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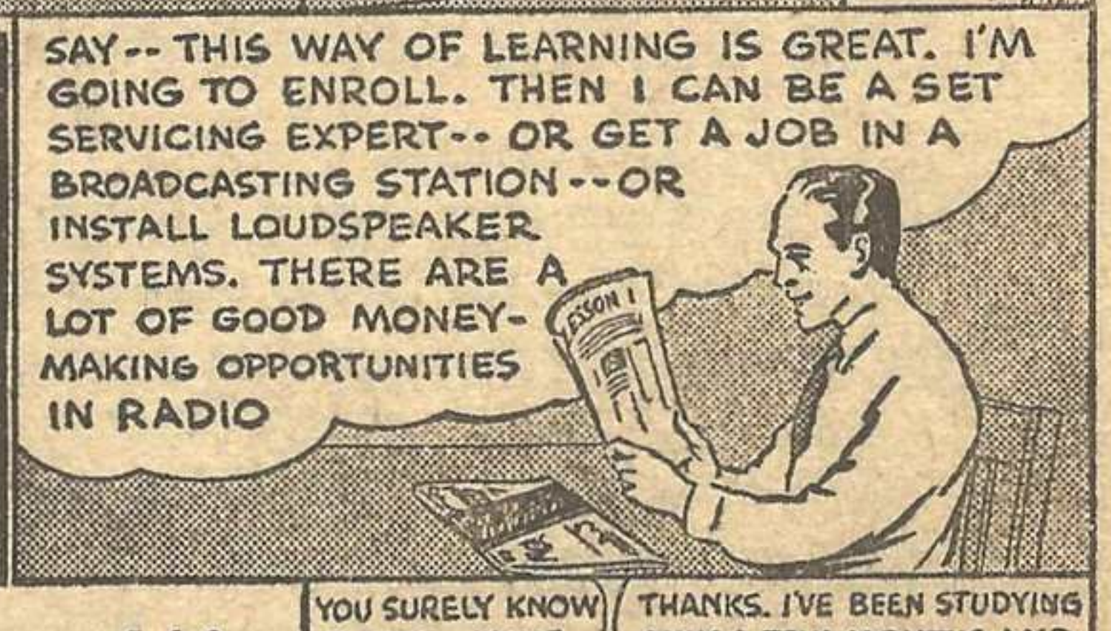








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Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 15 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, 90c. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. English Office: Charles Lavell, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand, London, W.C.2, England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession.

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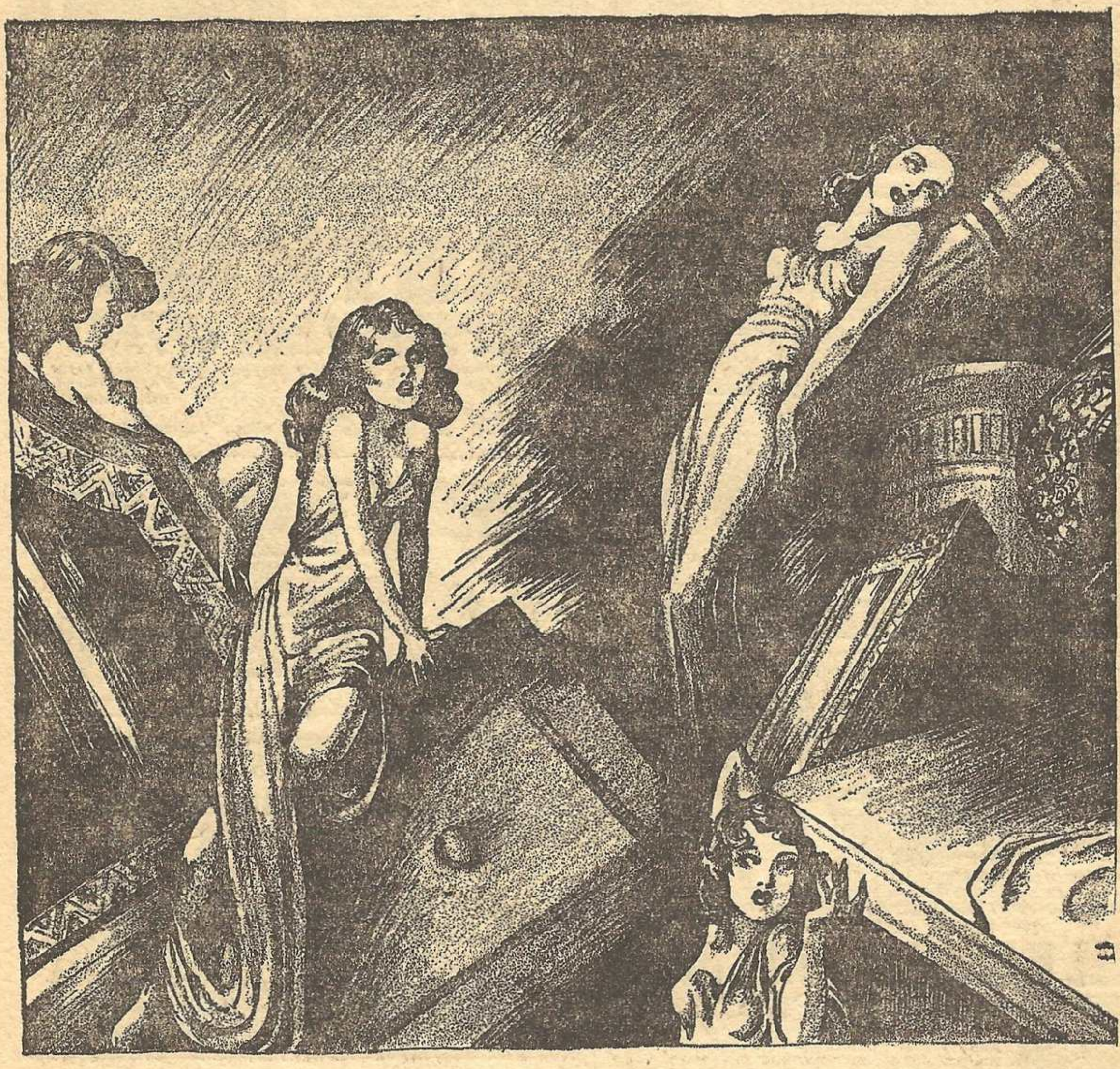
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The Man Who Loved



THE Lord of Mad Mansion was dead!

"Yes," reaffirmed the wizened little doctor from Milburn, "dead as a doornail. I found him lying in the great hall of his house on a pile of old lumber, his arms full of oak boards. What a house! We should have committed him long ago, for surely if there was ever a madman—"

Words failed the village practitioner. He took off his glasses and wiped them, shaking his head dismally all the time. Then he peeped at his watch. I knew he would be with me for some time yet, as he had just then sent for the coroner. And I knew, moreover, that all I had to do was listen, for the estimable doctor had not been awarded the title of village gossip for nothing.

"Madman?" I queried, stepping back from the easel and eyeing the work I had

Planks

By MALCOLM JAMESON



Many of them had lived for hundreds of years in unbelievable agony—a hand in one city, a foot in another, the head on a different continent.

in hand. I was trying to complete a painting of the giant elm that stood just west of the gatekeeper's lodge I was using as a studio. "An eccentric, I should say, but hardly mad."

The doctor snorted. I laid on another brushful of color, for now I knew I must bring my work to a swift completion. Within a few hours the hitherto sequestered estate would be overrun with curious morbid crowds. There would be police and lawyers—and, of course, Ada Warren, the acid-faced spinster sister and heir presumptive of Mad Mansion. Ada could

be counted upon to evict me at once, if only on account of her hatred for Kendall —Enoch Warren's sole friend and adviser. For it was from him and not from the recluse of the Mansion that I had received the privilege of tenancy.

"Eccentric, eh!" said the doctor presently, with a nasty, barklike little laugh. "You should see the inside of that house! Not a stick of furniture in it. No, sir! Not a bed, nor a chair or even a stool. The old man slept, apparently, on a pair of blankets thrown down on the tiled floor of the great hall. He was a maniac, I tell you. Imagine a man of his wealth living in such a fashion. No furniture!"

"That is odd," I commented, "two vanfuls of it went through the gates only last week. I peeked into one and saw many beautiful pieces—"

"That's just it," exclaimed the doctor, "that is why I say he was mad. *He bought that furniture for the pleasure of breaking it up!* Antiques, they were—all of them. Some even came from great museums. Do you wonder that his sister Ada tried to stop him from squandering his millions in that way?"

"It has always been my opinion," I said, as dryly as I could, "that what use a man made of the money he had made himself was his own business. I never talked with Enoch Warren but once, but I have often watched him rambling through the trees here. He struck me as extraordinarily mild and gentle, very fond of trees and nature. It is true that he forbade me to approach within five hundred yards of the mansion itself, but that again was his privilege. A man has a right to privacy, and if he chooses to make a hermit of himself—well, what of it?"

"Bah!" cried out the doctor. "You are talking nonsense! No one has unlimited right to destroy property, and no sane man would shut himself off from all society. And what of the consequences to others? The destruction of his mills threw thousands of men out of employment!"

The doctor glared at me, as if daring me to answer that. I shrugged and went on painting. There were too many aspects of the Warren case that baffled me as well. The difference was that the doctor was indignant and steamed up over it, while I was not. I shared old Enoch Warren's love of trees. That is why I paint them exclusively. It was that common love, indeed, that made it possible for me to break into that otherwise inhospitable estate. And it was for that reason that I chose to regard him as an eccentric rather than a lunatic.

"You recall that, of course?" snapped the doctor, looking at me sharply. "That was the beginning—eight years ago. Just a year after Mrs. Warren's death, when old Enoch came back here to live."

Yes, I remembered the story vaguely. I knew that Enoch Warren had built his ornate, castle-like mansion back in the nineties and had installed his empty-headed, baby doll wife in it. And I had heard that later they became estranged and he made it a point to be away on business most of the time. After her death he came home once—ostensibly to check the inventory of the great house's contents before putting them on the auction block.

I recalled that the flighty Mrs. Warren had gone in heavily for priceless antiques in her desire to climb into the Four Hundred, and that it was these items that had brought Warren back East. A million dollars was not a sum to leave to hirelings to collect. The matter of the inventory was something the shrewd captain of industry wanted to look into himself.

"He spent one night here, they tell me," I remarked, to show my interest, "stating he would return west the following day. Only he didn't—he has stayed here ever since."

"Exactly," replied the doctor. "And

that was the night he lost his mind. Until then he was a normal, highly successful business man. Every queer thing he has done has been since."

"Yes, go on," I said, squeezing another tube of white onto my palette.

"It was two weeks after that that the museum scandal occurred. Of course, a man of his wealth and prominence could get a thing like that hushed up—"

"He must have," I said, "since I have never heard of it."

"Perhaps not. But there were ugly rumors at the time. In fact, there are still plenty of people anxious to dig up these grounds to find the remainder of that young woman he was supposed to have killed and dismembered."

"Now you do surprise me," I admitted. "I would not think Enoch Warren capable of killing anything."

"HE WAS found," said the doctor, very impressively, "in the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum with the freshly severed arm and hand of a young woman hidden under his coat. A guard swore he had seen him inside the ropes of one of the exhibits stroking a dining table *with that arm!* They detained him there for awhile, in the curator's office, but in the end they let him go. It is worth noting there, I think, that a little later the museum sold him the particular table involved at a very, very fancy price."

"Meaning he bribed them?"

The doctor laughed deprecatingly. "What else is there to think?"

I kept on painting.

"It was the last time he ever left these grounds," the doctor went on, "except for the day he astonished the executives of his vast chain of lumber mills and yards by descending upon them in the New York offices. That was the day he extinguished his company."

"I do remember that," I said.

The whole world does. On that day Enoch Warren ordered every sawmill he owned demolished and all his existing stocks of lumber burned. Likewise he deeded to the government thousands of acres of standing timber to be reserved forever as national parks.

"Then," cried the doctor, triumphantly, as if he had abundantly proved his point, "after settling a paltry quarter of a million on his sister Ada, he hires this creature Kendall to spend the other millions he owned in the buying of antiques! What more do you want to prove the man is mad?"

I could see in that outburst how the man's small-town mind was tainted with the venom of unsatisfied curiosity. Milburn folk loved to know in detail what their neighbor was doing. For a number of years not one of them had been allowed within the grounds of Mad Mansion, let alone into the house. The first of those privileges had been extended to me (and, I should say, sundry truck drivers who each month brought more loads of furniture). But entry into the great house itself was forbidden to all save Kendall, the world renowned expert on wood grains and textures.

"I am afraid," I said quietly, "that you have not proved your case. Enoch Warren worked hard for many years to keep a vain, frivolous, society-struck woman furnished with the funds she needed to further her ambitions. She died and the necessity for his work was at an end. He chose to retire and devote himself to a hobby. I see nothing insane about it."

"What!" fairly yelled the little doctor. "Don't forget that when other men retire they sell their property, they don't destroy it. Then there is the matter of the woman's arm—"

"Pah! That is in the class with werewolf yarns," I exclaimed, not troubling to conceal my disgust. The town doctor's

chatter was beginning to pall on me, built as it was on one part fact, three parts rumor, and the rest sheer surmise.

He jumped to his feet, fairly quivering with anger.

"Oh, so you think this fellow Kendall's on the level, then? You think that *all* that money went for real antiques? Well, just wait until you have seen the house. That's all. Just see the house!"

He bustled about the room in a great state of agitation, muttering. It was a case of outraged virtue or something, for in a moment he added a bit to his other information that I had not even guessed before and had no inkling of what it meant.

"I happen to know," he sneered, "what is in Enoch Warren's will. Ada is cut off, and so is Lionel, his nephew. Arthur Kendall is to get everything—this estate, the house, what money is left, and the *antiques!* Hah! *Where* are the antiques? Do you suppose that a man as shrewd as Kendall would have sent real antiques up here for that old man to chop up with an axe even if he had really bought them as the newspapers report? Not a chance! And the money! 'To carry on my work, which only the said Arthur Kendall understands' is the way the will reads. His *work,* the doddering old fool!"

The little doctor stopped, bristling with emotion. I do not know what else he might have said, for just then there was a chorus of honking horns outside. I opened the door and peered out. It was a car containing the coroner and some others, also a flanking squadron of State Police on motorcycles. I could not miss seeing the long caravan of miscellaneous other cars banked in the road behind them. Those were packed with villagers, intent on satisfying the curiosity that had been balked so long. Reluctantly I took down the heavy ring of keys and went to open the gate.

Enoch Warren, the Lord of Mad Mansion, was dead! My own anomalous position as half guest, half employee would shortly be ended. No longer could I expect to roam the wonderful groves of the quiet estate, secure in the knowledge that I would encounter no one unless it was Warren himself, striding through the woods with his handsome gray mane flying to the breeze, patting and talking to his fine trees as if they were human. Nor could I shut the world out by simply pointing to the sign above the gate that read, "NO ADMITTANCE ON ANY PRETEXT." From now on the law would be in charge, whatever that was.

And I knew, without being told, that Ada Warren would sue to break the will. And that she would win.

I drew the gate open and silently motioned the caravan waiting so noisily outside to come on in. Then I went back into my lodge and locked the door behind me. At the moment I had no thought or desire to follow the prurient crowd into Mad Mansion itself. I thought only of the morbid, sensation-seekers I saw pass in behind the officials. Picks and spades stuck out of their car windows. By now they were doubtless digging in the shrubbery between the glorious trees. They would be looking ghoulishly for the buried fragments of a young woman—one lacking a left arm. Such is the power of wild rumor!

IT WAS another twenty-four hours before I opened my door again. In that time I had seen many cars pass in and out of the open gates. One had held the sour, frozen-faced Ada Warren with fat, indolent Lionel lounging beside her. With them were crisp, legal looking men, carrying brief-cases. Those, no doubt, were her attorneys.

I saw Arthur Kendall come in, alone and bearing the expression of a man in intense agony. He stayed a long while,

but when he drove out he did not stop to speak with me as I hoped he might. Later, after the undertaker had come and gone, there were more police to arrive, and to my immense relief they cleared the grounds of the souvenir hunters and set their own watch on the gate. Their captain knocked at my door and wanted to know if they might make coffee on my stove and I said yes. After that I was left to myself.

Interested only in my art and caring nothing for idle gossip, I had never concerned myself in the least with the various legends concerning the Lord of Mad Mansion, as the neighboring country folk had come to call Enoch Warren. Evidently he had seen some of my work somewhere, for he sent Kendall to arrange for my coming to the estate to paint several of his best trees.

The arrangement was that I was to have the use of the gate lodge and the run of the groves, but must not go near the house.

ONE day Enoch Warren came up behind me as I was sketching and stood looking over my shoulder. Eventually he said:

"You have some understanding of them, don't you?"

"I hope so," I replied.

"Do they ever talk to you?" he wanted to know.

"I am not quite that poetic," I laughed. But I realized at once I had said the wrong thing, for he stalked off as if offended. Later, however, he sent Kendall to me with carefully drawn sketches of two magnificent trees and commissioned me to make full color paintings of them. They were not trees that I knew, though I think I know all the finer ones in the dozen nearest states.

Later Kendall returned to criticize the canvases, insisting on a number of small changes. He directed me to entitle one "Chryseis," the other "Arethne." Afterward they paid me for the work and hauled the pictures away for framing. I had not seen them since.

On the day following my interview with Milburn's little doctor, I was astonished to hear a fresh commotion at the gate. I looked out to see two large farm trucks piled high with slabs of oak bark. A gang of grinning workmen sat on top their curious cargo. The leading driver bore a pass signed by Kendall, requesting me to allow them to enter, and stating that he himself would be along shortly to direct them where to put the bark.

Hardly had the trucks passed through the gate until I was favored by another visit from the garrulous man of medicine. He was as perky and irrepressible as a sparrow, and I could see that he was bubbling over with some new and exceptionally spicy bit of gossip.

"So you think Enoch Warren was sane?" he began, cheerfully, apparently having pardoned me for my coldness of the day before. "Well, we found something besides his will. He left directions for his funeral. . . ."

"Don't sane men ever do that?" I countered. I do not like that doctor.

"Not funerals like the one he wants. He won't have a preacher, nor any kind of Christian service. No, sir! He wants to be buried with a tree's ashes, to the tune of a crazy rigamarole he has all written out. And believe it or not, the tree's name is Arethne! He! He! He!"

"What's so funny about that?" I demanded.

He choked his laughter off with a sputter. "You oughta see the tree! A mess of boards glued together, the nut! And get this—this is a scream—he directs that the funeral shall not be held until Mr. Kendall has had time to suitably clothe Chryseis. Imagine that—'suitably clothe'—that's what the directions say. Now, I ask you—was the man sane?"

"I am a painter, not a psychologist," I replied stiffly. "I wouldn't know."

The doctor looked a bit crestfallen. Then he murmured something about having a string of calls to make down the road and left me. Shortly after that Kendall came.

HE STOPPED his car before my door and called to me. Always the serious, almost melancholy type, he was habitually a man of few words. He only said,

"You may come up to the mansion any time you like—everyone else has poked his nose in, why not you?"

Then he perceived that what he had said was ungracious, and he hastened to add,

"I didn't mean that last the way it sounded. I mean I would like at least one person around who has some glimmering of what I have to deal with."

"I'll be up shortly," I promised. And I cannot deny that despite my summary handling of the gossipy doctor, I was consumed with curiosity myself.

The sight of the mansion was a greater shock than I had anticipated. The building in its prime must have been a monstrosity, built as it was in a style of architecture that combined the worst features of Rhenish castles, neo-Norman-Gothic, and U. S. Grant jigsaw. But now the stone building stood hideously naked, its windows closed by rusty, warehouse type iron shutters.

I suddenly remembered that during the wood-burning phase of Enoch Warren's "insanity," he had stripped the building of its ornate porches and blinds and had burned them in one huge bonfire before the door. Some said that he had even gone so far as to rip the floors from throughout the house, so that above the stone and tile of the ground floor there was nothing to be seen but naked joists.

The two bark-laden trucks still stood before the door, but much of their load had already been carried inside. I stepped across the litter-strewn ground to the front door, avoiding as far as possible stepping on the chunks of bark the men had dropped behind them. The door was open and there was the hum of voices deeper within the house, but I did not go farther in than a few steps at first. The sight that greeted me was enough to stop any ordinary man in his tracks.

The light was dim, but in the first immense room in which I found myself I was astonished to see nondescript bundles of boards, planks, sticks and bits of wood of every conceivable length and shape stacked until they almost touched the stark floor joists overhead. In amazement I picked up one of the smaller ones of these bundles and examined it. It was bound with wire and bore a tag. The astounding label read "Phryne, parts of left hip and thigh, fragments of a hand."

I gazed again at the strange assortment of boards that made up the bundle. They were all of oak, hand-polished, evidently fragments of what had been once a piece of fine furniture. Some were flat boards, such as form drawer fronts, others were turned spindles, others were mere splinters. Somehow I felt a queer sense of disgust at the very holding of the scraps of this low-boy or whatever piece it had been, and was aware at a growing sense of resentment at the evidences of wholesale vandalism about me.

For every one of those bundles was similar. Whether composed of oak, walnut, cherry or mahogany, each appeared to be the tied-up fragments of what had been a beautiful product of the cabinetmakers' art. They varied enormously. Some bundles were of rungs and rails of chairs, banister spindles or wide planks such as must have come from desk tops or the side rails of beds. Some were firmly bound with wire or rope, others were no more than segregated piles of loose lumber. But all had

been robbed of what incidental hardware they had once possessed, and all showed the common sign of being of selected hardwoods.

Though saddened by the wreckage, a series of dull, heavy thumps such as are made when heavy weights are dropped, reminded me that I still had to find Kendall and see more of the house. The trail of broken bark led me to a door that gave admittance into what must have been a ballroom or banquet hall.

If I had been astonished at the collection of boards in the outer parlor, that was a tame emotion to what I experienced here. In the room were three roughly cylindrical colossi of wood—three amazing aggregations, each from twelve to eighteen feet in length and perhaps six feet in diameter, of odds and ends of boards and planks fastened together. They lay athwart heavy blocks, and the men I had seen on the bark trucks were working on them under the direction of Kendall. They seemed to be rounding out the monstrous things with plastic wood applied from tubs. And as that was done, others were covering the rounded forms with slabs of the imported bark, fastening it on either by glue or by concealed wires.

Kendall wheeled as he heard me enter. Immediately he flashed what was obviously meant to be a friendly smile, but in the brief instant before he recognized me it seemed to me that as he turned, unaware, I had a glimpse into the soul of a man burdened with a responsibility so terrific he knew he could never discharge it. He started to say something to me, but at that instant we heard the sound of a heavy truck crunching to a stop outside. A roughly dressed man appeared in the doorway and calling out, "Three crated pieces for Mr. Warren. Where do you want 'em?"

Kendall's face lit up like that of a condemned man on hearing of his reprieve. "There"—he pointed to a space within the door, then called back to his bark workers to knock off what they were doing and wait.

I watched with considerable interest as he knocked the crating away and tore the burlap from about the newest acquisitions. Two of them were of oak—a highboy and a wardrobe. The other was an exquisite piece of mahogany, Chippendale, I thought, a sideboard. I glimpsed a fallen tag. It read—Value $53,000. Kendall was running his finger along the grain of the wood, appraisingly, and his troubled frown was gone.

"Just in time," he said to me, across the top of the highboy. "The old man would be happy if he knew. This is mostly Arethne. There is a little more in the wardrobe, too, though that is mostly Chryseis and Melne."

Naturally, his words meant nothing to me. I supposed the terms he employed was common trade jargon of connoisseurs.

He rummaged around in a corner and produced some tools. Without further words, and with reckless disregard of possible injury to the beautiful parts, he attacked the museum piece before him, ripping it apart. As each bit came away, he would scrutinize it carefully, then lay it on one of the several piles about him, or toss it into a corner with other rubbish. In a short time, before my amazed and somewhat indignant eyes, he reduced both the oak pieces to the wooden elements of which they were built.

SETTING two of the workmen to the task of similarly demolishing the mahogany sideboard, he picked up one of his little piles of boards and carried it across the room to where the huge bulk they were encasing in bark lay.

He examined the boards in his hands very carefully, then began a methodical search of the queer aggregation of wood

that lay on the blocks. Presently he found what he was looking for and immediately, using glue and a few thin nails, he affixed another board to it. As he went about adding other boards to other spots, I suddenly comprehended what he was doing. The realization of it detracted nothing from the sheer madness of his undertaking, but it did serve to explain the present internal condition of Mad Mansion and the destruction of the antiques. Those huge blocks of assembled wood particles were in reality gigantic, three dimensional superjigsaw puzzles! Enoch Warren, aided and abetted by Kendall, had been attempting to reconstruct ancient tree boles by piecing together the planks and bits that had originally been hewn from them!

It was staggering. I looked again, and I was right. Not only was the wood the same, but the grain of each component piece fitted exactly with that of its neighbors. What a colossal undertaking! And at the same time, how futile, for of what possible use could it be? But it was clear enough that the celebrated antique collection was hopelessly lost—destroyed in the furtherance of a wasteful and expensive hobby, and it was also evident why Warren had hired Kendall, the expert on wood identification, for his buyer. But why? Why indulge in such a fantastic game? There was hardly any choice. Enoch Warren was more than eccentric; he was insane. Now, even I was convinced of that!

Kendall stood back from his work, the last piece firmly embedded to round out the irregular cylinder that had once been a tree trunk. He signaled his men to go back to their work and complete the barking of the bole. Then, he took the remaining boards and added them in like manner to the other two monstrosities in the room. I could see that the third one was far from complete—it would require many highboys and whatnot to make a tree of it.

Meanwhile, the men had torn the sideboard apart and asked him what to do with its pieces.

"In the far corner," he said, "the bundle marked Xaquiqui." He added, to me, as if explaining, "Mayan—Enoch Warren was delighted to find her. It was his first knowledge that there were such things in the New World. That's why he gave up lumbering. But I can't bother with joining those today, although I do think we'll get a leg out of it."

That cryptic explanation was far more confusing than enlightening. The sideboard very obviously had not one, but four legs, each of them marvels of beauty in line and detail. But again we were interrupted, this time by the arrival of a crew of house movers. Those he set to work tearing out the wide French windows that pierced the outer wall. From the massive dollies they brought along, I deduced they intended removing the finished tree bole from the room.

THE funeral was held the next day, at dawn. There were not many present. Lionel and Ada Warren were there, glum and angry looking, and several of Warren's old mill employees. The coffin had already been placed in the grave when I got there, but that apparently was a mere preliminary. Supported by heavy iron beams laid athwart the unusually wide grave, the enormous oak log lay, the bole of what in its day must have been the queen of trees. I hardly recognized it as the medley of scrap wood I had seen the day before within the house. Kendall's job of reconstruction had been superbly done. "Suitably clothed" was the injunction in the will.

The two younger Warrens' scowls deepened as an elderly man, one of Warren's former superintendents, began reading in a fine, resonant voice. That was no ordinary funeral, but a pagan rite conceived

by Warren himself. The words I heard were of the poetry and beauty of nature, and there was no reference to death—not until the closing words when I was almost startled to hear the familiar phrase "ashes to ashes."

Upon uttering the last sentence, the master of ceremonies mounted the butt of the log and lit a match to it. It must have been saturated with oil, for in a moment it was blazing vigorously from end to end. With a gesture of dismissal to the few present, the man who had conducted the odd ritual walked away. In a few minutes they all had gone but Kendall, who continued to stand there staring moodily at the blazing pyre. I started to leave too, but he called to me to stay.

Neither of us spoke for more than an hour. We simply stood there, fascinated by the surging flames and the smoke that billowed up to drift lazily off to the southeast. Chunks of burning bark broke loose now and then and fell hissing onto the coffin underneath. Later, the rain of ashes and living embers became incessant, and the crackling popping of the burning oak filled the ears.

Kendall plucked my sleeve. His face was grim, as if he had seen some horror and was striving to hold himself together.

"Suttee!" he exclaimed huskily, "do you realize that? Suttee, no less. But she insisted on it. For months he refused, and they quarreled often. Then he promised. And made me promise."

"I am trying to understand all this, Mr. Kendall," I said, "but what you say is a riddle. All I see is the ghastly whim of an eccentric rich enough to indulge himself. The cost of that bonfire to the world, though, is incalculable—think of the art treasures—"

"But think too of the agony—" he burst out, and there was unutterable sorrow and pain in his face. But he stopped and after a moment said very quietly, but with a trace of bitterness, "I'm sorry. I thought you knew, I was hoping you could see. Of all people you are the most likely one—you have studied trees, love them, know their moods—"

He paused, and I noted uncomfortably that his eyes were wet.

"If you could see, I would not have to tell you. Since you do not, there is no use my trying. You would laugh and call me insane, like those fools did Enoch Warren. You saw Ada Warren glaring at me today, and you may know that she is bringing suit to prevent my getting the money. Undue influence, they claim! Yes, there was influence all right, strong influence. The strongest of all—great love. Arethne it was, though, not I; and there she goes—with him."

After that outburst, he lapsed into bitter silence. We sat, finally on the turf, spellbound by the pyre. At last, with a sharp crackling and a groan, the huge log broke in the middle and its sagging ends slid into the grave itself. A great shower of sparks scurried upward, wheeling and twinkling in the pall of smoke overhead. The grave, deep and wide though it was, was full to the brim with smoking ashes, symbolic of something I had not yet guessed. Seeing Kendall still submerged in his own dark thoughts, I quietly slipped away and left him alone with his grief.

THE acrid contest over the will was drawing to a close. Avid sensation seekers greedily read every word as Enoch Warren's eccentricities were exposed in the press. Souvenir hunters infested the estate, despite the police guard. At Kendall's request, I kept an eye on the shuttered mansion, for the court proceedings kept him in town much of the time. He seemed to fear that people might break in to carry away the precious rubbish left behind by Enoch Warren, and intrusted me with the key so I could look in from

time to time to see that the remaining two synthetic logs were unmolested.

One evening late, I had gone to the top of the hill to watch the full moon rise, and thinking I heard sounds within the house, I let myself in. It was quite dark in there, except in the banquet hall. Through its east windows a flood of moonlight made everything clearly visible. The two oak logs were still where I saw them last, but in the place of the one called Arethne there was something else. It was only a beginning, as many loose boards lay scattered about the glued-up core, evidently handy to be fitted and cemented to the rest.

That, I observed, judging by the darkness of the wood, was to be a mahogany log. In an inner corner stood the iron bedstead Warren had used. Kendall must have moved it there to sleep on the nights he stayed in the house.

I sat down on it, and being drowsy and the bed a comfortable one, I was soon stretched out, staring at the ceiling and thinking about Warren's bizarre hobby and the colossal impudence of it. What astonished me most was Kendall's obvious intention of carrying it on. One would have thought that the death of Enoch Warren would have released him and that he would then abandon the silly business and go back to his former occupation.

I may have slept, but presently, for no readily apparent reason, I suddenly became aware that my heart was pounding and my breath coming in heavy pants; gooseflesh tingled on my arms and legs. I sat up, startled, then knew that someone was in the room with me. There was a vague but exotically delicious perfume, and I sensed rather than heard a low breathing. Abruptly, as if materialized on the instant out of the air itself, a beautiful girl stood beside my bed, not a foot away. She was gazing at me as if in earnest entreaty. Then, suddenly, she sat down on the edge of the bed beside me and began caressing my forehead with her tiny hands.

I did not move nor speak, nor did she utter a sound at first. But in a little while she began talking soothingly in a strangely whispering language. It was suggestive of the susurrus of high branches lightly tossed by a June breeze. Compelled to guess at her meaning from her tone, I assumed she was reassuring me as to her reality, despite her inexplicable apparition. But I did not need that. Tender and fairy-like though her fluttering touch was, it was real; she was no phantom.

Yet despite the calmness with which I submitted to her ministrations, a vague horror—not of her, but of something that affected her—grew on me. I looked at her more closely, straining my eyes in the pale, soft moonlight, and then I knew. She was covered with scars, she must have been hideously slashed at some time. Thin lines they were, almost hair lines, most of them, that covered her otherwise white and shapely body. One, heavier than the others, ran diagonally across her torso, from armpit to hip, as if she had been sawn in half and rudely sewn back together again. Then I observed that an ear was missing—that the outer curve of the thigh was gone, as if sliced away—and there were many minor scars lining her arms, face and hands. All those details I could see quite clearly, once I looked, for of clothing she had not a shred.

MY EMOTIONS by then were tender ones, but mingled with them was an upsurging of hot indignation, growing into anger as I contemplated her cruel wounds. It was then that I recalled with some difficulty a little of what Kendall had said to me. His hitherto esoteric utterances had been so far away from sense that I had actually forgotten.

"Chryseis?" I hazarded, speaking softly.

Like a delighted child she clapped her

hands and laughed, then sprang away from me and went into a graceful dance. Ah, so Chryseis was her name. But he mentioned another, or two—Melne, Arethne?

"Arethne?" I tried, but she ceased dancing and knelt beside me, face pillowed in her arms, and wept bitterly. In a moment she rose and gestured hopelessly toward the area where the funeral log had lain. But when I spoke the name Melne, she brightened again and called out in her queer, delightful language to an unseen person.

On the instant another like her appeared, and for a brief time joined her in her dance. It was a grotesque dance then, for I could not fail to see that the second nymph was not only scarred as was Chryseis, but that she lacked an arm, that part of one leg between mid-thigh and ankle, and a portion of the back of her head. But marred though she was, her mutilations detracted nothing from the wild grace of her pagan beauty, nor did they seem to impair her ability to dance.

As if the self-revelation of these two was a signal, other apparitions—or so I thought them, though they were real as my own self when I touched them—showed themselves in every direction. My first reaction was a gasp of horror at seeing the banquet hall take on the aspect of a charnel house, for wherever I looked there were fragments of dismembered-like creatures. Fingers, slices of arms, legs and torsos, slivers of head, sprouting ears or tresses of wavy hair, lay all about me, suggesting the atrocities of the infamous Nana Sahib at Cawnpore. Yet, on the other hand, they seemed firm and alive, twitching and moving of their own accord.

Strangely, I felt no fear. Somehow I knew that whatever catastrophe had caused the gruesome relics, it was one that had occurred long, long ago. Chryseis and Melne had gone over to where the nucleus of the mahogany log-to-be was, beckoning me to come and look. Beside it were the fragments of a dark-skinned beauty, and while the two nymphs busied themselves picking up the scattered boards about the floor and arranging them in strange juxtapositions, I noticed that the disjointed parts of the dusky one were reorienting themselves. In a moment I could see that there was the greater part of another nymph there, or an Indian Princess, judging by the nobility of the face which gazed at me unblinkingly from lustrous black eyes.

Chryseis returned to me and with vehement gestures toward the helpless one on the floor, addressed me passionately in her pathetic, rustling speech. It was plainly an appeal for my assistance, but of all she said the only word I recognized was "Xaquiqui," evidently the appellation of the one at our feet, or of the mahogany log with which she was associated.

While amazement and sheer incredulity were struggling for the mastery of my emotions, my intellect was vainly trying to function—to postulate some rational explanation of what I beheld. But my mind and soul was unexpectedly relieved of the burden of decision, for there was the sound outside of an automobile grinding to a stop before the door. The creatures before me scurried to their logs, and at the click of the latch vanished as abruptly as they had appeared. I was sitting alone in the vastness of the empty banquet hall staring into the steep shafts of silvery moonlight that struck downward through the windows. Between me and the light were only the fantastic silhouettes of the jigsaw logs.

ARTHUR KENDALL was surprised to find me within the house, no doubt, but his agitation over some other matter was so great that he wasted no time expressing it. All he said was a gruff, "Oh, you here? Please wait outside in the car. There is a private matter I must attend to here."

His voice was so charged with emotion, and his face so haggard and drawn, that I actually felt a sense of indelicacy at looking at him. There was a torment of soul there that an outsider shrank from seeing.

He kept me a long time—more than an hour, it must have been, for the Moon climbed until it reached its zenith. Once I thought I heard a wail from the depths of the mansion—not the wail of anguish of the physically stricken, but the high cry of poignant sorrow such as one might expect from a suddenly bereaved bride, or a fond mother at the foot of her son's gallows.

When Kendall did come, it was with a rush, as a man possessed. He sprang into his seat, stepped viciously on the starter, and whipped the car down the curving drive at a reckless speed. He slowed, though, for the gate, and once we were out on the road he drove more sanely.

"So you saw them, at last?" The form of it was a question, but it was a statement. He sighed heavily and slowed the car to a crawl.

"I'm glad they let you see. Whatever happens hereafter, there will be some strength and consolation in feeling that there is at least one human who understands what Enoch and I were compelled to do. *Compelled,* yes! How could we know of the long, hopeless sufferings of those dear creatures and not try to help them? Some we could save, or hoped to. For the others—there is always fire."

He stopped the car and looked back toward the mansion, but behind us was only the dark masses of the midnight woods. Presently he started slowly forward again, talking as he drove.

"Enoch Warren saw them first, the night he slept there after his wife's death. He woke with a start, in the middle of the night, feeling something lying on his chest, pluckling at the hem of his blanket. Then that something crawled up across his throat and he felt fingers lightly brushing his jaw and cheek. Just as you would have done, he grabbed at the hand and caught it. It was surprisingly small and light, a woman's hand, and it seemed to come away in his grasp, as if he had pulled it clear off the body that owned it. When he reached up further, with his other hand, to seize the arm that should have been there, there was nothing. Still holding his capture tight, he got up and made a light, and found he was holding the living hand of a severed arm.

"I say living, because the fingers wriggled in his, squeezing his hand. It was perplexing, and you can imagine how he searched the house. Our time is too short to tell you in detail of all those painful and slow first steps he had to take to solve the puzzle of the lonely, living hand. It could beckon as well as squeeze, and it would tap out messages with its fingertips. Patiently he followed its every hint.

"In time he learned that it was identified with the oak desk that stood in his bedroom, one of Mrs. Warren's antique purchases. Then, driven or led by the hand, he found that downstairs there were more parts—some of the upper arm that belonged to his hand, a bit of leg, and some other unidentifiable fragments. These, in turn, appeared to be associated with a piece of furniture, an oak buffet. Experimentally, he wrecked the two pieces of furniture, and sorting out the boards that seemed to match, he joined them together and found that by doing it some of his fleshy fragments correspondingly welded themselves together. But there were some of the body slivers that did not fit at all, and of course there was much missing.

"His wife's records showed that both the oak pieces were Ravenshaws, and he found an offer of a third, which she must have refused to buy on account of the price asked. He at once ordered it, tore it apart, and was rewarded by discovering he had

the head to his body—to his delighted eyes she was a lovely blond goddess, no less. He devoted many months to conversing with the head, learning its language. In time he understood enough to hear her story.

"That was Arethne. She was a very ancient tree nymph, hamadryad of a wonderful oak that grew in a grove near Stonehenge, and there had been a time when she was the object of worship of multitudes. In the year 1572, Hugh Ravenshaw cut her tree down and made it into furniture—"

"HOLD on," I objected. "Hamadryads cannot survive their tree. They die with it."

"That," he said, "is a gross error, a mistranslation of the old legends. Tree nymphs survive until the bole has been totally destroyed, whether by rot or fire. You may divide the bole, and the hamadryad with it, but neither ceases to exist, as you yourself have seen.

"But back to Arethne. She was very anxious to be reassembled. She said the agony of being hewn into planks was not so great as you might imagine, but the perpetual distress of being dispersed—a hand in one city, a foot in another, and perhaps the head on another continent—was painful beyond description. It made re-embodiment, or materialization, impracticable, for whenever she attempted it, she only succeeded in frightening the human she tried to appear before. Such efforts on the part of herself, or cousins, are the foundations upon which so many ghost legends are built. After a few decades of such experiences, she quit trying and resigned herself to her miserable doom. The fact that the cabinet work made from her tree was so beautiful and masterfully done made her situation all the worse, for they were carefully preserved. She had abandoned hope even of relief in death."

"But why," I asked, "should a hamadryad want to re-embody herself?"

"Because, although they are the souls of trees, they have the bodies of women. Now that there are no more satyrs, necessarily they must choose their lovers from among us. It is a hard fate for a lovely pagan creature to be dismembered and dispersed so finely, part in a museum there, another in a private collection in another place—in the midst of warm life, not dead, yet not able to partake of it.

"Her early efforts to reveal herself to potential lovers repelled, rather than attracted them. It was not until she met Enoch Warren that she found a human with the sympathetic nature and capacity of mind she yearned for. It was in search of the rest of her that he went to the museum that day, taking her arm with him to help him pick the pieces he must have. You see, by then he was well known in nymphian circles, and other dispersed hamadryads would show their pitiful fragments to him in the hope that he would aid them too. It was very confusing. It is a hard matter to match bits of the same body, especially when they are not adjacent, and it complicates things immeasurably to have to pick them from a jumble of alien parts.

"That is how he came to hire me. I could recognize them in their wooden form and need not expose myself to the embarrassment of being caught as he was, with a human fragment in my possession.

"I hunted Ravenshaws all over this country and Europe, and in the end we recovered most of Arethne's tree, and we fitted it together as you have seen. Once she was complete, she remained embodied most of the time, only withdrawing into the tree when strangers, such as the truckmen, would arrive at the mansion. She took a great interest in the living trees on the estate, and would go out at night and mingle with *their* nymphs, although she

thought them all distinctly of a lower class than the Old World hamadryads. It was largely due to her urging that Enoch burned his sawmills, that and the appearance of Xaquiqui. He did not believe at first that they are everywhere that there are trees.

"You see, in acquiring all that furniture, we had many pieces left over, as craftsmen mix their lumber indiscriminately. In the Ravenshaws we found much lumber from other trees of her own grove—two of them her own cousins, or sisters, hamadryad relationships are too involved for me to wholly understand. Those were Chryseis and Melne. Driven by his own impulse of compassion and by Arethne's pleading, he continued his buying, searching for the remainder of those trees. Soon we had enough to start their reassembly."

"BUT," I objected again, "wouldn't certain parts be irretrievably lost? The chips and sawdust and so on. And in all these centuries surely some whole boards must have been burned."

"Exactly," he admitted, "and therein lies the tragedy of it. Melne, whom you saw, is as complete as we can make her. It is true that there is a pair of stools in the Vatican made from her trees, but they refuse to sell them. Even if they would, they are unimportant—a pair of fingers, I think. I have searched everywhere—there is no more."

Some time before we had reached the top of the hill that leads down to Milburn, and he had stopped the car and parked at the side of the road, looking from time to time over his shoulder. I was aware of a redness flickering on the windshield, and I turned to look too. Behind there was a ruddy glow lighting the sky, and in another minute a high yellow flame lifted itself above the treetops, licking the smoky clouds. From the direction of Milburn came the sound of pistol shots. Then the clangor of bells, and finally the scream of a siren.

