinned at the other.

"Did you git one of them wacky letters this morning?" he asked.

His companion nodded. "You mean from a guy named Haddon? Yeah. Screwy, wasn't it? Well, people git funny ideas in war times."

"I know. But this is the funniest I ever heard. This Haddon says that every time anybody crates a bomb or a shell with brass in it, they should rub it and say, 'I want you to fall on Adolf Hitler.' Now, ain't that the dopiest thing you ever heard of?"

The second workman grinned "It's crazy, all right. But you know—I got half a notion to try it. Just for the hell of it. Couldn't do no harm. And, hell, for all we know the guy might be puh-sikic or something. It wouldn't take but a second to do it to every shell we make. Like this, for instance"—he rubbed a calloused palm over the newly completed bomb before him—"I want you," he chuckled, "to bust old Hitler on the beam . . . *Hey!* What was that? Did you hear it?"

His companion stared at him "Hear what? I didn't hear nothing."

"I'm going to stop drinking beer at lunch!" said the first workman solemnly. "I could of swore I just heard somebody say: *"O. K., Toots!"*"

THE END.

Continued from page 109

October's Unknown Worlds, and Nona Howard, in a series of articles in *Horoscope*. The first lines of some of these quatrains, with their interpretations, follow:

II, 29: "The Oriental will leave his seat—"
McCann: "A future Moslem conquest of Europe, about 1990."
Boucher: "De Gaule's coming invasion of France via Italy."

II, 34: "Beasts wild with hunger shall cross rivers—"
McCann: "Capture of Marshal Villeroi in the War of the Spanish Succession, 1701."
Howard: "Expulsion of scholars from Nazi Germany, and remilitarization of the Rhineland by Hitler."

III, 5: "Near the long default of the two great luminaries—"
McCann: "Coming restoration of the French and Spanish monarchies."
Howard: "Eclipses of the sun and moon during March, 1941, and world-wide resistance to Hitler."

VI, 97: "Forty-five degrees the sky will burn—"
McCann: "Coming invasion of France via Lyons by the next French king, Henri V."
Boucher: "Devastation of Belgrade by the German air force, 1941."

VIII, 3: "Alas what fury! Alas what pity—"
McCann: "The three-cornered French civil war of the 1580s, known as the War of the Three Henrys."
Howard: "Italian weakness in the War of 1939."

IX, 100: "A naval battle will be won in darkness—"
McCann: "Battle of Jutland, 1916."
Howard: "Coming United States naval participation in the War of 1939."

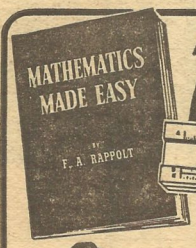
You pays your money— As implied by the above, two of Miss McCann's salient anticipations for our future are (1) restoration of the French Monarchy, probably under the present pretender, Henri, Duke of Guise, who will have a glorious reign; (2) Asiatic and African conquest of Europe during the 1990s.

Aside from questions of Miss McCann's general outlook, a couple of specific criticisms are: (1) Her interpretations are sometimes unfairly helped along by dubious translations. For instance *fosse* (trench, ditch) is rendered as "Line" (capitalized), which enables Miss McCann to ascribe the term to the late Maginot Line. In another translation the word "bayonet" appears; the original French is not given, but I am very suspicious, because this instrument was not invented for over a century after the prophet's death. Furthermore the author interpolates many of her own interpretations of Nostradamus' terms into the quatrains themselves, in parentheses, causing the reader to wonder just what Nostradamus *did* say.

The magic circle referred to in the first paragraph is that of circular logic, which runs: The quatrains must refer to real events, because Nostradamus was a genuine prophet; and we know that Nostradamus was a genuine prophet, because so many of his quatrains refer to real events. To those who are emotionally predisposed to accept either of these assumptions *a priori*, either or both of the above syllogisms will make perfectly good sense. To those benighted skeptics who follow the tradition of Lucian, Benjamin Franklin, and the late Joseph Jastrow, the entire business of Nostradamus-fancying remains an amusing form of literary gymnastics having nothing whatever to do with scientific investigation.

J. Wellington Wells.

THE END.



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