Arthur Kendall put his car in motion. Then, without a word of explanation, drove it crosswise off the road and killed his engine. Doggedly he sat there as the lumbering fire truck chugged up the hill from the village, and when the outraged firemen stopped at his barricade and swore at him he merely fumbled with the switches on the dashboard and pretended to be trying to start a car that would not start. The impatient firemen gathered around and a dozen pairs of arms pushed us literally off the road. Then, with siren screaming, they drove on past to the conflagration behind us. Mad Mansion was in flames.

"It was the only way," said Kendall, with a sob. He was driving furiously now. "We have burned others where there was no hope. So it must be with Chryseis."

"But why? Chryseis is whole—"

"Yesterday," he said grimly, almost biting the words off, "the court set aside the will. Ada and Lionel Warren inherit. *Everything.*"

I still could not see.

"An hour later Ada signed a contract with Seymour and Wrigley. It is that that I cannot bear. Seymour and Wrigley are restorers of antiques. They have photographs of every bit of the original furniture, and they know most of the original component boards are there. All those we have collected there will be scattered again, sold in the open market, to appease Ada's insatiable greed. I did the kind thing—they agreed with me, awhile ago, begged me to set the match."

"You loved Chryseis?"

He nodded. "For two years she has been my wife."

He let me out at Milburn, and drove off blindly into the night.

"I can see them!" I hollered. I stared at the pair of baleful golden horrors on toast. "And they can see *me*, too!"



The Downfall of Lancelot Biggs

By NELSON S. BOND

Come aboard the Saturn *for fun and laughs with Lancelot Biggs—mastermind of the spaceways.*

WE WERE about three hours out of Long Island Spaceport, and I had just finished swapping farewell insults with Joe Marlowe, head bug-pounder at Lunar III, when the door of my radio turret slid open and in slithered—if round things can slither—Cap Hanson, skipper of our gallant space-going scow, the *Saturn.*

The Old Man's eyes were as wide as a

lady bowler's beam, and his face, which boasts a pale mauve hue even under normal circumstances, was now a ripe, explosive fuchsia. He jammed a pudgy forefinger against his lips.

"*Shh!*" he shhed.

He squeezed in and closed the door behind him, shot a nervous glance about the room, then wheezed throatily, "Is there anybody here, Sparks?"

"Nobody," I told him, "but us amperes. Why all the Desperate Desmond stuff, Skipper? Got an old *corpus delicti* you want hid? You might try the air-lock—"

He snapped back to normal with a profane bang.

"Don't be a damned fool, Donovan! I ain't murdered any members of my crew yet. Though if I ever do, I've got a good notion who to start with. I got reason to be cautions. I just learned something—Listen!" He hunched forward and shoved his lips so close to my ear that I could almost hear his whiskers sprouting. "You know that Captain Cooper which come aboard at Long Island?"

"The Quarantine officer, you mean?"

"Quarantine officer your eye!" The skipper's voice was triumphant. "He ain't no more a Q.O. than I'm the Queen of Sheba! He's an inspector from the S.S.C.B."

"An inspector!" I gasped. "From the Space Safety Control Board! Why—why, that means—"

"Exactly!" Hanson rubbed his hands gleefully. "It means that Lanse is being examined for a commander's brevet. Well, what do you think of that? *My* son-in-law. Captain of his own ship. And him with only one year's active service!"

I said, "That's swell!" and meant it. The Old Man exaggerated a trifle when he called Lancelot Biggs his "son-in-law"; Bigg's marriage to Diane Hanson was not scheduled to take place, yet, for a couple of months. But with Hanson I could enthuse over the prospect of seeing Biggs win his four stripes and his own command. Lieutenant Lancelot Biggs was not only my superior officer, he was my friend, as well. He had once been my bunkmate. I had watched him rise from a gangling, awkward, derided Third Mate to First Officer; had been present when he earned his Master Navigator's papers; had seen him overcome seemingly insurmountable handicaps of appearance and personality to win a place in the affections of crew and command alike.

A screwball gent, this Biggs. Tall, angular, inconceivably skinny, graced (or disfigured?) with a phenomenally active Adam's-apple that bobbed eternally up and down in his skinny throat like an unswallowed cud—but blessed with two saving graces. A swell sense of humor and a *brain!*

True, his thought processes were oftimes fantastically involved. His motto, "Get the theory first!" sometimes led him down dark passageways of logic. But there never was a problem too deep for him; time and again his screwy logic had saved the personnel of the *Saturn* from peril to person or purse.

So, "That's swell!" I said—and meant it. Then I stared at the skipper thoughtfully. "But why," I asked him, "tell me about it? Biggs is the man to tell."

Hanson's eyes clouded, and he gnawed savagely at a grubby fingernail.

"That's just it, Sparks. I can't tell him."

"Why?" I demanded. "Laryngitis? Or ain't you and him speaking?"

"I can't tell him," explained the skipper, "because it would be unethical. You see, when a man's bein' examined for his commander's stripes, he ain't supposed to know about it. That's why Cooper come aboard under an alias. He wants to watch Lanse perform his routine duties in routine fashion — like nothin' unusual was goin' on.

"Then, at the end of the trip, he'll tell Lanse who he is, give him a verbal exam on the Space Safety Code, navigation practices, etcetera an' so on, an'—there you are!"

"There," I agreed, "I am. So where am I? Still in the dark, Skipper. Why tell *me?*"

Hanson glared at me witheringly.

"If you was as deaf," he said, making noises like a sizzling steak, "as you are dumb, the Corporation might give me a new radio operator for this here jallop—I mean, ship! Look, stupid! Biggs had ought to know he's bein' watched by an examiner, shouldn't he? Not that he don't know how to do things right, but because —well, because every so often the boy gets whacky ideas an' starts tryin' experiments.

"An' we don't want him tryin' nothin' like that, do we? Not on this shuttle. So, bein' as how you're his chum, an' since it would be unethical for *me* to spill the beans—*you've* got to tell him. Warn him to lay off the nonsense—get it?"

I got it. I nodded.

"Okay, Skipper. You're right and I'm wrong, as you usually are. I'll warn him. Only—" I hesitated, and the Old Man halted with one hand on the doorknob, looked back at me impatiently.

"Only what?"

"Only—if it's supposed to be a deep, dark secret, wouldn't it be unethical for *me* to tell him, too?"

"Don't," snorted Hanson, "be a donkey, Sparks! Whoever heard of a radioman with a sense of honor? Get word to him. An' make it snappy, too. He comes on in half an hour, an' I don't want he should pull any boners in front of Cooper. G'bye, now!"

The door slammed behind him.

SO PRETTY soon there was a commotion in the rampway like a trained seal stumbling around on hob-nailed stilts, a rap sounded on my door, and I said, "Come on in, Mr. Biggs!" And sure enough, it was him.

He ambled in, grinned lazily and said, "Hi! What's new?"

"Nothing," I said, "under the Sun. Ain't you heard the adage? Look, Mr. Biggs—you go on duty pretty soon, is that right?"

"That's right."

"Well, you don't happen," I asked him shrewdly, "to have any bright new inventions hatching under your skull, do you? Like the uranium time-trap, for instance, or the velocity intensifier?"

He said, "Now, Sparks—can I help it if neither of them worked exactly as I had planned? After all—"

"Answer," I insisted, "yes or no. Do you?"

He flushed and wriggled one toe in the carpet.

"We-e-ell, not exactly. I did have a little idea I wanted to try out, though. An anti-gravitic attachment. On the cargo lofts. It occurred to me that—"

"Well, junk it!" I said. "Hasten, don't hobble, to the nearest incinerator, and give your diagrams the good old heaveroo!"

He said, "Eh?" and looked faintly startled. "Eh?" he repeated. His liquescent larynx Immelmanned. "But, why, Sparks?"

I said, "Them stripes on your sleeve, Lieutenant—they're pretty, ain't they?"

He glanced down, fingered his triple braid proudly.

"Why—why, yes. Very pretty. I'm proud of 'em."

"But the more there are," I pointed out, "the prettier they are. Isn't that right?"

"I—I suppose so. But what has that to do with—*Sparks!*" His voice raised to a shout, and suddenly his pale eyes brightened. "Do you mean that—?"

"Nothing else but. That alleged Q.O. mugg, Cooper, is a phony? He's really an S.S.C.B. inspector. And since he's not riding the *Saturn* for his health, I'll give you

one guess who he's watching—if you start with yourself."

Funny what emotion will do to a guy. Biggs was not the type to go into a blue funk. I'd seen him face danger, disgrace and death, not once but many times. Every time, he had confronted the situation calmly, coolly, nary a quake or quiver stirring him. But here, handed good news on a silver platter, I thought for a minute he was going to pass out.

His eyes grew stalks, and his knees began to rattle like a marimba. The confused burble emanating from his lips resembled the vocal efforts of a tongue-tied hippo trying to speak Choctaw. His Adam's-apple—but why mention that monstrosity? Even *I* don't believe the things it did, and I saw it!

Words finally grew out of the *melange* of gutturals, sibilants and expectorants. Biggs' eyes receded into their sockets, became dewy and wistful, like the orbs of an amour-smitten adolescent. His voice was hushed and awed.

"My own ship!" he breathed. "My own command!"

"Don't cross your bridges," I reminded him, "until they're hatched. You've still got to win your letter, chum. Two letters, in fact. I-F. You become Skipper Biggs IF you pass the exam.

"Now, get to work. And remember—don't let on you know who this Cooper is. Deodorant's the word!"

I gave him a shove toward the door. He disappeared in a haze of little pink clouds. And I flopped into a seat, feeling so bad I could have bawled like a kid, but despising myself for feeling that way.

It was selfish, I guess. Biggs deserved the honor. But somehow—well, dammit! I sort of hated to see him leave the *Saturn*. We'd had a lot of fun together, our bunch. Cap Hanson and Chief Garrity, Dick Todd, the Second, and Wilson, the Third. And Biggs. And me.

WELL, things settled down into normalcy, then. The *Saturn* is a ten day freighter, which meant that Cooper would have beaucoup opportunity to judge Biggs' capabilities. So tempus fidgeted, and I fidgeted, and the Old Man came within two spasms of a nervous breakdown, and Biggs—as might have been expected—got his nerves on ice after that first shock and performed his routine duties in ultra-stellar fashion.

My duties were far from exacting. Four times a day I had to contact a Space Station to check our course, speed, and declination against Solar Constant. That was just regulation blah, though, because with Biggs plotting the course, we had about as much chance of getting off the line as a rural subscriber when a juicy scandal is being discussed.

It was also my job to keep in touch with Lunar III, which daily interlude—Joe Marlowe being the low scut he is—was the only disturbing influence in an otherwise languid existence. Understand, I don't believe for a minute that my gal, Maisie Belle, *was* out with him. She's true to me. But it was a dirty trick for him to say she was, and beside, how the hell did he learn about that birthmark if—?

Oh, the hell with it! The fact is that time passed and pretty soon it was the sixth day, and in just a few more days we'd dock at Mars Central and Lt. Biggs would be Capt. Biggs.

Because if I had been idle on this shuttle, my rawboned friend had not. Cooper had been putting him through a series of strenuous paces to test his knowledge, ability and resourcefulness. The trajectory computations had mysteriously disappeared, for instance, and Biggs had to compile a new set. When he went to use the calculometer, he discovered it to be accidentally-on-purpose "out of order." So he had to evolve the figures from his own cranium.

Then there was the false alarm fire in

the storage compartments — while Biggs was on the bridge. And the hypos went on the blink—with Biggs on duty. And one of the aft jets clogged. Guess who was standing watch at the time?

That sort of thing. But Biggs came through, every time, with flying colors. And with each succeeding success, another of the grim, suspicious lines melted from around the corners of Inspector Cooper's mouth, until he was beginning to look almost like a human being. Meanwhile, Cap Hanson's face got daily ruddier, happier, and grinnier. He was just one big smile on legs as he saw his son-in-law-to-be coming closer and closer to the coveted stripes.

"Just four more days, Sparks!" he chortled happily to me. And then, "Just *three* more days! Just *two* more—" He rubbed his hairy paws together gleefully. "Two captains in the same family! Ain't that somethin'? Boy, did you see the way he come through on that test yesterday? Cooper got Garrity to cross the heat control an' grav plates. The ship was hot an' weightless at the same time—"

"So that's what it was?" I grumbled. "Hell, who's taking this test—Biggs or us guinea-pigs? I went soaring to the ceiling, boiling like a kettle—and with the gravs off, I couldn't even drip sweat!"

"But Lanse fixed it!" gloried Hanson. "Spotted the trouble in three minutes flat, and had the circuits straight before you could say 'hypertensile dynamics'! What a lad!"

"Two more days," I said. "All I hope is that I can live through it. If Cooper gets any more whacky ideas—"

"Hrrrrumph!" came a voice from the doorway. I spun, startled.

What did my mama tell me about talking in front of a person's back? It was Inspector Cooper!

I said, "Look, Inspector—the acoustics are lousy in this room. Anything you heard which might have sounded like your name was strictly coincidental."

He glared at me. Then at Cap Hanson. Then at me. And, boy, what I mean—that guy could really glare!

"So!" he said. "*Inspector,* eh?"

Oh-oh! It dawned on me, all of a sudden—but too late—that I'd upset the legumes with a vengeance. Calling him "Inspector," when, so far as I was concerned, he was an officer in the Quarantine Service.

"Inspector, eh?" he repeated. And crisped Hanson's burning cheeks with a glance. "Well, Captain, it is just as I thought. Too many years of service have taken their toll on your discretion. When you start taking common radiomen into your confidence—"

I did the best I could. I rallied around.

"Now, wait a minute, Inspector!" I said. "Captain Hanson didn't tell me who you were. I—I guessed it. I'm pretty good at things like that. I figured it out the first time I saw you. It's my psychic—"

"It will be your neck," he snarled, "if you don't shut your yap! Well—now that you know who I am, I might as well tell you why I'm here. I need your cooperation in giving Lieutenant Biggs his final test."

Some of the chagrin left Hanson's eyes; his voice was hopeful.

"*Final* test?"

"Yes. I confess to a very great respect for your First Mate, Captain Hanson. He has proven himself capable in each of the tests offered so far. His theoretical knowledge is matched by his physical ingenuity; I have awarded him the highest possible grades in Astrogation, Analytical Judgment, and General Knowledge.

"If he passes the final test, Resourcefulness, and of course the verbal quiz on Safety Code practices, I shall take great pleasure in submitting his name for advancement.

"This test—" He turned to me. "Will be made in your department, Sparks.

You—" He transfixed me with an icy glare. "You are sick!"

"Who, me?"

"Yes. You have—mmm, let me see!—dyspepsia!"

"It's a lie!" I said indignantly. "I haven't been near one of them Venusian joy-joints for a year!"

"You have," repeated Cooper coldly, "a bad case of dyspepsia. Which is another name for 'indigestion,' young man! You will develop this ailment immediately. And since the captain of a space-going vessel is supposed to be able to step into the breach in any emergency, Lieutenant Biggs will be assigned the task of relieving you at your post."

Wow! Was that a break for our side? I darned near split a lip, trying to hide the great big grin that leaped to my gabber. If there was any man aboard the *Saturn* whose knowledge of radio was equal to my own, that man was Lancelot Biggs! Why, he was the inventor of a new type of radio transmission plate. If this were to be his "final test," he would breeze home, win, place *and* show!

But Cooper didn't notice the elation in my eyes, or the equal joy in the skipper's optics. He was finishing his instructions.

"—and because you have learned who I am, Sparks, I suggest that you make no attempt to get in touch with, or speak to. Lieutenant Biggs. You may consider yourself confined to quarters for the duration of the trip."

"Very good, sir," I said.

"And now—" Cooper turned to my instruments. "We shall set the stage for Mr. Biggs' final test—" He picked up a hammer. The biggest one in the turret. He lifted it, weighed it briefly in his paw, and then—

Wham!

Things clanked and clattered; glass tinkled; wires leaped from the innards of my set and wriggled out onto the floor like tiny metal snakes. Cap groaned, and I screamed, "Omigawd!"

"Omigawd!" I screamed. "Leggo! Stop it! Are you off your jets?"

"Stand back, Sparks!" warned Cooper. He raised the hammer again, again brought it down ferociously into the entrails of my beautiful transmission set. *Clinkety-clatter!* Something shorted; blue fire spat; there was a loud *pop!* and I had to clutch my breast to make sure it wasn't my heart. "Stand back!" he panted. "We—we've got to—make this—a tough—test!"

"We?" I howled.

And then he was done. He stepped back and studied his work with the pleased look of a ghoul in a graveyard.

"I think that should do the trick," he said gravely. "If he can repair this set and get it in working order, I'll give him top grade in Resourcefulness.

"Very well, now, Captain—you may return to the bridge and tell Biggs that Sparks has been suddenly overcome with illness. And you, Sparks—to your quarters. And don't forget—you're sick!"

I stared miserably at my once-perfect apparatus. I passed a hand over my brow and tottered to the doorway.

"Maybe you think," I wailed, "I'm not?"

WELL, I began to feel well enough to sit up and take notice along about lunch time. Doug Enderby, the steward of our void-cavorting madhouse, brought me my grub. He tiptoed in and laid the tray on the desk before me. He whispered:

"Are you feeling better, Bert?"

"Never worse," I told him gloomily. "Why the crape on the victuals? Are they *that* bad?"

I whipped off the napkin, took one gander at my so-called "lunch," and bleated like a branded sheep.

"Great monsoons of Mars—what the hell is this?"

"Shhh!" hushed Enderby. "Poached eggs, Sparks."

"I can see them!" I hollered. I stared at the pair of baleful, golden horrors-on-toast. "And they can see *me,* too! Take 'em away!"

Enderby said petulantly, "But you're sick! That's what Captain Cooper said."

"Cooper, eh?" I groaned. "I always said it wasn't smart to make torture illegal." Then I remembered why I was confined to durance vile. "You seen Biggs?" I asked.

"No. He hasn't been down to lunch. He had to take over for you when you were taken ill." Doug looked anxious. "There —there's something wrong in your turret, Sparks. The intercommunications system is out, and the radio won't work."

I glanced at my watch. Two hours had passed since Cooper's coup. Hardly time for Lanse to unscramble the mess of pottery.

"Well, cheer up," I said. "Everything will be O.Q. in a little while. Uggh!" I pushed my toast and tea toward him. "Look, pal, how's the cow situation in the galley? You got a nice, three inch steak? Rare? With onions?"

"Sirloins," said Doug, "for dinner."

"In that case," I sighed, "I'll give this hen-fruit a miss. See you at dinner-time."

Doug nodded sagely and sidled toward the doorway.

"Steaks," he said, "for the crew. But *you* get milk toast. You're a sick ma— *Hey!*"

Well, I *almost* nailed him with that second poached egg, anyway.

AFTER he beat it, I opened the door and peeked out, and sure enough, one of the sailors was standing down at the end of the corridor. Cooper was a canny duck. He was going to make certain that I didn't get loose and help Biggs.

But Cooper wasn't the only guy with smart ideas. I hadn't been radio operator on the *Saturn* for three years for nothing. There were a couple of wrinkles in the wiring system that even the Installation Department knew nothing about. I ducked back into my cabin, locked the door carefully, hung my coat over the keyhole, and pulled back my mattress.

Underneath, nestling coyly amongst the box springs of my bunk, was a tiny, complete transmission-reception set. I'm no dummy. Midnight watches are a bore, and many is the time I'd turned in with a pair of earphones on, rather than sit nodding in the turret for dreary hours waiting for messages that might never come in.

Of course this auxiliary set was useless so long as the main set was O.O.O.—but by listening in, I could tell how Lanse was coming along with his repair job, perhaps give him a little assistance by remote control should he need it.

So I donned the phones—and just like I thought, the circuit was as cold as a ditch-digger's toes in Siberia. For a few seconds. Then all of a sudden something squawked, "Krrrr-*wowowooo! Brglrp! Glrp!*"—and a familiar voice came from far, far away. The voice of Lancelot Biggs, saying:

"*That* ought to do it! Now, let me see if—"

I hugged myself gleefully. The old master mind had done it again! In just two hours and sixteen minutes. Tell *me* Lancelot Biggs isn't a genius!

I shoved my puss to the mike. I hissed, "Lanse!"

There was a brief silence. Then Biggs' curious response. "Is that you, Sparks?"

"In person," I told him, "and not a facsimile. How you getting along, pal?"

"Why, all right, I guess." He clucked, and I could envision the rueful shake of his head. "It was a frightful mess, Sparks. How you ever let it get in that condition—"

"I let it get in that condition," I told

him, "like I got sick. By orders of Madman Cooper. That guy's a wingding with the mace, ain't he? Where'd you get the replacement parts?"

"Out of the supply locker, mostly. I had to rewind the L-49 armature, though. We had no spares."

"You'd better throw a shunt across the No. 4 rheo," I suggested. "You're heterodyning on vocal freke; otherwise you seem to have matters under control. Nice going, bud. I guess you know this is your final test?"

"I suspected it. Well, I'm going to test now. See if I can contact Lunar III. Stand by, Sparks. I'll cut you into the circuit so you can hear."

Current hummed and squealed; dots and dashes ripped the ether as Biggs pulsed a signal to Mother Earth's satellite. Slow seconds dragged. We are very close to Mars, and it takes a message almost two and a half minutes to make the hurdle from the green planet to the red one.

I waited tensely. And then, faint and far, but yet clear, came the reply.

"Answering IPS *Saturn*. Go ahead, *Saturn*." It was Joe Marlowe's hand on the bug. I could tell that. You know how it is; every operator has a transmitting style just as distinctive as handwriting. "Go ahead, *Saturn*." Then, "Are you sober, Donovan?"

I gritted my teeth. But Biggs put an end to Joe's smart stuff with his next transmission.

"Donovan ill. Relief man at key. *Saturn* reporting for orders. Any orders, Luna? Any orders?"

Marlowe flashed back, "Sorry about Donovan. Nothing trivial, I hope? Yes, have one order, *Saturn*. From S.S.C.B. headquarters. To Inspector-Commander Cooper. 'If Lt. Biggs passes examination, assign him immediately to command of—' "

Thump-thump-thump!

DAMN! Of all the times to be interrupted Just at the happy, crucial moment when I was about to learn the ship to which Biggs was going to be assigned! And some idiot had to come banging at my door!

Thump-thump-thump!

"Just a minute!" I howled. I switched off the unit and shoved the mattress back into place, rumpled the sheets, tousled my hair and pulled my shirt off. I stumbled to the door, unlocked it and stood back yawning and rubbing my eyes as if I had just hopped out of the arms of Morpheus. "C'mon in!" I said. "Whuzza big idea—Oh! How do you do, sir?"

My visitor was Inspector Cooper. He pushed past me into the room, glared around suspiciously, turned and heaved me an extraordinarily evil glare.

"What were you doing in here, Sparks? Don't lie to me! What were you doing at the exact moment I knocked?"

Behind him, ashen-faced, stood Cap Hanson. *He* knew about the auxiliary unit. One more bite, and his forefinger nail would be bitten off to the second joint.

"The *exact* moment?" I stalled.

"That's what I said."

I held my breath, which is one way to create a most maidenly blush. I said, "I —I respectfully decline to answer, sir. My reputation—"

"Your reputation," roared Inspector Cooper, "is not worth a damn anyway! Answer, sir!"

I shrugged. I said, "Well, after all, you can't be court-martialed for dreaming. You see, there was this blond kitten named Dolly. Sweet kid, but—well, reckless. And I was—"

Cooper turned crimson, and he wasn't a bit happy.

"What! You claim you were sleeping? We distinctly heard you talking, Donovan! Who were you talking to?"

I said plaintively, "Well—it was this

way. Dolly was putting up an argument—"

That stopped him. He glowered about the cabin once more, helplessly, then he grunted and turned toward the door.

"Very well, Donovan. But if I ever find out you've been engaging in any skullduggery— Come, Captain Hanson!"

And they left, Hanson tossing me a swift "saved-by-the-bell" glance that meant undying affection and a bonus in next month's salary. So I muttered, "I hope you don't," and when their footsteps faded from earshot, I made a dive for the concealed set.

But I'd missed the important part. Joe Marlowe was just signing off when I got the phones on.

"—Captain Biggs will then lift his command," came the closing sentence, "from Mars Central, in accordance with orders which await him there! That is all, *Saturn!*" And he was gone.

Boy, was I nearly busting! I couldn't wait for the sonic to die away so I could tap Biggs in the turret. "What did he say, Lanse?" I hollered. "Cooper came pussy-footing, and I missed the message. So you're going to get a command, eh? Congratulations? Tell me—"

My nerves were like red-hot worms as I listened for Biggs' answer. And then—

"Whonk!" went my set suddenly. "Gwobble-*phweee!*"

Out of order! Again!

WELL, that was a stinker. But I had learned *some* things, anyway. That Biggs was in line for a captaincy, and that his new command was waiting for him at Mars Central. I dug a copy of Lloyd's Spaceways out of my desk-file, and leafed through it. The information was encouraging. Vessels land-docked at the Martian port included the transport, *Antigone,* the lugger, *Tethys VI,* and the brand-new, magnificent, special-extra-deluxe passenger liner, *Orestes!* Any one of these ships would be a feather in the cap of the skipper who took her bridge. Lancelot Biggs was getting off to a Big Start!

So I should have been very happy. For him. But I wasn't. Not altogether. Somehow I couldn't help feeling it wouldn't be the same ship—the *Saturn,* I mean—with Biggs no longer ambling the quarter-deck.

A sentimental sap? Well, maybe I am. But when you have laughed and cried and fought and triumphed and shared sadness and joy with a right, tight, snug little gang of men, all of whom you love like brothers, you hate to think of one of them leaving you.

And that's the way it was aboard the *Saturn.* Sure, we had our little squabbles and fusses. Wilson is a sort of show-off, and Todd sometimes has a tendency to let others do his work. The Old Man's not much of an astrogator any more; after all, he's been pushing ether for more years than I've been alive; he's not as smart and alert as some of the fresh young brevetmen. And Biggs' genius for getting us in tough spots is second only to his ability at getting us out again.

But we're a *team,* see? And now, with Biggs moving up the ladder, some strange new guy would come in.

It was hot!

I'd been so busy with the crying towel, that for a few minutes I didn't realize just how hot it was. But now, glancing at the thermometer on my wall, I was jolted to see the mercury standing at 98 degrees!

Without pausing to recollect that the audio system was out of order, I reached for the wall phone, bawled into it, "Ahoy, the bridge! Something's gone wrong with the—"

That's what I meant to yell, anyway. As a matter of strict truth, I got just as far as, "Ahoy—*blub!*"

For the moment I yanked the earpiece off the audio, a pencil of clear, cold water shot from the instrument like a diminutive

geyser! Smack in the tonsils it slapped me —and I turned and hightailed it for the door!

My guard, a gob named Jorgens, let loose a roar as I appeared.

"Oh, no, Sparks! I got orders to keep you in your cabin!" he bellowed.

"That's what you think!" I yelled back. "I'm not going to be roast Donovan for you or anybody! I'm hot!"

"Then maybe this will cool you down." He grabbed the firehose, pointed it at me, turned the wheel. I wailed, and waited for the punching gout of water to sweep me off my feet. But it didn't come! There came a rushing sound, and from the nozzle spilled—

Air!

Jorgens dropped the hose with a howl of surprise. He gave up all idea of stopping me. As a matter of fact, he was three steps ahead of me by the time we hit the end of the corridor, but I beat him up the Jacob's-ladder leading to the bridge by the simple expedient of using his vertebrae as rungs.

Together we charged through the upper passageways, turned onto the ramp that feeds the bridge. By now, everything had gone stark, staring mad. All the time we were on the hoof, I kept hearing music. And every once in awhile a wild burst of static rasped my eardrums. And the heat increased.

It took me some minutes to realize, with a burst of horror, that the music was coming from the radiators, the static from the darkened electric bulbs set in the ceilings, and the heat was pouring in a torrential flood from our air supply—the ventilating system!

We reached the bridge, shouldered the door open. But the situation wasn't any better there. If anything, it was worse. Cap Hanson, perspiration streaming down his red face, staining his jacket, was bending over a calculating machine that was flickering hazily with moving pictures! Across the room, Lieutenant Todd was masterfully struggling to subdue the clamor of a generator that was chattering wildly in the Universal Code. Dots and dashes!

Above the bedlam, I managed to make myself heard.

"What's wrong?" I bawled.

The Old Man acknowledged my presence with one look of torment.

"The ship's gone nuts! The heater plays music and the telephone's a spring; there's static in the lights, and electricity in the gas jets. The ventilators give heat and Slops just called me on his refrigerator to tell me the gas stove is spitting ice cubes!"

Cooper, his face flaming with rage, pulled his paws from his ears long enough to scream, "This is a disgrace to the service! Whoever caused this should be cashiered! And by the Lord Harry—"

Just then the door opened, and into the room, with a big, friendly grin on his pan, gangled our lanky lieutenant, Lancelot Biggs.

"Hello, folks!" he said amiably. "Sort of—sort of noisy around here, isn't it?"

Cooper glared at him wildly.

"Biggs, get out of here! You're supposed to be up in the turret repairing that radio set. Get along—"

Biggs smiled sort of sheepishly; his unbelievable Adam's-apple did a loop-the-loop in his throat. He coughed gently.

"Well—er—you see," he said, "that's what made me come down here. I—I guess I must have got a little bit mixed up in the wiring. I got the circuits all crossed up, and—well, durn it, this is what happened!"

BY SHEER coincidence, just at that moment the air stopped hissing, the music stopped playing, and the tumult that had been flooding the room died away to a whisper. In a brief, horrible silence I heard

Cap Hanson gasp, "Lanse! Lanse!" and heard the incredulous snort of Inspector Cooper.

"What? *You* caused this, Lieutenant?"

Biggs' pale eyes shifted, and he twisted his lanky frame into a pretzel.

"R-reckon I did, sir. Couldn't seem to get things straightened out in the turret, so I—I went down to the control room, and —and I guess I must have turned the wrong knobs or switches or something."

His excuse dwindled into silence. But Cooper did not. Cooper loosed a blat like a robot wired for newscasting.

"Wrong knobs! Wrong switches! Indeed, sir—" he swung to me, sweating painfully and quivering like an electroscope in a pitchblende mine. "Sparks, can you do anything about this—this disgraceful mess?"

I couldn't meet Biggs' eyes, nor could I meet those of Cap Hanson. I just nodded slowly.

"I think so, sir."

"Then get to work! And as for you, Lieutenant—" His eyes burned Biggs' pale, embarrassed face, "It will not now be necessary to determine whether or not you are versed in Safety Code practices. You have demonstrated very well that you are not yet capable of assuming the rank and duties of a commanding officer. Your butter-fingered handling of a simple, routine test has resulted in the most disgusting contretemps it has ever been my lot to witness!"

Cap Hanson said, "But—but look, Inspector—he's only a boy! Anybody can make a little mistake. Give him a chance to—"

"There is no place for 'boys'," snorted Cooper, "on the bridge of space-going vessels. Lieutenant Biggs has possibilities, yes. But I shall suggest to the S.S.C.B. that he be given another year of intensive training—under an old, accomplished spaceman; yourself, Captain Hanson—that he may learn resourcefulness, coolness, how to act under stress of emergency!

"And now, gentlemen, I shall retire until we reach Mars Central. Sparks, for God's sake quiet this bedlam as soon as possible!"

And he stalked from the bridge with as much dignity as a man can muster with hands clapped over a pair of sweat-dripping ears.

I went below. It was a mess, but not an impossible one. I got it straightened out in fifteen or twenty minutes. And by the time things were back to normal, we were warping into the cradle-lists at Mars Central Spaceport.

AFTERWARD, everybody was sympathetic. Bud Wilson said, "Too bad, Biggs! But you'll get another chance." And he went out. Dick Todd said, "Aw, the hell with it, Lanse. You were just a little excited, that's all—" And he left, too. And that left Biggs and the skipper and me alone in the turret.

Biggs squirmed and said meekly, "I—I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to be such an idiot. But—well, after all, I am young. And I haven't had your experience."

The skipper still looked like a man who'd grabbed a live wire by accident. He shook his head sadly.

"I wouldn't of thunk it of you, Lancelot, son," he grieved. "You was always so quick at graspin' things before this. I was bankin' on you to make it two captains in the same family. But—well, let bygones be bygones. Next year you'll have another test. An' in the meantime, I'll try to teach you more about how to act in emergencies."

Biggs said gratefully, "Thank you, sir. And—and Diane?"

"We won't tell her," said the Old Man promptly. "I alluz say that what women don't know won't hurt 'em. We'll keep this to ourselves. But, mind you!" A

flash of the old fire lighted his weathered, space-faded eyes. "But, mind—I want you to study hard durin' this next year! If you want to win your stripes, you got to listen to a wiser head!"

"Yes, sir," said Lancelot Biggs. "I will, sir."

Then the skipper left. A great old guy. No longer listless and lackadaisical, space-weary, but a new man, imbued with a strong, fighting new urge. To help a young man earn his spurs. There was something admirable in his attitude, and something a little pathetic, too.

And after he had left, I turned to Biggs. I said, "Okay, pal—come clean!"

He started.

"I—I beg your pardon, Sparks?"

"Come," I repeated, "clean. You can fool some of the people some of the time, and you can fool some of the people some of the time—but you can't fool some of the people some of the time. And I'm them. Biggs, I know you like I know my own hangnails. I've seen you in a thousand tight spots, and I never once knew you to go into a dither. But you messed this one up so bad that it smelled from here to Pluto. Now I want to know—why?"

Biggs' eyes looked like saucers. His larynx jumped up and down painfully.

"I don't know what you mean, Bert."

"Talk," I said grimly, "or I start rumors. Why?"

And then—Lancelot Biggs grinned!

"So I made it look bad, eh, Bert?"

"Bad? Awful! That heat—great comets, pal, you nearly killed us all! But why? I heard part of that transmission from Luna. I heard enough to know that if you passed your final test you were going to be given a command immediately. A ship of your own. The *Tethys* or the *Antigone* or the *Orestes*. All good ships—"

Biggs said quietly, "There was another one, Bert."

"What? No, there wasn't. I looked it up. There were only those three waiting captainless in port."

"But there would have been four," he said, "if I'd passed my exam. Sparks—Cap Hanson's a great guy, isn't he?"

"Sure. A grand old-timer. But—"

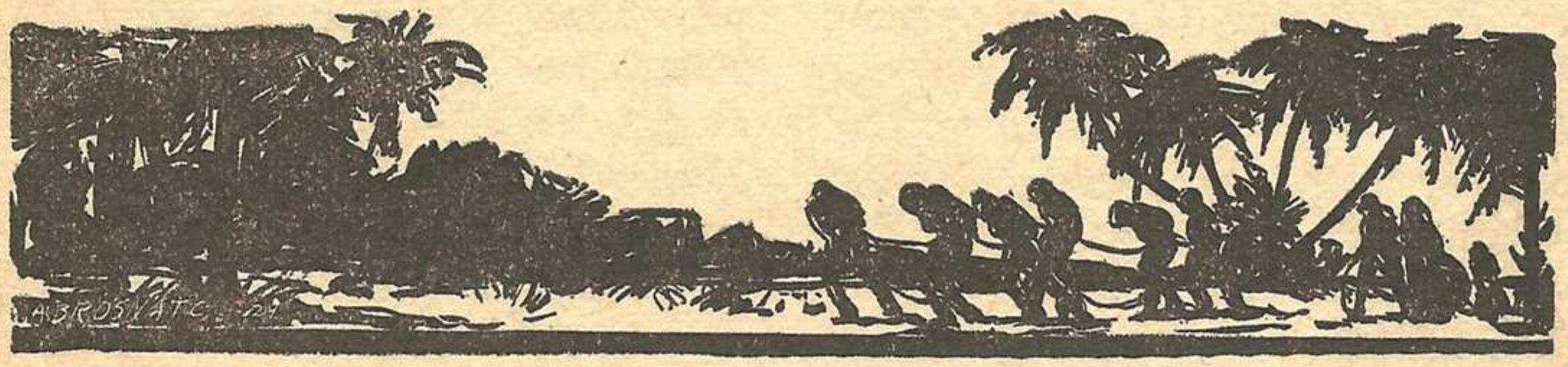
And then, suddenly, I got it! Got it, and realized what an all-around humdinging hell of a real man Lancelot Biggs really is! I said:

"You mean—you mean that if you had earned your stripes, the Old Man was going to be set down? And you'd be placed in command of the *Saturn?* Is that it? Why, you—"

And I swallowed hard, and I gave him a shove. And I said, "Aw, Lanse—"

But Lancelot Biggs isn't the kind of guy you can act gooey with. He just grinned again, and he said, "Sparks, old-timer, what do you say you and me have a drink or three, eh?"

So we did. Double. Without soda.



Wake



". . . something there that walks around at night."

—and Remember

By SEABURY QUINN

Like the drawing of a curtain a century fell aside. And two lovers—who had known tragedy together in another yesterday—found happiness today.

MEHITABEL stirred petulantly and thrust her face into the pillow as the mellow tinkle of a cowbell sounded through the open window. "Go 'way!" she murmured querulously. "Go get somebody else. I'm only the fifth call." Then with a sigh of relief she realized. She was no longer an interne. Her period of probation was over, her license duly issued. No more answering ambulance calls, no more interminable watches in the psychopathic ward. She was legally entitled to practice anywhere in the state—and get paid for it.

She turned over on her back, watching the latticed patterns of the early sunlight on the floor, raised her arms and stretched luxuriously. She was quite lovely when she smiled. It lightened her too-serious expression and lifted her eyes, ever so little, at the corners. But when she sat up the color drained out of her face and purple shadows reappeared under her eyes. Her arduous interneship had sucked the stamina from her, only her nerve had held up the last six months; she hadn't come up here to rest one day too soon. "Lord, but it's good to—" she began, but broke

off with a grimace as the long-drawn hooting of a motor's siren sounded from the lane. "Drat it!" she exclaimed, glancing at the business-like man's style watch strapped to her left wrist. That fall she proposed doing special work in nervous diseases and insanity, and when she had announced her intention of vacationing at Mount Auburn, Superintendent Ballau had offered to give her introductions to the staff at Rocky Hill. Letters had been exchanged, and she had an appointment to breakfast at the sanitarium that morning at seven. Her watch said it was twenty minutes after six, the car was waiting for her and—here she wasn't even dressed. "Just a minute!" She leaped from the bed as if a call for ambulance duty summoned her, ran to the window and called to the driver. "Be with you in a jiff!"

She was. Years of response to the orderly's "Ps-st, Doc—ambulance!" had trained her to put on her clothes in less time than most women took to pull their stockings on, and her watch registered just six forty-five when, washed, combed and dressed in jumper, slacks and tennis shoes, she hurried down the garden path and climbed into the waiting station wagon.

BREAKFAST at the sanitarium was substantial. Tomato juice, cereal, bacon and eggs, fried potatoes, hot rolls and coffee. After years of internes' fare it seemed like a Lucullan feast to her. The younger doctors had gone out upon their rounds, but the superintendent, Dr. Stillwell, lingered over his fourth cup of coffee. "So you're staying at the Holmead Lodge?" he asked as he held out his lighter for her cigarette. "Alone?"

Mehitabel drew down her brows in a mild, puzzled frown. "Why, yes, of course," she answered. "Why not? You're the second person to ask that. The taxi driver at the station almost balked at bringing me up to the place last night, and nearly ran us off the road twice in his hurry. Muttered something about not wanting to go there after dark. What's wrong with the place: bears, robbers or spooks?"

Dr. Stillwell's smile was reassuring. "I'm afraid I'm old-fashioned, my dear, that's all. Somehow, I can't seem to get used to young women traipsing all around the country, living in deserted houses two miles from the nearest neighbor, and all that."

"Oh," she laughed, "is that all? You should have seen some of the places they sent me into when I was out on ambulance duty. After East Side dives, and Chinatown, and Bowery flophouses, solitude has no terrors for me, I assure you.

"Shall we start?" she added as he glanced down at his watch.

Rocky Hill Sanitarium was a beautiful, remodeled, private country home, and in appearance differed in no wise from the typical Adirondack estate except that its extensive park was enclosed by a stone wall topped with an overhang of barbed wire. Quarters for the staff were in a pleasant house set fifty feet or so from the main building, with which they communicated by a covered porch. "How's Delarue this morning, Miss Sears?" asked the superintendent as he and Mehitabel entered the wide central hall of the main building.

"Worse, Doctor," replied the competent-looking young woman in nurse's uniform at the desk. "I've sent Sarles up to him twice this morning, but the dosage had to be increased each time, and the medicine doesn't seem to hold as well."

"Umph," he muttered noncommittally, then to Mehitabel: "I think you'll like to see this case, Doctor. It's a young man, just past thirty, who's been in our charge almost three years. He was an aviator, and had done some really brilliant work in design, but when the Spanish Civil War broke out the offer of a huge salary, plus

his natural craving for excitement, I suppose, lured him away. It was criminal, sending those inexperienced kids out to fight seasoned flyers. They shot him down in his first dog-fight, and though his 'chute opened and he got down all right he left the best of him up in the sky somewhere."

"The best of him?" she echoed, puzzled.

"That's right. A young man, educated, with a brilliant future, good-looking, and with everything to live for, took an airplane out that morning. What they picked up when they cut him loose from his 'chute's rigging was a helpless, hopeless imbecile. No more reason than a two-months-old baby.

"His family is well-to-do, but he has no near relatives, so when he came back he was shipped up here. Poor lad, physically he's perfect; he'll probably outlive all of us.

"He's been an ideal patient, from our standpoint. Never gave us a moment's trouble, but last night he began acting like the devil. Tried to brain a nurse with a cup, and made a murderous assault on another. From a sweet-tempered little idiot he's turned into a first-class hellion overnight. If he'd been suffering from ordinary dementia I could understand it, but—" His voice trailed off as they approached the barred door of a ward.

"How's Delarue?" he asked the male nurse who admitted them.

"Resting quietly now, Doctor, but when th' dose wears off—" The nurse shrugged his shoulders pessimistically.

Mehitabel peered through the peephole in the door that barred the young man's room. If she had not been warned of his condition she might have taken the boy on the bed to be in perfect health. About him there was neither the emaciation nor the obesity commonly seen in cases of dementia, no drawing of the features, no flaccidity of the mouth. One cheek was pillowed on a bent arm, and as Mehitabel looked at him he smiled slightly in his sleep with the wistfulness of a tired and not entirely happy child.

Mehitabel took a quick breath. It was as if a breeze laden with memories blew over her. Somehow, there was something poignantly familiar in the calm, sad face of the sleeper. Sometime—centuries ago, perhaps—she'd seen it, loved to watch emotion steal across it as ripples steal across a quiet pool when a raindrop falls into it. Centuries ago? Or was it centuries ahead?

"Poor lad," murmured Dr. Stillwell. "It would have been far better if his rip-cord hadn't worked."

His soft voice wakened the young man, and instantly a dreadful change came over him. His lips stretched into a square like the mouth of an old Greek horror-mask, his eyes glared with a fiendish light, and from his gaping, distorted mouth came a flood of abuse and invective foul with the nastiness of two languages, dirty with the mingled indecencies of waterfront and camp.

A dull flush of embarrassment spread on the superintendent's face. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "He doesn't know what he's saying, of course. Such language—"

Mehitabel checked him with an impatient nod. She was a physician, and as such impermeable to language which should have shocked her merely as a woman. "What have you been giving him?" she asked. "This seems more like delirium than dementia."

"Umph?" Dr. Stillwell had forgotten momentarily that she was also a doctor. A young woman with a disturbingly pretty face, dressed in sports clothes which set off rather than concealed a figure Aphrodite might not have cared to disown was certainly not his idea of a physician, male or female. "Why, we've been administering brandy and strychnine in small doses, but they haven't seemed to take hold—"

"We found hypnotics more effective than stimulants in our psychopathic ward," she broke in professionally. "Half-hourly doses of hyocin hypobromide injected intravenously—"

"By Jupiter, of course!" Stillwell interrupted. "That should be a cerebral sedative; give him some rest, and us, too—I say!" He checked himself in amazement, for another lightning change had come to the young maniac.

He had caught a glimpse of Mehitabel through the peephole, and from a blaspheming, cursing fury had again become a quiet, sorrowful-looking child, and on his suddenly-calmed face there was a look of longing, beseeching entreaty. "Me—" he stumbled on the syllable as if it were an unfamiliar foreign word, then, "Mehitabel?" he asked half longingly, half incredulously.

Pitying sorrow welled up in her heart. She was more woman than physician, now. "Yes?" she answered. "What is it?"

"Mehitabel?" he repeated. "Is it really—" Something seemed to grasp him by the throat, choking off his voice. A dazed, bewildered look spread on his face, like the expression of one who wakes up suddenly at some strange noise, and tries to identify it. Then a look of utter, fatuous imbecility came in his eyes, and he burst out in sudden speech, eager, bubbling, yeasty words scarcely intelligible; oddly jumbled, senseless words, babblings about betrayed love and hangmen's ropes and the possibility of expiration. As she left the ward with Dr. Stillwell his voice came after her, weak, half-stifled, punctuated with deep, broken-hearted sobs: "Mehitabel, Mehitabel, don't you know me?"

"CAN you shoot, Miss—er—Dr. Goodrich?" asked Dr. Stillwell apropos of nothing while they waited for the station wagon to take her back.

"I've shot skeet and made fair scores," she answered, wondering at the question.

"That's good; fine," he replied. "I'm glad to hear it. I suppose you brought a gun up with you?"

"Why, no. The hunting season won't be on for three more months. Besides, I didn't come up here to shoot; I just want to rest. Three years interning has almost done me in, Doctor."

He gave her an odd look, seemed on the point of speaking, then apparently thought better of it. Finally: "I wish you'd let me lend you a gun and some shells. This is wild and lonely country, Doctor. All sorts of critters around here—wildcats, snakes, even a few bears. And, of course, an occasional tramp. A gun might come in handy, and I'd feel better if I knew you had it."

"Why, thank you," she replied. If he wanted her to take the gun the least she could do was to accept it gracefully.

"By the way," he added as he brought the light sixteen-gauge gun and a box of shells from a coat closet, "what made you decide to spend your vacation at Holmead Lodge?" His voice was casual and friendly, not at all prying, not demanding an answer, just inviting one. But she had a feeling there was urgency behind his offhand question.

"No special reason," she returned. "The property was once in my family, you know. A great-great-aunt of mine—I'm named for her, in fact—was the last one of us to occupy it. She had some sort of unfortunate love affair, I've been told, 'died of a broken heart' and all that sort of pre-Victorian nonsense. Strangers bought the house just as it stood when she passed on, and quite by accident I ran across an ad, in *Country Life* announcing it was vacant and for rent. It's been modernized to a considerable extent and is really quite comfortable, but they're asking only twenty-five dollars a month for it, so I took it for

two months. I wanted a place to hole up in for the summer, away from everything, off main highways, without even a telephone. Holmead Lodge seemed just the thing, and there's an added attraction in living in a place our family once owned, and using some of the very furniture that once belonged to my ancestress and namesake."

Suddenly a thought struck her. "Is there something wrong about the place, Doctor? The hackman at the village didn't want to go there with me last night, and" —with difficulty she suppressed a giggle— "you seem so solemn about it."

"Oh, no," he answered with somewhat more emphasis than occasion seemed to require, "there's nothing wrong about the house that I know"—he put just the slightest emphasis on "know"—"but, as you say, it's lonely, and for a woman by herself—"

Her tolerant laugh broke through his rather halting explanation. "'Votes for Women' won the battle years ago, Doctor. There are no clinging vines or sheltered, drooping violets in skirts today—even when we wear 'em." By way of emphasis she stretched a straight, slender trousered leg out for his inspection. "But thanks for the gun, just the same. I'll take it with me on my walks and sleep with it beside my bed."

"Is that a promise?" he asked rather soberly.

"It's a promise, Doctor." She put her small, firm hand out to shake his in token of their bargain.

Mehitabel would have laughed even more tolerantly if she could have listened to a conversation between two nurses as she climbed into the station wagon for her homeward trip.

"Cute little trick, that Dr. Goodrich, ain't she?"

"Yeah, but she's an educated little fool, if you ask me."

"How come?"

"Stayin' at that Holmead Lodge. Don't she know what's happened there?"

"Search me. What has happened?"

"Why, ain't you heard? They can't rent that dump for sour apples. Nobody's been able to live there more'n a few months for gosh knows how many years. Something there that walks around at night, bangs the doors and windows, and sometimes jerks the bedclothes off folks while they're sleepin'.

"Just last summer—that would be before you came here, though—a couple of fellers from the city took the place. They was tough guys for fair, talked outa the side o' their mouths an' called ever'body 'sister'. Some people said they was a pair of gangsters from New York on the lam from the police. Well, anyhow, they heard some funny things, and started to shoot it out with whatever it was that disturbed 'em. One of 'em was killed—choked to death—and the other was so scared he didn't stop to pack his stuff before he lit out for the city."

"Humph, that so? What d'ye think it is?"

"Ghosts, you chump. That place is haunted, and has been ever since the old girl died there more'n a hundred years ago. Looks like she resents anyone livin' there."

"Listen, simple, you better lay off whatever it is you've been drinkin' lately. Ghosts! D'ye actually mean to stand there with your bare face hangin' out an' tell me you believe in 'em?"

"I don't know if I do or not. An' I don't know if those New York gangsters believed in 'em, but one of 'em got killed and the other took a powder, didn't he?"

MEHITABEL stretched luxuriously in a big rattan chair set on the small bricked terrace behind the lodge. Her hands were folded idly in her lap, her

head was pleasantly empty of intention. Before her the land fell away in a steep slope to the little lake, at the horizon the green hills made a notched line across the smooth blue of the sky. In the small unkempt orchard apples lay in the long grass, birds bickered in the branches. The sunshine of high summer lay on everything in a sort of pale, powdered-golden light that seemed to take on iridescence from the massed green of the woods. Idly she wondered what the boys and girls were doing at the hospital. Who had the ambulance duty today? Who had the "murder beat" south of Canal Street; had any calls come in for fire duty. . . . Fire! as she framed the word mentally she was suddenly aware of something she'd been seeing for some time without noticing it. From the grove of pine trees bordering the lake a tall, gray shaft of wood-smoke mounted like a weathered obelisk against the still blue of the sky and still green of the trees. Some fool had made a campfire in the pine woods.

Visions of the roaring devastation of a forest fire flashed across her mind . . . the orange flames advancing in merciless *blitzkrieg,* destroying birds and beasts and people as they swept across the wooded slopes and valleys, leaving blackened ruination in their wake.

In an instant she was on her feet, but at the terrace edge she halted. Doctor or no doctor, she was a woman, and alone. She'd need something to enforce her authority. Running back to the house she picked up the light shotgun, broke it, thrust two shells into its breech, then hurried down the path that wound between the trees to the lakeside and pine grove.

Parked on the gravelly shingle of the lake was a decrepit motor truck which looked as if it might have been second cousin to one of Ringling Brothers' earliest circus vans. Several incredibly dirty children wrestled on the short grass. A man in greasy corduroys sprawled full length under a tree, a slouch hat pulled over his face, while another lounged in the van doorway. Two women in faded calico dresses and an amazing amount of junk-jewelry were busily engaged, one cutting brush-wood to replenish the fire, the other stirring something in a large, smoke-blackened pot that swung from a tripod above the blazing sticks.

"You, there!" called Mehitabel. "What d'ye mean, building a fire here? Don't you know you're apt to set the woods ablaze? Go down to the lake if you want to camp; there's no fire hazard there." Authority—the sharp, uncompromising authority of the "amb'lance doctor" ordering tenement-dwellers was in her voice.

But this was not the lower East Side, nor did she have the driver and policeman to support her commands. The women looked at her in sullen silence, their fierce beady eyes aglow with anger under straight black brows. The man turned lazily, nudging his hat up until it showed one eye. "I lika deesa grass for lay on," he informed her. "Too mocha stone an' sand down dere. I stay here. See?"

Mehitabel could feel the wash of angry blood in her cheeks. She faced him with dilated nostrils and hard eyes. "Pull your freight!" she ordered sharply.

The man rose slowly, menacingly. "You talla me pulla da freight?" he demanded, almost incredulously. "I showa you sometʼing, me." He was a big man, tall and heavy-set, but none of his fat sagged. His eyes were black and bright as obsidian and his jaw was thrust out truculently. From childhood he had seen his women cuffed into submission; Simon Legree could have been no more surprised and angered if Uncle Tom had struck him in the face than he was at this summary order from a woman. "I showa you sometʼing," he repeated ominously, and a sharp *snick* sounded as he pressed the spring of a case-

knife, releasing a six-inch blade from the bone handle.

Mehitabel snapped back both hammers of her gun. "Steady, girl," she told herself. "Aim low the first time, but let him have it in the legs if he keeps coming on. You're sunk if he once gets his filthy hands on you." Aloud she repeated:

"Pull your freight, I told you!"

She had faced drunken men, insane men, criminals. She knew murder when she saw it, and she saw it in the gypsy's eyes that moment.

Easily, effortlessly, without raising her gun from the crook of her left elbow, she squeezed the forward trigger. The gun's report was like a cannon's roar. The charge of shot struck the earth scarcely six inches ahead of the advancing man, and one or two small pellets ricocheted and lodged in his shin.

It was as if he'd walked into a stone wall. One foot half raised, he halted in his tracks, and she could see his black eyes widen with surprise and fear as they looked into the smoking muzzle of her gun. He slipped his knife back in his pocket, forced his swarthy features to the semblance of a smile, and doffed his tattered hat. "Pleeze, Missa Lady," he besought, "don' pointa da gun deesa way. I make da joke. See? We taka da camp offa you' lan' right away. Yes-s."

"Put that fire out and get going!" Mehitabel commanded, continuing to keep her gun in readiness. "If you're not gone before I've counted twenty-five I'll let you have it—and next time I shan't aim at the ground. One—two—three—"

The fire was trodden out, the van's protesting engine cranked, the filthy brats collected, and the gypsies gone almost before she reached fifteen.

SHE had eaten a light supper, washed the dishes, set the oil-lamps glowing; now she sat at the piano, idly thumbing



"She felt — she *knew* — that she was not alone."

through a portfolio of songs, sampling this one, playing a stray bar or two from that, sometimes singing to her own accompaniment. It was a room in which to sing love songs, this big, timber-ceilinged apartment with its fieldstone fireplace, its row of casement windows draped in flowered chintz, and the mellow glow of lamplight over almost threadbare rugs and the softly-gleaming polish of old, waxed mahogany and maple and walnut furniture. She sang well in a slightly husky contralto, sometimes with a note of longing in her tones. She had chosen her career, hers was the task of mending broken bodies, straightening twisted minds, bringing other women's babes into the world, but—the deep scent of the woods came to her through the opened windows, outside the moon-stained shrubbery and trees were whispering in the light breeze—it must have been on such a night Leander swam the Hellespont; it must have been a night like this that Romeo poured out his heart beneath Juliet's balcony.

The song book fluttered open to a musical setting of Browning's *Evelyn Hope*. There had been small time for poetry in her life. The verses were new to her:

"I claim you still for my own love's sake!
Delayed it may be for more lives yet,
Though worlds I shall travel not a few:
Much is to learn, much to forget. . . ."

Something stirred in the quiet room. Not a breeze, exactly, but a soft, light current of air, a little colder than the summer night, yet not precisely chilling. She had that oddly-persistent feeling a person has when someone stares fixedly at him from behind. There was no fear in it, no uneasiness, even, but it was there. She felt—she *knew*—that she was not alone. The feeling grew so strong she turned and looked across her shoulder. Everything was as it had been, the lamplight penetrated to the farthest corner of the room; nowhere was there a shadow, certainly there was no substance of another in the place, yet—

She turned again to the piano, singing softly:

"So hush, I will give you this leaf to keep:
See, I shut it inside the sweet, cold hand.
There, that is our secret; go to sleep!
You will wake, and remember, and understand."

What was that? This time there was no mistaking an alien presence. Not only could she feel it, she could hear it. Stealthily, almost soundlessly, but certainly, a footstep scraped upon the gravel just outside the window; a hand was on the sill, then, silhouetted against the night, with the lamplight full upon it, rose a face.

A tense, taut face it was, with murder written on it. She recognized the gypsy she had driven off that afternoon, recognized the black malignancy in his eyes, the scar that traced a half-moon on his right cheek and seemed to dance grotesquely as he smiled.

"Deesa time you not have gun!" he told her, speaking softly, with a sort of dreadful jubilation in his voice. "Deesa time I cut you' heart out, you—" His knife-blade slid out of its handle with a sharp *snick;* he raised it, drew it back. . . . Like a boxer, gauging his opponent's next blow by his eyes, she knew with perfect sureness where the blade would strike. There was no time to dodge, no time to run for the gun standing in the corner. As certainly as if she faced a firing-squad she was looking wide-eyed in the bare-boned face of death. There was a queer, flinching feeling in her left side just below the rondure of her breast. The steel would pierce her there—

It was incredible, impossible, preposterous; but it was so. Nothing moved across her line of vision, there was no shadow, no opacity, but, unbelievably, the gypsy's face blotted out—like a figure fading from a motion picture screen when the film tears. She heard a startled, strangling,

choking cry, saw the knife fall, heard it clatter on the floor. Then the intruder was visible again, but now he lay across the window sill. His empty hands hung down before him, his face was partially averted, but it required no second look to know that he was dead. A light froth lay upon his lips, his tongue protruded, the eyeballs almost started from his swarthy face. She knew the signs—trust a graduate of three years' ambulance hopping! He was strangled, and his neck was broken.

Mehitabel rose, stepping unsteadily. She let her breath out slowly, with an odd jerk in it. She felt as if she hadn't breathed in a long time, and needed practice to pick up the way of it again.

Death doesn't frighten doctors, soldiers or embalmers; it's an incident in their business. She knew what she must do. Medical examiner's rules required that the body be left in place. Coroner's regulations were probably the same. Methodically, she changed her lounging pajamas for a sweater and tweed skirt, kicked off her sandals, pulled on a pair of woolen socks and heavy walking shoes. The nearest farmhouse was two miles away, and she must telephone to the state troopers.

At the door she paused. The shotgun? She half turned back, then shook her head. Somehow, she knew she wouldn't need it. She felt safer in this old deserted house, safer in the dark, untenanted forest, than she had ever felt on Broadway or Fifth Avenue. Somehow—she didn't try to analyze the feeling, but she knew—she was not alone.

NEXT night it rained. Not one of those soft cooling rains that she'd been used to in the city, darkening the pavements and making fuzzy, butter-colored glows about the street lamps, but a shrieking, tearing torrent with wild thunder and the blinding blaze of lightning. The tall trees bent and twisted in agony, the wind howled down the chimney, frightening the lamp-flames till they cowered flickeringly in their glass shades. The bushes growing by the walls scratched at the window panes like fingers of dead things that clawed for entrance to the house.

She had found a stack of cordwood in the lean-to at the rear of the lodge; now a fire blazed on the hearth, its dancing flames etched ever-changing patterns on the rug.

From her suitcase she had brought a book, Skeel's "Manual of Gynecology and Pelvic Surgery," but the precise wording of its technical text palled on her. She tossed it in a chair and crossed the room to the tall secretary desk. Surely, there would be a book or two in there, perhaps some poetry. The lock was stiff with long disuse, she had to wrestle with the key, and then the door was stuck. Once, twice, three times she tugged before it came open, and with the jar of its forced opening came a litter of knick-knacks: A Dresden figurine of a shepherdess in Marie Antoinette costume, a leather-bound edition of the Rev. Silas Higginbotham's "Gems of Devotional Verse," a little gold locket set with a circle of seed pearls and fastened to a cord of plaited silk.

"How lovely!" she exclaimed, and snapped the watchlike case open. Inside were two miniatures, exquisitely painted on ivory.

The picture in the left-hand panel was that of a young woman with dark hair smoothly parted in the middle and brought down each side the face in little corkscrew curls. A very pretty girl. She had a broad white forehead, wide-spaced hazel eyes, a small, straight nose, a full-sized mouth with full red lips. She would have been much prettier had she not seemed so serious. She wore an off-the-shoulder gown of palest yellow satin, the decolletage fringed with a lace bertha.

Mehitabel's eyes went wide with sur-

prise. She'd seen those calmly studious features too many thousand times to fail to recognize them. Every time she combed her hair, each time that she renewed her make-up, they looked back at her from her mirror. The only difference seemed to be the pictured woman wore her hair a different way and was, perhaps, a year or two her senior.

In the right-hand side of the locket was the portrait of a young man, blue-eyed, auburn-haired, with a hint of weakness in his face; not weakness denoting lack of strength or character so much as the frailty of something delicate. He wore a uniform of some sort, a deep-blue coat trimmed with white, with a double row of gold buttons sewn on the facings. The collar was unhooked, displaying a black-satin stock tied round a linen neck-cloth, on one shoulder was a gold-laced epaulet.

There was something vaguely familiar about him, but what it was she could not say.

Somehow, it seemed to her that she had seen that sensitive, attractive face before, and not so long ago, but where, she could not recall. She had an oddly melancholy feeling as she gazed into the smiling blue eyes —like experiencing the re-enactment of an old, unpleasant scene.

She raised her shoulders in a shrug. Why struggle with the memory? It was like the effort to recall a name, or fit together the notes of a tune she had forgotten. The more she tried to recall it the more elusive it became.

The little walnut-cased clock on the mantelpiece began to whirr as she moved toward the fireplace with the locket. Perhaps, she thought, if she sat there a few moments she would recall the face of which the picture reminded her. She took a step, the clockwork's whirring stopped, and the gong struck a quick, light bell-note, the first stroke of the hour of nine. The second ring was just sounding as she caught her foot in the frayed border of the rug.

Involuntarily she closed her eyes, put out her hands to break the fall, but—astonishingly, she did not strike the floor. Instead, her outstretched hands seemed plunging into something soft and warm, like a steam-cloud, and faintly perfumed, like the breath from a hot-house. Now the fragrant cloud enveloped her; she was not falling; rather, she was floating. Slowly, easily as a snowflake she drifted downwards. "Good gracious!" she exclaimed, and opened her eyes.

THE vapory mist was swirling round her, but it was beginning to thin a little. As she looked about she began to distinguish objects. A chair, a couch, a table—all the familiar furniture of the room. Yet it was not quite familiar. It seemed newer, and it was arranged differently. "Good gracious!" she repeated. "I must have hit myself an awful crack—" She stopped abruptly, for someone else was in the room, and speaking *with her voice:*

"Nay, Allan dearest, I beg you to give this folly up. The war must soon be over, then you can return with safety. Meantime, am I of such small account that you cannot find diversion here in our hills?"

Mehitabel looked toward the speaker. She was the woman of the portrait, but in life she seemed much younger than the picture showed her. Now her eyes were warm and soft, and her voice tender as she spoke.

Across the fireplace from her sat the young man whose picture was in the locket. His uniform was slightly shabby, his linen, though clean, frayed about the edges. He spoke softly, persuasively:

"You do not understand, Mehitabel. I am an officer of His Majesty's Navy. This information is vital to our cause. If I can cross the border into Canada—"

"Nay, Allan," broke in the girl, "let us not talk of it. We love each other dearly, but our countries are at war. If you persist in this folly my only recourse is to inform General Macomb—"

"Mehitabel!" Unbelieving astonishment was in his eyes, his voice. "Surely, you would not consider such an act! 'Twould mean the death of me."

Her hazel eyes met his blue ones steadily. "Allan, my dear, my only love, I love you more than life, or soul, I love my country more. If you attempt to escape with this information you have gleaned I must stop you any way I can. If they take and hang you, know that my heart dies with yours; my spirit will forever hover round your grave, but"—her serious, wide eyes met his and flickered for a second—"a woman's heart is but a little thing to lay upon the altar of her country."

He rose and took her hand. "Good night, Mehitabel," he told her gravely. "If you do this thing, a dozen lifetimes' sufferings will scarce atone for love's betrayal—"

"Then tell me that you'll give the project up," she burst in eagerly.

"Nay, little love of mine. 'Tis as you say, a life—and heart—is but a little thing to lay upon the altar of one's country." Then he took her in his arms and kissed her.

Her arms were warm and tender round his neck for a long moment, the tears were coursing down her cheeks, but she made no move to stop him as he drew his cloak about him and went out into the raging storm.

A sudden shrill wind seemed to blow across the room. The bite of it was marrow-chilling. Mehitabel felt goose-flesh forming on her arms but hardly noticed the discomfort, for the billowing clouds of mist were swirling round her again. She was blinded, closed in, smothered by it, then, slowly, almost imperceptibly, the cloud-curtains drew aside, and once again she saw the room clearly.

But it was changed. The chairs and sofa had been moved back, and in the center, all alone, and gruesome as the altar of some prehistoric terror-god, an open coffin stood. She knew before she looked what it contained, yet, impelled by something stronger than mere curiosity, she glanced across the bowed shoulder of the woman kneeling by the bier—into the pale, still features of the young naval lieutenant.

Her medical training told her how he died. Even if his linen collar had not just failed to conceal the circling band of livid bruise about his throat, she could have diagnosed the cause of death. The man had been hanged.

The house was quiet with a silence which was almost terrifying. Nothing but the ticking of the clock upon the mantelshelf disturbed the utter stillness. The woman kneeling by the coffin seemed hardly breathing. Her face was pale and motionless as if it had been carved from ivory, there was no reddening of the eyes; she had not shed a tear. Occasionally her clasped hands tightened on each other, otherwise she made no movement.

At last she spoke in a small, scarcely-audible whisper: "I died when you did, dearest love; only the shell of me remains here. Tomorrow when the sexton puts you in the grave he lays away my dead heart with you." A pause, then: "See, belovèd, here are the first flowers that you gave me that sweet day so long ago." From a little bag of taffeta she shook a cupped handful of faded rose leaves. "These are thine, belovèd, take them with thee." Tenderly she took one of the pale hands lying on the shabby blue coat and put a pinch of petals in it, folding the white, slender fingers over it. "These I'll wear always on me"—she put the small bag back in her bosom—"and these I'll put in our locket. Perhaps, in some far-distant day, some

other lover will find them, and may they bring her happiness." Snapping back the locket's case, she thrust a few brown, withered petals into it, then:

"Good night, dear love; good night of all good nights, until the dawning of God's Great Tomorrow." She bent and kissed the dead lips softly. Mehitabel heard the small rustle of her dress as she rose and tiptoed from the room.

Once more a chilly draft of air was blowing over her. The mist-clouds deepened, thickened; she heard a sharp, incisive chiming, and . . .

She was lying on the rug before the fire. The locket, fallen from her hand, had burst open and from its broken case a few crisp, browned rose petals had spilled into a spot of firelight. The little clock upon the mantel was striking. She looked up. Its hands indicated nine o'clock. Her vision—if it had been that—had lasted only while the hurrying gong beat out the final seven of nine strokes. Less than six seconds.

MY DEAR NIECE [wrote Aunt Susan in response to Mehitabel's urgent appeal for enlightenment]: I am sorry I can't tell you much about the tragedy of the unfortunate young woman for whom you're named. Your Uncle Pembroke and Aunt Agatha had her diary and many of her letters, but these, unfortunately, were destroyed in the Chicago Fire. Accordingly, I can give you only hearsay accounts, and as I shall be seventy next birthday, I must ask you to bear with me if at times my memory seems to falter.

As I recall the story, Mehitabel Holmead lived alone in the house where you're now staying, her parents having died some years before the War of 1812.

Following the Battle of Lake Erie, captured British officers were quartered inland for safekeeping, as our military prisons were inadequate. One of these, a young Lieutenant Allan Arbothnot, was billeted in the village of Mount Auburn, some five miles from the Holmead Lodge, the office of the village church having been pressed into service as his quarters. He had given his parole, and as Mount Auburn was so far inland, no guard was kept on him, and he mingled freely with the villagers and local gentry.

Great-aunt Mehitabel fell desperately in love with him, and he returned her devotion, but early in the summer of 1814 he came into possession of General Macomb's plans to halt the British army which was to invade New York from Quebec. Thereupon he determined to make his way in disguise to Canada and warn the British of Macomb's plans.

Your great-great-aunt begged him to respect his parole, and when he refused threatened to denounce him to the American authorities. Nevertheless, he persisted, and, true to her threat, she informed against him. He was arrested in civilian clothes, tried by summary court-martial, convicted, and hanged as a spy forthwith.

Great-aunt Mehitabel begged his body from the American provost marshal and had it buried from her house in the Holmead family plot in the village graveyard. She died before the first snowfall that winter, and by her express request was buried in the same grave with him.

A single tombstone served for both of them, and I've been told she dictated the epitaph, which described both him and her as patriots, and ended by declaring that each loved his country so much that he did not hesitate to lay a votive offering of a broken heart upon the altar of duty.

Mehitabel laid down the letter. So—She'd heard of such things, heard how inanimate objects sometimes had the quality of storing up thought-waves and emotional vibrations, keeping them imprisoned as the anthracite holds prehistoric sunlight, then,

just as the coal releases its stored heat in combustion, giving forth their long-held secrets when some sensitive person was brought near them in the proper circumstances—she'd heard such theories expounded, but she had never believed them. And yet—

The baying of a hound came to her from the hills beyond the lake, deep-throated, with a bugle-note in its tone; eerie, mournful, lonelier than the wail of a forgotten soul. Then, from somewhere to the south, an echoing deep-toned call, and, so far away that it was scarcely audible, a third. She raised her head, listening intently. The hunting season would not begin for three months. If the dogs were out upon an expedition of their own they would be running in a pack, not widely separated.

She stiffened with a sudden tenseness. The word-association formed a chain in her mind: Hounds—fugitives—man-hunters— This was wild country, such as fleeing criminals might head for after escaping from prison— She took the little shotgun from the corner, broke it and inserted shells. The feel of it in her hand was a comfort.

The baying drew nearer. Now, mingled with the barking of the dogs she heard men's shouts. They were coming up the incline from the lake. "What is it?" she hallooed through cupped hands as she went out on the terrace.

"That you, Dr. Goodrich?" came an answering hail. "You're all right?"

"Of course, why shouldn't I be?"

"Were from Rocky Hill," the man replied, and as he spoke she saw the gleam of his white jacket underneath his dark topcoat. "Delarue, the young flyer, got away an hour ago, and we're trailing him with the dogs. He's dangerous, ma'am. Very violent. This evening he got so bad we had to strap him down before we could administer the hypo. After the injection he was quiet for a while, but when the nurse went in with his dinner he attacked him and threw him up against the wall so hard he almost cracked a rib. Then he got clean away. Can't be gone far, though. We'll find 'im before morning, sure. Keep your doors and windows fastened," he flung back as he ran down the hill to join the other hunters.

The dogs were at fault. She could hear them circling through the undergrowth down by the lake, now whining in a puzzled way, now yelping suddenly, as though they had picked up a scent, then whimpering disappointedly again. She turned to re-enter the house, paused uncertainly; came to a full halt, her gun half raised. There was a rustling in the branches of the big birch overhanging the terrace, a scrape of slipper-soles against the bark; something hurtled down and struck the bricks with a soft thud. Not twelve feet from her stood the madman.

Mehitabel had not been trained in vain. The first rule was to take no weapon near a maniac. Remembering, she tossed the gun behind her, and advanced slowly toward the visitant. "Be calm," she told him in a cool, authoritative voice. "Don't get excited. I won't hurt—" She stopped in mid-syllable.

THIS was no raving, raging lunatic. The eyes were bright and clear and wholly sensible, save that they seemed to hold a light of almost breathless surprise. "Mehitabel!' he exclaimed, and held both hands out to her.

Recognition flooded over her face. This face—it was that of the young man pictured in the locket, the young lieutenant she had seen in her vision—

Then, like the ghost of dimly remembered past years made carnate, something else came to her. Not recognition—memory!

"Allan!" she cried tremulously. "Oh, Allan, my beloved, I've dreamed such dreadful things—I thought they'd hanged you!"

Now she was in his arms, his kisses warm and tender on her face while she whispered brokenly against his cheek, soft, meaningless words, the kind of words that women have made use of since the dawn of time to comfort their children—and their men.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed. "I'm acting just as if I were Great-great-aunt Mehitabel, and you were Allan Arbothnot." She half pushed him away, but his arms tightened round her.

"Does it matter who we are—or were—my sweet, now that we've found each other?"

All will and power seemed to have gone from her; it seemed as if her life had flowed out of her hands and into his. The present blended with the past, the past was intermingled with the present. She wasn't certain of her own identity, or his, or what the year was. She knew only that she'd found a thing so infinitely precious that life would have no worth without it; but whether it had just come to her, or whether she had lost it years and centuries ago, and had regained it, she neither knew nor cared. "Oh, my beloved!" she breathed ecstatically. "It's been so long, so long—"

A hail behind them brought them racing back to reality. "Hey, Doc, here he is—there's *two* of 'em!"

DR. MEHITABEL DELARUE (*née* Goodrich) leaned on the rail of the balcony. Behind her the lights of the hotel dining room glowed softly, the orchestra was playing an old favorite, recently restored to popularity by radio:

"Kiss me, my honey, kiss me,
And say you love me, as I love you—"

Almost at her feet the beach stretched out as white as burnished silver in the moonlight. The sky was filled to overflowing with big, cool, untroubled stars. Little wavelets, delicate as duchess lace, tiptoed with soft chuckling noises up the sand. Her evening dress was silver net that sparkled like a dew-jeweled cobweb in the moon-radiance. It was backless and strapless, adding suspense to the fascination of her smooth white shoulders.

"Happy, dear?" her husband asked.

"Blissful, darling!" Her fingers found his and laced through them. "When I think how easily it all might not have happened—"

"Have you any idea how it came about?" he broke in. "I haven't—"

"I've a theory, treasure. I've told you what I saw that night in Holmead Lodge, and shown you our pictures in the locket—"

"Yes, I know, but—"

"Quiet, darling. Don't interrupt the doctor when she's making a diagnoisis. As I was saying, I've a theory that Allan Arbothnot and Mehitabel Holmead were earth bound, because their destiny had not been worked out here. The ghost that haunted the Lodge was his—perhaps because he had the greater vitality, possibly because of the violence of his death. You know, he wasn't disagreeable to everyone who tried to live there, but when they happened to be the sort of people he thought had no business in his dead sweetheart's house—those gangsters, for instance—he could make himself extremely obnoxious. I'm certain, too, that it was he who saved me from the gypsy that night."

"He?"

"Well, you, then, if you want it that way. At any rate, I'm descended from Great-great-Aunt Mehitabel, and look as much like her as you look like Lieutenant Arbothnot. You—your body, that is—were

in a sort of suspended animation, due to your experience in Spain. I'll never believe it was by accident you were sent to Rocky Hill, or that it was just chance that put your body so near Holmead Lodge. When I came up there all the conditions were perfect for the spirits of those poor, thwarted lovers to take possession of our memories, and realize, through us, the happiness that was denied them in a former incarnation."

"But why should I have been so violent just before we met that night?" he wondered.

"Perhaps it was the poor, sick spirit of your body fighting hard to hold it against Arbothnot, when he was trying to take possession—"

"See here," he interrupted with a puzzled laugh, "what does that make me? What am I, anyhow, a ghost walking around in a borrowed body, or—"

Her slim bare arms stole up and tightened round his neck. The fragrance of her hair was on his cheek. "I don't know if you're a ghost or not," she whispered. "And I don't care. I only know—"

The last bars of the tune's refrain came from the orchestra, and she hummed the words softly, invitingly, against his lips:

"—"kiss me, honey, kiss me,
I love you."

LOVECRAFT MANUSCRIPT DISCOVERED

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To WEIRD TALES comes *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* — grand NEW two-instalment Lovecraft novel, hitherto unpublished—and the "last of the Lovecrafts." It's in your next issue of WEIRD TALES.

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▼

No one knows how old he is, but when he must be well over a hundred Curwen marries an eighteen-year-old girl, and it is from this blasphemous alliance that Charles Ward descends. The young man inherits a legacy of unspeakable fear and dread — a destiny beside which death is no worse than a wet week-end.

In the May Issue of WEIRD TALES—out March 1st.

An Adventure of a Professional Corpse

The Affair of the Shuteye Medium

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

He certainly took a dive when he invaded the spirit world!

IN RECOUNTING the singular affair of the shuteye medium, and my final appearance as a professional corpse, I desire to make it clear that I have no belief in ghosts or in the occult powers of any professional spirit guide. This understood, on with the tale!

Doctor Roesch and I dropped into a thriving western city, got settled comfortably in a small hotel, and ran our usual ad in the local papers:

PERSONAL: It is possible to simulate death, as I can demonstrate to interested parties. Endorsement of medical profession, absolute discretion. All work confidential but must be legal and subject to closest investigation. News Box B543.

Our determination to stick to legal, ethical work was real. We had run close to the edge in the case of the miraculous healer's daughter, and wanted no more of it.

Roesch had developed many improvements in our technique. My peculiar physical attributes, having my heart on the right side in combination with a barrel chest and a very slow pulse, were not enough to trick any careful examiner into thinking me dead; but by a judicious combination of drugs that put me to sleep, Roesch was able to induce all the symptoms of death. The one thing he could not get around was the mirror test for breathing.

However, he could manage this by being in charge of the act himself, as he must be. I would trust no one else to administer the injection that brought me out of the trance.

Our advertisement brought the usual run of answers from curiosity seekers and crooks, which I discarded. Then came one of a different sort. It read:

Gentlemen:

I believe you can fit into my plans, which are entirely legal. In fact, they are philanthropic. You can assist me in saving unfortunate people from the trickery of a scoundrel. If you can convince me that you can do as you boast, and are honest, suppose we get together.

Yours truly,
John McWhirt.

I tossed this letter over to Roesch.

"Sounds interesting, Bronson," he said when he had read it. "But when a Scotchman claims to be a philanthropist, you want to keep your eye peeled!"

"Look him up," I said, "and get him here this afternoon if he's on the level. Tell him our price first."

Our price was high, naturally; I was not



"He really went to town, doing things in the spirit line that positively left me aghast."

risking my life in any piker's game. Roesch disappeared, and did not return until lunch time. When we settled down over our meal, he disgorged his information.

"McWhirt's coming around to look us over, Bronson. Canny is the word for him, too; but he's straight as a string, financially good, and not a local man. He's about fifty and was a manufacturer of chemical goods in Chicago. Now he's retired."

All this whetted my curiosity, for our prospect had done little talking. When McWhirt was brought up to our hotel room an hour later, he was still slow to talk. He was a brisk, red-haired, hard-eyed man, cautious but to my notion extremely honest.

"Gentlemen, prove to me that you can do as you say," he told us. "Then I'll put my cards on the table; not before."

I had no hesitation in trusting him. I gave him ocular evidence of my peculiar physique, then went on to tell exactly how I played the part of a corpse. He shot in shrewd questions; he knew all about drugs.

"Sounds good," he said. "Hm! A bit of atropine, to dry up all secretions and stop

saliva or sweating. Yes, antipyrin will cause coldness of skin and finger-tips, and blue lips—yes, yes. But breathing does not stop."

I told him how Roesch managed the mirror test himself, and showed how, by practice, I was able to breathe "via diaphragm" without moving the upper chest, forcing the lungs down instead of up and sideways. He nodded.

"I see. I believe you're honest enough; so here are my cards. Do you gentlemen know what a shuteye medium is?"

We shook our heads, and he went on.

"It's slang for a fake spirit worker who, in one way or another, comes to believe in his own powers. When this belief seizes such a person, he is overcome by remorse for his own rascality. In nearly every instance, he becomes a suicide. Now, here's the advertisement of a local spirit-worker. Look it over."

Unfolding a copy of a local newspaper, he pointed to the grandiloquent advertisement of one Professor St. Edward. The professor ran the usual religious racket, it seemed, thus avoiding all licenses or fees and other legal impedimenta; he was in direct contact with the spirit world, not to mention the Almighty.

"I'll have nothing to do with any such racket," I said. "He's a friend of yours?"

"We have never met, Mr. Bronson," said McWhirt frigidly. "He does not know me; but I know him. For five years I've been on the trail of this crook; and now I've got him."

His cold, implacable manner was impressive. He went on to explain.

It seemed that McWhirt and his wife, years ago, had lost an only child. Mrs. McWhirt had fallen under St. Edward's mystic spell, endeavoring to communicate with her lost child as so many grief-stricken parents do. St. Edward had kidded her along and taken her money in chunks. Then, one day, she learned he was an absolute fraud; the shock killed her.

Ever since, McWhirt had been gunning for the professor, and had now located him, and meant to get him hard.

He knew all about the quarry. St. Edward was doing very well here, pulling off miracles right and left, and had come to believe implicitly in his own occult powers. As McWhirt explained it, this was a psychological phenomenon which frequently affected such fake workers in the spirit world.

St. Edward was actually good, as McWhirt grimly admitted. It seemed that our client, using another name, had joined the "congregation." Now he intended to get into personal contact with the professional and play the part of a sucker with money.

"We'll be bosom friends inside two days," he went on, and prodded his finger at me. "You come along and pretend to fall for his stuff. Roesch, you likewise. The man drinks like a fish. The better class of people here are down on him, and so are the local churches, on account of his travesty of religion; but he's too smart to be touched legally."

"Then what do you intend?" I demanded. He shook his head.

"I don't know yet. I'm building on the vague idea of using your trick death; give me a few days to think it over. I'll pay half now, the other half when you agree to fall in with whatever plan I think up. You'll be worth it, if my hunch is right."

It sounded fair enough and it was fair enough. We agreed, on condition that his plan meet with my approval; and he wrote his check on the spot.

ROESCH and I attended Professor St. Edward's "services" that night. Doc Roesch had dabbled in the fake occult and knew how many of the trick "manifestations" were produced; but we both got the surprise of our lives.

St. Edward was a burly, uneducated, rough and red-faced racketeer with all the big heart of a wall-eyed pike; but he had the gift of the gab, a convincing personality, and the gall of a canal-horse. The way he milked the suckers was a crime. It was pitiful to see what implicit confidence some of those poor men and women had in him, and how he abused it. His seance produced spirits, voices, table-talk or anything else that was wanted.

Yet he had something on the ball, something we could not understand. He was the worst sort of a faker—and he was something more.

His "church" was a small hall, with platform and chairs. After his religious rigmarole ended, the seances took place in a large, bare back room dimly lit by invisible lighting. Any one could see that no apparatus of any kind was used.

"Just the same, he used it," said Roesch. "Illusion's a great thing. But how did he pull all that spirit talking. He got my father, who spoke of things I alone knew; it was no trick. The man never saw or heard of me. He did the same thing with other folks there."

"Illusion's a great thing," I repeated mockingly. "You fell for it."

In my heart, however, I felt this was not the answer.

Roesch, who had a genius for detective work, devoted himself for the next three days to running around town, finding out what he could do about the professor. I took it easy. We both stuck to the nightly seances, and witnessed things past comprehension, mixed up with undiluted fakery. The only explanation was that the professor had a number of stooges planted in his circle; yet the people who got messages or manifestations or even materializations were not, to my way of thinking, stooges. They were too really and profoundly affected.

On the fourth day, McWhirt came to the hotel and we held a conference. I had not asked Roesch about his findings, but now I did so, saying frankly that before going ahead I wanted to know where we stood. I did not intend to victimize any innocent man.

"No danger," said the doctor grimly. "I've uncovered a lot of stuff, although not with legal evidence. St. Edward has swindled no end of people in this town. He pays high police protection and can't be touched ordinarily. His victims are usually women. He owns half a dozen pieces of property taken over from his victims; here's a list of it," and he laid down a typed paper. "Complaints have been made against him and dismissed for lack of evidence. The chief suckers haven't squawked, of course; they never do. At the same time, other folks swear by him. We've seen how he goes after the coin like a bird-dog—yet a lot of people think they get their money's worth."

I nodded and looked at McWhirt, who had a dour gleam in his eye.

"What d'you think of him, Mac?"

"What Roesch has said, is true. My belief is that the man does have some natural talent in the occult direction, and doesn't hesitate to mix it with really raw work, the lowest sort of trickery. He has an avid cupidity for money, and stops at nothing to get it."

I nodded again. "My scruples are removed. Have you got a plan?"

"Yes. First, I have a present for you." McWhirt produced a box which held a small pocket mirror with a glass in each side. "You told me that the only danger to your little trick of simulating death, lay in someone trying the mirror test, which would reveal that you were still breathing. Well, I know a few tricks myself," he added, smiling. "One side of this mirror is treated with a certain acid, the other is natural. Try it."

I did so. The natural side was clouded

by my breath; the treated side was not. An exclamation burst from Roesch as he, too, tried it.

"Good lord, Bronson! This answers all our chief and last problem! With this mirror, we're safe, absolutely safe!"

"Right," said McWhirt briskly. "I thought you'd jump at it. By the way, let me make a copy of that property list, will you? Thanks. Well, here's the scheme. All three of us will gang up on the professor. We'll join his classes, we'll become ardent followers of the occult, we'll kick in with money as well to prove our devotion; I'll put up the cash needed."

McWhirt had been busy, it seemed, among reputable citizens and among the churches. There was a growing sentiment that Professor St. Edward was no credit to the city; that he was, in fact, a distinct menace.

Better business organizations would be only too glad to get rid of him, and McWhirt, guided by his insatiable desire for punishment upon this man, was providing the means.

"With your help, I'll bust him higher than Gilroy's kite," he told us. "Lend yourselves to the job for a week or two. When he goes on one of his periodic benders, then I'll strike—"

"Hold on," I broke in. "He can't pull this occult stuff when he drinks."

"You don't know him. He's better than ever at such times! Didn't I tell you he believed in his own powers? It's even more true when he's drinking heavily. Well, the plan is simple. You keel over during one of his seances. You're dead. I'll be running articles in the local papers about the danger of such seances; your death will prove it. Roesch will file a murder charge. The press and pulpits and public organizations will take up the matter and ballyhoo it to the skies—and St. Edward, blast him, will either be run out of town or into jail, or else will skip in a hurry! He'll be ruined for life as a medium; I'll see to that."

We had no objections. We were working in a good cause. But we should have known that McWhirt, being Scotch, had kept a card or two up his sleeve.

As we became more firmly established in the professor's circle, I became more aware of a peculiar thing about his racket. This was the personal angle. All the occult stuff he pulled for anyone else, even for Roesch, impressed me little. It might be real or it might be fake; I could not be certain either way, and cared less.

But he began angling for my sucker money, and I chuckled to myself. He had a queer way of getting to his point; he would announce frequently that names did not matter in spirit-land, but he would describe certain people in the audiences, for whom messages were waiting, or with whom spirits wanted to speak. It cost five dollars or more to get the works later in the seance, depending on how affluent the sucker looked.

SO, two nights in succession, he described me among others. I thought this was all a clever dodge to avoid using names which he could not know, as he did not know mine; but now I am not so sure. While I attended the seances afterward, I did not swallow the bait at first; he got his money in advance, and one had to arrange with him before the call would be answered. Watching others get results which seemed to amaze them, I got curious at last, and one night hunted up the professor before the performance began. He had a strong aroma of bourbon on his breath, but this was not important.

"Twice," I said, after bringing myself to his attention, "you've described me and said someone wanted me. I wonder if it could be my sister Kate?"

I had no such sister, of course. St. Edward rolled his eyes in a wild way he

had, and spoke with unction as he saw me taking the bait. Or so I thought.

"Brother, I don't get names, I don't call names," he said. "The spirits don't take much stock in names, far as I can discover. If you want to take a chance during the seance, I'll say you're ready and you can figure results for yourself. My vibrations are strong tonight and it may be an important message. It'll cost you five bucks now, though."

I slipped him the five, and he beamed.

He ran through the usual patter, adjourned the "service," and we trooped into the seance room. He was doing a trance act this evening, combined with a crystal. There were a couple of dozen in the room, including Roesch and McWhirt.

Holding hands all around, going through the usual songs and ritual, he stared intently into the crystal ball and then began to twitch. His eyes closed. His voice came in a hoarse straining manner as though he were short of breath.

"A brother is waiting," he said, and described me. "Who wants him? Who wants to speak with him? Come closer, friends, closer! Now I can see you. There are two of you. One is a man with a wart on his left cheek; I see the little finger of his right hand is gone. The other is a boy with red hair and a freckled nose. Step up, young man! Deliver your message through me. I am waiting."

He waited, and I waited, and there was a chill inside me, too. I knew who the man was, all right; the description was exact. And I knew who the boy was. St. Edward began to speak, jerkily.

"I'm your cousin; you remember me," he said, or the boy spirit said. Take your choice. "I was with our folks last night. Your mother was saying they had not heard from you in two months and she's worried. I'm worried too. You are associated in business with a man who has red hair like me, and he is holding out on you. He has no evil intentions, but you are being used by him for his own purposes. I want you to know this for your own good because we were always pals. You are in some kind of danger but I don't know just what it is, so be careful. Good-by, Art, and I'll meet you when you come over—"

The voice faded out. St. Edward went on to play the next sucker; I was through. But the woman next me, a nice motherly old soul who was in the racket for all she was worth, leaned over to me.

"Your hand's sweating," she said. "I bet it was a real message, wasn't it?"

"Sure sounded like it," I replied.

AFTER the show, Roesch and McWhirt and I met in our hotel room.

"Now, gents, pay attention," I said. My nerves were steadied by this time. "My real name, which I'm not using, and which even you, Roesch, don't know, happens to be Art. It's exactly two months since I've written my mother. That boy was the spit and image of a second cousin who died years ago; he and I were intimate friends. And, Mr. McWhirt, you're the only red-headed man I'm in business with. Are you holding out or not?"

McWhirt's blue eyes were bulging.

"Lord!" he gasped. "Yes, it's a fact; I am. Nothing that's any of your business, though; I'm putting over a little deal of my own on the side."

"Then forget it," I said. "You're straight. I just wanted to clear up the facts in the case. Now, how the devil did St. Edward know all this stuff? Oh, I forgot! The man he described, with the wart and one finger off, was my uncle John . . . no mistake there. Speak up, Roesch! Did the man read my mind, to know such things?"

Roesch was anxious, McWhirt was mopping his face.

"Might be that," replied the doc. "Don't ask me, Bronson!"

"That rascal has something on the ball," said McWhirt earnestly. "I told you he mixes real with false, didn't I?"

"Either," said Roesch, "you've got to accept the occult business in a gulp, or else figure it's some sort of trickery, perhaps telepathy, we don't savvy. One thing is sure, though. Remember the old lady sitting next to you in the seance, Bronson?"

I nodded. He went on quickly.

"I happened to be looking her up today. She's a sucker for sure; alone in the world and was left well off by her husband, but she's turned over most of her money to St. Edward. All she has left is a boarding house, which supports her. He's fixing to get his hands on that, next."

"Then suppose we get busy and stop his game," I said. "The thing got me jittery tonight, I don't mind saying. I'd like to get it done with."

McWhirt was brisk and assured once more. "Suits me," he said. "St. Edward is drinking, which means that for the next week he'll be on one holy binge and pulling no end of his blasted miracles. Let's set the business for Saturday night. Suit you?"

It did. This was Tuesday; we had four days to go. McWhirt meant to get the press and the pulpit stirred up, guaranteeing to have some newspaper men on hand Saturday night, and a local physician to back up the findings of Doc Roesch. It would make a big story in the Sunday papers, and he predicted that by Sunday night the professor would be finished for keeps. We discussed the details, and McWhirt departed.

Roesch gave me a queer look. "Are you in earnest about being jittery?"

"Yes," I said, and told him why. That uncle of mine, with the missing finger and the wart, had been a wanderer all over the world, and had come home to die. With him he had brought all sorts of queer plunder. I had dipped into it, and found some queer herb extract from the Peruvian jungles. Sampling this, I had died, as everyone thought, only to come alive once more when the effect wore off.

"That's what started me on the corpse racket," I concluded. "Analysis of the stuff led to the dosage I now take, on a scientific basis. Thus, my Uncle John was more or less responsible for my career as a professional corpse. You yourself never knew these details; then how could St. Edward have faked his spirit stuff with me? It was telepathy."

"I expect so," he agreed. "He pulled it out of your own mind, eh? Well, I'll now get more personally acquainted with the professor, just so he'll know a doctor is on hand when the break comes Saturday night."

THIS was essential, since Roesch had to handle me and give me the dose that would fetch me around afterward, as well as manage the details with the mortician in charge.

When we showed up next evening at the "church," St. Edward beckoned me into the back room. He had been hitting the bottle, but his potations had not impaired his occult powers.

"Glory be, young man!" said he impressively. "I'm told you had two visitors last night—of course. I know nothing of what transpires while I'm in a state of trance. Did you get your money's worth?"

"Plenty," I said. "One of the visitors gave me a swell message."

"Then you must get the other one," he went on, and I saw his little game. "You can't afford to let the matter drop, when you get such remarkable results! Shall I call your other visitor tonight?"

"No thanks, I'm satisfied," I rejoined. I had no intention of passing the time of day with my Uncle John; he had always been a rough customer. Nor would I hand the professor any more cash. "I'll

stick around and make up my mind later. Right now, I want to wait."

"Well, don't pass up a sure thing!" said the professor solemnly.

"I won't," I said. "I want to be sure you're not faking it, to be honest with you."

That hurt him. He put an arm about my shoulder and almost wept with emotion.

"Young man, I used to be a sinful fraud," he said, with a hiccup. "Yes, I confess it; the ways of fraud and evil laid hold upon me and the bond is hard to break. But I have the power, understand? When my vibrations are going good, I can do anything! And some day I'll quit all the faking and stick to honest work, like I am doing with you."

I GOT away from his maundering, whiskey-sodden confidences. McWhirt was right; he believed in himself. He was a shuteye and no mistake, drinking himself into remorse for his rascality but not abandoning it.

And during these next three days, he really went to town. He did things that positively left me aghast, in the spirit line. Whether they were real or fake, I could not tell; as I said before, only the person concerned would know this. It seemed to me that the harder he drank, the more astonishing became his wizardry; and if he could nearly convince me, it may be imagined how his less skeptical devotees fell for his line.

However, there was one thing that argued against his occult power. He never tumbled to the presence of McWhirt, who was using another name, or to my game, or to the danger that threatened him. And if a master of the occult cannot divine his own peril, then what good is his racket?

During the seance that evening, the professor again described my Uncle John. He went into a frenzy; it seemed the spirit was demanding, not asking. I got up and left the seance abruptly. I really thought that St. Edward was just making a determined play for my cash, and it disgusted me.

McWhirt, during these last three days, was rapidly improving his acquaintance with the professor and flashing a good deal of money. He got manifestations every night which must have cost him heavily, and he played the sucker to perfection; but apparently none of the spirits tipped off the professor, for all was lovely.

On Saturday McWhirt lunched with us at the hotel and we checked every detail of the arrangements for the night's job.

"You may think I'm a fool, but I've got a funny feeling about this," Roesch said gravely, when he and I were alone again. "No question that the professor deserves all that's coming to him; but I think we've mixed into something deeper than we know."

"Yes, damn it!" I agreed. "Exactly what I feel myself, Doc. A sense of danger, as it were. I'm uneasy. Yet I know it's all imagination. You keep your eye peeled tonight."

"Trust me," he said, and I did.

Knowing to the minute how long my sleeping-potion required to work, I arranged to take it during the preliminary "services" so that it would hit me during the seance following. As evening approached, I grew nervous, which was most unusual for me. With any decent excuse I would have thrown up the job, but we had taken McWhirt's money and could not back out now.

The hall was partly filled when I drifted in. Up on the platform, McWhirt was talking with the professor. They were both pretty jovial, and it was easy to see that St. Edward had been imbibing heavily; his expansive manner told as much.

Roesch was already here. I took a seat directly behind him, so I could get rid of

the bottle after swallowing the drug; if it were found on me, I might be thought a suicide. The "services" began, and St. Edward was in fine fettle, roaring and bellowing his alleged religious patter. Some of his talk was directed at me, and I saw that he seemed to have me on his mind.

I furtively uncorked the little bottle, awaited my chance, and swallowed its contents. The die was cast. No way out of it now. I passed the bottle to Roesch, and relaxed.

It was an unusually large circle that trooped into the back room for the seance that evening. A couple of newspaper men were planted in the crowd, and I knew McWhirt had others waiting outside, with police handy. Everybody held hands, and the usual ceremonies of prayer and singing went ahead. I was seated directly opposite the professor.

The invisible lighting was dim, but objects were perfectly clear. St. Edward went into his trance, and about the same time I felt the drug beginning to take effect. Almost at once, the professor let out a yip and, his eyes bulging at me, began to describe me so exactly that eyes were turned upon me from all directions.

"This man," he went on, "has a visitor who insists upon delivering a message. It is a message of vital import, a message of life and death—"

That was all I remembered. They say that I just gasped and keeled over.

Now there was the devil to pay. Roesch was ready; shouting that he was a doctor, he took charge of me. At the same moment, the newspaper boys went to work, and in from the outside came others with the police. Flashlight bulbs exploded. Women shrieked; there was a rush to get away, while St. Edward sat humped over in his chair in a daze.

Thanks to McWhirt's precision and the adroitness of Roesch, who had mapped out every detail, everything went off like clockwork. The police took charge; I was pronounced dead from heart-failure, a police surgeon backing up Roesch in the matter. The professor was hauled off to jail on some trumped-up charge, and McWhirt went along to bail him out—a highly essential part of the scheme.

Since I was a stranger in town and Roesch claimed to be a friend, he was put in charge of the corpse, and the coroner was summoned to hold an inquest immediately. This was done. It was obvious that, startled and perhaps horrified by the words of St. Edward, my heart had given way. Thus, everything was neatly cleared.

A mortician, with whom Roesch had previously made arrangements, was summoned. My body was placed in the coffin he brought, then at the request of Roesch was left here until the morning; a more devoted friend than the doc never lived. He wanted to say some prayers over the corpse before it was moved, he declared.

It went off swimmingly. Everyone skipped out and the doors were shut. Then, just as Roesch was about to administer the injection that would bring me to life again, in walked St. Edward and McWhirt. They had arranged the bail quicker than expected, because there was no question of murder in the case and no real charge to be laid against the professor.

Roesch ducked for cover behind a curtain, and neither of the two men noticed him.

St Edward had a bottle in his pocket, and took a stiff pull at it before looking at the corpse. He was in a tearful, melancholic mood and mighty sorry for himself. McWhirt, said he, was his only friend on God's green footstool.

"Well, you've got plenty of spirit friends," said McWhirt, and encouraged him to take another swig, which he did. "But right now, you're in one hell of a bad spot, professor. The morning papers are going to lam you hard. You're going

to need cash, and plenty of it. I hope you're well heeled?"

"No," said St. Edward. "Didn't you supply the five hundred to bail me? I can't get any money this time of night. I haven't much in the bank anyhow. I'll have to raise some on my property. I've got plenty of that."

"You won't have it long," McWhirt told him. "This man will have relatives. Sure as fate, they'll sue you and clap down on everything you own."

This was probable, and the professor sank down on a chair, wagging his head.

"All my own fault," he said mournfully. "It's a punishment brought on me because I misused the power given me! The spirits have done this thing, I had the power, and wasn't satisfied but went farther and faked results—"

"Never mind mourning about it," McWhirt said briskly. "I'll show you how you can get out of this with some cash and save your property to boot, if you'll trust me."

He went on to explain, while St. Edward finished off the bottle and listened. He had a couple of thousand cash with him. He would buy, on the spot, all the professor's property. He had deeds all made out and ready, it seemed, pre-dated a day. Thus, if and when the pinch came, the relatives of this dead man would find nothing to grab.

To the professor, it looked wonderful, a real miracle, and he said so tearfully. To Roesch, who was listening, it was a dead-give-away on McWhirt's canny scheme. He was getting all the revenge he wanted, and he was also getting some chunks of valuable property for a trifle in cash. Except for the liquor and his remorse, St. Edward would never have agreed to such a thing, naturally; but now remorse had him by the throat, stifling his reason.

"I'll do it," he sobbed out, wringing his hands. "You're my only friend. I'll sign anything, anything!"

And he did it. But McWhirt was not finished.

"Did you ever know a woman by the name of McWhirt, in Chicago?" he asked.

St. Edward looked up, wildly. "Eh? Yes, yes. Where did you hear of her?"

"Why, tonight! When you were in your trance, she spoke. She said she was an old client of yours, and you had tricked her and caused her death—"

THE professor nearly went out of his head at this, talking about the spirits and his lost power, and so forth. McWhirt stuck in his barb more deeply.

"If you've got the power," said he, "why don't you bring this dead man to life?"

"I could do it in a minute," mourned the professor, staring at the corpse and the coffin. "I could do it, sure; but now the spirits have turned against me. It's a punishment for what I've done—"

"Well, try it and see," said McWhirt, getting out one of his trick mirrors. "The man's dead—this mirror will prove it. You call on the spirits; if you've really got any power or if you ever had any, you can put breath in his body."

St. Edward groaned, but rose and stood over the coffin. McWhirt tried the trick side of the mirror, showing that I was really dead, as the glass remained blank.

The professor went into his act, and really meant what he said according to Roesch. He was groaning and heaving and sobbing out his remorse, praying to the spirits to give him one more chance; it must have been a ghastly and sickening performance. Presently McWhirt held the real side of the mirror to my nostrils.

"Look!" he cried.

In his excitement, the professor nearly shook me out of the coffin. Sure enough, the glass showed that I was breathing!

"You've brought him to life!" exclaimed McWhirt, straightening up. "But maybe the spirits only wanted to show what you might have done—here, try it again. You try it."

St. Edward took the mirror, as McWhirt put it into his hand, and held it before my nostrils. A deep groan burst from him; there was no breath on the glass.

"Dead, dead!" he cried, and dropped the mirror. "A judgment on me, sure enough!"

"I guess so," agreed McWhirt. "If you had never done any trickery, this wouldn't have happened. If you hadn't caused the death of that woman in Chicago—"

"Oh, my lord!" groaned the professor. "You're right, you're right! To think how I've misused my powers, and what I might have done—"

They went away together.

Doc Roesch, who had heard every word, slipped in beside me with his hypodermic ready. He gave me the injection that would fetch me around, and waited for it to work. When I came to myself, he pressed my arm hard.

"Easy, now! Stay right where you are. Everything all right?"

"Sure," I rejoined. It was exactly like waking from slumber, for me.

"Then don't move," he said. "I've arranged with the mortician that I'll close the coffin here; he won't object or investigate. But I'll have to get the weights that will replace your body, so lie still. If anyone shows up, play possum. I'll be back in ten minutes. Our grips have already gone to the station."

"Okay," I said, and he went out of the place.

I closed my eyes drowsily and relaxed. Something flicked across my face; opening my eyes, I looked up and saw a man standing beside me.

It was my Uncle John.

Say, if you like, that it was some hallucination resulting from the drugs; yet such a thing had never happened before. I woke clear-headed and alert. My mind was clear as a bell at this instant. He was there, scowling down at me, dressed as he had been in life.

"Art, you're a fool," he said.

I lay speechless; a chill panic had seized me. I could not move a muscle.

"I've been trying night after night to reach and warn you," he went on slowly. I knew him, I knew his voice. I could hear the ticking of the big clock on the wall. "You refused to accept the message. Tonight your medium had a strong control. He has given me strength to appear to you. Art, do you realize the power of thought?"

I mumbled something, I know not what.

"A thought, a word, is creation," he went on. "Keep any thought before you strongly enough and it becomes reality. Every thought or word is an energy for good or bad. Speech clothes thoughts, and speech creates thought in others. There is no chance; there are no accidents to human beings. What you do today has to do with what you did yesterday. Even the suicide is not aberrate; he is fulfilling in one blinding instant the destined accumulation of countless years of accretion. So with you, in thought, word and deed. You have been playing with dreadful forces, building up for yourself a karma that now threatens you."

"Karma?" I repeated blankly.

"Karma is a force, exerted by anyone who does any action; it may be good or bad. It is a result, not a cause. Thus far you have committed no great wrongs, but this is the end. If you once more repeat this trick, let me warn you solemnly that you will not waken from your imitation death; it will be real."

"Are you real?" I blurted out, staring at him. He smiled.

"As real as your cousin, who spoke to you the other night. As real as the sun-

light, as the soul itself, as the terrific peril which menaces you; as real as the Ancient Law which binds us all! Ask your friend the name of the woman who spoke with him last night, the woman who wore a cluster of golden flowers at her throat and a rose in her hair; ask him what she said to him, and tell him she was as real as I am. That is all."

Shivering, I closed my eyes and lay immobile. When I looked up again, the room was empty. Roesch came in a moment later.

I tried to tell myself it was nerves. Roesch had occupied our double room at the hotel each night; there had been no woman at all. When he helped me out of the coffin I went to the nearest chair and collapsed on it, waiting until he stuffed the flour-sacks into place and was screwing down the coffin lid.

"Roesch, tell me something," I said. He looked up and grinned.

"Everything's okay, Bronson. You're taking the two-thirty train; wait for me at Centerville. I'll be along tomorrow with the coffin, for burial there."

"Hold on," I said. "Do you know of any woman wearing a cluster of golden flowers at her throat, and a rose in her hair?"

Doc Roesch is about as hard-boiled as the average physician, but as he straightened up and looked at me, he went white as death.

"Good God!" he breathed. "How do you know that? I dreamed of her last night. I dreamed that she was warning me to get out of this business and never do it again."

"Who was she?" I muttered.

"My mother. She always wore that old brooch at her throat—she loved flowers—"

Laugh if you like; call me a fool if you like; explain it if you can! But, when Roesch had put me aboard the two-thirty train for Centerville, we had made a solemn compact. Our partnership was ended. This stunt would never again be pulled off.

Centerville was only fifty miles north. I got there, secured hotel rooms, and tumbled into bed. The drug dosage always made me feel drowsy and bad for a day or so, and I did not waken until late afternoon.

Then I got a morning paper and looked it over. But I did not read the story of my own death, at once; something else caught and held my attention—a boxed, flash item on the front page. "Mystic Kills Self," it was headed. And then I remembered what McWhirt had told us about the inevitable suicide of a shuteye medium . . . and I knew with what savage cunning he had played for his revenge to the uttermost.

For, last night, St. Edward had gone home and put a bullet through his brain. That was his end. And it was the end of my career as a professional corpse, also.

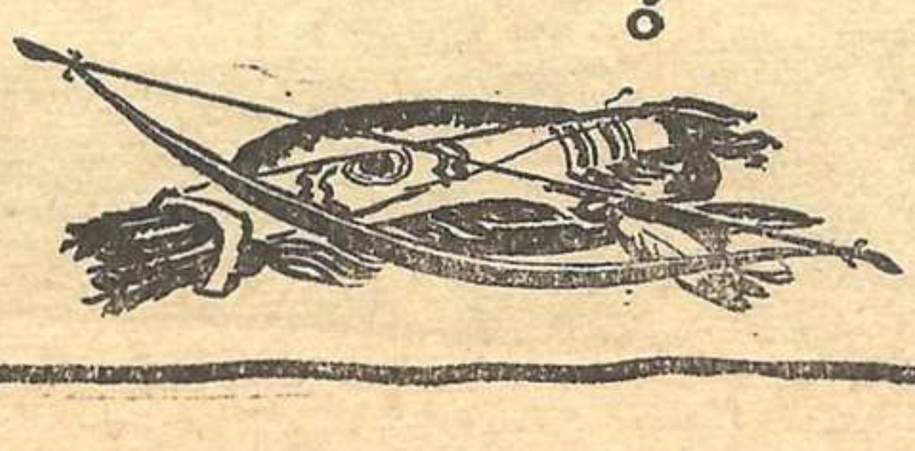




SUPERSTITIONS



AMONG THE **OJIBWAY INDIANS**, A MOTHER CONTINUOUSLY LECTURED HER SON *NEVER TO GIVE HIS RIGHT NAME.* TO DO SO, SHE SAID, WOULD MOST CERTAINLY STUNT HIS GROWTH AND CAUSE HIM UNTOLD MISERY FOR THE REST OF HIS LIFE! IT WAS TABOO FOR ALMOST EVERYONE IN ABORIGINAL AMERICA TO GIVE HIS RIGHT NAME, AND BECAUSE OF THIS, PRIMITIVE INDIANS SELDOM RECORDED THEIR HISTORY. WITH SOME AMERICAN INDIANS, HOWEVER, IF A MAN'S CREDIT WERE POOR, *HE COULD* **PAWN** *HIS NAME FOR A YEAR,* DURING WHICH TIME IT COULD BE USED BY ANOTHER AND LATER BE REDEEMED BY HIM THROUGH PAYMENT OF AN EXCEEDINGLY EXORBITANT PRICE!



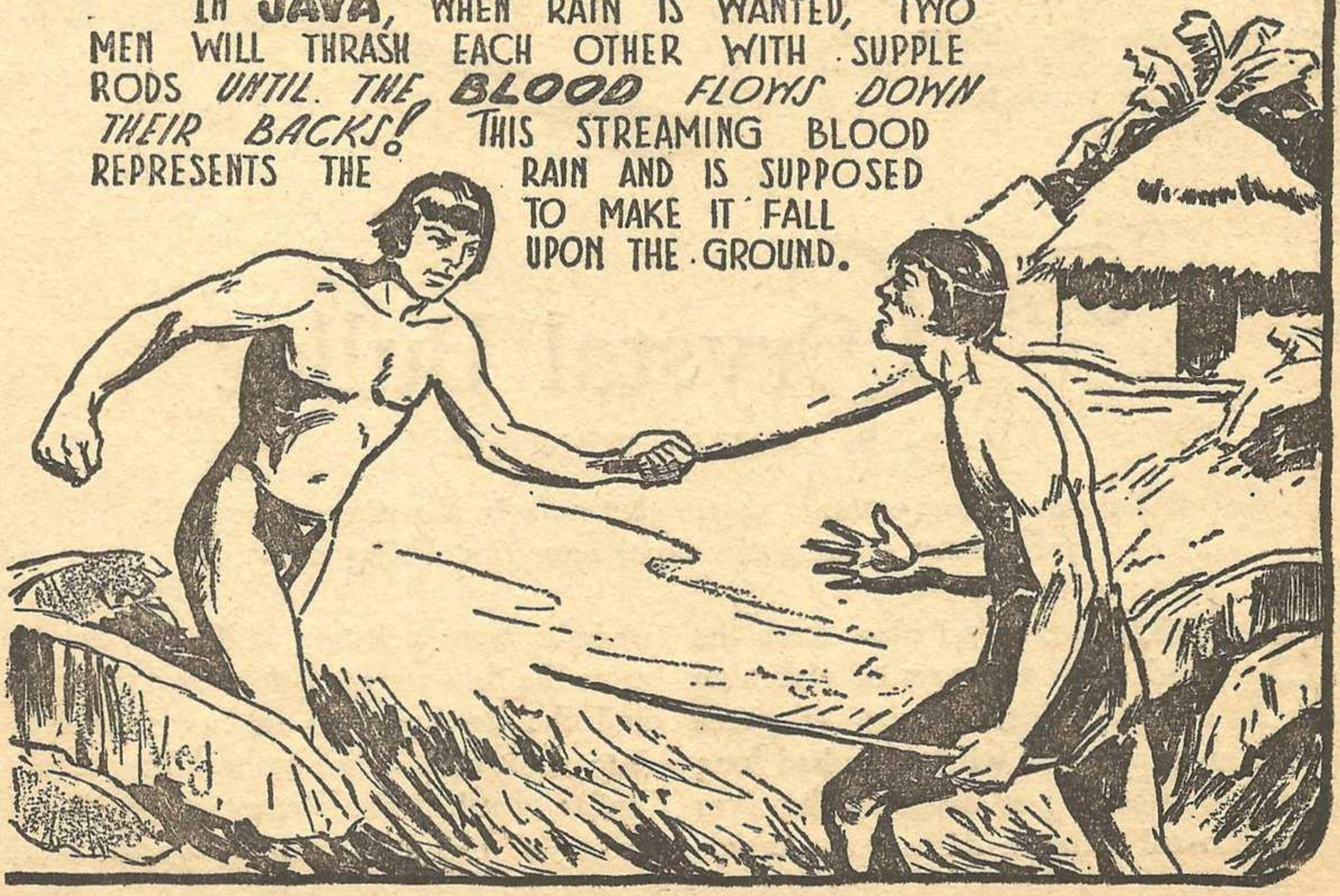
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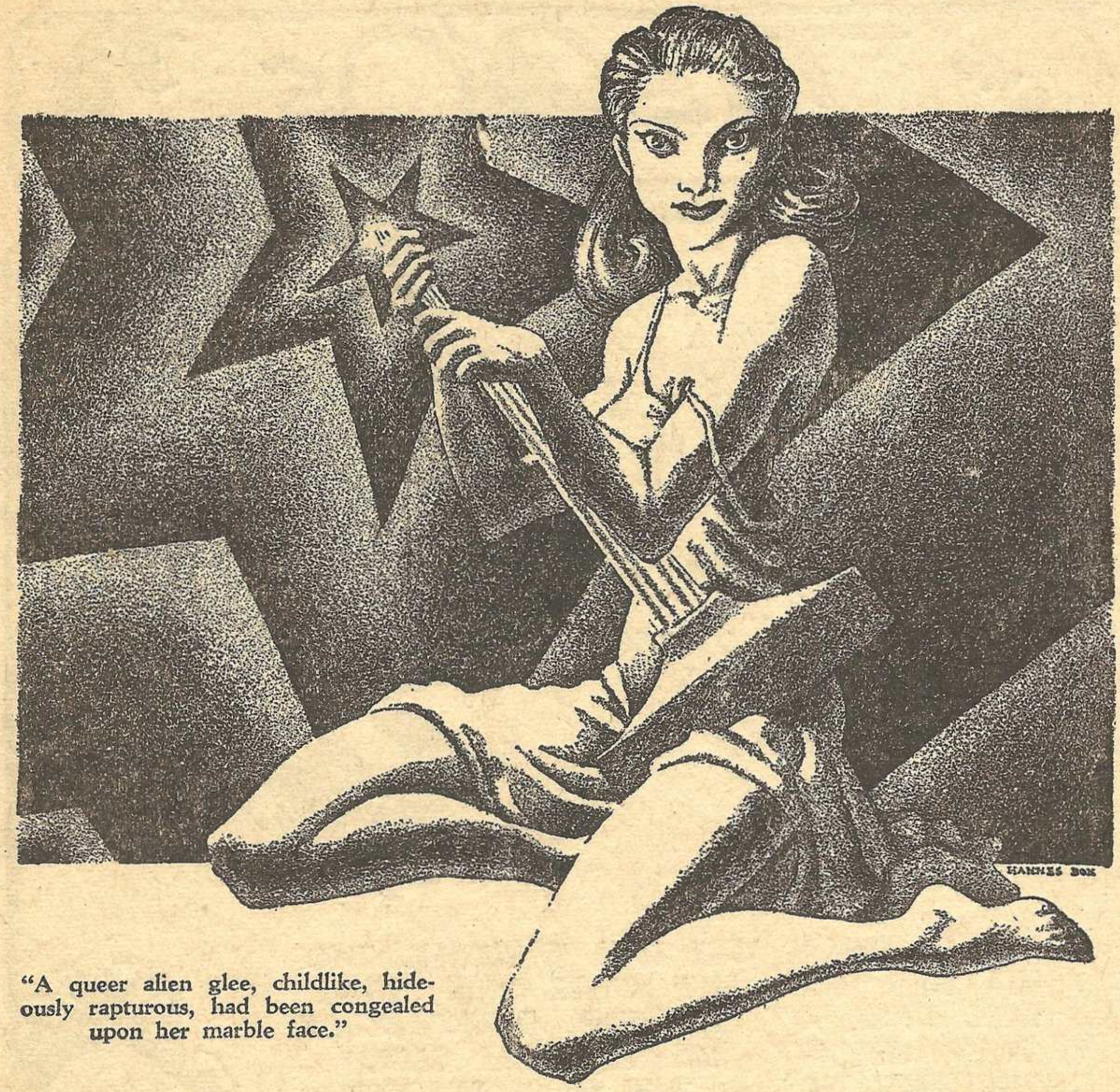
by III=III

SNAKES ARE A WELCOME SIGHT TO THE **EL KIBORON** CLAN OF EAST AFRICA, AND ARE **NEVER KILLED**... IN THE KRAAL, SAUCERS OF MILK AND HONEY ARE SET OUT UPON THE GROUND FOR THEM; FOR *IT IS BELIEVED THAT SERPENTS ARE THE TRANSFORMED BONES OF DECEASED MARRIED MEN!*



IN **JAVA**, WHEN RAIN IS WANTED, TWO MEN WILL THRASH EACH OTHER WITH SUPPLE RODS *UNTIL THE* ***BLOOD*** *FLOWS DOWN THEIR BACKS!* THIS STREAMING BLOOD REPRESENTS THE RAIN AND IS SUPPOSED TO MAKE IT FALL UPON THE GROUND.





"A queer alien glee, childlike, hideously rapturous, had been congealed upon her marble face."

The Crystal Bullet

By DONALD WANDREI

What were those fantastic shapes that rode in the strange projectile from outer space, and whence came that killing cold?

A WARM, wet wind blew from the south with whispers of wakening spring and the return of green things growing. The wild geese had long since gone honking at dawn up the river valley toward Canada. Already the meadowlarks were nesting, while day by day came the fleet-winged orioles and tanagers, and the darting flash of hummingbirds. Into fields crept mice from winter refuge under cornshed and strawstack. With pattering of feet and rustling in underbrush

and tearing of branches, the squirrels, the badgers, and the stately skunk took over the woods.

Morning light lay softly upon the land, warming the moist black loam that rilled aside in long furrows from the blade of the plow. When steel grated upon stone with a dull clang, the man at the handles shouted and lifted the plow by a powerful heave. The team halted. He tore a boulder loose and carried it to the edge of a forested hill that rose a hundred yards northward.

Returning across freshly plowed ground, he saw the pair of Belgian grays stand like lordly inheritors of all earth. The field stretched south to woods and low hills. No farmhouse or buildings of any sort lay within the vista. Only the big horses, waiting patiently, the hand plow, and his tracks on the soil marked the presence of man.

Amid this peaceful scene, the sudden rumble from a sky without clouds sounded utterly strange. The man stopped, perplexed, his head lifting away from the sun. A streak of dazzling fire plummeted out of space. Something crashed upon the hill that he had just left. Then a greenish glow enveloped the hilltop, and an instant later came a sharp, thunderous report.

He began running away from the hills. His team had whinnied shrilly, rearing in panic. The plow's drag retarded the plunging horses until he seized the halter and quieted them. They stood trembling. He talked to them with strong, soothing affection.

When he resumed plowing, the team jerked, and fifty yards of furrow spilled out before the grays pulled together. A glow still hovered above the trees on the hilltop, a palpable, greenish bloom in the yellow-bright sunshine. There was no smoke or sign of fire. Every time he reached the field's edge and reversed the plow, he looked at the light on the hill. It did not spread. Neither did it lessen. The freakish radiance persisted as if it had come to dwell forever.

The sun rose higher. At noon a woman walked around the side of the hill. She wore a broad-brimmed straw hat that shaded her face. Still young, not pretty, but with roundly attractive features and roundly muscled arms and a sturdy figure against which the wind pressed her blouse and slacks, she stopped at the field's edge. She carried a lunch box with a pint thermos of coffee.

The man left his plow where the grays could munch bags of oats.

As he strode toward her, she turned to stare at the pale-green light. "What's afire up the hill?"

He opened the lunch kit and took out a cold chicken sandwich as thick as a mail-order catalog. "I don't see no fire." He spoke with deliberate flatness and bit into the sandwich.

"A light's back there all the same. It's been there ever since I come out of the kitchen. And a while back——"

He washed the sandwich down with a swallow of coffee. "Shooting-star fell. Ain't cooled off yet."

"Shooting-star!" she exclaimed in quick alarm. "Red-hot—it'll start a fire!"

"On what? Woods are too wet."

"But it's burning, up there. I'd better go see——"

"Leave it be. It's got to cool off first."

HE FINISHED the sandwiches and coffee, ate a quarter section of apple pie, and gave her the empty containers. She walked away, her eyes straying toward the strange glow.

He watched her till she was out of sight, and remained motionless for some minutes longer. A feeling of wrongness that he could not account for had begun to trouble him. Not until she had gone did he become conscious of the change: song

of lark and scurry of woods-creatures had left the hilltop. He heard them in the distance, but not here, when now a curious quiet reigned, like a vacuum in nature.

He began climbing the hill. Bloodroots crushed underfoot, clumps of prickly ash snagged him, and he pushed through tangles of wild grapevine on the lower slopes. Then he came to more open ground. where elm and birch, maple and oak were unfolding their young leaves, and sunlight dappled the mold underneath.

The greenish glow capped the rocky outcrops of the hilltop. The light rose in the shape of a great core with ridges, like the center and petals of some luminous, unimaginable flower. It was a pulsing light, rigid in outline, but through whose depth ebbed and returned a rhythmic wave that started from the crystalline object.

This was no shooting-star, the burned-out cinder of an iron-hard meteorite, fallen to earth from the gulfs of space. Milkily translucent, it resembled the nose of a shell, or a giant bullet, standing two feet high, upon a blackly metallic base; but its fluted sides curved to embrace a tiny filament set in its tip; the object tilted at an angle of nearly forty-five degrees, as though pointing toward its origin in the distant immensities of stars and universe; and its entirety veined with a network of fine green threads among the crystal. It was a little machine, designed for a purpose not beyond conjecture, but above his knowledge of even man's inventions. And it remained perfectly balanced on an edge of the black base that barely touched ground, held thus by some guiding beam from remote space, or some gyroscopic part built inside the base.

All around it, to the limits of the radiant bloom, whiteness covered the ground-hoarfrost. He saw diamond points glitter as they settled. He stepped into the greenish light, and cold blanketed him, the chill of autumnal nights, of deep winter, of the frozen arctic wilds, then such cold as he had never known, when he approached the crystal bullet. His breath turned to a congealing puff. Young grass crackled like slivers of glass tinkling underfoot.

He turned suddenly and strode downhill. The warmth of sun fell upon him. The south wind dried the sweat that broke on his brow and back.

Through the long afternoon, he guided his team and watched rills of black soil turn over. The course of plowing on this section took him steadily away from the hill. He could not, however, resist glancing at it each time he reversed his field; and each time the green light hung there, clearly marked against the ultramarine of the sky.

By late afternoon, the field was ready for the harrowing that would precede planting the golden kernels of corn. He unharnessed the grays, drove them to pasture, and turned them loose. The sun was setting, a dark red ball that cast lengthening shadows on the ground, while the edge of the ghost-white new moon rose.

From the pasture he saw smoke rising above the farmhouse. Supper would be almost ready. The path homeward wound between pasture and the waters that filled an abandoned limestone quarry. The way home and the green light pulled him equally. He paused, watching the sunset's bloody trail crawl across the pond. Muddied from melted snows and spring rains, and with a sullen fire upon it, the little lake looked like part of the somber stream which Charon ferried.

The door of the distant farmhouse opened. Then, ringing clear in the twilight, through that hush between the stilled cry of the whippoorwill and the yet unrisen frog-piping of the hylas, a bell pealed. He had never failed to follow it, but now he walked away toward the glow shimmering spectral and unearthly on the hilltop.

There were shadows on the slopes, and deeper pools in the wild grape thickets, but the last rays of the sun still slanted over the hill, where the green phosphorescence clung. Hoarfrost lay inch-deep around the crystal bullet, and diamond motes glittered down endlessly within the zone of frightful cold, approximately ten feet at its extreme radius, composed of a five-petal pattern, one petal for each of the fluted ridges on the crystal shell. He donned heavy work-gloves, lifted the bullet, and marveled at its featherweight, its strange, incredible cold.

The cold was insidious, deadly. It numbed him, crept into him, penetrated the thick gloves and overalls. He felt the warmth drain out of him in a perceptible tide. He had experienced temperatures of thirty-five degrees below zero in wintertimes, but never such frozen concentrate as this. It seemed, in some baffling and rapturous way, alive.

He tried to drop the torpedo, and found that he could not. He began walking, with a sense of compulsion, and dream-like, mechanical steps; then broke into a rush, crashing against trees, and staggering along the path, while the frigid air he gasped burned his lungs.

NEAR the farmhouse by a woodpile stood the old stump of a tree, a chopping-block. He attempted to set the bullet there, but stumbled and fell. His chin cracked on the sharp edge of the cut trunk. His face sandpapered itself on the bed of chips and the roots in the ground. He felt no pain, no sensation, nothing. The crystal shell, torn from his grasp, settled on the stump; and then, oddly, tilted sidewise until it stood at a forty-five degree angle as before.

He got up, hammering his hands against his thighs. He whacked and slapped his frost-white features. It was like hitting the mask of ice on the coils of a refrigerator. After a while his face began to burn as though scalded, and a fiery bloom splotched it.

He deliberately smacked the bullet, a powerful blow that should have hurtled it to smash and shatter against the woodpile.

The bullet swayed back to perpendicular; and the moment his hand was released it stood on edge again, the pointer in its nose swinging northward towards the region of the Pole Star.

He went in to supper. At the entrance of the doorway he stopped his wife, iron skillet in hand, running to help him. He pushed her back.

"Take it away," she begged. "Get rid of it."

He gently disengaged the skillet from her hand and replaced it on the stove. "Everything'll be all right, long as we don't touch it. I've heard tell museums pay cash money for meteorites and such. Maybe the scientists down in the Twin Cities at the U——"

He ate supper in silence; and though he occasionally rubbed his bruised face, his thoughts appeared to be far away on other things.

He got up and went out to the barn where the cows lowed. Green light blossomed around the stump with its crystal bullet, but he did not pause. Night had fallen, and the moon rode well above the horizon before he finished milking. He carried the full pails to empty into the big can in the kitchen. This time, passing the stump, he frowned at the queer torpedo, the layer of hoarfrost thickening on the ground in the five-petal pattern of measureless cold.

He smoked a pipe for an hour with slow enjoyment, listening to the sounds his wife made doing the dishes, the frog chorus down by the pond, and all the small voices of night. When he strode outside to empty the dottle, the flower-like

blossom of light still enfolded the crystal bullet, still poised uncannily on edge.

Later, her warm, firm body a more solid reality beside him, he lay musing. When the corn was planted, he would write to the State Bureau of Minerals, or the newspapers, or the men at the U, about the strange bullet that had plummeted from space. . . .

Out of the void of troubled sleep, he woke with the sound of a thin, high, bell-like music tinkling in his ears. He listened in vain for the soft breathing of his wife, rhythmic in slumber beside him, for she was gone; but through all the air broke brittle flutings, like the snapping of myriads of fine crystal threads; and to the jangle of that fantastic music, his nerves quivered eerily.

SLIDING from bed, the cool of the night unblanketing his body, he prowled out of the bedroom. A rectangle of moonlight whitened the floor, but a stronger light, a stranger light, a greener light bloomed around the house, and when he came to the crystal bullet upon the chopping-block where he had left it, he was aware in a vague, sick manner that some boundless flood of energy was pouring from it; that three-dimensional shadows projected, moved, and took substance within the green radiance; that shapes and forms of things which had never walked upon earth by day or by night or hovered in dreams were issuing forth; curious organisms part gaseous, part mineral, part vegetable, and part flesh, with faceted eyes upon stalks and electrical discharges between feathery feelers and ruby-bright luminous rods for skeletal structure in transparent, bubbling flesh; that steadily they became denser, more material; that they talked in a crystalline language which became louder as the green tide pulsed out in mounting waves; and that the five-petal pattern of terrible cold was expanding at an ever accelerating pace. Of all this he became conscious—and her chalk-white body, brittle as the tinkling music, rigid with the shell cradled against her and her hands crisped upon the now blindingly, coldly incandescent pointer in its tip. A queer alien glee, child-like, hideously rapturous, had been congealed upon her marble face.

He lifted her and carried her in, heedless of cold that burned his arms and chest with intolerable fire. He pulled a quilt over her, as though any warmth could comfort the dead. He paused with his head at an angle, listening, as though to a dimly heard and ghostly echo of farewell, then prowled outside again. There was an old blanket hanging beside the kitchen door. He seized it and tossed it upon the crystal bullet. The green illumination, unsmothered, billowed away through the great teardrop forms of the five-petal pattern.

He was hardly aware of twigs or stones that bruised his soles. Moonlight bathed the world, and the spring night was filled with many murmurs, whisper of wind, trees stirring with sap, the frog-throng of the hylas, and bat-wings overhead. He listened to these, and not to the hateful crystalline voices which the blanket could not muffle, and felt a growing cold penetrate the wool, until his chest became as insensitive, as brittle as glass, and the encroachment of ice crept into solid flesh.

His heart had begun to labor fitfully, missing beats, and taking long, convulsive throbs, when he reached the old limestone quarry. Mechanically and without thinking he flung the bundle out as far as he could. Instantly there came a great drag upon his mind, a paralyzing inertia that struck him motionless, like a stone statue on the pond's edge. But the bundle had been hurled, and the blanket fell away. The crystal bullet emerged, curving toward the moonlit waters, and the green light mushroomed over all the waters with a chorus

of frenzied bells. Fantastic beings swirled in the luminous glow, so thick in substance, so real, so perilously close to breaking through the prison walls of radiance, that he would have leaped back had his heart given the command. This machine from unknown, mysterious wildernesses of the universe, this message from some planet in other galaxies, this bolt successfully hurled across light-years of space and millennia of time, bringing forth in triumph whatever purpose it had—or launching a three-dimensional record—or acting as a wonderful agency to transmit by ways and energies unguessed the very beings which had shot it upon its voyage——

He would never know what, or care. The crystal bullet splashed. The water and the great cold reacted, created gasses and ice. As though a giant hand smote it into oblivion, green light and shadow creatures and tinkling voices vanished. A great geyser foamed and spewed, with a hissing roar. The bullet shattered, sinking in countless fragments that bubbled and boiled.

Ripples widened across the water, while the swath of moonglow danced, and subsided.

Like a drunken man, he weaved homeward, with heart pounding as the block of ice thawed from his chest. He felt a slowly deepening delayed shock of grief over something lost that might have flowered splendidly: the frozen body of his wife.

Dreamer

By C. S. YOUD

HIS dark eyes hung upon eternal space;
His brow was chapleted with mighty stars;
The silver moon spread round him like a lace
Her tender loveliness which no shade mars.
He took the road, a sturdy staff he wrought;
He left for realms and mysteries undared;
His solitary kingdom was a thought
And his great staff was but a slender word.

Dreamer of dreams! Your path will ever be
As bright and gilded as the tales you love,
Through valleys whence the dreary shadows flee,
Those valleys which your own sweet longing wove;
And when your earth-bound wanderings are through,
The Master Poet shall make a home for you.

The Cream-Colored Cat

By ANN SLOAN

"Will explain by letter but dare not wait. If you love me get rid of that cream-colored cat."

PETER was only three, the first time the cream-colored Cat looked in at his nursery door. He was hot—terribly hot—and "they" kept pulling up the blankets, no matter how often he threw them off. He was too tired now, to try it again, and he cried for a drink of water. His mother came and knelt by the side of his bed, and let him suck a piece of fine linen with a bit of ice in it.

The room was vaguely dark, and there was a strange young woman in a white gown standing by the doctor. Peter had always liked Dr. Keith, but today it was too much trouble to speak to him. He turned his eyes back to his kneeling mother, and over her bowed head, he saw the cream-colored Cat creeping into the room.

Its eyes were of a deep orange color—very large and round; they were staring fixedly at Peter. He wasn't a bit afraid of the Cat—then! He was wondering in a confused way where it had come from. His eyes, which had been so lifeless for hours, kindled, and he looked inquiringly from the Cat to the strange young woman. She caught the look, and smiled back at him.

"I think Peter wants to speak to you, Sister," said Mrs. Vicars.

His throat was so queer that he could hardly get the words out, but he drew his arm from under the covers, and pointed at the cream-colored Cat. "Is—it your—pussy?" he managed to ask.

"Where, darling?" said the woman that Mummie had called "Sister."

His arm was tired—he stopped pointing, and let it drop. The cream-colored Cat had paused cautiously on the door-sill, and was watching the nurse. Peter thought it was a little afraid of her. It must be her cat.

"Sister's" eyes had followed his gesture, and come back to him.

"There's no cat there, Peter," she said.

Peter frowned. All grown-ups were funny. There sat the creamy, furry Cat right on the door-sill, and she said that it wasn't there! He choked in a strangling cough which brought the doctor and nurse to him at once. In spite of his paroxysms he still watched the Cat. He whimpered —"It's coming in—"

His mother gave a frightened turn toward the doorway, then took his hand protectingly in both hers.

"There's no pussy there, sweetheart," she said, but she seemed troubled, and looked back over her shoulder again.

Somebody said something Peter didn't understand—but he caught a new word "delirium," and decided to remember it—it seemed to belong to the Cat. He choked again desperately, and felt a soft plop on his bed—the Cat had jumped up on it, and was staring grimly at him—and still "they" didn't see it!

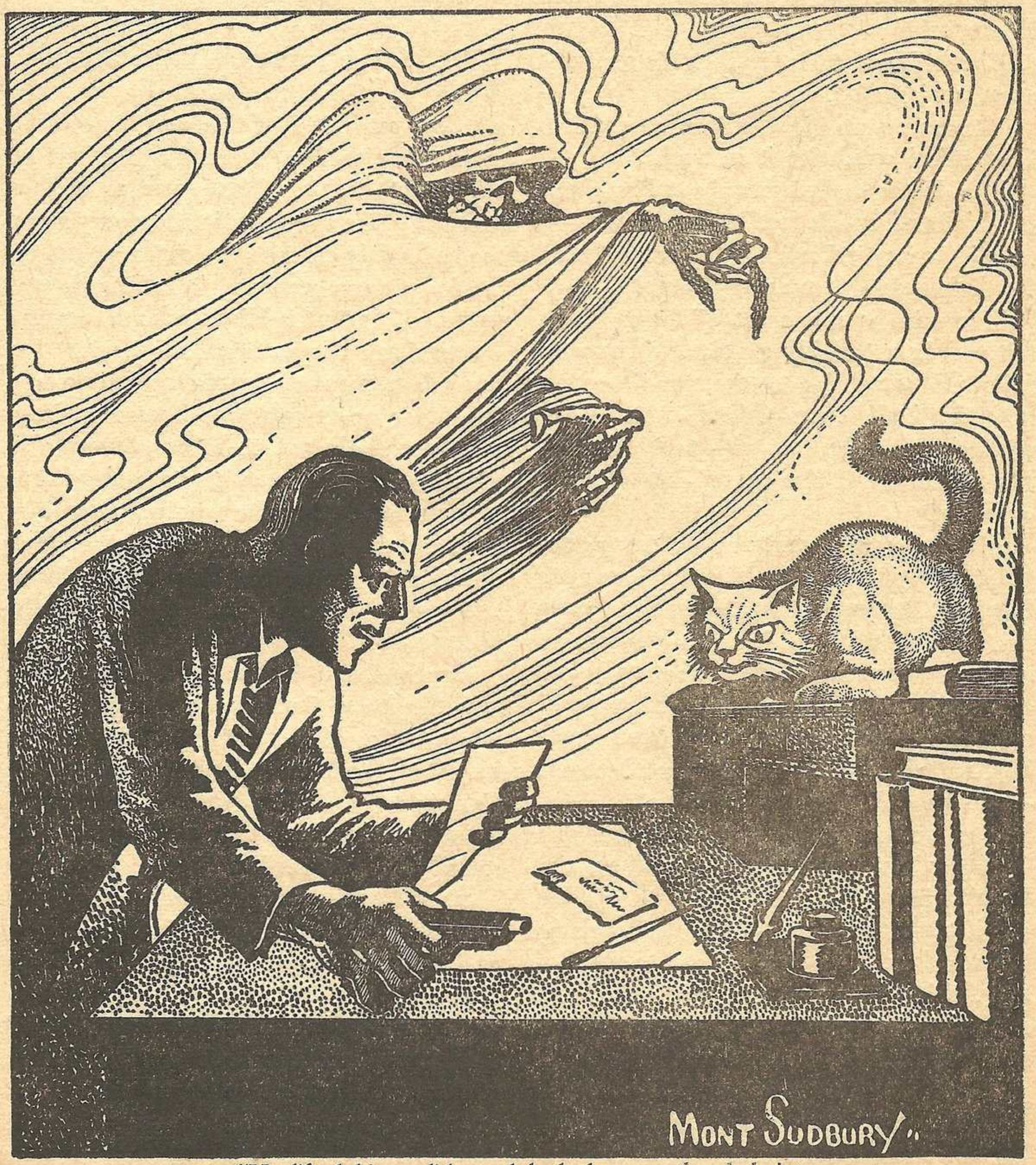
He was frightened this time; he screamed and struggled. They were doing things that hurt to his throat. He didn't fight them off—as he had done before—he was watching the cream-colored Cat, and wondering how soon they would drive it away. Mimi, his mother's big Persian, had tried three times that morning to get into

the room. They had driven *her* away each time—and she had cried and scratched at the door. He pulled his hand from his mother's grasp, and held it out to the big new Cat.

"Puss! Puss!" he tried to call.

There was a shadow flashing through the open window. Mimi jumped all the way from the flowering branch of the apple tree into the room. *She* knew that the cream-colored Cat was there! The hairs on her back bristled, and her eyes shot fire as they had done the day she drove the grocer's police dog down the lane. But in spite of her brave attack Peter knew she was dreadfully afraid of the big Cat!

That frightened Peter too. He screamed. His mother put her arms round him—



"He lifted his eyelids, and looked across the desk into the round orange eyes of the cream-colored cat!"

tight! For a moment she kept even the doctor away.

"I can't bear it!" she cried.

Then Mimi sprang at the cream-colored Cat! Peter stopped screaming, and raised his head to watch. The great beast waited for Mimi—all humped up and ready—when—suddenly—it turned! It jumped from the bed, Mimi at its heels. It leaped for the door! Mimi was driving it from his room!

Peter relaxed; he lay back in his mother's arms, and smiled.

"It was a very big Cat," he murmured, "but Mimi won't let it in again."

The doctor looked sharply at Peter, and put his hand on his forehead. "It's wet—" he said in startled relief—"what happened—what made this sudden change?"

"He said he saw a cat—" Mrs. Vicars faltered in a trembling voice. "His eyes followed *something* across the floor and onto the bed! Then—Mimi came in the window—and she saw—*it*—too! Her fur was all on end! She chased—*it*—out the door!"

"Come, come," said the doctor gently. "You *are* all in, Mrs. Vicars. Don't let Peter's delirium start you off seeing things too! Mimi came in that window after a moth, and chased it across the room. We can't let you begin raising ghosts now, after the soldierly way you've been carrying through. Let Sister give you a bromide—you haven't slept for days!"

Mrs. Vicars smiled—unconvinced.

"Peter saw something — and so did Mimi! 'See—Peter's drousing off already—I'll try to nap over in the deckchair by the window. But—if I do go to sleep—and I think I can—now—please let Mimi stay if she comes back! I'll—I'll feel safer about Peter if she's here!"

"Surely, my dear—if you wish it. But—" he looked keenly at her. "Lie down—do! We'll let Mimi stay."

Peter and his mother were fast asleep when Mimi came back to the nursery door. Both doctor and nurse found themselves watching the cat as she crouched on the doorsill. Eyes fixed on the turn in the hall, she settled down for a long vigil. Twenty minutes later when the doctor left, he stepped carefully past her. She never moved, but she did lift her head, and he saw how huge and dark the irises of her watchful eyes had grown.

FROM that time on Mimi's little trick of meeting the family where the meadow-path touched the highway seemed much more to Peter's mother than just an affectionate habit. Mimi was so serious about it. She was ecstatic and purry when she had safely escorted her charges through the long, wavy grasses. Mrs. Vicars was very like her Scotch-Highlander father and she couldn't forget Mimi's behavior that day when they all fought so for Peter's life. She never spoke of it again to anyone—especially not to Peter—but on the nights when Peter woke screaming of a cream-colored Cat, she would soothe him first, and then, taking her candle, go down through the house until she found Mimi and could bring the cat back to guard the nursery door.

Her husband knew that she did this, and she knew that he knew it, but they never spoke of it. Peter entirely forgot his illness and the part the cream-colored Cat had played in it, but the Cat haunted his dreams, and his fear of it grew until it included all cats but Mimi.

Peter's home was set in the curve of a Cornish tidal-river; a drive along the shore, and the short-cut through the upper meadow were its only land approaches. Peter knew that the cream-colored Cat came prowling down through the meadow whenever Mimi was not on guard. It never came up from the river end of the property.

He told that to the visitors one tea-

time, and a big red-faced man said it must be because cats hated water! Another man added slyly that then Peter's cream-colored Cat must hate *running water* still more! Everyone but Peter's mother laughed; Peter got very red and ran out of the room. He never talked of his Cat again—and only spoke of it once in the next ten years.

It loped past him without looking back the day the two carriages crashed on the highway. Peter was running up the meadow-path after his father and the two gardeners. He caught one glimpse of the over-turned carriages, the eight rearing, trampling, frightened horses, and heard the shrieks. Then his father spied him and sent him home. He woke screaming of the Cat that night, and his mother brought Mimi with her. They sat patiently beside him till he fell asleep again.

The summer after his eighth birthday held one month when every time he went through the meadow he was uneasily aware that back in the deep grass something white was stalking him. He didn't really see the cream-colored Cat these times—but it was more frightening to know that it was there, and only a matter of time till it would run across his path again. Mimi was bristly too—she took to following his mother everywhere. Twice when Mrs. Vicars started across the meadow, Mimi did her best to coax her toward the river road—failing. The cat kept ahead of her on the grassy path, watchful and belligerent.

Many afternoons when Mrs. Vicars was "taking a nap" Peter would follow Mimi into the little garden beneath her window, where the cat and the little boy kept vigil together and comforted each other in the instinctive uneasiness that possessed them both. And Mimi slept in Peter's room at night.

That unforgettable night when unaccustomed noises in the house woke Peter suddenly, he put out his hand to feel for the cat—and Mimi wasn't there! The telephone rang—again and again, and twice carriages drove to the door. Peter sat on the edge of the bed, afraid to go out in the hall, unable to go back to sleep.

His room door, which wasn't quite shut, pushed open a few inches, and Mimi, a pale shadow in the dark, went past him and jumped up on the window-seat. He followed.

From his window he could see the front of the house, and his mother's room—all brightly lighted. He knew himself to be a very little boy, alone, in a world he didn't understand. Tonight even Mimi couldn't comfort him—she was as troubled as he was.

Then the thing they were both fearing happened!

Mimi rose from her crouching position; she growled, and Peter could feel the long hairs on her back rising. She took a menacing step over the edge of the window-sill.

The moonlight was bright on the meadow before them, and Peter could see a little ripple in the grass, as if something was passing through: something not tall enough to reach to the tops of the grass-blades. He turned to Mimi—she was trembling as her eyes followed that gentle swaying of the grasses.

The ripple reached the edge, the tall grass beyond their little lawn separated, and the cream-colored Cat came into the garden.

PETER tried to shout at it—to call for help—to throw something—but his voice wouldn't work, and his hands were as lead. The cream-colored Cat seemed much bigger than he remembered, but that might be the moonlight. It came toward the house deliberately. It didn't look up at Peter's window though it surely knew that he and Mimi were there. It crossed the little lawn till it came to the

foot of the apple tree, and shot up the trunk like a streak of silver.

Peter instinctively tensed his muscles to meet the attack—but at the fork of the tree the Cat turned. It took the other branch, the one that passed within a few inches of his mother's window.

Mimi roused from the paralysis of fear that had held them both. She gave a jungle-like shriek as she sprang into the tree and started after the cream-colored Cat. It turned and waited for her! The round orange eyes were balls of fire in the moonlight as the Cat reared back huge and threatening, to receive Mimi's attack.

She sprang at him, and the two animals swayed back and forth on the branch—grappled together—tearing at each other's throat. Mimi knew she was fighting a losing fight, and the helpless child in the window knew it too. Peter heard an ominous snap—he'd heard it once before when the gardener's terrier broke the neck of the big rat.

Mimi stopped struggling, the cream-colored Cat released its grip, and Mimi's body hurtled to the ground.

Peter's torpor snapped too; he seized a book from the window seat, and flung it at the Cat. It didn't turn—it didn't even try to dodge the missile. Down the branch it paced with a sure and delicate step, and sprang into Mrs. Vicars' window.

Peter cried hysterically for his mother to come and help him, though he somehow knew she couldn't come. He watched her windows fearfully. Someone in her room was dimming the lights. A shadow passed from one window to another pulling down the shades—evenly.

Peter rushed to the door. The strange silence in the hall was so frightening that his heart fluttered. He crept slowly down the empty corridor—and his voice came back—he screamed. His mother's door opened, his father, white and shaken, came out to him.

"Peter—! My little boy—my poor little son!"

He lifted Peter in his arms, and carried him back to bed.

"The Cat!" Peter sobbed. "The cream-colored Cat! It killed Mimi! And it went into Mother's room!"

His father shuddered, and tightened his clasp on the little body.

"Hush, Peter!" he said. "You were dreaming again! I'll stay with you till you go to sleep. I've just come from Mother's room, and there was no cat there. Nurse Watters will stay—with Mother—till morning."

For a long time Peter held his father's hand in a hot clasp—and John Vicars sat motionless in the darkness. When at last the small hand loosened its grip, the father took his flashlight, and went down through the silent house seeking Mimi. But though he searched thoroughly he could not find her. He thought again of Peter's hysterical outcry, and wiped cold drops from his forehead with a trembling hand.

Next morning when the gardener brought Mimi's body in from the grass-plot, Mr. Vicars forbade the servants telling Peter. Peter didn't ask any questions nor did he seem surprised when his father carefully explained that Mother and the baby sister for whose coming they had made so many happy plans, had decided not to stay with them, but had gone back to Heaven together—"They took Mimi, too," was all he said. But he was dumbly grateful to his father for taking him into his own bed that night.

LIFE changed completely for Peter after that. His father sold the happy little house and went up to London where Peter would be near "the Aunts." The house, the river, the meadow, Mimi, and the cream-colored Cat faded together into a dim memory for Peter. His days were filled with a new interest called school; and a

multitude of fascinating activities which his father and school together brought into his life. He was ashamed if his childish fears were mentioned but—but other people gradually forgot about them—and when he was old enough to go away to one of the big public schools, he never thought of them himself. But he could not be induced to stay in the same room with any cat. And he still turned pale when the moonlight fell on rippling fields of grass.

When he had turned sixteen he believed football was the most important thing in the world. One afternoon before the daily practice, he was detained overtime by the Latin master, and so was the last to leave the dressings rooms. Pulling his sweater over his head as he came out into the corridor, he stepped on something soft which slithered away from under his feet. The wall opposite was all that saved him from falling. A final pull on the sweater brought his head out at the top, and he caught a glimpse of a cream-colored Cat turning into the next hallway.

Peter's heart skipped a beat. Then he pulled himself together. That old memory was kid's stuff—crazy—should have been well beaten out of him! He rounded the corner in pursuit—he'd be all right when he made sure the cat was real!

The main hall with its many closed doors stretched empty before him. Hoteling Major was coming from a room at the far end. Peter waited for him.

"Nearly took a header over that bloomin' cat," he growled, "which way did it go?"

"Cat?" said Hoteling. "No cat down this hall."

Peter turned white. He had not only caught a glimpse of the cat as it turned that very corner ten seconds ago, but he was shudderingly aware of the furry softness he had tripped over. He went onto the field with misgivings, but the excitement of the game swept them away.

Half an hour later, pale and trembling, he helped carry young Hoteling from the field. He was present when the doctors said that the boy's neck had been broken instantly—he had probably never known what had happened. Peter had been ten feet away at the time, but he was sure he'd seen a creamy white flash dart in front of Hoteling.

Peter went out and telegraphed for his father, and when he came—told him, with many hesitating pauses, what had happened. John Vicars took Peter back with him, and they went to see a famous nerve-specialist, who after asking many questions put Peter through a stiff physical examination. He found no serious trouble, and sent him to an oculist—it might be eyes. If not, come back again. It wasn't eyes—and both doctors admitted being gravely puzzled by the case-history as John Vicars told it. For the first time Peter learned that his mother had been stricken with a heart-attack as she came through the meadow from an evening at the rectory. As her husband carried her to the house she murmured something about "Peter's Cat!" She only lived a few hours after that—there had been a premature delivery, and she and the little daughter died together.

The doctor said that sometimes it did seem as if "there were more things in Heaven and Earth, etc." and recommended a long sea-trip for the boy and his badly shaken father.

Peter jumped at the idea. The long leisurely trip through southern waters did him a world of good. Mr. Vicars saw that for some reason Peter felt safe—that he did not now fear meeting the Cat again. That joke made ten years ago about the safety of running water as a protection for the hag-ridden had made a great impression upon the little boy. Mr. Vicars did not remember this, nor indeed did Peter. He only knew he was safe.

In the end that voyage with its abiding sense of well-being brought Peter and his father to an agreement on Peter's future. As soon as he could be prepared for the entrance examinations, he was to enter the Naval College at Greenwich. He found he could make it easily when he was eighteen, and Mr. Vicars planned for Peter's entrance the autumn following.

PETER'S eighteenth birthday fell in the spring of Nineteen-fourteen and the following autumn saw him in the trenches.

For awhile he went in daily dread of meeting the Cat. But it never came. Then he worked out a theory of the purely personal menace the creature held for him. The carnage around him was too general. In the back of his mind he could picture the great cream-colored beast as lying lazily in the now well-remembered meadow waiting for the moment when the bullet, shell, grenade, or bayonet specially marked for Peter should give him his cue to spring again. Peter rather morbidly felt that if the Cat were given his choice it would be the bayonet!

Since he didn't meet the Cat he grew utterly reckless. Young Vicars' daredevil courage was the astonishment of those magnificently courageous mess-mates of his. Peter was ashamed of this; he felt he was sailing under false colors — he took no chances—he must always *know!* Men fell all around him; new men came out to take their places—and Peter went steadily up in regimental rank.

Home-leave was the only thing that stood out through those four years. Peter's father always met him at Waterloo platform and together they went off to the gentle English hills for a cleanly respite of orderly life.

ON THE night of the Armistice the mess wildly celebrated their reprieve from violent death. Peter, for all his four years of reckless living, felt that reprieve the most actively. After an absurd, side-splitting review of the months behind them, he ended up with a ribald toast. He had raised his glass, arm high, and his eyes following it widened in stricken terror. On a shelf across the room, insolently eyeing Peter as it washed a paw, was a cream-colored Cat!

Peter's glass flew from his hand, a clean throw. It crashed through the Cat and smashed against the brick wall behind it.

"The Cat!" he cried. "The Cat!"

His mess-mates laughed and jeered.

"For once—Peter, old top—you've gone the limit! You're seein' things!"

Next day a sober Peter could find no Cat among their dugouts.

Two days later he approached Waterloo with dread—and met his weeping aunts with dry and burning eyes. He had been certain, all these hours, that his father would not be there.

Peter learned that his father had been the victim of an Armistice night celebration. In order to get the latest news as it came in, John Vicars had gone to the public rooms of a big hotel on the Embankment. Someone in the drunken crowd threw his helmet at a great plate-glass mirror—the whole thing crashed down on Vicars; the broken glass severed an artery; in the confusion skilled aid reached him too late.

Peter became dangerously morbid over this. For more than a year he kept seeing, over and over again, the great Cat goading him into throwing his glass. What if —if—he—hadn't thrown it?

His colonel tried to plumb the depths of the boy's despair; but Peter kept his own counsel, and the doctors put it down to belated shell-shock.

It was Peter who finally brought himself to take up life again. He openly said that he had no ambitions left. It was too late for the Naval College—yet he longed, as never before, for the solace

of blue water. There was some money—plenty, he was sure, for his unambitious needs. A friend of his father's helped him with introductions, and two years after the war ended, Peter began his work as super-cargo on a large British liner.

HE WAS contented now. His co-officers knew his war record, and they admired and respected the taciturn lad. His calm poise was nothing new; so many young men of twenty-four had that same quietude.

They were surprised at first that young Vicars could so rarely be persuaded to spend the night away from the boat. He was happier after the dusk had dropped to laze serenely on deck with a pipe between his lips. He never slept soundly if he did not hear the lapping of the tide beneath his portholes.

The Headmaster of his old school worried over Peter's complete submersion in such an unimportant niche. He sent for Peter just to tell him that. And Peter's quiet acceptance of the implied criticism was most disconcerting to the great schoolmaster. He, in turn, found it hard to parry the "cui bono" of the younger man whose record of extraordinary valor was, ironically enough, such an incentive to the lads just starting out from Peter's old school.

Half a dozen years of this life found Peter with stanch friendships in most of the English speaking ports. This at least he had won for himself; all sorts of men and a few women. He was serene these days, and not unhappy,

He met the Cat twice during these years. Both times it happened, as he had always known it must happen, while the ship was in port. The first time they had docked in New York, and were held there overtime for engine-room repairs. Peter and Macrae, the Scotch engineer, took an evening off for a fight at the Garden. On their way back to the ship they cut across the wide and empty expanse of Water Street. Skirting the front of one of the dimly lighted ferry-houses, Peter stopped abruptly with a muttered oath.

Scuttling directly across their path ran a huge rowdy-looking cat. Peter put his hand out to stop Macrae—and then, for the first time in his life, was violently, deathly sick. For Macrae didn't stop—and walked straight *through* the beast! Macrae heard Peter's muffled call, turned back, and caught the reeling Peter by the shoulder.

"Man!" he cried. "What's happened to ye?"

Peter steadied himself; the paroxysm was over.

"I was sure, Macrae, you were falling over that great Cat—"

"Cat?" cried Macrae, "where would a cat be comin' from on this waste of cobbles?"

It took Peter the better part of the next ten minutes to convince Macrae he had not been drinking boot-leg American whiskey.

THEY separated in the cabin, Macrae to give a glance at conditions in the engine-room, and Peter to spend the rest of the night soberly putting his books in order, and writing a long letter to his old Headmaster to be delivered "if—"

He finished at daybreak, and went on deck for a breath of air before turning in. He passed Macrae's cabin, met the captain coming out, and caught a glimpse of the ship's doctor working over a body on Macrae's bunk. A worried group of engine-room oilers waited in the narrow passage.

So that was it!

The captain joined Peter. Mechanics from the naval-engineering firm had worked through the night installing a new flywheel. In the gray dusk before the dawn they had finished. Calling Macrae

they had started up the engines. The new part had a hidden flaw, and Macrae was in the path of the flying piece of steel. He was still living when they carried him to his room, but it was hopeless. The clang of an ambulance on the dock announced the arrival of competent help, but the end came before anything could be done.

Peter tore up his letter, and added a few lines and the date to those other items in his locked diary. While he had it open he read back through the years, and tried to think out some explanation of the Cat and its influence. What it had meant in his life was fairly clear but he had no explanation of the Cat! He gave his Highlander ancestors the dubious benefit of his "possession"—and realized for the first time that nobody ever said what "second sight" was, nor how it operated.

For a long time after Macrae's death it was on deep water alone that he breathed freely; it was strange how sure he was that the Cat couldn't reach him here. But for weeks his heart sank as they neared port, and, once there, his uneasy eyes watched for his familiar on every street. He confessed to a "nervy" fear of traffic.

But when the months passed uneventfully into years, and the Cat still lay couchant "somewhere in space," his nerves steadied themselves.

IN Nineteen-twenty-six they reached Aden around Easter time. It was blisteringly hot. No one wanted to go ashore. On deck and in the cabins electric fans kept a certain amount of motion in the air. Men and officers alike were restless to get out to sea again, but the cargo would take another twenty-four hours before its transfer was completed.

At midnight a knot of officers were still sitting out with pipes and cigarettes and long cool drinks. Thank God for the ice-machine! It was much too hot to think of turning in. The tropic night was purply blue, and there was a very red moon rising over the sands of upper Egypt. Peter wondered idly how much those mysterious old Egyptians had really known. A lot, he felt sure, that our crass materialism was ignoring. The book-shelves in his cabin had doubled and trebled during the years. He had amassed a store of volumes in many tongues, which gave him a shadowy understanding of the various interpretations of life and death that man has alternately made and discarded through the few thousand years since he became articulate.

Peter glanced from the desert to the skies. He had come to know the constellations as few super-cargoes ever do, and he had read widely what the long past had believed of their influence on human destiny. Brockly, now, in the light of Peter's ranging thoughts, sounded pretty futile.

Peter had been trying to ignore Brockly all the evening. A rampant North-of Irelander, he was holding forth on his pet subject, the religious credulity of his southern compatriots. Indeed for over an hour the group had been arguing in a desultory fashion about religion.

Brockly ended a long harangue. Peter was dumping the ashes out of his pipe and had started on his usual neat, meticulous job of refilling it.

"Brockly," he said, pausing, match in hand. "I do envy you the certainty of your religious opinions. I'd like to be told one thing. Just what do you honestly expect to see and do—five minutes after you are dead?"

There was a long pause. Peter still held his match, unstruck, and waited. Brockly, after much hemming and hawing, finally said that the next world was so different from this that it was difficult to grasp just what it was like.

Peter struck his match and lighted his pipe. The group smoked on in thought-

ful silence. They were evidently turning Peter's question over in their minds. Peter got up and went back to the smoking-room galley. Old Ferguson was cutting beef in thin slices for sandwiches. He knew these all-night sessions when it was too hot to sleep, and everybody got hungry at three o'clock.

Peter, leaning on the rail, listened while Ferguson talked. Ferguson had been head steward on all the voyages Peter had made. They had chanced to transfer from ship to ship at the same time. So a very real and sincere affection had grown up between the two because of, rather than despite, their differences in age and rank.

"It sounded for a bit, sir, as if they were getting all heated up back there on the quarter-deck, Mr. Vicars."

"That was Mr. Brockly," said Peter.

Ferguson nodded. "He was down here, for a while, sir, and he always gets excited when he starts on the Papists, as he calls them."

"I stopped him off, tonight," said Peter. "I've always wondered what he'd say if I sprung that question."

Ferguson waited.

"Just what do you expect to see, Ferguson, five minutes after you're dead?"

Ferguson turned, knife in hand. "I don't think anyone could answer that off-hand, sir! Yes, that's one to make a man think a bit."

Peter leaned further over the rail. Something dim and whitish was moving in the black shadows on the dock below them. It was certainly coming nearer with a slinking, feline motion.

"What made you think of that, Mr. Vicars? Five minutes after you're dead? There'll be some of us know the answer pretty soon, sir! Pretty soon!"

Peter wheeled back and caught the old man by the arm. Ferguson was gazing into the dark with a rapt, listening expression.

"Ferguson what made you say *that?*"

"Nothing, Mr. Vicars, nothing! It just seemed to say itself."

There was a scratching, scrambling sound behind Peter. He wheeled back. The cream-colored Cat was sitting on the rail. As Peter stiffened, it jumped to the deck, and passed rapidly through the galley.

"Did you see it, Ferguson? The Cat!"

Ferguson looked at him curiously.

"No cat on this ship, Mr. Vicars! The captain hates them."

"But it just came over the side!"

The old man shook his head.

"It's been a pretty hot day, Mr. Vicars," he said. "I wouldn't stay out in the sun so long tomorrow, if I were you. It's got you a bit jumpy, and your eyes could be feeling the glare, too."

Peter walked the deck for the next hour. When he met the Cat there was always the question—who?

It stood as far as he could guess between Ferguson and himself. And the old man's response to his fantastic question had been what Peter's grandfather used to call 'fey'. "There'll be some of us know the answer pretty soon, sir! Pretty soon!"

Before he turned in Peter went to the bridge and asked the captain if Ferguson might be excused from duty on the morrow. The weather was unusually hot, and he was worried about the old steward. Peter was never known to suggest anything, unasked, and the captain sensed something unusual behind the request. He nodded, and said he'd arrange it in the morning.

IN THE morning the inexplicable disappearance of their dock laborers threatened a serious delay to the boat's sailing. A force of disreputable looking ruffians was recruited from the sweepings of the port; all of the officers, wardroom and petty, were ordered to stations in case of trouble. Ferguson spent the day mixing

cool drinks, and rushing them to the hot and exasperated men. He carried several trays to the upper deck himself, and forgot his cap each time.

Peter, coming back from escorting mail-bags to the steamer for home, was called to the ship's hospital. Ferguson had collapsed with a sun-stroke; the captain and the doctor were with him, and he had asked for Mr. Vicars. Peter was just in time. Ferguson smiled when he entered, and tried to speak. Peter knelt beside him.

"Five minutes after, you said, sir?"

Peter could only press his hand. His throat was choked up. This old warrior was going on courageously to solve for himself the mystery Peter had so idly propounded.

The captain sent for Peter afterward.

"What was it, Vicars, made you ask the day off for Ferguson?"

Peter blushed. "You'll think me an awful fool, sir—but—my Mother's people were Highland Scotch—and sometimes—I know!"

The captain shook his head thoughtfully.

"I'd never call a man a fool for such reasons. I've seen too many strange things in my day to question anything a man's serious about. We'll act on it—next time, my lad."

Peter lingered, hesitant.

"If you please, sir! I'd rather not be quoted as having presentiments. It doesn't help a man any to have his mates think there's something odd about him."

" 'Tis a burden on any man's shoulder's —you're not to be envied."

Peter remembered then that the captain was a Fifeshire man. Perhaps he, too, had experiences. Most men would be wise enough to keep still about such things. His own breaking of that same habit hadn't done any good! How much respite was the sea bringing him, after all? They had been in port, to be sure, both times he met the Cat; here in Aden, and in New York with Macrae. He did hope the captain would keep counsel; men might with reason be a bit shy of a shipmate who saw Death at their elbow. Jonah needn't be the last prophet to suffer from the aroused sailormen.

AS IF to test his theory of immunity at sea, at the end of this very trip he had an ugly mixup with a London bus, and fractured his ankle, the accident keeping him on shore for six months between voyages. The ship sailed with a substitute, and Peter was carried down to his Aunt Ellen's home in Dorset. It was his first long leave.

He found himself let in for a novel and flattering experience. His three young cousins lavished their adoration upon him. Little girls just starting school during the war, they had followed his exploits and felt vicariously heroic in their relationship. He found it impossible to convince them that his life at sea was not equally magnificent. With them it was "once a hero—always a hero."

But it was the serious-eyed young daughter of his former colonel who really opened up new vistas to Peter. Colonel Carstairs had a particularly warm corner in his heart for Peter, the one young officer who had been with him from the beginning to the end of the war; and he viewed the growing attachment between his former protegé and his adored daughter with a funny mixture of fatherly dismay and approbation.

Peter fell desperately in love with Elinor, and she with him. He discovered that she had long since built a little pedestal in her heart for his unseen image—and he was filled with proud humility by her blissful happiness when the chosen idol of her schooldays became the lover of her young womanhood.

Peter's middle-aged patina fell away.

For the first time since the Armistice he was the happy youngster he had missed out on being. He and Elinor read together and rode together. When he began to walk again his arm was in hers—and through it all they made love entrancingly.

They drew plans for a perfect future. The Cat never entered Peter's mind these days; life was so full of radiance, and it offered such powerful reassurances; the uprushing flood of youth and happiness forced his enemy back into Limbo.

He would rejoin his ship for what was to be his last voyage. A long voyage to be sure; to New Zealand and around home by Java and the East Indian ports. But when he got back he would be transferred to the company's headquarters in London, and need roam the world no more. He and Elinor would marry then, and go down to Kent. The colonel was giving them the beautiful old house where Elinor and her mother before her had been born. They took Peter down to see it just before he sailed, and the place brought back crowding memories of the house in the curve of the Cornish tidal river—memories of forgotten childish happinesses that all but drowned out the memories of the Cat! Peter knew at last that ever since he left Cornwall his heart had been homesick.

Here in Elinor's birthplace it was at home again; he wandered round those Kentish orchards and gardens, and marvelled that he and Elinor should be so unbelievably fortunate. With her hand in his he could defy his obsession.

His last trip proved a happy one in spite of their separation. Now that there were always letters waiting it took the curse off making port. Delightful letters! And thanks to the radio, one could get a message answered inside twenty-four hours. Elinor's most-understanding father often treated her in turn to a round-trip radiogram.

The ship was in Rangoon when Peter got the letter that brought him sharply back to the great terror of his life. It began charmingly. Full of excitement over the new car her father had given her that she might drive Peter to London. Full also of the girl's naive pride in her status of fiancée, and in the lovely things her family and friends were planning for her and Peter. It gave Peter a warm glow of belongingness that he had not known since his father's death. He sat beaming over the letter. Then he idly turned the last page, and found the hastily scribbled postscript.

"And oh, darling Peter! I am so flattered. A beautiful cream-colored cat has been coming into the garden lately, and it's made friends with me. It's very shy, and runs away when anyone else appears. But it isn't afraid of me a bit—it fairly haunts my footsteps."

Peter went white. His mouth was dry and stiff. He couldn't move his lips—then—

"Oh! Dear God!" he cried. "She's seen the cream-colored Cat!"

PROTEST seemed so futile—so senseless! Yet he couldn't sit there on the other side of the globe, and let the thing go on. He waited helpless in the growing dusk, head buried in his arms, motionless, wondering, planning! He finally sat up with a jerk, switched on the cabin lights with a quick frightened gesture, and then looked about with dread.

There was nothing untoward. No white shape lurked in the shadowy corners. Nothing rustled among his papers. There was no soft furry bunch curled beneath his feet. Taut and on guard, he drew a radio blank to him, and scrawled a terse note. He staggered to the companionway, and his head was reeling as he climbed to "Sparks" receiving station.

Sparks looked surprised at the message, and whistled as he finished reading it. One glance at Peter's face shut off any re-

marks. He dropped his hand to the key, and sent Peter's warning out into space.

"Will explain by letter but dare not wait. If you love me get rid of that cream-colored Cat!"

Allowing for differences in time of day, latitude and longitude, Peter expected an answer in the morning. He spent a tiresome forenoon on shore. There were many papers to be signed and witnessed by a too casual and easygoing lot of tropical business men.

He was still rounding them up at lunch time, and finally came back to the ship, hot, worried, and exasperated, too late even for tea. He ordered some sent to his cabin, and dashed down there to wash up and change.

As he had hoped a radio envelope lay on his desk. It had come just after he left the ship. If that lazy gang on shore had kept appointments on time he'd have had it long hours ago!

He slit open the envelope and read the enclosure with a puzzled frown. "I LOVE YOU OF COURSE. DON'T UNDERSTAND MESSAGE. WHAT CAT?" Elinor.

The captain's Malay "boy" tapped on Peter's half-open door.

"If you please, Mr. Vicars, the captain wants to see you at once. In his cabin, sir."

To be sure—he hadn't turned in those damned papers! What did Elinor's message mean?

He went up to the captain's cabin two steps at a time, and stood at attention to make his report. The captain and the ship's doctor were standing together. There was deep gravity and distress in both faces.

Peter's eyes grew wary. He spied, and watched—fascinated—a yellow radio slip in the captain's hand.

"My dear boy," the captain's voice faltered. "It is impossible to break some kinds of news gently. This message came through twenty minutes ago, with the request that I deliver it to you."

Peter was faintly aware of the pitying hand on his shoulder. His mind was racing furiously. He knew that when he had read that message he would understand both the postscript in Elinor's letter, and her denial of that postscript in the message he had just found on his desk.

"I think I understand, sir," he said. "May I take it away? I'd rather—read it —alone!"

His step was mechanically even as he went back to his cabin.

He went straight to his desk and sat down, the slip still unread. He opened a drawer and took out his old service revolver. He examined the catch and the load, and with set lips extracted a cartridge. Feeling in his pocket he brought out another cartridge carrying a silver bullet. He had made time that morning to have this molded for him at a native silversmith's. He reloaded the empty chamber with the new cartridge, and set the revolver within easy reach of his hand.

His preparations complete he unfolded the yellow slip and spread it out—flat—before him.

TO THE COMMANDER OF THE
S.S. BAY OF BALLERICA

PLEASE INFORM PETER VICARS THAT MY DAUGHTER ELINOR WAS KILLED IN A MOTOR ACCIDENT LATE LAST EVENING.

G. T. CARSTAIRS.

Last night? Just after she answered his message? THE CAT! But the Cat hadn't forced his hand—this time—had it? Hadn't it?

He jerked open the small drawer where Elinor's letters fitted so perfectly, and then thought back as he did so to the day when she measured it to see exactly what size paper she must use in writing to him.

There was a strange little smile on his lips as he drew out that last letter—the one whose postscript had so alarmed him the night before that he had been driven to sending his fatal message!

The Cat—the Cat!

His eyes lingered fondly over the happy sentences of the letter itself.

But when he had read the last words—the signature—over and over, he held the letter for fully five minutes before he could summon courage to look at the postscript. At last he slowly turned the page.

It was quite bare!

He stared at the blank whiteness and his heart began to pound. He lifted his eyelids, and looked across the desk into the round orange eyes of the cream-colored Cat!

His hand groped for the revolver. For a moment his fingers refused to close on it—was it the weight of the silver bullet that made it seem so heavy?

"Too slow—" he thought despairingly, for the Cat had sprung!

It was smothering him—great waves of agony spread and stabbed from his heart to his left shoulder. A searing pain from the stroke of a huge taloned claw scorched the right side of his face. Then the pressure on his heart abated, though the pain above his heart still stabbed unendurably. His hand slowly brought the revolver up —wavered for a moment under a second onslaught from the Cat—then—as the Cat retreated—he fired at it.

PETER lay back in his chair. His tortured eyes were fixed on a tiny mirror across the room whose glass was shattered in splinters round a circular hole.

"Angina!" said the doctor kneeling beside him.

"Not—?"

"Suicide? No!"

The captain drew a sigh of relief, but he came nearer, and laid his finger on the long red mark stretching from temple to jaw.

"What made this—scratch?"

The doctor examined it and looked about him. Then he lifted the revolver from the floor, and studied it carefully.

The captain waited in growing anxiety. His glance fell again and again on Peter's pain-wracked face, and moved back each time to the worried face of the doctor.

"What are you looking for?" His words seemed forced out against his will.

The doctor handed him the revolver and pointed significantly to the roughened notch by the bore.

"See that—" he spoke with great reluctance. "I'm afraid he did mean to end it all! He must have had the revolver at his temple when the heart attack started! And this roughened edge ploughed its way down his cheek as his arm dropped."

"Not Vicars!" the captain spoke positively. "He shot at the mirror over there! Why did he—man—why?"

"Spasms from angina are pretty dreadful—" said the doctor soberly. "If he was still clutching the gun, they could account for anything!"

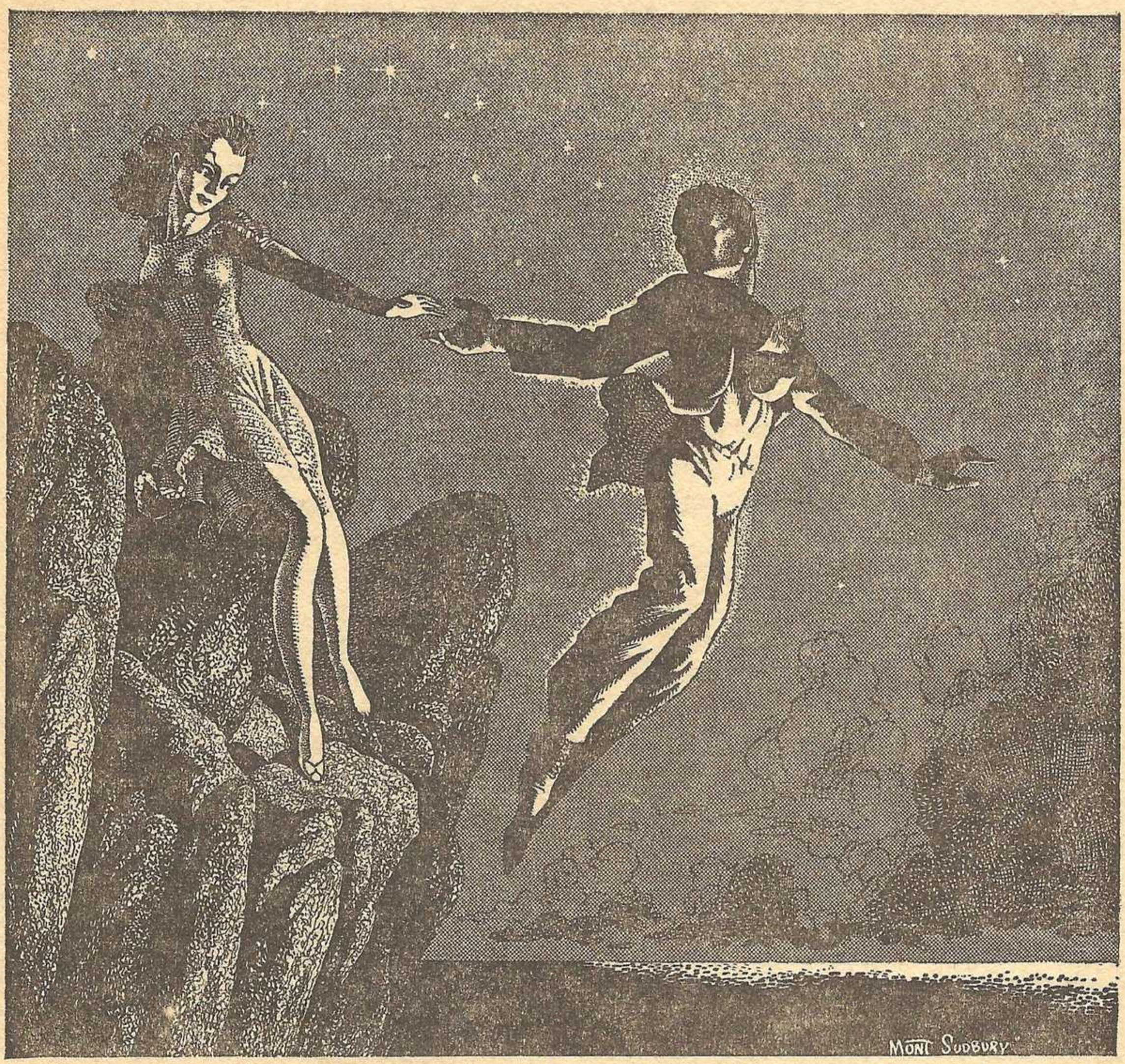
In the morning the captain's "boy" brought him a silver bullet he had dug out of the wall behind the mirror.

"I—looked for this!" he said. "On shore among my people—it is whispered that yesterday—*he*—had this bullet made! You know the meaning of the silver bullet?"

"I have heard." The captain set his mouth sternly.

The boy nodded reassuringly.

"You feared he meant to shoot himself —this proves he did not! He was a very brave man. He died in a losing fight. And now—" the slim young Oriental shrugged his shoulders eloquently—"and now, God alone knows just which of the Dark Powers he was fighting!"



"'Come!' he said softly, and this time held out his hand. The girl tried to grasp it, but he was going down—down into the blackness."

Edge of the Cliff

By DOROTHY QUICK

It takes courage to jump into the Unknown; but the Stranger understood—and helped.

THE girl sat on the edge of a cliff and gazed down at the jagged rocks below her, watching the water beat relentlessly upon them. The last rose tints of the sunset gave the eddying waters a translucent loveliness, but she shuddered as she looked at them. She couldn't see the beauty, only that the rocks and water were terribly far away.

"I haven't the courage," she half whis-

pered, her voice lost in the rushing waters. For a long while she sat quite still, staring blankly before her. From somewhere in the distance came the shriek of a whistle.

Automatically the girl raised her head, listened, and laughed—a laugh that had no mirth in it. Her thoughts, which had been a formless confusion, suddenly focused.

"The factory whistle. Jim will be home soon. How he'll rave when he doesn't find me. If I went back, he'd beat me. But I won't go! Dear God, help me to be brave."

With the force of her prayer she clasped her hands and moved convulsively. As she did so her pump slipped off and went down into the dimness. She strained her eyes to watch, but she could discern nothing in the darkness. So she listened, every nerve tense.

But she heard nothing—only the swishing snarl of the water beating on the rocks. Her slipper had gone—soon she would follow. She dully wondered if it would hurt. She saw herself lying crushed and mangled, perhaps not dead, and began to shake. Unsteadily she got to her feet. She was going away from the terror of the cliff, back to Jim— It would be horrible, but at least she knew what it was like.

"If I were only brave," she thought, "I wouldn't go back." She buried her face in her hands and sobbed hopelessly.

All at once she was conscious of someone near. She took her hands away to look. There was a stranger standing beside her.

"What is the matter?" he asked softly. There was no light and she could not see his face, but something in his voice swept her terror away.

Without an instant's hesitation she began, "I want to die." She pointed downward. "But I haven't the courage."

"Perhaps I can help you." There was deep understanding in his tones. "But first you must tell me why."

Strangely she didn't wonder that he made no attempt to preach or dissuade her from her project. Her soul went out to the sympathy and understanding she sensed in him. Her words came tumbling out jerkily, one sentence after another.

"I loved Bob—my family married me to Jim. Jim had money—a house. I was pretty and could cook. Jim didn't love me, but I was useful. I hated him!" She clenched her hands until the nails, digging into the soft flesh, brought drops of blood to the surface.

"Yes?" questioned the stranger. "So—" Monysyllables which left a gap to be filled.

She went on, "I tried hard to like Jim—I couldn't. He was a drunken beast. Bob kept on being sweet to me, brought me little things when Jim wasn't there. Once he found me crying, saw my arms all black and blue. Then he took me in his arms." She paused a second to savor fully the joys of the remembrance.

"We decided to go away together when Bob got enough money," the thread of her memory continued to unwind. "Jim came home early. I hid Bob but Jim was drunk. He began beating me. I tried to be brave, but God must have been asleep that night. I cried out. Bob came to help me—and Jim killed him!"

The stranger was silent.

She continued, "Jim got off—he was a wronged husband. The jury was on his side. It was worse than ever for me when he came back. I can't stand it anymore. I want to go to Bob, only—I'm not brave enough."

The stranger moved a little nearer.

"It only takes a minute," he whispered, but in his low tones there was a vibrancy. "One second and it is over."

Her slight figure swayed, "I can't!" she gasped.

The stranger took another step.

"You won't be alone. I will go too," he said slowly.

"But why?" she began, then suddenly reached her hand out toward him.

He ignored that and took a step toward the edge of the cliff. "Come."

She moved forward. All at once she was aware of the sound of the water striking the rocks below—those sharp, jagged rocks. She shrank back. "I'm afraid."

"Then return to him!" He flung the words at her.

"No, no!" cried the girl.

"You must choose between Jim and Bob," he said sternly, then added, "once you did not take so long to decide."

"Bob might not find me," she sobbed.

"It only takes a second," he pleaded, "and then there is—Eternity!"

The girl shivered again. "It is very dark!"

"At the bottom there is light."

"It will be very cold."

The stranger smiled. "My arms will be warm. Come!" he said softly, and this time held out his hand.

The girl tried to grasp it, but he was going down—down into the blackness. There was a strange luminous light about him. It didn't look quite so dark. The girl suddenly found courage.

"Wait!" she cried, "I am coming!"

From below the stranger was smiling at her with Bob's smile, and his arms were outstretched. He wasn't a stranger anymore—he was—Bob! Without one second's hesitation, she flung herself into his arms.

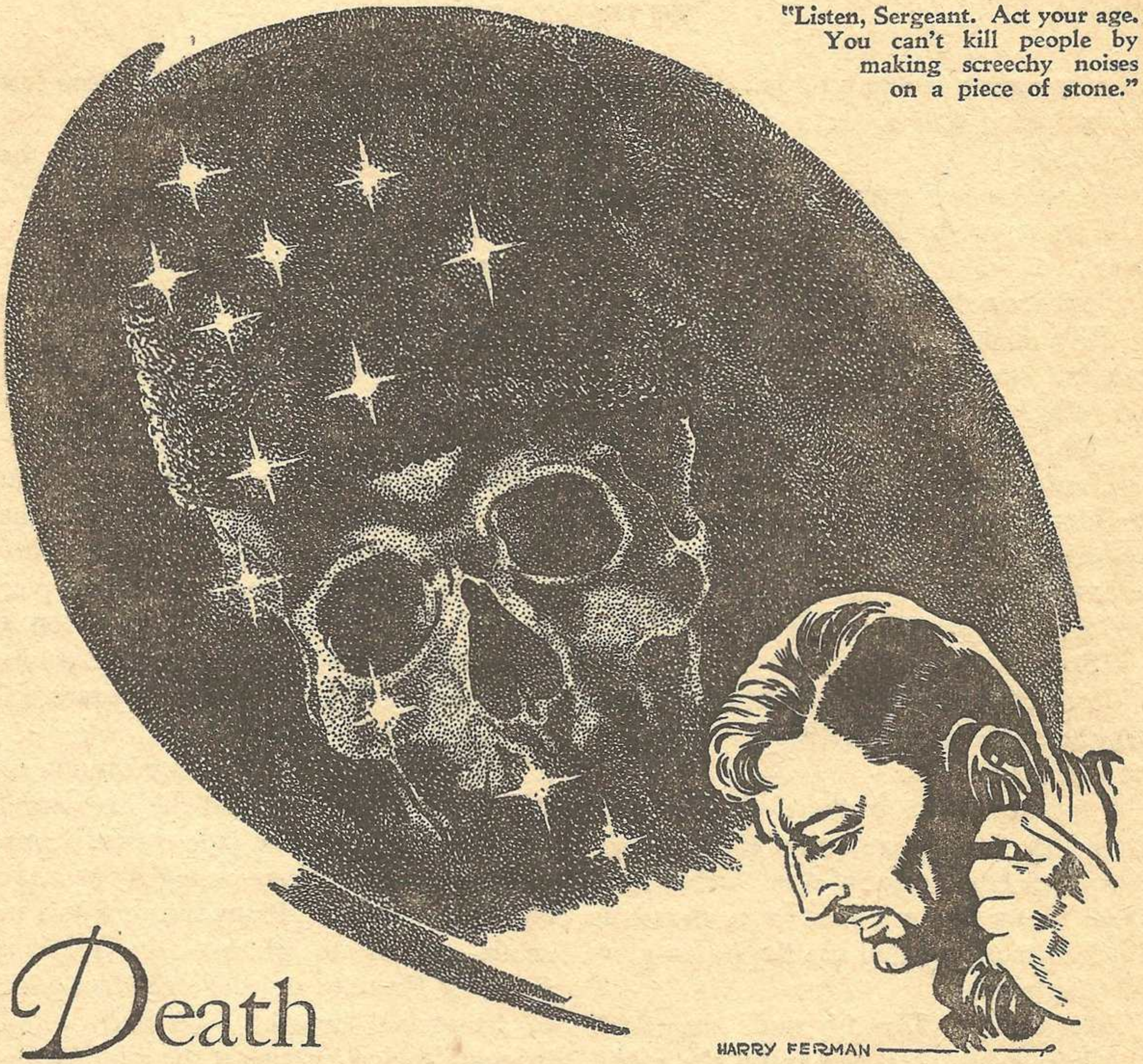
They went down and down, toward the bottom. Bob's lips were warm on hers. She did not even know when the waters enveloped her completely.

Flight of Time

By JOHN M. BARNARD

OVER our dreams and ever-changing plans,
Like birds of prey begot outside earth's laws,
Time flies with ruthless haste, and what is man's
Must feel the terror of the dragging claws.
Must feel the terror, and permit the dead
To sit at tables loaded for the quick:
Only the briefest moment may have fled
Since pulses wearied and their tongues grew thick.

The heavy shadow of the beating wings
Shortens the days of all our promised years,
Making of hope a gutted form that flings
Us empty nights in which to catch our tears.
And always, while our looted lives are spent,
Time flaps forever on, destruction bent.



Death Wore An Astrakhan Hat

By WALTER C. BROWN

Just a shabby old man in a woolly hat—who hitched his murders to a star

WE WERE sitting in the Little Shanghai over a stone bottle of *samshu*. It was past midnight, and we had the back room all to ourselves except for a couple of Chinese playing *ching gong*, which is the Oriental idea of checkers.

It was quiet as a joss-house in the Little Shanghai. The players pondered their board like a pair of dreaming Buddhas. The sifting of snow against the window might have been a warning hiss from the gold-thread *kylin* writhing across the black silk curtain.

"Rocky," I said, "what was the strangest thing you ever ran across down here?"

Every one calls him "Rocky," but you'll find him listed on the rolls of the 14th Precinct as Detective-Sergeant Russell Stone, Chinatown Squad. And unless I

miss my guess it won't be long before he turns in his stripes for a captain's gold shield.

He took a few moments to think it over. "I'd say it was the Man with the Astrakhan Hat."

"What was that—a murder case?"

"We don't know. Three men died, you see, but we were never sure."

"Why? Couldn't you get a confession?"

"Oh, yes. That's the trouble. The confession specified murder. But if it was murder, then it's the strangest case on record. Yes, and the queerest weapon ever used to kill."

"What was the weapon?"

"Stars!"

Rocky tossed out the word in the casual way he might have said "Knife" or "Gun" or "Poison."

I suppose I just sat there and looked at him. He lifted his narrow glass and absorbed a few drops of the "triple fire" from Hong Kong. *Samshu* is almost as thick as molasses, and has the sullen glow of Chartreuse.

"How do you like this stuff?" he asked.

"Two shots of this'd make the rabbit chase the bulldog," I told him. "But let's not get off the subject. You were going to spill a yarn about a Chink with an Astrakhan hat who hitched his murders to a star."

"He wasn't a Chink," Rocky retorted, "and I didn't say a word about telling the story. You asked a question, and I answered it."

"That's known as quibbling," I tossed back at him. "Do you want to be coaxed?"

"It isn't that. I'd be wasting my breath. You wouldn't believe the story. Nobody does. Fact is, half the time I don't believe it myself."

"That's one swell prologue, Rocky. Go right on from there."

"No, I mean it. The thing doesn't make sense. It's a piece of black magic—a thousand years out of its time. You just can't let yourself believe it."

"You try me," I told him. "After the things I've seen tonight, I'm ripe to swallow anything."

For Rocky had been showing me Chinatown—*his* Chinatown. It wasn't anything like the Chinatown I'd seen a hundred times before. We went exploring in weird nooks and corners, places like Sword Alley, Half Moon Street, and Paradise Court.

We met moon-faced Mark Sin, high priest of fantan; watched Yow Gat, the blind man, carve a perfect Chinese *junk* from a peach stone; heard Kow Lun play "Love comes to the least of men" on a bamboo flute, and had a drink of white whiskey with Wang Tsi, proud wearer of the last pigtail in Chinatown.

We'd seen the wooden war drums of the Ting Tsien Tong, and the five sacred candles burning in the jade-crusted Lamp of Peace. We'd been smuggled past the bolted doors of the Plum Blossom Joss in coolie smocks to glimpse the fragrant shrine of Kwan-te and the eight-foot gong of hammered bronze. We had peeped through beaded curtains at the gilded bamboo cages in the nortorious "Blue House" of Peking Court.

All of which gives you a rough idea of what Rocky meant when he said "Chinatown." And having had previous samples of Rocky's yarns, I meant to add the story of the Astrakhan Hat if I needed a subpoena to get it.

I told him so in good, round Anglo-Saxon.

"ALL right," Rocky agreed, "but remember, you asked for it. And no arguments. Just listen and keep your mouth shut. I'm tired of arguing about it."

"Okay," I promised, "but start at the beginning. You call him the Man with the Astrakhan Hat and say he wasn't a

Chink. Well, what was he? And what was his name? Or didn't he have a name?"

"Two names, in fact. His professional name was Astro. He was an astrologer, and his star-parlor was in Pagoda Street, over the Green Buddha tea-house. His real name was Melchior Azrael something-or-other. I don't remember exactly, except that it was a mouthful. You can look it up later if you're interested. It's all in the Precinct records. He came from Syria, or Armenia, or one of those places."

"Astrakhan hats are Persian," I put in.

"That doesn't matter." Rocky waved it aside. "I'll never forget the night that shabby old man walked into the 14th with his fantastic tale about murder from the stars. We thought he was crazy and chased him out. That was a mistake that cost us about two weeks' sleep before we found him again.

"THIS all happened some years ago. Philip Connelly was Precinct Captain then. The House Sergeant was a hard-fisted Irishman named—well, let's call him McDonald. You'll understand why, presently. Looking back on it afterward, it seemed as if everything that was said and done that night fitted into a pre-arranged scheme.

"I was on the midnight shift that week, and I had just reported. Now, coming or going, Captain Connelly was always on the dot. St. Mary's was still striking twelve when he came out of his office, putting on his overcoat to go home. Outside it was snowing and blowing and bitter cold, something like tonight, only more so.

Sergeant McDonald had taken over for the night. He was sitting at the desk behind the railing, reading a newspaper—a late edition he had brought in with him. If he hadn't brought in a paper that night the whole thing might have taken a different turning.

"Any hot news there, Sergeant?" Connelly asked, winding a silk muffler around his neck.

McDonald rattled the paper. "Nothing startling, Captain," he replied. "Oh, I see where old Simon Brent dropped over dead."

"Heart?" asked Connelly.

McDonald nodded. "He dropped over dead at the dinner table."

Now this Simon Brent was a regular Chinatown character. We all knew him. He wore an old frock coat and gates-ajar collar, and carried one of those cloth bags with a drawstring lawyers used before briefcases were invented.

Brent owned a batch of Chinatown properties—part of a family estate from away back, before there even was a Chinatown. He was supposed to have barrels of money, but he was a close-fisted old Shylock.

Connelly stood there nodding his head over the news. "That's the way I'd like to go when my time comes. No fuss, no bother—just a Zip!—and it's over." He pulled on his gloves and laughed. "But after dinner—not before. Well, good-night, boys."

"Good-night, Captain," we said, and he went out. Nothing more was said about Simon Brent. Old men dropped over dead every day—nothing in that to talk about. Fact is, Brent had been a first-class nuisance, always wanting the Squad to crack down on tenants who didn't come across with the rent.

It was very quiet after Connelly left. McDonald and I stayed out front, the rest of the boys started a pinochle game back in the roll-room. There'd be a flurry for a few minutes every hour when the pull-boxes rang in, but that was all.

One o'clock struck, two o'clock, three. By that time we had a couple of howling drunks down in the coop, and they started to out-yodel each other, banging on the cell-bars for music. McDonald threw down his paper. "I'll fix that," he said, and

went out. In a couple of minutes he came back, a little red in the face and rubbing his knuckles. There was no more singing.

Everything was quiet again. McDonald kept turning pages and I was over at the bulletin board looking through the day's fliers from Headquarters. Suddenly there were footsteps out in the hall. They were light, like a woman's, and hesitated so long outside the door that both of us had our eyes glued on the knob, waiting for it to turn.

When it did, there was the Man with the Astrakhan Hat, and a blast of cold air that gave us goose pimples followed him in.

"Shut that door!" McDonald barked, and he turned meekly and went back and closed it. Then he came slowly toward the railing, pulling off his funny round hat and bowing and scraping. He was covered all over with snow, as if he'd been walking in it a good while.

McDonald smoothed down his paper. "Well, what do *you* want?"

"EXCUSE, Mister, please. I think I make a murder!"

Out it came, just like that. Nothing sinister about him, no. A touch of the grotesque, perhaps, but just a shabby old man. He had a small face, dark and foreign, with a thin beaked nose and a silky beard all dotted with snow. You could tell by his eyes he was all wound up about something.

McDonald looked him up and down. "You *think* you have," he said, "but you're not sure. Is that it?"

The old man bobbed his head. "I am not sure. I try to kill him, and now he is dead." He kept screwing up his face and making those cringing bows at the desk, holding that woolly hat in his hand.

"Is that so?" said McDonald, very pleasantly. When somebody walks in, hat in hand, and starts to tell you they've murdered someone, you learn to take it with a bushel of salt. Bona fide killers don't act that way. You hear some wonderful yarns in a police station, especially late at night. Hopheads, drunks, reefer boys, half-wits or less—they'll wander in and run off a long spiel about some imaginary crime. We'd given this fellow the once-over, and he looked like one of the tribe.

McDonald looked past him and gave me the nod. I came up behind the man and gave him a quick fanning—we called it a frisking in those days. That was merely routine stuff. He had nothing on him more dangerous than a safety pin.

There were a couple of packages in his overcoat pockets, wrapped in old newspaper. I didn't open them. One felt like a book. The other was flat and narrow and made a rattling sound, almost like dice.

The old man stood quiet enough while this was going on, but he was holding himself in tight as a bowstring, and I saw that the facial contortion was nerves, and not a smirk. There was a sickly sweet smell about him I noticed, too. Thinking he might be a hophead, I pulled up his sleeve, but there were no needle marks in his arm.

"Okay, Sergeant," I reported.

"Now, then," McDonald went on, "we can get down to business. Step up a little closer, Pop. What was the name of the man you killed?"

"His name is Simon Brent."

I pricked up my ears when I heard that name. These owl yarns generally tie up with something big, if they tie up at all, but Brent wasn't important and his death wasn't headline stuff. Page four, I think they gave it.

But McDonald was an old hand at games like this. You couldn't tell from his face he'd ever heard the name before. He reached for a pencil and pad. "Simon Brent. Where does he live?"

To our surprise, the old duffer gave the correct address—street and number.

"What'd yuh kill him with—a knife?" asked McDonald.

"No, Mister."

"Gun?"

"No."

"Well, what? You must have had a weapon."

The old man made a wide gesture. "I kill him with the stars. I make the Curse of Draco for him, and he is dead. Your law make me go in prison now, yes?"

That business about the stars was the tip-off to McDonald. He looked over at me and winked, as much as to say, "Watch me have some fun with this nut." McDonald would listen to these goofy yarns and kid them along. There was a method in it. If they started to act violent, he'd lock them up for observation, otherwise he's shoo them along after awhile.

"Well, I'll tell you how it is, Pop," he said with a perfectly straight face. "Our jails are full up just now. I don't know that we'd have room for you. Maybe I could put you on the waiting-list, though. What's your name?"

McDonald pretended to write it down. "Melchior—Azrael—how do you spell that last?" He made the old fellow spell it over several times.

"Where do you live?"

He gave a number on Pagoda Street, right in the heart of Chinatown.

Now I knew Pagoda Street from end to end, and I had never seen him around there anywhere. I thought he was lying, and tried to trip him up. "Is that over Wan Lee's shop?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "Wan Lee is other side. Where I live is teahouse called Green Buddha." He was right about that.

"What's your line of business?" McDonald broke in.

Out came a business card. McDonald looked at it and handed it to me. The card was soiled with thumbmarks. In large type was the name "ASTRO," and under it, "Let the Stars Guide You in Love, Marriage, Money Matters. Full Reading, 50c. De Luxe Reading, $1.00."

"So you're a fortune teller, eh?" McDonald snapped.

"I am astrologer," said Astro. "I read the stars."

"Yeah? You read the papers, too, don't you? Trying to pull off some kind of a publicity gag, I guess."

Astro shook his head. He looked puzzled.

McDonald banged his hand on the newspaper. "You're not kidding me, Pop. I read the papers, too, and it says right here in this paper that Simon Brent died of heart failure at the dinner table. What's the stars got to do with that?"

Astro waved the hat around excitedly. "I have tell you. The stars make his heart to stop. The Curse of Draco make him dead. Always before I am afraid to make this curse, but *him* I hate so strong I try it. I am glad I make him dead."

"So you hated Brent? Why?"

"Mister, he put me from my house. Because I have not enough money on day he mark down, he send men with yellow paper. They are strong men who push me outside. They laugh at me. They sell my bed and chairs. They sell my books and my maps. They leave me nothing. *He* send them to do this, and so I have wish him dead."

"Oh, I see," said McDonald, "you've *wished* him dead. Well, Pop, I take off my hat to you for a good, two-fisted wisher. I've had a whack at that game myself now and again, but nothing came of it. There's no law against wishing a man dead, just so you don't go 'round to his house and put a knife in his back."

"I do not need knife, Mister. I make the Curse of Draco on him. The stars kill."

"Well, well," said McDonald. "That's a new wrinkle. This Curse you mention, what would it be like?"

By this time the boys in the back room had heard our voices and come out to see what was going on. I saw that McDonald was all set to give the old fellow a ride on the merry-go-round. Naturally I didn't take any stock in the old man's jargon about the stars, but the rest of his story made sense, and I had a sort of uneasy feeling about the whole thing.

Anyway, I slipped into Connelly's office and closed the door and used his phone to call Brent's house. When I heard the bell ringing at the other end I felt like a darn fool to be routing them up at 3 A.M. to answer silly questions.

HOWEVER, I got an answer right away. Brent's houseman was still up, attending to things. I told him who was calling and a little about Astro, then I asked a few questions.

The houseman assured me that no such person had ever called there, that no foreign-looking man had been seen hanging about the place, and that if any threats had been made against Mr. Brent's life, he had never mentioned it.

"Were there any dinner guests tonight?" I asked.

"No, sir. Just the family, as usual."

"Was Mr. Brent stricken during dinner, or after?"

"Before dinner, sir. They had just sat down."

"And there's no doubt whatever that it *was* his heart?"

"I don't quite understand, sir," he replied.

"Well, all I've had so far is the newspaper account, and sometimes they say 'heart'—"

"Oh, no, sir. No doubt whatever. The doctor was quite positive. He could give you the details, sir. It was Dr. Robinson."

"Thank you," I said, and decided to go the whole hog while I was about it. Doc Robinson didn't take very kindly to the idea of being dragged out of bed at that hour and I didn't get very far with my questions. "Look at the death certificate," he snapped. "I've been in practice thirty-five years, and I believe I'm competent to certify to *angina pectoris.*"

Bang went the receiver, and that was that.

When I came out of Connelly's office the boys were all crowding around the old man, laughing and joking, and his voice was away up, like a screech. "You do not believe. You think I lie. I show you. Give me name of bad man, man you hate very strong, and I show you what Draco do. He die—like that—quick!" The old man snapped his fingers by way of illustration.

"Have I missed anything?" I asked McDonald.

"Oh, he's been telling us how to work this Curse of Draco. It seems Draco is a bunch of stars somewhere—you know, like the Dipper—and we're all hooked up to them by little threads or wires you can't see or touch. He's got a piece of smooth stone there, and a pencil. You put marks on the stone, then draw over it with the pencil, and that breaks all these wires and you fall down dead. Can you tie that one? Crazy as a loon, but harmless."

"Where'd he get this stone?"

"Spain, he says. Spain! I'll bet he picked it up along the docks somewhere."

I pushed up front to see for myself. Astro had unwrapped his paper packages. In one of them was an Arabian manuscript, supposed to be the work of Haji somebody-or-other. It was made up of a bunch of thin slats strung together through the ends, so you could spread it out like a little Venetian blind. The writing looked like half-melted music.

The other package held the magic stone.

It was a very curious stone. It was black as soot, hard, and yet it felt greasy to the touch—something like jade. But it wasn't jade. And it had a smell, a sickly sweet smell like rotting bananas. I rubbed my finger over it and it felt magnetized—very unpleasant. Did you ever handle a live snake?

"Well, it felt like that, hard and scaly, yet sort of quivery underneath. This black stone had a number of cuts like little stars, arranged in a design—a sort of S in reverse. I found out later this S shape followed the outline of Draco—the Dragon—one of the Northern Constellations. The little stars had a sort of glitter to them.

Astro was hopping mad by this time. The boys' razzing had worked him into a fury. I saw that the pupil of one eye had spread to a wide circle, while the other was just a pinpoint. And if you don't know it, that's a bad sign.

"You, Mister," he challenged McDonald. "You give me name, please. I kill him for you."

"Sure," said McDonald. "Why not? It's the chance of a lifetime. Try your gadget on the captain. That's his name on the door over there—Philip Connelly. I guess we could get along without the captain," and he winked at the boys. That raised a laugh. Connelly was a good copper, but not exactly what you'd call popular with his men.

THE old man got busy right away. He copied the name off the glass panel and spread out his string of slats and began to jot down stuff that looked like Arabic writing. After that he copied them onto the black stone, one under each star.

"It is ready," he announced. "You want I should make the Curse of Draco for him?"

"Sure," said McDonald, "go right ahead. We can hardly wait."

Astro picked up the black pencil. It looked like a carbon stick from one of the old-style arc lights. Well, he moved that black pencil from one star to another on the black stone, and you never heard such a shrill, scratching sound in your life. It was worse than a roomful of slatepencils going at one time. It put an edge to your teeth and made your blood crawl. We were all glad when the sound stopped.

"It is done," said Astro.

"All right, Pop," said McDonald, giving us the wink again. "I hope you made a good job of it. If you didn't, the captain'll come down here and kick the pants off you for disturbing his sleep."

Just about this time the telephone buzzed, and Miller popped up from behind the switchboard. "Hey, Sergeant—a three-alarmer at Reimiger's factory. The F. D. wants all the men you can spare to set up a fire-line."

McDonald raised his voice. "Break it up, boys, break it up. Back to the job. All right, Pop, wrap up your stars and run along now. We'll see you again some time."

The old man gathered up his things and shuffled toward the door, mumbling and chuckling as he went out. Reimiger's factory burned till dawn, and we forgot all about Astro and his magic stone. At eight o'clock my trick was over and I went home and went to bed. I had just about touched bottom when the phone rang. It was Sergeant McDonald, and his voice was so shaken I could hardly recognize it.

"Rocky," he said, "I just had a call from the Precinct. Mrs. Connelly phoned them. *The captain died last night!*"

I was still half asleep. "Died?" I said. "Where? How?"

"At home. In his bed. He was asleep. Mrs. Connelly said he sat up, groaned, and toppled over. When the doctor got there he was dead."

Something went Click! in my mind and the question popped out. "What time?"

"*Half-past three*—this morning!"

I didn't say anything. It was all to sudden for me. McDonald's voice was shakier than ever. "Rocky, do you think it could be—?"

"Don't be a sap," I cut in on him, sharp. "What'd the doctor say?"

"Heart attack."

"Well, what's queer about that? That could happen to anybody, anywhere."

"Yes, but the time, Rocky! It was just half-past three when—"

"Listen, Sergeant, act your age. You're carrying on like an old woman. You can't kill people by making screechy noises on a piece of stone. That sort of thing belongs in the middle of Africa."

"But I'm the one who gave him the captain's name. I'm the one who egged him on. I told him to go ahead. Rocky—I've *got* to find out for sure about that stone!"

"Okay," I told him, "wait for me. I'll get dressed and come right over and we'll get hold of the old man, just so you'll get it out of your head. You're crazier than he is."

I did that. I went around to McDonald's house, and he looked like a haunted man. That telephone call had put about ten years on him. "Buck up, Sergeant," I said, "you're making a damn fool of yourself over nothing. It's a coincidence, that's all."

"Maybe," he said, "but I've got to *know*. I feel like I murdered Phil Connelly."

"All right, we'll start by going down to that place on Pagoda Street. Maybe he's still hanging around there. When you see him in broad daylight you'll realize he's nothing but a ragged old crackpot."

It was a two-story house. The Green Buddha was on the ground floor. The upstairs part had a separate entrance, and there was a "For Rent" sign tacked on the door. There was also a cheap tin sign with the name "ASTRO" and a splatter of stars like a comet's tail.

"We're too late. He's been here and gone," McDonald said, pointing to two sets of footprints in the snow drifted over the steps.

We found the door unlocked and went up a dark staircase. The rooms were cold, bare, stripped of everything, and the window panes frosted over solidly.

The back room was black as midnight. I struck a match and looked around, then called McDonald. "Look at this," I said, and struck another match.

From baseboard to ceiling the smooth plaster walls had been painted with all sorts of signs, symbols, and hieroglyphics. On the ceiling itself was a circular chart of the zodiac as wide as the room. It was neat work, and the shiny black paint stood out against the white plaster like wrought-iron tracery.

"Are there no windows in here?" McDonald asked.

"They've been smeared with black paint," I told him. "The old man wanted a spooky corner for his hocus-pocus."

"I don't like it," said McDonald. "Smell that sweet stuff in here?"

I had, and the more you smelled it, the less you liked it.

"He's gone," said McDonald, "and he won't come back. There's not even a place to sleep."

"Of course he's gone. Didn't he tell us how old Brent sold up his furniture because he couldn't pay his rent?"

"I've got to find him. And when I do, I'll get the truth out of him if I have to wring his neck!"

"Well, there's no use wasting any more time here. Come on, Sergeant."

"Where to?"

"Over to Brent's office. Maybe they can tell us something."

BRENT'S office looked like nothing had been changed since Grover Cleveland's time. There was a bald-headed bookkeeper

at a high desk and an old maid typist. They couldn't do any work because everything but the ink was locked up in a big iron safe and only Brent had the combination. Anyway, the bookkeeper told us about Astro.

He told us Astro had fallen back with his rent until Mr. Brent had ordered a levy. Then the "funny little man" had come to the office, very much excited, and had made threats about some sort of curse he would bring down on them.

"When was this?"

"About a week ago."

"Was this just a general threat, or did he give any particulars?"

"No, just general."

"Did he make these threats to Mr. Brent personally?"

"No. Mr. Brent was out at the time. I was alone here in the office. I had to threaten to call the police before he would leave."

"Did he come in again?"

"No, he never came back."

"So you put the old man on the street?"

The bookkeeper looked apologetic. "What else could we do? We have nothing but trouble with those Chinatown rents. You can't get good tenants down there, so we have to protect ourselves."

"Do you know what became of Astro?" I asked him.

"No," he said, "I haven't seen him since."

Outside, McDonald kicked at the snow. "We've got to find him. First thing you know he'll get out of the city."

"We'll find him, Sergeant, don't worry about that. He's got no money. He won't be far away. All we have to do is watch for the Astrakhan hat. That'll be a cinch to trace. We can start right now — divide Chinatown between us. You take all this side of Mulberry Lane — I'll take the other."

But it wasn't as easy as that. At the end of the day neither of us had turned up a single trace of the old man. And when the midnight shift lined up in the roll-room of the 14th there was a lot of buzzing and whispering among the boys about Connelly's sudden death and that hocus-pocus with the black stone.

When McDonald walked in to call the roll you could have heard a pin drop. When that was over he looked along the line, and his face was white. "Men," he said, "you've all heard by this time about what happened last night. Of course there is nothing in it, but I won't rest easy till I have that old man back here for questioning. God knows I had nothing against the captain. What I said was all in fun. I want you to bring in Astro. Turn the district upside down, if you have to, but bring him in! Dismiss!"

But the old man refused to be found. We couldn't understand it, for we covered Chinatown like a blanket. Day and night we had a man watching Pagoda Street, but he never came back there. We combed through the Homeless Shelter and the flop-houses.

Day after day went by, a week, another week, and still no luck. McDonald had become a different man, haggard, brooding, red-eyed from lack of sleep. "I've got to find him!" he'd say, over and over. "I've got to *know!*"

"Rocky," he told me one day, "I've been on the force 28 years. Always I wanted to wind up with my own precinct. Yesterday they offered to make me acting captain of the 14th, and I refused. I couldn't go in there and sit at Phil Connelly's desk. I just couldn't do it."

There were tears in his eyes when he told me that—hard-fisted Sergeant McDonald who'd handle a messed-up homicide stiff like you'd pick up a bag of laundry.

Then, late one night, I found Astro. I spotted the Astrakhan hat. He was look-

ing in the window of Johnny Moy's grocery store. As soon as he heard my footsteps he was off, but I managed to hang onto his trail.

I followed him to a tumble-down shack on Quince Street, where the gypsies have their winter quarters. I waited there half an hour and he didn't come out. So I hunted up a phone and called McDonald at the Precinct.

"Sergeant," I said, "I've found him."

"Wait for me!" he shouted, and he was with me in less than two minutes. I pointed out the house. "Let's go!" said McDonald.

"Hold on, Sergeant. We go in and grab him. That's easy. But then what? What's the charge? Murder? Do you think any jury'd give an indictment? If you took that black stone into court they'd think you were the nut that ought to be locked up."

"Never mind the argument. We'll grab him first—then we'll see."

The front door was locked, so we waited until someone came out of the house, a young gypsy. I flashed my badge and we took him by the arm as far as the corner. "You have a key to that house?" I asked. "I'll take it. Now, there's an old man in there, an old man with a woolly hat. Which room is his?"

THE gypsy told us, and we sent him for a walk. Then we got inside the house and found the room. There was no lock on the door and we came up on tiptoe. It was a small room, and dirty. Nothing but a cot, a chair, and a table with a kerosene lamp.

Astro had the Arabic manuscript spread open on the table, and he was putting marks on the black stone. As soon as he saw us he jumped up, screaming. "Go away! You tell me there is no law. You tell me to make the Curse of Draco!"

"Grab the stone!" I yelled to McDonald. Astro was clutching it, ready to run. McDonald got one hand on him and the old man hit at him with the stone. It caught McDonald on the neck and he went down as if he'd been shot.

Small as the room was, the old fellow nearly got away from me. He hopped up on the cot and made a flying leap from the springs like a diving-board. I had to stop him with a left and a right, and in the excitement I clipped him harder than I intended. He folded up like a rag doll.

McDonald was out cold. The edge of the stone must have caught him across the vagus nerve, for he was plenty sick when I got him back on his feet. Meanwhile the stone and the manuscript went into my pocket, and as soon as McDonald could navigate we took Astro by the elbows and practically carried him back to the 14th.

The old man was still too groggy to talk. "We'll have to put him in the cooler till the bells stop ringing," McDonald said. "You hit him too hard."

"How are you booking him?" I asked.

"Suspicious character."

We went into Connelly's old office and I emptied my pockets. "Here it is, Sergeant. Now that you've got it, what are you going to do with it?"

"I don't know, but *he'll* never see it again."

"It's his property. This is confiscation. He'll raise a howl."

"Let him howl."

The black stone seemed to hypnotize McDonald. He kept touching it, and rubbing his finger over it, and gripping the pencil.

"Now that you have it right in front of you," I said, "does it look like a thing you could kill a man with?"

"No, it can't be," he agreed, shaking his head. "Yet—"

"Look here, Sergeant, I told you from the start it was a silly idea. Coincidence, that's all."

McDonald nodded. "I guess so. Still,

it scares you when you think about it. But you can't kill a man just by drawing one piece of stone across another. Nobody could do that. Remember the funny noise it made—"

The pencil screeched as he moved it, and it set my teeth on edge. "I wouldn't fool with that thing," I said, sharply.

But the screeching didn't stop. The black pencil was moving from star to star. "Stop that!" I yelled, and tried to take it away from him.

McDonald pulled it free as if he were drawing a nail from a post. He looked frightened. "That's queer," he mumbled, "I didn't mean to do that. It pulled itself along, like it was in a groove. I couldn't stop it."

Then we heard somebody shout, and footsteps running back and forth. One of the boys stuck his head inside the door. "It's Astro, Sergeant—he just keeled over in his cell. Looks like he's gone!"

McDonald and I looked at each other, then he turned as white as a sheet and flung the black stub away as if he'd just come out of a trance and found a snake in his hand.

"I killed him, Rocky! There's a curse in the thing! There is! For God's sake, take it away from here!"

He toppled into Connelly's chair and sprang up again as if it had burned him.

"I'll see about this," I said. "You stay right here in this office and keep that crazy talk to yourself."

It so happened that Doc Cameron, of the Coroner's Office, was in the station at the time, and when he'd looked over the old man's body I had a long pow-wow with him downstairs.

"He tried a break, Doc, and I had to clip him. Would that have anything to do with it?"

"Well," said Cameron, "it wouldn't help him any."

"I wish you'd go upstairs and tell all that to the sergeant. Tell him it was my sock on the jaw that did it. He's letting this thing run him ragged."

But all our words were wasted on McDonald. "It's the stone," he said. "I *know!* Once could be a coincidence—twice, perhaps—but three times, never! There's some kind of power in it we don't know anything about. I wish to God I'd never laid eyes on the thing. It's put blood on my hands!"

We tried everything—reason, ridicule, argument. He never got over it.

Perhaps the purple mark had something to do with that. It looked like a birthmark, and it came out on his neck where the black stone had struck him. He went from one doctor to another, but he couldn't get rid of it. Finally he gave up, turned in his stripe, and left the city. The last I heard of him he was working in a tire factory in Akron. The mark was still on his neck.

"But what became of the black stone?" I asked. "And what did you do with the Arabic manuscript?"

"I burned the manuscript," Rocky replied, "and I smashed the stone with an axe. It was quite a job. Then one day I took a boat ride down the bay, and every mile or so I dropped a piece of it overboard. It cost me a new overcoat, too."

"How was that?" I said.

"Well, the stone left that sweetish smell in the pocket. I couldn't get it out. I tried everything—sponging, steaming, dryclean-ing. Finally I got rid of the coat."

"Look here, Rocky," I said, "you yourself don't take any stock in that yarn about the black stone—"

"No," he replied quickly. "No, of course not. Just a coincidence, those three deaths. What else could it have been?"

He held his *samshu* glass against the lemon-colored lantern which hung over our booth like a midget moon. "Coincidence—it's a funny thing, isn't it?"



By AUGUST W. DERLETH

There came to the courtroom One whose verdicts were beyond the law—but Eternally just

JUDGE HILLIER was very tired.

For three weeks the trial of the United States *versus* Elsa Laing had dragged on in the Federal District Court, but at last the jury had retired, and with any reasonable fortune, the verdict would be rendered in a few moments, the sentence pronounced, and an end put to this troublesome case. The prosecuting attorney, a Government man, lean and hawk-nosed, with a mane of shaggy white hair, looked like a savage wolf to the attorney for the defense, a small meek man dressed in an ill-fitting suit of black clothes, who in turn was being catalogued in the prosecuting attorney's mind as a beaten dog. These mental pictures were not exactly inappropriate.

The judge sighed and looked anxiously toward the jury room.

Even as he looked, the door opened and the jury began to file back into the box. The judge sighed, put on his spectacles, rustled his papers, shot a look almost of

pity at the defendant, a frail woman not over forty, whose look of abject despair was disconcerting, and turned to the jury.

The foreman stood up.

"Have you reached a verdict?" asked Judge Hillier in a tired voice.

"We have reached a verdict, your Honor." The foreman of the jury hesitated a moment, looked nervously at the defendant, and said, "We find the prisoner guilty of the charge of using the mails to defraud."

A cry escaped the woman, but her attorney bent quickly to soothe her. In a moment he had risen, opened his lips to speak, and was about to ask for a retrial, when he was disconcerted by the sergeant-at-arms who had been cautiously whispering to someone in the hall, had shut the door, and was now coming down the aisle with a yellow sheet of paper in his hand.

"Your Honor," began the attorney for the defense.

"One moment, Mr. Bartlett," said the judge, as he bent and took the telegram, for such it was, from the extended hand of the court official.

"It was found just outside the courtroom, your Honor," whispered the sergeant-at-arms. "There was no envelope."

The judge reflected fleetingly upon the unusual lack of an envelope; then he looked at the telegram, which had apparently not been folded or creased in any manner.

The printing at the top was strikingly faded in comparison to the sharp black of the message. He read:

A SUPREME JUSTICE WILL ARRIVE TOMORROW TO PASS ON THE TRIAL OF ELSA LAING AND TO CONSIDER HER CRIMINAL RESPONSIBILITY STOP YOU WILL NOT OCCUPY THE BENCH DURING THE TIME HE PRESIDES STOP HE WILL BE PRESENT AT THE OPENING OF COURT.

Judge Hillier dropped the paper, took off his spectacles, and began to polish them with a slow and irritating deliberation.

"Your Honor," began the attorney for the defense again.

"Please, not now," said the judge testily. He continued to polish his glasses, looking from the yellow sheet of paper to the woman in the prisoner's box, and wondering what had caused the Department of Justice to take up her case at this point. Presently he addressed the court.

"I am advised that the Government will pass on this case in the morning and will assist in determining the criminal responsibility of the defendant. I will not occupy the bench tomorrow since a Supreme Justice will sit in my place. I am obliged, therefore, to adjourn the court until ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

A murmur ran through the court, but the sharp rap of the judge's gavel silenced it.

The attorney for the defense allowed himself a brief flash of hope, patted his client's hand, and drew a deep breath, while the prosecuting attorney openly exhibited his impatience at this unforeseen delay.

The judge descended the bench. "Monstrous," he murmured, sensing in the interfering telegram a criticism of his court. Then he went into his chambers and closed the door. There he opened the telegram once more, and immediately his eyes fell upon a line which he had somehow missed at first reading.

YOU WILL ISSUE SUMMONS TO MR. JAMES MACINTYRE MRS. JANET STRAIKER AND MR. RICHARD RAJOHN TO PRESENT THEMSELVES TO AWAIT THE PLEASURE OF THIS COURT TOMORROW MORNING.

For a moment Judge Hillier imagined

that some ghastly thing had happened to his eyes, for he had at first most certainly seen only the lines he had originally read from the bench. Yet this added line had abruptly appeared and had an aspect of permanence. Judge Hillier closed his eyes tightly, then flashed them open and looked at the telegram. It was all there, both the lines he had read before and the additional line he had only just seen. He took off his glasses and looked at them as if they were responsible for the defection of his eyesight that had caused him to miss the last line on first reading.

Then, with a sigh, he sat down to issue a summons to each of the persons mentioned in the wire.

ON THE following morning, court was packed. Judge Hillier was nervous, for he must open court within a few moments, and as yet the Supreme Justice had not arrived. Ten o'clock struck. He waited a few moments more, then stalked grimly from his chamber to the bench, his quick eyes seeking and finding the three who had been summoned at the mysterious direction of the Supreme Justice.

He took up his gavel and brought it down once or twice. He was about to speak when there came a confused murmur from the courtroom, and a simultaneous craning of necks toward the door of the chamber he had just quitted. He turned, and to his amazement saw coming toward him the Supreme Justice, a venerable old man whose face seemed strikingly familiar, attired in full regalia, who, even as he walked, nodded to Judge Hillier while waving him aside with his right hand.

The Supreme Justice ascended the bench and after gazing around the room rapped for order.

Then he began to speak in a slow, carefully modulated voice that brought an instant hush to the eager onlookers. "The case of the United States *versus* Elsa Laing was held over until today at the express request of the Department of Justice. This case having been brought to our attention, the Department of Justice will this morning dispose of it through their representative who now occupies the bench.

"Elsa Laing has been found guilty in this court of using the mails to defraud. What her crime was, has not been adequately defined in the opinion of the Department of Justice. It becomes my duty to ascertain this. Ostensibly—I say ostensibly advisedly—Elsa Laing conducted a highly questionable business, upon the assurance of an income adequate to support both her and her aged mother, an income to be made throughout the year during which the business she conducted was to remain in operation, and to be of an amount sufficient to last through Elsa Laing's lifetime and also that of her mother.

"The defendant's argument is that she worked at the direction of someone she did not know, but had been assured by a respected citizen of this community that her business was strictly legal, and, drawn on by the hope of a secure home for her mother and herself, she entered into this business, not entirely without reluctance. This court has shown that the assurance by letter of this respected citizen was a forgery; whether by the defendant's hand or not remains yet to be proved.

"The defendant was engaged in selling a group of secret bond and stock issues in valueless companies, bonds and stocks upon which in the space of ten months an enormous profit had piled up. This court has shown that this profit has evidently been hidden somewhere, for Elsa Laing's bank account shows nothing but the flat sum which she was to receive for nine months' work, a sum which had been paid in cash by installments into her

account at the end of each quarter by persons unknown.

"With the exact manner in which this fraud was carried out this court is not at this moment concerned."

The Supreme Justice paused and looked cold, yet kind eyes, his strong long-fingered hands conveyed to everyone in the courtroom a sense of power so great that when his voice ceased to sound, those in the great room did not break the hush by so much as a whisper.

AGAIN the Supreme Justice spoke. "The Department of Justice has caused an investigation to be made, and has gone into the details of the case of the United States *versus* Elsa Laing with much greater care than the investigators of this District have apparently done."

Once more the Supreme Justice paused. Then he raised his voice and said, "James Ordan Macintyre is in the courtroom in answer to our summons. Let him rise and come forward."

In the silence that hung in the room, the disturbance made by the corpulent figure of James Ordan Macintyre, one of the city's most prominent bankers, sounded thrice as loud as it was. Macintyre's almost benevolent face was beaded with perspiration, and his hands trembled.

"James Ordan Macintyre," intoned the Supreme Justice slowly, " you were summoned to appear before this court so that we may enter more fully into the matter of Elsa Laing and her criminal responsbility."

For a split second a rustle disturbed the quiet of the courtroom as the attorney for the defense, his face gleaming with hope, leaned toward his client. Then the voice of the Supreme Justice sounded again.

"On the twenty-first of December last, you, having carefully disguised yourself, approached Miss Elsa Laing, who until only a few months before had been in your employ, with a scheme for the sale of worthless stocks, which you speedily convinced her were good, using a letter from a certain citizen of this community to add weight to your false claim. Miss Laing, the defendant in this case, agreed to take the helm of the so-called Universal Stock and Bond Company, which was ostensibly a mail-order brokerage house. The defendant assumed her duties on consideration of the sum of twenty thousand dollars, to be paid at the rate of five thousand dollars a quarter into her account at the First National Bank of this city. Thus far Miss Laing has reecived the sum of fifteen thousand dollars, or three-quarters of the sum she felt was necessary to maintain her for the remainder of her life.

"But, though Elsa Laing signed all outgoing letters, she answered none but those expressly left for her to answer, for the extraordinary procedure through which Miss Laing was required to do was this: all incoming mail was kept sealed and was left in the office of this Universal Stock and Bond Company which was located at number seven, Lord Street, in office number three hundred and forty-two of the Salsay Building in this city. At night, the mysterious director of this corporation—you, Mr. Macintyre—came to this office, opened this mail, and left only those letters which required answers, occasionally with directions for her replies.

"As I have before pointed out, the bonds and stocks in which this company specialized were highly speculative and in many instances almost worthless. As a result of the Company's activities, you, Mr. Macintyre, made a net profit of one hundred and seventy-seven thousand dollars, which is now drawing four and one-half percent interest in the Merchant's Bank of Talullah, Illinois. Do you admit the facts?"

It was on the tip of Mr. Macintyre's tongue to burst into a tirade of baffled fury

against the justice on the bench, but a greater power than his was in possession of his faculties; the only sound that escaped his lips was a low "Yes," accompanied by a slow nod. A mutter of amazement passed through the courtroom.

"It is the order of this court," continued the Supreme Justice in a cold even voice, "that you pay the aforesaid sum, one hundred and seventy-seven thousand dollars, together with the interest that has accrued, back to the swindled investors whose names are on file in the office of the Universal Stock and Bond Company. Furthermore, be it hereby ordered that any action on your part against this court will result in your prosecution on the charge of using the mails to defraud. You will finally complete the payment of twenty thousand dollars to Miss Elsa Laing by an additional five thousand dollars, and will besides pay all the costs of her trial. You may sit down."

To the surprise of everyone in the courtroom, James Ordan Macintyre slumped down into his seat without a murmur of protest, his face gray with terror.

The Supreme Justice smiled at the bewildered judge who sat below the bench, clasped his hands before him, closed his eyes, and stood for a moment in silence. Then an expression of weariness passed over his calm features, and he looked once more into the courtroom, where he encountered the now hopeful gaze of the defendant, and smiled at her so kindly that she could not help smiling in return.

"In answer to the summons of this court," he said, "Mrs. Janet Straiker is in the room. Let her rise and come forward."

Mrs. Janet Straiker, social leader and respected citizen, rose from her place in the rear of the crowded courtroom and made her way as if in a daze to the rail before the bench. She was a tall, imposing woman, dressed now in plain sport ensemble with a lorgnette swinging on a cord from her neck. Her face was pale, and about her eyes there was the suspicion of fright and dismay.

"Mrs. Janet Straiker," intoned the Supreme Justice, "you were summoned to appear before this court so that we may enter more fully into the matter of Elsa Laing and her criminal responsibility.

"Many years ago, when you were still a young woman, you were indiscreet, according to the conventions of your social order. Among those of your acquaintances who hold evidence of your indiscretion, the nature of which it is not the purpose of this court to probe, is James Ordan Macintyre.

"On the fifteenth of last December, the said James Ordan Macintyre appeared before you with a letter which he requested you to sign. He pointed out that the letter recommended stocks and bonds which were not solid investments, and supported a projected business, in short, the Universal Stock and Bond Company at present under discussion in this court. You objected to signing this letter, knowing that your signature carried weight, but the said Macintyre forced you to sign by threatening to expose the now forgotten indiscretion in your past. You signed. Precisely one week ago today you swore in this court that the letter you then signed was a clever forgery. Do you admit the facts?"

Mrs. Straiker could only nod; her voice had forsaken her. It seemed to her that she stood in a vast assembly, as if indeed the very heavens were stretching above her instead of the roof of the courtroom. She thought she heard the justice say "a victim of circumstance," and then abruptly came to herself.

The Supreme Justice was speaking once more. "Mrs. Janet Straiker," he said, "by committing perjury you open yourself to prosecution under the laws of this coun-

try. However, it is not the intention of this court to prosecute petty charges and you are hereby dismissed without danger of such charges being pressed in the future. Let no disrespect for this country's laws occur again. You may sit down."

Mrs. Straiker felt that if she had not sat down when she did, she would unquestionably have collapsed.

ONCE more the cold, steely eyes of the Supreme Justice sought out the form of James Ordan Macintyre.

"James Ordan Macintyre," intoned the justice once again, "rise." Without awaiting for his order to be obeyed, the justice continued. "In a safety box numbered seven hundred and seventy-six in the Merchant's Bank of Talullah, Illinois, you have locked certain papers relating to the aforementioned Mrs. Janet Straiker. You are carrying the key for this box in the pocket on the lower left side of your vest.

"It is the order of this court that you surrender this key at once to the register of this court, or prepare to face prosecution on the charge of blackmail. Come forward."

James Ordan Macintyre had stood as if hewn in stone. Now he came hesitatingly forward, his hands trembling, beads of perspiration standing out on his porcine face. Without a sound he turned over the key of his safety box to the register of the court. He wanted to ask the justice whether there was anything he didn't know, but felt instinctively that the man on the bench could have answered "No," without the slightest deviation from the truth. And James Ordan Macintyre would have believed him.

"You may sit down," resumed the Supreme Justice. "The papers relating to the aforementioned Mrs. Janet Straiker will be destroyed, as is fitting."

The justice waited until the banker had regained his seat; then he looked once more out upon the people assembled in the room. Still silence reigned.

"Mr. Richard Rajohn is in the courtroom in answer to our summons. Rise and come forward."

A tall thin man dressed in morning clothes came nervously up to the rail and faced the justice. He wore a pince-nez on a black ribbon, and carried gloves and hat in his hands.

"Your Honor," he murmured.

The Supreme Justice leaned forward. "Mr. Richard Rajohn," he intoned, "you were summoned before this court so that the case of the United States *versus* Elsa Laing could be assisted to a more satisfactory conclusion than has been reached by the District Court in the present session."

The man at the rail bowed nervously.

"Despite the directing hand of James Ordan Macintyre," continued the Supreme Justice, "yours was the intelligence behind the colossal fraud which has been perpetrated, and for whose success Elsa Laing was intended to suffer. For its conception you were paid one hundred thousand dollars by the aforementioned Macintyre, who hoped to profit exactly one hundred and fifty thousand dollars during the year which was to embrace the operations of the Universal Stock & Bond Company. This was on the seventh of December last, and the payment was made in Government bonds at your home. No witnesses were present, and no record of payment was made.

"Since that time you have not infrequently advised James Ordan Macintyre in its operation. Do you admit the facts?"

Mr. Richard Rajohn looked into the eyes of the Supreme Justice and dropped his gaze, for he saw in them a fierce white glow, as if great fires were burning deep within them.

"I admit the facts, your Honor," he murmured.

"It is the order of this court," continued the Supreme Justice, "that you distribute this one hundred thousand dollars to charity in this city. You will make a note of every distribution, and will record it with this court within twenty days of this date. Should you fail to follow this order, even by so much as one cent of the sum mentioned, you will be prosecuted for your complicity in the plot this court has uncovered. You may sit down."

Mr. Richard Rajohn went back to his seat in silence. No murmur disturbed the eager crowd, no rustle broke the almost oppressive quiet.

The Supreme Justice leaned toward the prisoner.

"Miss Elsa Laing," he intoned, "rise and receive the verdict of this court."

The woman rose, her head thrown back fearlessly, her attorney at her side.

"It is the order of this court that the United States marshal free you immediately. It is furthermore the order of this court that Mr. John Bartlett, attorney-at-law, attend to the payment of his fees and of any other fees by James Ordan Macintyre, as previously ordered, and that he make a complete report to this court within ten days."

A glad cry escaped the woman, but it died away at once, for on the other side of the bench, the attorney for the prosecution had risen, and on his face was a cloud of anger.

"I object!" he thundered.

THE Supreme Justice turned and gazed at the attorney for the Government. "Mr. Jason Hamilton, attorney for the Government," he said, "this court overrules your objection and calls you forward."

Slowly, as if drawn by an irresistible magnet, the attorney for the prosecution came forward, his eyes fixed upon the now forbidding features of the Supreme Justice. On his face there was an expression of unreasonable fear.

"Mr. Jason Hamilton," said the Supreme Justice, "it is the duty of any agent for this Government to further the cause of justice. Two weeks ago it came to your notice that Miss Elsa Laing proposed to suggest that she suspected her mysterious employer of being James Ordan Macintyre, but you objected to her making such a suggestion in the courtroom, though you yourself suspected the same fact. Is this not true?"

The attorney for the prosecution, who but a moment before had dared break into the silence of the courtroom by shouting his objection, hung his head. From his lips came an ashamed, "It is true, your Honor."

"It is the order of this court," said the Supreme Justice, "that you be suspended from the service of the Government, and it is the further recommendation of this court that the bar thoroughly examine your standing."

The Supreme Justice swept the courtroom with his eyes.

"Mr. James Ordan Macintyre, Mrs. Janet Straiker, Mr. Richard Rajohn, rise."

There was a hurried, bewildered movement in the court, as one by one, the three who had been to the rail once already came forward to stand beside the attorney for the prosecution.

"As this court has before said, it is not our intention to prosecute you for your parts in the matter before us, and this court now directs that it be recorded that all harm wrought by your dishonesty and deception has been undone, this record to be contingent upon the carrying out of the previous orders of this court.

"As for your punishment, that will be fixed at a later time. You will again appear before me. That is all. This court is adjourned; after recess Judge Hillier will again occupy the bench."

For a full minute there was no movement in the courtroom. Then came a great sigh, as if the scores of people present had sighed together, and immediately the onlookers began moving slowly toward the door. Elsa Laing got up. She moved to where the Supreme Justice stood looking over the courtroom, and stopped before the bench. He bent and smiled at her, his eyes warm and kind.

"Thank you," she murmured simply. "I prayed. Only for a little while did I doubt. Forgive me for that. I knew they could not punish me."

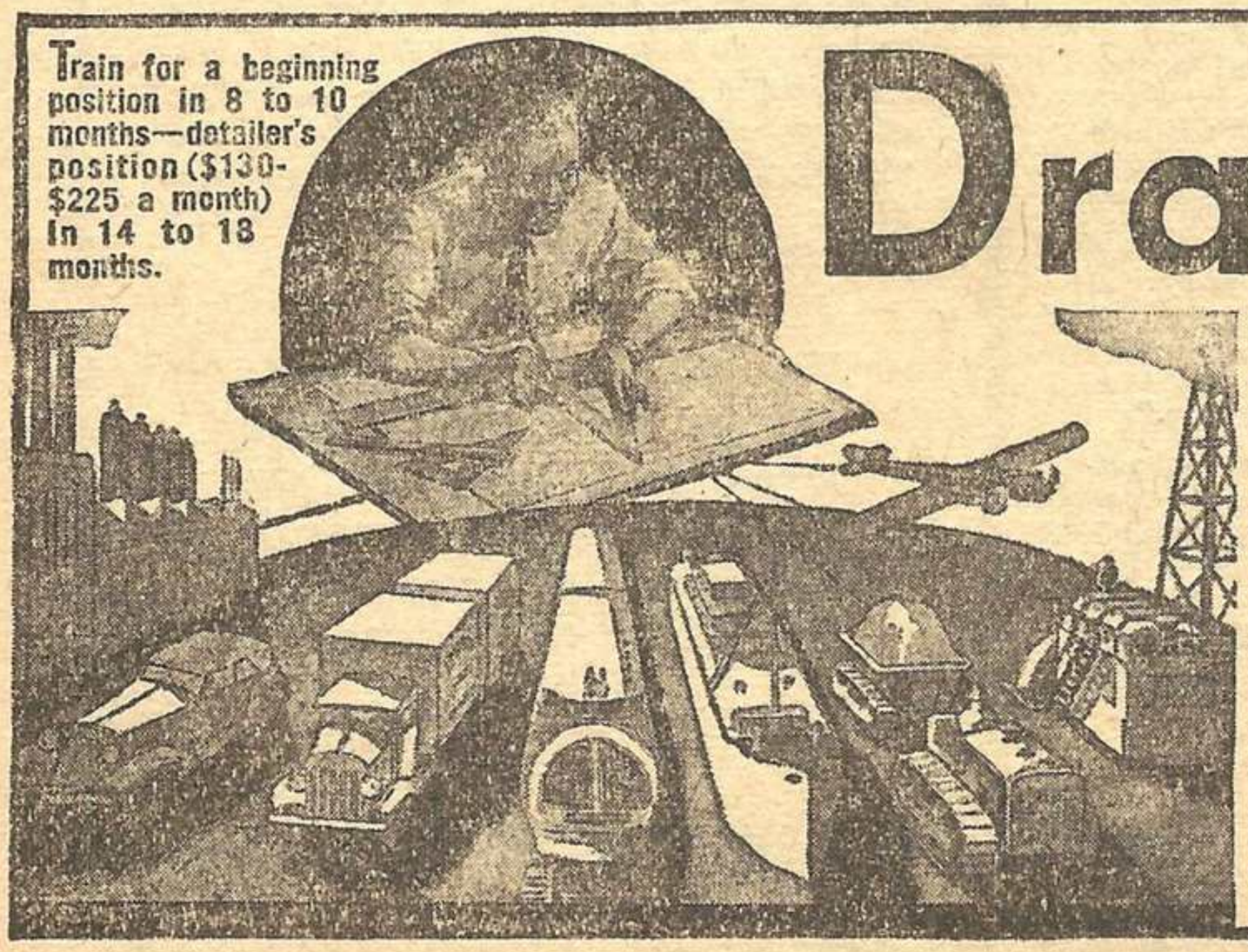
Then she, too, went from the room, followed by her attorney. The Supreme Justice was left alone with Judge Hillier. To him he now turned and spoke in a gentle voice, "Contrary to your fear of yesterday, no censure of your court was implied in our message to you. How can any man pass judgment justly? He must do his best. You have done your best. Continue to do so."

And then, before Judge Hillier could reply, a remarkable change came over the Supreme Justice. Before Judge Hillier's eyes, the justice's black robes changed into a dazzling white, and about his entire body a brilliant glow came into being. The Supreme Justice raised his arms and smiled; then he was gone!

For a minute Judge Hillier sat rooted to his chair. Then he rose, shakily, steadying himself against the bench, and moved toward the spot where the Supreme Justice had stood. His mind was in turmoil, he walked automatically, his free hand pressed against his throbbing temples, and an ineffable sweetness filled his entire being. He stepped from the bench and entered his chamber.

There his eyes was caught by something gleaming on his desk, and he knew it at once as the telegram he had received on the preceding day. He stepped over to it and looked down at it. It was no longer a sheet of yellow paper—it was no longer even paper. And it was shimmering and gleaming like the fire of a million gems, and from the shimmering surface of white stuff the message had faded and vanished, and in its stead had come another, its words alive with movement, writing in unquenchable, eternal flame:

"Come to Me, all ye persecuted—"



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WEIRD TALES

THE RETURN OF THE GREAT LOVECRAFT

Scheduled for your next issue of WEIRD TALES is a NEW novel by HOWARD PHILLIPS LOVECRAFT — titled *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*. This is NOT a reprint, has never before been published — is a scoop exclusive to the pages of WT. Too long to run complete in one issue, *Charles Ward* will appear in two instalments of twenty thousand words apiece, the first in the May and the second in the July number. Thus we are giving you complete the longest story LOVECRAFT ever wrote; and it is a completely enthralling one.

Long-time readers who have enjoyed — since the founding of the magazine — the writings of this supreme master of the weird tale, will find in this one plenty to remind them of the old days; the Necronomicon of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred, for example, together with the Cthulhu tribe, are back again in full force. While old and new readers alike will thrill over the perfect wealth of thrills in this full-blooded horror drama by an author who reigns as undisputed lord of the fantasy field.

"The Last of the Lovecrafts"

As far as is known, this is the "Last of the Lovecrafts" — although there is a bare possibility that WEIRD TALES may be able to present just one more at some future date. August W. Derleth, discoverer of *Charles Ward*, writes: "A year ago Donald Wandrei and I learnt that there existed two unpublished HOWARD LOVECRAFT novels, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, and *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath*. We found the first fifty-one pages of *Kadath*, and all of *Ward* last summer. To the best of our knowledge the remainder of *Kadath* has been lost, though we are still searching. There is no other Lovecraft story — and the possibility of *Kadath* turning up is remote."

Here, then, is a chance that you cannot afford to miss — for this novel is the very last of the LOVECRAFT works . . . unless, of course, August Derleth's quest for *The Dream Quest* should be successful.

To make certain of reading this grand tale, why not ask your newsdealer to reserve you a copy of WEIRD TALES?

SEABURY QUINN has turned in a tale of those souls in revolt — witches! It's a yarn told in the old tradition, is complete with the casting of spells and the evil eye, and the sticking of pins in wax and leaden images; but there are heaps of new goose-flesh angles. Read of the "Black Artists" — co-opters of the powers of darkness in their war to the death with the saints and angels!

We wish there were space to tell you about all the other grand yarns booked for the May number — but guess you'll just have to get the magazine and read them for yourself!

The May Issue Will Be on Sale At Your Newsstand on March 1st

"When Hildur took the crucifixes from the grave she allowed it to escape."

"And so we have driven a stake into something as dead as a lump of earth."



The Graveyard Horror

By THORP McCLUSKY

A Goose-flesh tale of the Thing that had been Karl Maercklein, and the corpse of a once-lovely girl—and the fearful laughter that floated over the cemetery.

1. Two Strange Deaths

IT WAS in May that Karl Maercklein knotted a steel-yard weight to his ankles and jumped off the covered bridge three miles south of our village, to drown in the swift cold waters of the Little Stony, and it was still the month of May when they buried Jorma Nurmi in the Nurmi family plot, a scant score of feet from the white wooden fence that separates the Dutch Reformed section of our cemetary from the several other Protestant denominations. People whispered that Karl had taken his own life because of old Sven Nurmi's oath that never would a daughter of his marry a Pennsylvania Dutchman. They said, too, that Jorma had died of a broken heart. And at the time I agreed with them—

I did not attend Jorma's funeral. No Dutchman did, for we all knew well Sven's hatred of us—a hatred whose genesis Sven himself, perhaps, had forgotten. But I called at the house in the morning, reasonably certain that Sven would retire to the kitchen through those hours, that Jorma's Dutch friends might pay her poor still body their last respects. And so it was: Sven had effaced himself.

Chris Petersen met me at the door and ushered me into the house with that stealthy unctuousness which undertakers seem able to put on and take off at will.

"For Lord's sake, Chris," I remember whispering to him as I stepped into the hallway, "don't be so sanctimonious. Sven hasn't any love for me; I feel jumpy enough as it is, coming here."

He looked at me, then. And in that instant an odd chill of bewilderment swept me. For stark horror was in his eyes.

"What's the matter, Chris?" I said, quickly.

"Nothing," he muttered. "Nothing." We were already at the living-room door. Abruptly his gloved hand dropped from my arm. "She's in there."

I went forward, alone, toward the flower-banked casket.

Even in death Jorma Nurmi was beautiful. I had not seen her since Karl Maercklein's funeral, and then only for a moment, and her face had been drawn and wan and her eyes red-rimmed from weeping. But now her girlish beauty was breath-taking. She lay as though lightly asleep, her slender hands crossed above her breasts, her fine-spun hair like gleaming gold upon the satin pillow.

I looked at her for a long moment while my mind thronged with recollections of her: as she had looked running to school, at husking-parties, or waving to me, starry-eyed, riding past my house in Karl Maercklein's decrepit old sedan. Then, with a lump in my throat and a dimness before my eyes, I stepped into the dining-room and spoke briefly, and I hope consolingly, to the distraught mother. My exact words have escaped my memory. I was too saddened by the double tragedy.

I HAD forgotten the horror I had seen lurking in Chris Petersen's eyes. But as I left the house he stopped me.

We were alone on the porch, he standing beside the rail, I, pausing on the topmost step.

"For God's sake, Chris," I said, then, "tell me what's wrong. You don't look yourself at all."

He licked his lips and nodded.

"It's them," he muttered, almost shamefully. His head jerked toward the living-room windows. "Karl Maercklein, in his grave these two weeks, and Jorma, following him so soon."

I looked into his eyes again, and checked an impulse to smile; for the realization had come to me sharply that whatever had put the fear in this stolid undertaker's soul and the quaver in his voice was a thing not idly to be pooh-poohed or laughed away.

"I don't understand, Chris," I said soberly, after a moment. "You're speaking in riddles."

His gloved fingers reached out and touched my arm. I could feel the tension and the trembling in them.

"There is a strangeness about Jorma's death; I have been talking with Doctor Strom——"

I listened carefully; Doctor Strom is a young and capable general practitioner. Sven Nurmi of course had not had in a Dutchman.

"Kurt, old friend, there is an ancient belief among our northern peoples that the soul of a suicide cannot rest until the evil that caused the unfortunate one to take his life in exorcised—a belief that the suicide's tormented soul must remain near its outraged body, dragging its loved ones into a death that is not death, but an unholy cessation of life and suspension of true death akin to its own."

I looked at him narrowly.

"You're an old fool," I said, after a moment.

He stared at me, his jaws taut.

"Yes?" he said quietly. "Kurt, it is not normal for a young girl to die of a broken heart. I doubt if anyone, anywhere, ever

really died of heartbreak—and I do not say this merely to be cynical. Heartbreak, of course, may cause a person to so neglect himself that death will ensue through secondary causes. But Jorma Nurmi did not die of starvation, or thirst, or infection. She merely died—within two weeks."

"Oh, fiddle!" I said bluntly. "I've heard enough. I've got to get along."

He put his hand on my arm.

"Listen, Kurt. Karl Maercklein's body lay at the bottom of the Little Stony through a night and half a day before it was found. Yet, on that suicide night, when no one on earth could know that he was already dead, Jorma Nurmi dreamed that he came to her! That dream was so extraordinarily vivid that in the morning she told her mother. Kurt, how in heaven's name did Jorma Nurmi know—*know* that Karl Maercklein was a suicide—hours before his body was found?"

Despite myself I was impressed. He spoke with such utter conviction. Uneasily, then, I shrugged.

"Telepathy, perhaps," I suggested. "In the last supreme moment before extinction a man's mind may perform incredibilities. We know that telepathic visions are recognized phenomena. What more natural than that Karl, in his last instant of life, should wish to communicate with Jorma?"

He shook his head.

"Jorma Nurmi's dreams of her lover recurred again and again, night after night. Kurt, I have talked with her family and with Doctor Strom. In the last hours she lay like a living, emaciated thing from which the soul has already fled. The pupils of her eyes no longer reacted to light; her motor reflexes were gone. Yet Strom was filling her full of stimulants. Kurt, she was like a machine voluntarily deserted by its driver!"

"Oh, tush," I said impatiently. "You're imagining things."

He stared at me, and there was no more expression in his blue eyes than in a china doll's. He laughed, then, harshly.

"If you'll come to the cemetery with me tonight, Kurt," he said with macabre significance, "I'll show you proof!"

Sharply, then, he paused; for two mourners, a middle-aged husband and wife, were slowly coming up the walk. Instantaneously, as an actor clothes body and soul in the spirit of the part he plays, he straightened, became again the mortician. Only the horror in his eyes remained.

"Very well, Chris. I'll come with you."

I turned slowly away, bowing to the husband and wife as I passed them on the sun-bathed walk.

2. Karl Maercklein's Grave

"CHRIS, I think we're acting like a couple of doddering old fools!"

Our muscles protesting against the chill night air, Chris Petersen and I stood on the narrow gravel road that wanders through the Dutch Reformed section of the cemetery. It was abysmally dark, for there was no moon; all about us we sensed, rather than saw, the slender-shafted tombstones and the grassy mounds beneath which slept the dead. Then the yellow beam from Chris's flashlight split the gloom, revealed a small, new headstone and a grave which still showed the crude rectangular pattern in which the slabs of grassy topsoil had been carefully removed and replaced. Karl Maercklein's grave. . . .

Almost resentfully I looked down at the high-shouldered, new grave. Half a dozen moss-filled wire frames and the withered shreds of dead flowers still littered the mound, and I saw that some one had recently placed at the gravehead a small cornucopia of zinnias, asters, and foxglove. The unpleasant thought occurred to me that within a score of years at most I, too, would become a permanent inhabitant of this cemetery. . . .

Chris had turned the flashlight beam down upon the grave and was searching, with careful, painstaking slowness, every inch of the turf. At last he dropped to his knees and commenced parting the withered grass with his left hand.

"Kurt!"

Crouching at his shoulder, I intently scrutinized the circle of turf, located at about the middle of the grave mound, upon which he had focussed the light. But I could see nothing worthy of interest—only a hump of withered grass and the dead, desiccated remnant of the funeral flowers. And—yes—two small holes, close together, barely visible between the blades of grass—holes that looked as if they might have been made by the fat night-crawlers boys use for bait.

Chris had put his left hand on my arm.

"See there, Kurt?" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Those little holes? I noticed them days ago. And the old legends say——"

I straightened stiffly.

"You're an idiot," I said impatiently. "Those holes were made by earthworms, and you know it. Come—it's getting chilly."

Abruptly he snapped off the flashlight, and the sudden, swooping rush of darkness affected me far more unpleasantly than all his vague, wild allusions. In the black gloom I heard him breathing heavily. Then, after a moment, as we turned slowly from the grave, his words came to me.

"Kurt, I can feel it: before many days have passed you will wish with all your heart that you had helped me cleanse Karl Maercklein's grave—tonight."

3. The Wings of Death

DURING the days immediately ensuing, I found it oddly difficult to efface from my mind the memory of Chris's vague hintings. He had seemed so convinced, and withal so sane, that I caught myself, more frequently than I would have believed, wondering if it were not barely within the realm of possibility that obscure phenomena, such as that at which he hinted, phenomena of a half-occult, half-physical nature, might not really be. Uneasily I recalled the legends, some of which were even affirmed by the mediæval church, legends which denied heaven, hell, and even limbo—that shadowy realm many students of the occult believe really exists—to the soul of a suicide. And yet I confess that I thought of these things indulgently, and, as the days passed, with greater and greater infrequence.

And then, early one evening, Wilfrid Andersen called me to his home. Hildur, his wife, was ill. And as I climbed into my car and threw my bag on the seat beside me I abruptly remembered, with an odd, uncomfortable start, that Jorma Nurmi and Hildur Andersen had been sisters—Hildur only a little more than a year older than the dead girl.

Wilfrid met me at his front door and ushered me into his house. We shook hands pleasantly; he had none of old Sven Nurmi's prejudices against the Dutch. I found Hildur lying on a couch in the parlor. She smiled at me faintly when I entered the room. After a few unimportant words Wilfrid left us alone.

Hildur's appearance was a distinct shock to me. The Nurmi's are normally a healthy family; until Jorma's illness the girls—tall, straight-limbed, high-breasted blonds—had known very little sickness. But Hildur! When last I had seen her she had weighed a little over one hundred and twenty pounds, every ounce of her firm, radiant flesh. And now she looked little more than a bag of bones. The skin was drawn so tightly over her temples that it looked almost transparent; the contours of her skull and cheekbones were knife-sharp.

I examined her thoroughly, questioned

her with particular care about her diet. At the conclusion of my examination I was completely puzzled. For the girl was organically sound, and there was no trace of disease in her. Her eyes were slightly glazed.

I attempted my most jovial attitude.

"There, there, Hildur!" I said reproachfully. "A big girl like you lying about the house! You should get a grip on yourself. Try and forget what has happened and put your thoughts on more pleasant things. You've had a bad time, I know, but there's nothing really wrong with you."

She smiled at me, a smile of sheer amusement.

"No, Doctor Kurt," she said quietly. "There is nothing really wrong with me. Within a few days I shall be dead; but you are right, there is nothing really wrong with me——"

"Dead?" I ejaculated stupidly.

For an instant the glaze seemed to lift from her eyes as she looked at me. The amused smile on her lips deepened.

"Dead," she repeated softly. "And unutterably happy. And it will not be long before Wilfrid follows me. Jorma was my favorite sister. . . ."

She turned her face to the wall.

"Practical people like you, Doctor Kurt, are sometimes so terribly stupid. Go away now, and let me sleep and dream——"

Her voice trailed off in silence.

4. To Drive a Stake

"AND that's the gist of it, Chris. I've left medicines with Wilfrid, and Hildur seems vaguely amused but perfectly willing to take them, and in my heart I know that they won't do her any good. The girl wants to die, Chris. And God knows what ails her."

I had gone straight from the Andersen's to Chris Petersen's house, and now we were seated in the undertaker's office-parlor, with its rubber plants and marble-topped table and straight-backed, formal chairs.

Chris put his hands on his bony knees and stared at me.

"I warned you, Kurt," he said gravely. "Something damnable is beginning here in our village, or, rather, began with Karl Maercklein's suicide. What it is we know only vaguely; we have no precedent to study, only legend. But we do know that this phenomenon must be stopped, and as speedily as possible. Obviously, Karl Maercklein's soul is not at rest. Obviously, too, Karl Maercklein's soul must be freed from the bonds which force it to remain near the living before we can hope to end this chain of death."

There was humility in me now, as I listened to the middle-aged mortician. For with the failure of my medical knowledge had come bewilderment.

"Yes," I asked uncertainly, "and how are we to know of what those bonds consist?"

He shook his head impatiently.

"They can consist only of flesh and blood—of the flesh and blood from which his soul was separated before the proper time. Karl Maercklein's suicide was, in one way, distinctly peculiar. His body was unmutilated. The old legends speak of stakes through the heart, and of burnings. We must render Karl Maercklein's body uninhabitable."

"And Jorma Nurmi's——" I whispered.

"Yes. And Jorma Nurmi's."

An oppressive silence fell between us. My gaze was fixed, with a kind of dull fascination, on a worn spot at a corner of the rug. I spoke, then, uneasily.

"Neither the Maercklein's nor Sven Nurmi would permit any tampering with those graves. There is the possibility that

we may be caught. I have no desire to be sentenced to state's prison as a ghoul!"

He looked at me for a moment. A curious stubborn opacity was deepening in his blue eyes.

"Gustav Wendt, the caretaker, lives in the small lodge behind the cemetery chapel. To the best of my knowledge he has never in his life refused a free drink of whiskey. And I doubt if any spooners would wish to visit the cemetery late at night—at this time of year. The graves are new graves; we could restore them to their present appearance without difficulty."

I stared at the worn spot in the rug.

"We would require another man."

"Yes. I have talked with Wilfrid Andersen. He is willing to help."

That calm statement completely surprised me.

"Wilfrid said nothing to me today," I observed, puzzled.

Chris nodded. "I told him of your—doubt. But he believes as I believe. He has kept me informed, each day, of Hildur's condition. We have only waited as long as we have in order to be sure."

Suddenly, then, he stood up, went to his small spinet desk, and extracted a long flat envelope which apparently contained several angular metallic objects.

"Come," he said, quietly.

Without comment he slipped the envelope into his breast pocket.

5. Hatching a Conspiracy

AS WE left the house and walked down the driveway toward the garden I could not refrain from asking Chris what was in the envelope he had just placed in his pocket. His answer was laconic.

"Crucifixes."

"Crucifixes!" I exclaimed. "But—we aren't Roman Catholics, Chris; neither were Jorma and Karl."

He put his hand earnestly on my arm.

"We're going into this thing almost blindly, Kurt. And it is possible, as you imply, that these crucifixes may have no efficacy. But we would be fools indeed if we left any weapons untested. And as for our not being Roman Catholics—the significance of the Cross extends far beyond the confines of Catholicism. Sometimes I wonder, Kurt, if we Protestants are not unwise in attaching so little importance to the great symbols of religion. But—here we are."

The toolhouse loomed before us, a blacker blotch against the night. Chris disappeared within. I heard the sodden clanking of metal against wood, and then he reappeared, his arms burdened with a folded tarpaulin, a spade, a shovel, a crowbar, and two short stakes, each about ten inches long and sharpened at one end to a rapier point; stakes that had apparently been sawed from a hardwood shovel handle.

Methodically, then, he distributed those grim tools between us, and we walked down the driveway to his car, where we put them on the floor in the rear. Climbing into the car, we drove to Wilfrid Andersen's.

Wilfrid seemed unsurprised to see me. He gripped my hand for a moment, hard, as we entered the house, but he said nothing. We went into the parlor and sat down. The couch upon which Hildur had lain, earlier in the evening, was unoccupied.

"I carried her upstairs and put her to bed," Wilfrid said, in answer to our unspoken question.

"You gave her the sedative tablets?" I asked.

Chris was standing beside the parlor table, his lean hands sharply outlined in the bright light from the table lamp. He had ripped open the envelope, and on the table top lay a motley assortment of small

crucifixes. I was wondering, idly, how and where he had obtained them.

"Wilfrid," he said then, slowly, "take these crucifixes upstairs and fasten them on the window-shades. Pin one on Hildur's nightdress, and tie one to the door-knob. See that the windows are securely closed, and the door locked."

With a curious, childish reverence Wilfrid Andersen took up the crucifixes and left the room. We waited, standing in silence in the center of that old-fashioned parlor.

From overhead we heard the soft thud of a closing window, then the creaking of the stairs beneath Wilfrid's descending footsteps.

"She is sound asleep."

Together we three left the house. Outside we paused on the board walk for a moment while Chris tersely outlined what we should do.

"Wilfrid, in the side pocket of my car are three pints of whiskey. Take that whiskey, spill some of it on your clothes and rinse your mouth with an ounce or so. Doctor Kurt will give you something to put in Gustav's drink; be very careful that he doesn't detect you. We will wait an hour before we follow, and we will not drive into the cemetery; your job is merely to keep Gustav occupied. If possible, drug him, but if you cannot give him the drug do the next best thing: get him full of liquor. When we have—finished—we will walk to my car and sound the horn, very briefly, at five-minute intervals. Do you understand?"

Very gravely, then, Wilfrid looked at us.

"Yes, I understand," he said, in a low, firm voice. "I will do exactly as you say."

Chris rested his hand for a moment on the young man's arm.

"Wilfrid, if any spooners drive up to the chapel gate, keep them from entering the cemetery. Only God and we three must ever know what happens tonight."

6. A Corpse Exhumed

MIDNIGHT was near when Chris, after a wait that had seemed an eternity, started the motor of his car and sent us gliding quietly through the streets of the sleeping village. The distance was not great; presently we were passing the long wrought-iron fence behind which the closely packed tombstones nestled amid somber, conventionally trimmed evergreens. We drove past the arched gateway, past the small sandstone chapel and the caretaker's lodge. Two rectangles of yellow light stared at us through drawn shades, and Wilfrid Andersen's five-year-old sedan stood black and still beside the road, close against the tall iron fence.

Softly Chris's car slipped along the narrow gravel road, one hundred, two hundred yards. Carefully, then, Chris drove the car off the road and into the underbrush, shut off the motor and lights. In the thick gloom we climbed from the car and fumbled in the tonneau for the grisly implements we had brought. Silently, cautiously, we felt our way across the road and along the wrought-iron fence until we came to the square sandstone pillar that marked its termination. Here, running back from the road, began a three-strand barbed-wire fence that bounded this side of the cemetery. Stooping between the strands, we found ourselves on hallowed ground.

Here darkness, palpable, almost opaque, lay like a fluid blanket on the smoothly cropped grass and the unpleasantly suggestive little mounds across which we stumbled. The night was chill, yet there was no tang in the air; I knew that before many hours had passed there would be dank, drizzling rain. We dared not use Chris's flashlight.

It was not far to the inner, picket fence that encloses the Dutch Reformed section of the cemetery. Sliding our macabre tools

under the fence, we climbed over the breast-high barrier.

Abruptly, Chris stopped. I sensed that he was feeling about for the bits of wire and moss that would mark Karl Maercklein's grave. Presently he grunted.

"All right, Kurt. We'll spread the tarpaulin out here. We'll have to be careful about taking up the sod—the grave must look untouched. I think that it will be safe to risk the light when we replace the sod; it will be very late by then."

We began to dig—

It was slow, grisly toil. By the sense of touch alone we cut away the top sod and piled it carefully on a corner of the tarpaulin.

Then with spade and shovel we attacked the still loosely packed earth and sand beneath. But although we worked doggedly, without pause, while the sweat ran down our backs and the pile of loose earth on the tarpaulin grew waist-high, two hours had passed before Chris's shovel grated against the steel vault enclosing the coffin. Then black moments elapsed while we scraped the smooth metal clean.

A small circle of ruby light, hardly more than the dullest glow, touched the earth-encrusted steel. We were now six feet beneath the lip of the grave, and that dim light could not be seen except by someone in the immediate vicinity. Chris had covered the flashlight lens with crimson tissue paper. He was on his knees, fumbling with the clamps that sealed the vault—

Six clamps, and the lid of the vault lay loosely above the coffin. Using crowbar and spade we pried it up, lifted it from the grave and stood it beside the mound of earth. The gray, cloth-covered coffin, as yet untouched by water seepage, lay revealed, pallidly red beneath the flashlight's glow.

With professional skill, though with hands that violently trembled, Chris released the silver clamps that locked the coffin lid in place. Carefully he tilted it back. . . . We were kneeling precariously on the edges of the coffin and the vault, at opposite ends of the grave. Between us, beneath our eyes, lay the body of Karl Maercklein.

The body lay exactly as it had lain after Chris had prepared it for burial. The hands were folded on the breast, the eyes were closed. There was a quarter-inch growth of beard on the face, and the nails had grown considerably. The cheeks were sunken, but the throat was bloated, and on the forehead the flesh had turned dark. The clothing about the torso was tight-stretched, and the corpse exuded a noticeable odor of disinfectant, mingled with the unmistakable miasma of decay.

I looked at Karl Maercklein's body, barely visible in the reddish glow from Chris's darkened flashlight, and felt my flesh crawl.

"Chris," I whispered, then, "we've made a terrible, terrible mistake! That body is completely dead; it has already begun to decompose. We've let our crazy thoughts run away with us; we've tried to inject the supernatural into normal, human death! God! let's refill the grave and leave him in peace!"

Through minutes that dragged leadenly Chris crouched there above the head of the casket, while the dank night silence sent chill after chill of fear and horror sweeping my body. Then his voice came to me in a strange, hoarse whisper.

"Yes—yes! But I must first be sure—"

I saw his right hand fumble within his coat, emerge clutching a small scalpel. The hand moved downward, the scalpel sheared through the flesh above a rotting artery. Then Chris's fingers pressed gently against the dead flesh.

From the small incision oozed a thin trickle of embalming fluid.

"Dead," he whispered, then. "Utterly dead. I must have been mad."

7. *Hildur*

FORTY minutes later, our muscles stiff and sore, our nerves shrieking from the strain they had undergone, we tamped the last square of sod down on Karl Maercklein's grave and replaced the wire frames that had once held floral wreaths and the cornucopia of withering flowers. Dead tired, moving like automatons, we folded the tarpaulin and stood for a long moment in the darkness, listening intently. Then, for an instant, Chris flashed the beam from the light, brilliant now that he had removed the obscuring red paper, across the grave, snapped off the torch.

"It will rain before many hours," he muttered. "Thank God for that!"

Stumbling wearily, we turned away. Minutes that seemed years later we climbed into Chris's car and returned over the gravel road past the caretaker's lodge. The twin lights still gleamed from the windows, and Wilfrid Andersen's car still stood unobtrusively beside the road. We drove on a hundred yards and sounded the horn. In a few minutes we heard the whir of Wilfrid's starter and the clashing of gears. We drove on, then, and Wilfrid followed us to his house.

Without speaking we three entered. Within the house Wilfrid left us. "Hildur," he had said, thickly. . . .

Like dream sounds I heard his footsteps ascending the stairs. And then, splitting the quiet, came his agonized scream!

For an instant Chris and I stared at each other. Then we plunged up the narrow stairs.

The door to Hildur's room stood open, and from that gaping portal streamed a rectangle of brilliant light. Like men amok we burst into the room.

Wilfrid Andersen stood in the center of the hooked rug beside the bed, his young figure tense, his haggard eyes riveted on the lax, still body of his wife, crumpled there among the disheveled bedcoverings like a bit of incredible waxworks.

God! When I had visited her earlier in the evening she had been thin, emaciated almost beyond belief, but now she was literally unrecognizable. She was a skeleton over which thin parchment had been stretched; her right hand, hanging limply over the side of the bed, seemed almost transparent. I have seen tubercular patients hovering at death's very door, but never before nor since have I seen a body so emaciated that still held life.

For she was alive. There was still pulse in her, though faint as the flickering of a guttering candle, and I knew that only an immediate transfusion would save her life.

8. *The Three Crucifixes*

GRAY dawn was in the room before I dared, even for a moment, to turn from Hildur's side. I was dog-tired, and my nerves were like old rubber—the resilience had gone from them. I had the feeling that if someone were to fire off a revolver beside my ear, or if Satan himself were to step into the room, I would not start.

The room was still with a ghastly quietude. Wilfrid, his face pale from loss of blood, had not uttered a word since I drew the tubing from his arm and bandaged the incision. Chris Petersen stood before the window, his back to the room, gazing out into the lightening grayness. He was pondering, I knew; he had been pondering thus for a long time. . . .

And then he turned, and his brows narrowed as he gazed about the room.

"I was right, Kurt," he muttered slowly. "We should have done to Karl Maercklein's body as the old legends say; we should have severed the links that still enchain his soul. I was deceived by the fact

that his body had begun to decompose. It was contrary to the tales I had heard. But now we have additional proof. This—this death that reached for Hildur last night was no ailment you will find in your medical books, Kurt. We have it all to do over again."

I lifted my right hand and stared for a moment at the unfamiliar blisters that had formed at the base of my fingers, then let the hand drop to my side again.

"Yes, Chris," I said tonelessly. "We have it all to do over again."

He took a step toward me. The puzzled frown still creased his forehead.

"I had hoped—the crucifixes——" he said uncertainly. Then he glanced at Hildur's thin, exhausted form.

A small, triangular rent showed in the pale yellow of her nightdress. She had torn the crucifix from her breast in the night—

My eyes followed Chris's to the door. The crucifix that Wilfrid had tied to the door-knob still hung there at the end of its bit of string. And then I heard Chris's hoarse exclamation as he swiftly stooped at the foot of the bed and retrieved a second crucifix, attached to a tattered fragment of cloth.

"She threw it from her!" he whispered. "Even in her drugged slumber, she threw it from her! But there was a crucifix at the window!"

He peered for an instant uncomprehendingly at the shade. Then his gaze lifted, focussed on the roller at the top of the window. Swiftly he strode over, grasped the ringed cord and drew the shade down. Still pinned to the shade was the third crucifix.

"I understand," he muttered, then. "I understand—"

I, too, understood. Hildur had risen from her bed and gone to the window, perhaps with the hell-induced impulse of ripping away the crucifix. But the shade had pulled away from her weakened hands, winding up on the roller.

And then Chris jerked the cord, releasing the shade. It ran half up and stopped abruptly. The crucifix, winding around the roller, had increased the bulk of the shade so that it would roll up no further.

I could see the shape of the crucifix plainly, where it had stopped the roller—a small, angular, *inverted* bulge within the shade!

Silently, then, Chris gathered together the crucifixes and went out of the house. And I knew that he was going to put them on the graves.

9. The Thing in the Grave

THE long day was gone, and again it was close upon midnight when, for the second time, we stood in the blackness beside Karl Maercklein's grave and arranged our grisly tools. The chill rain that we had been expecting had already begun—occasional flurries of fine, sleet-like moisture struck into our faces and settled mistily upon our clothing. Small chance, we told ourselves, that spooners would come near the cemetery tonight.

Swiftly Chris removed the two crucifixes from the head and foot of Karl Maercklein's grave and put them carefully within his coat.

Despite the unaccustomed lameness in our muscles we worked much faster, once we began to dig, than we had labored twenty-four hours ago. For we were in less fear of interruption, and, too, the earth through which we had already dug was now broken up and easier to handle. In less than an hour Karl Maercklein's casket lay open, and Karl Maercklein's face stared upward at us, ghastly beneath the dull reddish beam from Chris's shaded flashlight.

And ghastly, too, for another reason—a reason that sent the ice coursing through

my veins like needles of fire, a reason that sucked the strength from my crouching legs and clutching hands and swirled my brain with a temporary vertigo that almost plunged me, a gibbering madman, head foremost upon the corpse!

For Karl Maercklein's face had changed! The reddened cheeks were no longer sunken, and the bloating had gone from the throat. And the beard was only slightly noticeable, about as it had been, Chris told me afterward, when first he saw the body. The discoloration was no longer apparent on the forehead. The torso was normal, and the nails were once more short!

And, although the odor of disinfectant remained, striking upward at us from the coffin, that other, horrible miasma of decay had disappeared!

And then I heard Chris's voice, wheezing, whispering:

"Dear God, Kurt, it is as though to-night those crucifixes kept the hellish life that inhabits this corpse from escaping—the hellish life that was elsewhere last night! For the thing has come back, and driven from itself all trace of decomposition! God, Kurt—by day it rots and by night it roams about and rejuvenates itself!"

For an instant his hand touched the pocket in which rested the small crucifixes he had picked up from the grave before we began to dig. And I knew that the thing was alive. The crucifixes had bound it to its tomb!

Uncertainly Chris stood up on the metal edge of the vault, fumbled with his right hand about the lip of the grave. When again he crouched down he held in that hand one of the thick hardwood stakes—a stake that he had sharpened to a needle point.

"All right, Kurt," he said then, his voice grim. "Hold this over his heart, and hold it steadily."

He handed me the stake. And in that hideous moment I was conscious of myself as two entities—I was myself living a nightmare, and I was myself looking on, watching my own dream as one watches a play. But I placed the stake against the breast of the corpse, moving it about until it was between the false ribs, tilting it so that it would strike upward into the heart. I had to lean forward, had to place my left hand on the edge of the vault to retain my balance. The smooth steel was cold against my flesh.

Chris lifted the crowbar. He had jammed the flashlight into a corner of the grave; beneath its red rays we looked like demons from one of Doré's hells.

And then, like lightning searing into my brain, I heard the soundless pleadings of the thing! And the words that seemed to spring alive within my brain—thought-words that never passed mortal lips—were in the voice of Karl Maercklein!

I saw the crowbar tremble, saw Chris's lips twist momentarily, and I knew that he had heard the thing. And then the crowbar swung downward through a clumsy arc, and the stake sank half its length into the corpse, and bright, red blood, mingled with a quantity of embalming-fluid, jetted upon my hands from the wound. And again the crowbar lifted and fell, and now the stake had sunk its length into the corpse, to grate against the floor of the casket.

I looked at the thing, at the blood that spurted from the great wound. And I looked at its face, and a cry burst from my lips—a cry that I would not have recognized as any human sound.

The discoloration had once again overspread its face. Once again the cheeks were sunken, and the bloating had returned to the throat. The nails, springing from hands now bathed with fresh blood, had abruptly grown long, and the torso was swollen. A quarter-inch growth of

beard showed on the jaws; the sickening odor of decay struck into my nostrils.

And yet, crouching there six feet beneath the surface of the earth, surrounded by and bathed in horror, I felt suddenly at peace. For as though from an incredible distance I seemed to hear Karl Maercklein's voice returning to me, thanking me for what I had done, and urging me on—to do more. . . .

10. The Voices in the Cemetery

WORKING with painstaking care beneath brief, eerie gleams from Chris's flashlight, we restored Karl Maercklein's grave as perfectly as we could to a semblance of undisturbed naturalness. The brief gusts of rain were coming with increasing frequency, and our hearts were almost light as we replaced the rectangles of sod and the shriveled remnants of floral wreaths and sprays and the cornucopia of fresh flowers. And yet we knew that the more terrible portion of our task remained undone. We must perform for Jorma Nurmi that which we had already accomplished for her sweetheart, and the time was short. Dawn was but two hours away.

Hurriedly we gathered together our soil-encrusted tools, paused for a last brief inspection of the grave. Then, stumbling uncertainly, dragging our leaden limbs across the acres of billowing grave mounds, we made our way from the Dutch Reformed portion of the cemetery to the Nurmi plot. Here, in the utter darkness, we halted.

I could hear Chris's breathing as he moved about, trying to locate Jorma's grave. And then, with unexpected, nerve-shriveling abruptness, came his startled oath! Simultaneously the light sprang on, illuminating redly the ground at his feet.

The body of Hildur Andersen lay there across Jorma Nurmi's flower-strewn grave!

I exclaimed something, hoarsely. And then I moved forward, dropped to my knees beside that quiet form. Mechanically, my hands went about their work. Vaguely I realized that there was no discernible pulse, that Hildur's body was cold—

"She is dead, Chris."

He sucked in his breath, sharply. When he spoke, his words were grim and bleak.

"The thing that Karl Maercklein had made of Jorma called—and with her last strength she came. But why? Ah—to remove the crucifixes from the grave!"

He loomed over the grave, and I saw that no crucifix remained upon the flower-strewn mound. Hildur Andersen had hurled them into the dark.

Chris was looking down at the grave.

"It has left Jorma's body," he muttered. "But I think that it is near. It must know of what we are doing, and it must be afraid."

He broke off abruptly, seemed almost to be listening. And I, too, listened, though for what tangible sound I had not the slightest conception. And yet I heard it, or, rather, sensed it, there in the night about us, steeping the night with unclean, unhuman, macabre exultation. And the horror was that the thing was Jorma, a hellish distortion of the Jorma I had known. And it was as though a second, vaguer individuality shadowed the invisible presence that was Jorma; I also seemed to know that Hildur was there, anxiously questioning.

"God, Chris!" I mumbled, then. "I can feel things—watching us!"

For what seemed an eternity he stood there. . . .

"Yes," he said at last, slowly. "Jorma is watching. And Hildur. And I can feel the strength and the uncleanliness in Jorma, but Hildur seems somehow anxious—and lost. I wonder——"

I peered into the blackness, as though by straining my eyes I could glimpse the intangible, the invisible. I sensed, then, that in the darkness he had stooped, had lifted, gently, Hildur Andersen's body from Jorma's grave and put it as gently down. For time flew, that night, on sable wings, and there was much that remained undone.

We began to dig, first putting aside the scarcely wilted floral pieces and removing the blocks of sod with meticulous care. The sandy soil beneath the thin blanket of grass was still loose, and we dug now with gruesome, mindless efficiency—it was as though our muscles had gradually learned, of themselves, how to dig in the dark.

I have a fragmentary recollection of removing my jacket and placing it over Hildur's still form. The intermittent mistiness had turned into a chill, fine rain.

And as we worked, the odd conviction returned to me, again and again, that Jorma Nurmi's spirit, somehow no longer the sweet clean soul I had known, but a soul distorted as though seen in reflection in some enchanted mirror that left it a gargoylish thing of alien evil, hovered above us both and laughed as we dug.

"God, Chris," I remember saying, as we neared the lid of the vault, "I don't think that whatever—whatever is hovering above us, watching us—has the least fear of what we're going to do. It seems—*amused!*"

Chris did not reply. For at that moment the spade and shovel grated against the smooth steel lid of the vault, and there was the work of unclamping the lid and lifting it aside, of releasing the silver clamps within the vault and opening the white satin coffin—

ONCE again I gazed upon the sweet young face I had known and loved, weird now beneath the reddish glow from Chris's shrouded flashlight, quietly calm and serene amid the awful accouterments of death. I was grateful, in that moment, that the grave had not yet had time to progress far in its terrible task of dissolution; Jorma's face, except for a slight puffiness beneath the eyes and the jawbone, was as beautiful as in life. And yet—her fine blond hair lay upon a small satin pillow, and I steadied my precariously poised body against a six-foot wall of cold, damp earth. And already a thin film of rain covered her face, her virgin-white dress, her folded hands—

"The stake," Chris said, his voice horribly calm, and as calmly my right hand reached out, grasped the thick section of shovel handle he had sharpened to a rapier-point. I saw the crowbar swing up.

The crowbar fell heavily, lifted again, and beneath my hand the stake had settled three inches into the still young breast. And as I felt it move downward between my fingers I shuddered, for it had met with more resistance than had that other, driven into Karl Maercklein's rotting body. And yet no spurt of blood welled through the torn, indented dress!

Again and again the crowbar fell, and with the third blow I could feel the tip of the stake root itself firmly against the bed of the casket.

Yet about the wound had appeared no blood—only a slight oozing of embalming-fluid. No fantistic change had taken place in the corpse; it lay there stilly beneath our eyes, unchanged, the body of one dead. I wiped my brow.

Chris was looking down at the corpse.

"Strange!" he muttered. I had thought —and yet—we have done what we did to Karl, and it is nearly dawn——"

He commenced tilting the satin-lined lid over the corpse.

And then, out of the darkness, it struck at us—the thing's laughter, fiendish, triumphal, exultant—the soundless laughter of an entity we could neither see nor feel

nor hear, yet laughter none the less real. And sharply Chris paused, and his words came across the casket lid to me—deliberate, measured, assured.

"It laughed too soon, Kurt," he said quietly. "It believed that the danger had passed, and it could not longer restrain itself—

"It was not in the corpse, Kurt. When Hildur took the crucifixes from the grave she allowed it to escape. And so we have driven a stake into something as dead as a lump of earth. But—we freed Karl Maercklein because the thing was in him when we struck. Very well; we will wait until dawn!"

For an instant there was silence. More than silence, for even the soundless laughter of the evil that had warped and wound itself about and amid the soul of Jorma Nurmi had suddenly ceased. And I caught myself looking upward at the black sky, wondering when would come the dawn.

"It will not be long," Chris muttered grimly. "Perhaps an hour. We must wait; it is the only chance left to us. We know less about this horror than little children know about metaphysics. Yet we know that dimly, vaguely, the legends follow the truth."

Prosaically, in that moment I felt pitiably grateful that the rain was coming down with greater and greater violence, and that the Nurmi plot lay behind a thin blanketing of spruces. And we would be watchful—after the dawn—

WE climbed from the open grave, then, and settled down grimly to waiting, to waiting that seemed endless. The presences—Jorma's vindictive, and Hildur's vague and bewildered—had seemingly gone. And yet I was apprehensive.

And then, suddenly, I felt Chris, huddled close beside me on a corner of the drenched tarpaulin, tense.

"Shh!"

A moment passed. And then I heard the sounds, the sodden, stumbling hurrying sounds. Someone was running toward us, through the blackness amid the graves.

"God!" My fist tightened around the shovel handle as I stood erect. If that person came closer—if we were discovered! I clubbed the shovel handle between my hands, with the iron bit toward me and the smooth wood extended. Perhaps, if the man stumbled upon us, one sharp blow would stun him before he recognized us. I must not strike too hard—

And then my hands loosed their grip, and the shovel dropped unheeded to the dank earth. For the man was mumbling, babbling crazily to himself, and I had recognized his voice.

The man was Wilfrid Andersen!

He was stumbling his way to the body of his wife, crouching above her.

"Wilfrid!" The dull red glow of Chris's flashlight stabbed down into the upturned face. He was stroking her brow, her temples!

"Wilfrid!" It was Chris speaking, soothingly, trying to calm the man. "She's dead, Wilfrid."

"Dead?"

He turned toward us slowly.

"Dead?"

Beads of moisture gleamed redly on his haggard face.

"She is not dead!"

His voice was full of a wild, insane conviction.

"Jorma came to me, there in Gustav's lodge, and told me that she was here, and what I must do in order to regain her!"

His lips curled back from his teeth, and his muscles, as he crouched there, tightened.

"Fill up that grave, you damned ghouls! Fill up that grave, or I'll kill you both, here and now, with my bare hands!"

He was crouching like an animal at bay, crouching above the still body of his wife. Young, powerful, maddened with grief, facing us two old men.

"Listen, you damned ghouls! Can't you hear her speaking to me—speaking to us all? Can't you hear Jorma—and Hildur?"

Dear God! As though from deep within our own minds we heard those soundless voices speaking to us, speaking to us by some ghastly telepathy the occultists may be able to explain, but which I cannot.

"Doctor Kurt! Doctor!" It was Jorma's voice—I would swear that it was Jorma Nurmi's voice; recognizable beyond any doubt, and yet horribly, horribly changed, as though a curtain of evil partly obscured a soul that had once been beautiful. I cannot describe—no man could describe—the crawling intensity of that moment. For before there had been only the conviction of those presences, watching. But now—

Why Jorma seemed to speak to me I do not know; perhaps because I had always been like fatuous old putty in her hands.

"Doctor Kurt! Doctor Kurt! It's Jorma—little Jorma—don't you recognize me? —don't you remember me? Go away and leave me in peace, and I will let Hildur go——"

"There, you hear?" Wilfrid Andersen said suddenly. His voice was a rising snarl. "You hear?"

And then, weakly, and with a strange wondering plaintiveness, as though she did not quite understand, I seemed to hear a second voice—Hildur's voice:

"Make them do as Jorma says, Wilfrid Jorma knows best."

And I knew that the evil that had been Jorma Nurmi was laughing in exultation as it heard.

Suddenly Chris Petersen spoke. The sound of his voice startled me—it was so different from those incredible thought-images that seemed to originate within my own brain, and so quiet and sane after Wilfrid's tormented bablings.

"You should be with Karl, Jorma," he said slowly, and my flesh shriveled, watching him speak as though to empty space. "This—this interlude should never be. There is evil in you now, Jorma, through no fault of your own. You should let us set you free."

The thing laughed.

"When I lived among you I loved your form of life. Now that I live as I do I would not change."

Abruptly, then, its words grew faint. Hurriedly it addressed Wilfrid:

"Now I must go. Wilfrid, do not let them touch my grave. And in return I will restore Hildur to you——"

Like a vanishing dream the voice was gone. For a moment I stood there in the rain bewilderedly. And then, as though through eyes that had been for long moments blinded by some strange hypnosis, I saw that the blackness of night had changed to gray. I saw the tombstones stretching into the mist, and the long, rain-drenched row of spruces.

In the east the dawn hovered on the brink of the world.

11. Release

A HALF-SIMIAN growl aroused me. Wilfrid Andersen had towered to his feet, stood above Hildur's body, his shoulders slightly hunched, slowly clasping and unclasping his strong hands. He took a step toward us.

"Fill the grave!"

Chris, facing the man, shook his head. I could see the grizzled stubble of beard on his mist-drenched jaws.

"No."

And then, powerful fists swinging, blue eyes mad with implacable resolve, Wilfrid Andersen charged—charged like some

wounded beast. Chris, meeting that first rush, went down beneath a blow that would have dropped an ox. As though by instinct, I dropped to my knees, groped for the shovel.

Only vaguely do I remember stumbling to my feet, swinging the shovel handle through a short, choppy arc. Bewildered, I heard the crunch of wood against bone, saw Wilfrid fall grotesquely.

I know that I leaped into the grave, illumined now by the grayness that overspread the earth—I know that for a moment I was aghast as I looked upon the moisture that had collected in small pools on Jorma's dress, on her white satin pillow. I remember the choked scream that burst, then, from my suddenly nerveless lips—

A mist had seemed to collect at the bottom of the grave and within the casket, a mist so elusive and vague that in that first moment I had been unaware of its presence. And that mist was pouring, as though drawn by some internal suction, into the nostrils of the corpse!

And that two-inch-thick stake that Chris Petersen had sledged through Jorma Nurmi's breastbone and spine was slowly rising upward from her shattered breast! With a slow, inexorable motion, smooth and irresistible as the rising of the plunger of a hydraulic ram, it was being forced out of her still body. Inch by inch it was emerging from its flesh-sheath. And a spattering of embalming-fluid was welling from the lips of the wound and spreading over the white satin dress.

Faster, now, the twin ropes of grayish smoke were pouring into Jorma Nurmi's nostrils. . . .

The stake had protruded nearly its entire length. It had begun to waver, to oscillate. Wet with rain, glistening with embalming-fluid, it slowly tilted over and fell from the wound, rolled to the side of the casket and lay there.

And—God!—the wound had vanished! Beneath the jagged round hole in the white satin dress I saw new flesh—the *unmarred,* faintly roseate flesh of a young girl!

The last wisps of smoke had curled into Jorma Nurmi's nostrils. And then, in that final instant of cumulative horror, I sensed the thing's triumphant laughter, slumberous, utterly evil—

With that hellish laughter came abrupt release from the ecstasy of horror that had enchained me. The life that had hung suspended in my veins suddenly moved; almost without volition my arm swept outward across the casket, grasped the grim, slippery stake.

It was done in an instant. Huddled on my heels on the casket edge like some ungainly old gargoyle, my back pressed against the dripping earth, I lifted the heavy crowbar in my right hand.

It swung uncertainly, erratically, as with short weak blows I drove the stake through Jorma Nurmi's body. How many times the bar of iron rose and fell before the thick stake ground against the solid wood of the casket I will never know; perhaps three strokes, perhaps six. I remember only the clean red blood that welled from the wound and thickened and spread over the white satin dress, and the pleading mist that seemed to clutch at my hands, and the swift returning puffiness at Jorma Nurmi's throat. And, as I finished, Jorma's voice, no longer evil, but clean and sweet again—the voice of the little girl I had known, thanking me. And the overwhelming conviction, as that voice dwindled into the infinite, that she had gone to that place where Karl Maercklein waited—

I did not look at the corpse, then. I did not dare. But stiffly I clambered from the grave.

Now that it was over, my body had begun to shake.

And then I passed my right hand uncer-

tainly across my eyes and stared through the misty rain in utter astonishment. For Hildur Andersen was stumbling to her feet, tall, strong, beautiful, fair, with a look of dazed, uncomprehending horror growing on her face. And I knew that she had awakened from nightmare into nightmare, and that if I were to save her for Wilfrid I must comfort her now—

WE PAUSED beside Gustav Wendt's lodge and looked back over the sea of graves into the silence and the peace we had left behind us. For a moment we were still. Then Wilfrid, passing his left hand tenderly over the goose-egg lump at the side of his skull, his right arm was about Hildur's shoulders, looked toward the open lodge door and made a wry face. For the door stood half open, and within the light still burned. And the unmistakable odor of whiskey struck outward into the rain-washed dawn.

Quickly, then, we turned our backs upon the lodge and walked toward our waiting cars.

Bad Company

By LEAH BODINE DRAKE

The owl, the bat and the twisted tree—,
I wonder why they are dear to me?
The owl is eerie, the owl is evil;
And everyone knows that the bat's of the Devil!
And a tree that's gnarled and leans awry,
And bears wild fruit that is puckered and dry
Is surely one that the most pass by,
Afraid of its goblinry.

There's something wrong with a human wight
Who likes to be out in the windy night. . . .
I love the night and the wild wind over;
The wind to me is a sky-born lover!
But the night is black and so is sin;
Then witches ride while the good stay in;
And the owl and the bat are the witches' kin;
So look at my fearful plight!

I love the things that the most pass by;
The tree on the heath that leans awry,
The wild black night and the lanterned owl,
The bat that goes in a velvet cowl. . . .
Oh, there's no doubt, a witch I must be
Who love with unholy ecstasy
And wind in a midnight sky!
The owl and the bat and the twisted tree,

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THE EGYPTIAN CROSS

By RALPH RAYBURN PHILLIPS

THIS true psychic experience deals with the Egyptian. Everything pertaining to ancient Egypt has always had a great fascination for me, not only that but a feeling of familiarity with it all has also existed.

Many factors seem to combine to link me with the dim, distant Egyptian past. My name, for instance, which contains twice the great god Ra's name—RAlph RAyburn, this name was given me by my parents who did not know its meaning. Since I am an Occult student I am certain things do not just happen. There are no accidents.

I now come to the experience, the most amazing I have ever had, which has given me positive proof that I am linked with ancient Egypt.

A number of years ago a photographer made a study photograph of myself in the costume of old Egypt. This picture was taken in an attitude of devotion, sitting on my heels, looking downward into a flame burning before me. This pose was called "Adoration of the Light."

It was not until years later that I showed this negative to a friend, knowing her to be interested in such things. She examined it closely and then asked:

"Did you know the Tau or Crux Ansata (Egyptian Cross) appears in this film?"

I was amazed, for she had discovered something I was unaware the film contained. I looked at it closely then, and sure enough in this film were two Crux Ansatas, one above the other, both not exactly the same but having slightly different forms, quite large, perfect and plain to be seen. These seemed to be hovering in space before my figure. In other words, they were spirit symbols.

Later I showed the negative to another friend and he discovered still a third Crux Ansata, smaller than the others. I have since let other friends see this and all have been able to see the Egyptian crosses. These remain in the film today, the outlines are clear enough to leave imagination out of the question.

What is the explanation?

I do not claim to fully understand. Perhaps there are mighty Egyptian guiding forces that let themselves be seen in this form.

I should add that all the gods of ancient Egypt depicted in statue form hold this symbol in their hand. It is deemed the most powerful of symbols, used to ward off evil. It is also a hieroglyphic symbol often found in the ancient Papyrus and means Life.

The mysterious symbols do not appear in the printed photograph, but only in the film.



Malcolm Jameson poses a question to which there is no answer—

Does a Tree Ever Die?

The author of the "The Man Who Loved Planks" has a few words to say about trees and their fascinating souls—the wood nymphs.

The wholesale destruction of fine trees in New England several years ago set me thinking about wood nymphs. The belief that each grove has its dryad and each tree its hamadryad is an old one. For thousands of years people have thought that the hamadryad died with her tree. But when *does* a tree die? Strictly speaking, a living tree is already mostly dead—if we consider the sapwood as the only part enjoying the pulse of life. In my account of the unhappy fate of Chryseis, Melne and the others, I have chosen rather to consider that no part of a tree really dies until it has entirely rotted away or been consumed by fire. Its spirit, therefore, would continue to reside in it.

Whether or not that spirit would be dispersed into fragments, should the tree be dismembered, is one of those things that lie in the realm of the unknowable; so is the exact place of the ghost's residence in the human body—if there *are* ghosts. But in the dreamworld of fantasy it's not necessary to know things. We need only believe them, or half believe them. In that delightful land we require only a degree of plausibility. From the myths of antiquity to the WEIRD TALES of today, the formula is the same. *If* such and such creatures exist, and *if* such and such laws are in operation, things will be so and so.

So I considered the problem of the wood nymph, whose tree was of such beautiful wood that men would not allow it to perish, but cut it up into bits and attempted to preserve it forever in the form of fine furniture. It seemed to me that such a nymph would be most unhappy and yearn to be once more reunited with herself. That such a reassembly of a tree is possible was suggested by some of the expert testimony at the famous Hauptmann trial. By piecing these thoughts together I conceived the story in this issue as the most humane solution of her problem.

Malcolm Jameson.

Frank Carson writes from Richmond, Virginia:

I have been reading WEIRD TALES for many years, but this is the first time that I have ever written in. As a matter of fact—and this may sound strange from a reader writing in (and who presumably wants to see his letter published!) —I am writing this letter to say how glad I am to see fewer letters published in the Eyrie!

Short, pithy letters that really have something to say, and let me know something new—I like reading these. Or those that give me a laugh. But long-winded sermons—covering columns of the likes and dislikes of some person I've never heard of—give me a pain in the neck! In every issue there are stories that I enjoy, and one or two that leave me cold. That must be so in any magazine that gives us a variety. But there are always far more stories that I like than those that leave me cold. Otherwise I wouldn't continue to read WEIRD TALES. In the January issue, which I've just finished reading, I liked seven of the stories very much. Two of them, in my opinion, were terrible. But I'm not going to tell you which they were—otherwise I'll be doing the very thing that annoys me!

With best wishes for the future of the magazine.

Thanks for your letter, Mr. Carson—we are glad to print it. Numbers of readers have written in expressing the same views, and it seems that most of you favor the devotion of as much space as possible to stories—and prefer a short Eyrie containing a few down-to earth letters with something to say.

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5.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
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The Naked Man

THERE seems to be quite a bit about trees in this issue—what with Malcolm Jameson's story of a "Man Who Loved Planks," and the author's comments in the Eyrie. So we thought you might be interested to hear something about the Naked Man, super spooky tree reputed to be the oldest in England's most ancient tract of woodland—The New (!) Forest.

The Naked Man stands by himself—a few hundred yards from the thin ribbon of road that winds across the ancient battlefield of Setley Plain. No leaves grow upon its branches, no ivy curls around the trunk, no moss carpets the roots. The tree is itself about the height of a man—and winter or summer stands gaunt and unclothed, pointing one withered arm towards the sky.

Set midway between two burial mounds, the Naked Man is supposed to be the sole survivor of a holy grove. Sleeping in the mounds are the fallen of a battle fought before recorded history—even the causes and identities of the contesting armies are swallowed utterly in the mists of the past. Old maps have marked the place with a pair of crossed swords; and that is all. Under the pagan religious beliefs of those times the grove served a very definite purpose — "anchoring down" the souls of the slain and preventing them from escaping to wreak havoc on the living. The Naked Man is the last warder that remains to guard this prison of soldiers' ghosts.

Dozens of tales are told locally about the Naked Man—some weird, some humorous. Ten odd summers ago a small heath fire, caused by weeks of rainless heat, threatened the Naked Man. Flames were already licking at the base of the trunk when a hurriedly organized "fire brigade" arrived from the nearest tavern. Because of the drouth no water was available, but they saved the tree by dousing the fire with gallons of beer.

To conform with its legends the tree must have seen at least fifteen hundred summers. Maybe it really is that old; maybe not. In any event local lore insists that — should the Naked Man finally surrender—all the ghosts lying hidden in the mounds will be turned

loose to haunt the forest. And they're liable to be pretty impatient after all this time.

Anyway—why try and be logical when it's much more fun to believe the legends?

"Viva" W.T.!

From Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, Rubye Gordon Collins writes:

Need I say that WEIRD TALES is tops in any fiction for me? You've heard it so often, I know. Especially do I admire the works of Seabury Quinn and Robert Bloch. Why, Quinn even seems like an old, old friend of mine, one of those old-timers, you know, who used to thrill us until our hair rose as high as the Empire State Building and our stummicks turned trapeze performers, while the fire flickered our own shadows into grotesque hoverers dogging our every move —and how we loved it! And, though there are only a few of these old-timers left, we can still capture these juicy thrills behind the covers of this grand magazine. And so, the echo: "Viva, W.T.!"

"Howdy, Mr. Rabbit!"

From Evansville, Indiana, Leah Bodine Drake writes an open letter to Francis X Moriarity:

"You may be interested, among other WT readers, to learn that the superstition around which Gans T. Field's superb story, 'The Dreadful Rabbits,' (July issue) was written, is a sure-enough real one. The locale is not the Catskills, however, but a section of the 'Green River' country of my own state, Kentucky. Although it is really a custom of farm-folk in Daviess County to salute every rabbit seen with the greeting, 'Howdy, Mr. Rabbit!', other near-by counties do not observe it, nor have they all heard of it. Yet in Daviess a farmer will bring his car to a dead stop in the road if some member of the party neglects to say the time-honored words, and he will 'stay stopped' until the omission has been remedied! How or when or why the habit started is not known—at least not by me, who hail from the Blue Grass section, where, alas, there are few superstitions left.

"During a correspondence with the author, I happened to mention this quaint custom; and he wrote back what a good idea for a story it would make. Not long afterward he wrote the tale you all read in WT, and a dilly of a story it was! If his explanation of the custom's beginnings do not tally with the unknown real one, it *should* have been as he wrote it, anyway!

"P. S.—Thanks for the kind things you said about my 'pomes.' The editor has several in WT's poetry bin now, awaiting the light!"

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a wage-slave
IF you wish
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DON'T you wish you were like some of your friends who are forging ahead while you stay put? Like it or not, people size you up by what you earn. Is their sizing flattering to you? —Why not *plan* to get ahead, to make more money, to get a raise? If you don't know how, perhaps we can aid you as we have so many others. Chances are good that we can help you *boost yourself up* in ways you never thought of. —Thousands will gladly tell you how our planned training helped them—directed their work along *charted* paths to business success, bigger earnings, 10%, 20%, 50%, some even 100% and 200% greater income . . . At any rate, let us send you the inspiring book "Ten Years' Promotion in One." It's FREE! It will surely help you *plan* your next raise whether you ask us to *help* you plan or not. Write us today for the book—the coupon is for your convenience.

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Write to MARTIN WARE, SECRETARY

• This is your club—a medium to help you and other fantasy and science-fiction fans get together. Readers wanted it—they wrote in telling us how much they would enjoy meeting others of similar tastes.

• Membership is very simple: just drop us a line, so that we can enroll you on the club roster, and publish your name and address in the magazine.

• A membership card carrying the above design—personal token of your fellowship with the weird and the fantastic—will be sent on request. (A stamped, addressed envelope should be enclosed.)

Light in the Darkness

WE ARE four fellows who enlisted in the Air Corps and are stationed over 400 miles from our home towns. The WEIRD TALES CLUB struck us like a shaft of light in the dark. Please enroll us immediately. All four of us are desirous of making some new friends. Our squadron travels with the weather and when we get to a new town we find ourselves alone. It would be very pleasant to find someone we may have the pleasure of corresponding with on our travels.

Magazines are our greatest means of killing time on lonely nights. They were all the same until we came across a copy of WEIRD TALES. The supernatural fascinates us more than the average fiction stories. WEIRD TALES should be published once a week because once one of us gets hold of a copy we won't give it up till we finish it. We read it through in one night.

Robert Spinney,
Dave Benjamin,
Robert Nicholson,
Phillip Wheeler.
3rd Observation Squadron, A. C.
Langley Field, Virginia.

Good News for Fans in Colorado

Please enroll us, Lew Martin, Roy V. Hunt, and Charles Ford Hansen, the three co-editors of THE ALCHEMIST (a weird and scientifiction fan magazine) in your WEIRD TALES CLUB.

The Colorado Fantasy Society (the state-wide, not the national) would like to affiliate with the WEIRD TALES CLUB—we will send you a complete list later. We would like to be considered your Denver Chapter although we will not change our name—so please write us a letter stating we are the Denver Branch for framing in our hall.

The Eyrie is tops. How about it being enlarged?

Weirdly yours,
Colorado Fantasy Society,
Lew Martin,
Secretary-Treasurer,
Roy V. Hunt,
Charles F. Hansen.

1258 Race Street,
Denver, Colorado.

Want to Form Local Branches

There are several people in this part of the country who are interested in forming a local club. May I hear from any members near us, especially occultists?

Dorothy Vincent.

1707 West 45th Street,
Kansas City, Missouri.

As one of the charter members of the WEIRD TALES CLUB, I would like very much to get into touch with people living near me who are interested in forming a local club.

John Haliburton.

Box 2104,
Norman, Oklahoma.

Wants to Swap Ideas

Dear Readers of Weird Tales:

It seems as though I am the only one among my acquaintances who likes the unusual and mysterious. Won't someone come to my rescue and write me? I'd like to swap ideas and opinions.

Incidentally, are the men outdoing the women in their quest of the unknown? By the looks of things the male members far exceed the female to date.

Please enroll me as a member and send me one of those cards designed by Hannes Bok.

Sincerely wishing you great success I remain,

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A Cry in the Wilderness

Answer the cry of a lonely one! I am lonely for the things that interest me. Such as books, art, music, drama, and WEIRD TALES. I have many friends, but none of them like these sort of things. So I want some that do.

Please accept me as a member of your club and publish my name and address. Some kind old soul may hear my call and I shall be happy with my friends in their letters.

John F. Breslin.

1409 Oak Street,
Wilmington, Delaware.

Makes Them Fight

Dispensing all formality and getting right down to facts, my husband and I desire to become members of your "club."

Not only does your magazine contribute to reading pleasure: it also serves as an excellent subject for debate, downright arguments, and fights. It certainly makes life more interesting.

WEIRD TALES has subject matter for unlimited thought and study. To those scientificly (I'll bet I mispelled that one) minded, they can argue on, and on and on. Those to whom theorizing is living can debate to their heart's content. Then there is logic, facts, and reason also to take their rightful places.

And last but not least, is the fact that for pleasant, recreational reading WEIRD TALES is first, last and always.

As this is our first letter to you and all the other club members, we are especially desirous of being fully understood about our feelings for WEIRD TALES. As is often quoted, "There are more things on earth and in Heaven——"

And now we take leave of you and your members, as I am for my husband, he is for me, and we are both for WEIRD TALES.

Occultly yours,
Mr. and Mrs. C. E. Suter.

P. O. Box 387,
Vancouver, Washington.

Would Like to Hear About Weird Books

Science interests me a great deal; but often I have interesting debates with scientific-minded friends who are strongly anti-occultists.

If it is not asking too much, I would like some kind member to send me a list of books wherefrom one may learn something of witchcraft, demonology, and the Black Arts.

Sincerely yours,
Albert F. Lopez.

24 Havre Street,
East Boston, Mass.

Collector of Thrills

I am a constant reader of WEIRD TALES and I have always enjoyed the stories very much. As a rule I can never do too much reading, so to speak, as I am "*the* book worm," and so long as I have my nose buried in a book I'm happy, but take it away from me and there's H - - - to pay.

I'm not a citizen of Wyoming, by the way. I am from little Rhodey (Rhode Island). And I soon hope to be back there in December.

Well, I may just as well get down to business. I would appreciate it very much if you would enroll me in your WEIRD TALES CLUB. I am not a collector of stamps or of any other sort except thrills and adventures, so please do enroll me into your class of thrill seekers.

William Pare.

Co. 2131, C.C.C., Side Camp,
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Grass Creek, Wyoming.

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Robert Spinney, 3rd Observation Squadron, A. C., Langley Field, Va. (age 19.)

Dave Benjamin, 3rd Observation Squadron, A. C., Langley Field, Va. (age 18.)

Robert Nicholson, 3rd Observation Squadron, Langley Field, Va. (age 19.)

Phillip Wheeler, 3rd Observation Squadron, A. C., Langley Field, Va. (age 18.)

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(*Continued on next page*)

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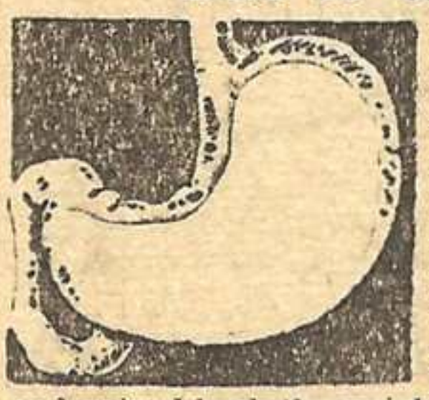
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